

The Sirens Call

Halloween 2020

issue 51

*A Dark Fiction
& Horror eZine!*

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

*Featured Artist:
Photographer
Pieter*

*Featured Author:
Lee Andrew Forman*

*Featured Novel:
The Bury Box*

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"Come along, Marcus," called the cloaked figure of Doctor Anthis Scarlock as he stood at the entrance of a broad alley. The voice was thin and reedy, very much like the man who spoke. He wore thick woolen clothing and fur-lined boots to chase away the chill of autumn. Shadowed by a black tri-corn hat, intense dark eyes behind round-rimmed spectacles darted around the area. A large black leather satchel which hung from his shoulder thumped against his hip as he turned away. The soft clink of glass could be heard from the light impact.

Moments later, a young man with a thicker build and a mop of messy brown hair stumped into view pushing a small cart. He wore a satchel similar to the first man, but this one was stained, worn and discolored. His simple brown shirt and pants also showed signs of poor care. "Are you sure this is okay, boss?" he asked in a low whisper. "I'm all for research and getting new alchemy ingredients but if the guard catches us, we might end up in the stockade and that place is full of all manner of diseased and deranged killers."

"Yes, Marcus. Everything will be fine," answered the first man. "I have all of the paperwork in order to allow us to collect specimens for study. The city officials want a cure for this plague to be discovered as much as any of the victims. Fear and crime that accompany such a virulent menace are a detriment to the city's coffers. Purchasing a license to collect bodies for our research is quite a simple thing."

"If we have permission, why are we out here in the middle of the night?" Marcus looked around warily, trying to pierce the shadows in vain. Unfortunately, his eyesight was not suited to the task, unlike many of the non-human denizens of the city. His nervous energy seemingly had no effect on his companion as the doctor strode through the narrow alley as if it were a warm summer day in the park.

"Why didn't you take your cats-eye potion?" Anthis asked. His eyes gleamed unnaturally in the darkness as he turned to look at his colleague. "You made them specifically for our night-time endeavors."

Marcus shifted uncomfortably before answering. "You have the last one. I ran out of brightmoss and I can't make any more potions without it. The herbalist was completely sold out so until he restocks, we won't have any more to use." Marcus tended to ramble when he was nervous. Anthis could also hear the trembling in the thickly-built man's voice.

"I can see well enough for both of us. Leave the cart and follow me. If anyone or anything tries to accost us, you run to the nearest place of safety. Call out for the Night Watch as well. They usually respond quickly and efficiently. Leave the cart here. We can come back for it." With that, he turned and continued down the alley. Twisting and turning through the narrow brick-lined path, the pair would have quickly become lost if they had not studied this part of the city so thoroughly.

"What if whatever has been doing the killing is still around?"

Anthi smiled grimly as he pressed his glasses further up his nose. "Then we have two choices: we run or we die."

"What about fighting?" Marcus asked, his hand sliding suggestively to the heavy knife on his hip.

"Marcus that would be part of the second choice. Trained and well-armed guardsmen have been found dead. They were torn apart and missing various portions of their anatomy. I know you served in the military for a stint, but that knife won't do anything compared to the weapons the guardsman carry."

"Then what are we doing here?" The man's voice took on a slight warble of fear.

Rather than answer, Anthi held up one hand before pressing his index finger to his lips in a shushing gesture. He cast his gaze upward, scanning the rooftops high above them. Marcus looked around wildly, fighting his urge to run.

Faint dust and soot rained down on them and Anthi looked back to his partner. He motioned for him to follow before turning and sprinting silently down the alley. He winced as Marcus' heavy footfalls thudded along behind him and he increased his pace. The temperature around them dropped and he could see his breath puffing from his lips. The shadow of something large and dark moved across the sky from one roof to another, but the two men took no notice as they continued to run.

Further ahead, Anthi could see growing brightness. He hoped it was an inn or a dwelling or maybe a fire warming some homeless vagabonds. Whatever the source, light was good. It meant safety and potential allies. As he turned a corner, the source of the brilliance was revealed and he realized that he couldn't have been more wrong.

A gaunt humanoid figure with dark skin that looked like cooled lava crouched over the charred remains of a body. Fire licked at the edges of the victim's clothing. The creature turned to look at Anthi. Glowing embers burned in the depths of its gaze and flames curled up from the corners of its eyes.

Marcus puffed and thudded up behind him. "It's right behind me!" he called out between panicked gasps while looking over his shoulder.

Anthis couldn't look away from the fiery gaze of the being in front of him, but he could hear the scraping of claws on the cobblestones and the low, rumbling growl of something massive behind them. "Marcus," he hissed through clenched teeth. "You need to move to the side, quickly!"

The larger man turned to look down the alley and gasped at the sight of the flaming creature before them. Instead of following his partner's instructions, he froze. Anthis felt time slow around them. A scream welled up in his chest as he turned to push his friend out of the way. From the darkness behind Marcus, a blackened vine covered with thorns and frost lashed out to wrap around the man's neck. He couldn't make a sound as he was lifted off his feet and dragged back into the darkened alley.

The crackling of flames behind him made Anthis spin around. The elemental creature now stood at its full height and the blaze had grown even brighter. It didn't look down at the man backpedaling to press himself against the alley wall. Its gaze was focused beyond him where a hulking creature of darkness was tearing the life from Marcus. The human-like face of the flaming entity twisted into an expression of rage and disgust. Flames erupted from its clawed hands and rolled over its entire body.

As the being strode past him, Anthis tried to escape the scathing inferno. He noted that Marcus had gone silent and tears began to well up. There was a sizzling hiss on his cheeks where the liquid began to boil. Squeezing his eyes shut, he dropped into a ball to escape the heat but the air grew hotter and more unbearable.

The light flared to an impossible brightness and he screamed. Super-heated air flooded into his lungs, causing his chest to burn from the inside out. His skin began to melt. After an eternity of agony, he passed out and everything went dark.

He floated in a black void while the pain became a distant sensation. Through the silence came a voice that was a soft gentle hiss, the sound of water dousing a campfire. "I was summoned to destroy that creature of winter but you and your friend were not meant to be the target of my wrath. A life was given so that I could end an unnatural menace but a second life was taken before I could act. Without my aid, a third life would be added to that tally, yours."

Anthis began to feel pain flooding back into his body, threatening to overwhelm him once more. The voice continued while he fought to stay awake. "I call now on the power of the faerie realm. Flame itself can only destroy and consume but the power of the fae can do much more. Sleep now, mortal. When you awake, you will be whole once more but changed." Darkness swallowed him once again as a warm sensation slid over his body, like drifting into a hot bath.

Eventually he did awaken. He looked down at his body and saw that the fire fae had been correct. He was changed. His clothing had been almost entirely burned away and his exposed skin looked like pale melted wax which felt soft and pliable to the touch. He looked down at his hand and concentrated. In response, the flesh solidified and took on the usual texture and color that he was accustomed to seeing. With another thought the skin darkened and the hair on his arm faded away. The fae had turned him into a creature with no true form, a changeling. For the rest of his days he would blend in everywhere and yet, he would never truly be human again.

The soft hissing voice flared in his mind once again. "Rise, young warrior. You now serve the court of summer. Winter's forces are moving through the land and you will be needed in the months ahead." Anthis got to his feet and his natural appearance shifted quickly into place. Flames flickered softly in his dark eyes and he greeted the dawn with a new purpose.

About the Author:

J.W. Grace started writing seriously in 2009 when he self-published the first of 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. In his free time, when he's not writing or spending time with family, he's usually gaming.

Author Blog : [Writing is a Matter of Life or Death](#)

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There is a knock at the door on All Hallows Eve, and Mama flinches as is her way, for she is not one for surprises, and we rarely get the children from the village down here on witching night, living as we do somewhat beyond the last streetlight down the winding forest road. Mama goes to lurk in the kitchen, shutting off the light for fear they see we're home. But I'm not so young as I was, and not so small these days to join Mama in cowardly concealment. Still she calls me child and cuddles me, but she won't see I'm changing and I don't scare so easy these days.

So manfully I go and I answer the door, and there I see the visitor standing alone on our porch. I am all set to utter a manful greeting, until I take stock of what my eyes are beholding and my legs take a fearful backward step. For there is something not right, not right at all, with this gentleman. Tall and very thin he stands in his dark suit, and the grinning pumpkin on his head is too small to contain a head, by which I mean a normal, average head. And I've a sudden foolish fancy as I stand there gawping that the pumpkin is his head. Leastways, the sight of him gives me such a turn that I shut the door with a slam and scurry back to the kitchen to lurk there with Mama in the dark.

"Who is it?" she asks, clutching my hand too hard.

I cannot respond at first, my tongue being dry as a husk of stale bread. "A man," I say at length after several swallows. "His head," I add weakly.

"His head?" she enquires. "What of his head?" And "Why are you shaking child?"

But soon I am not the only one shaking, for our visitor knocks again.

"Don't answer," she commands as if believing for even a second that I might.

Our shaking gets still more violent as a whisper starts up at the keyhole of the front door. The gentleman is whispering to us, and it sounds to my ears not like words but like the papery wings of hundreds of moths. We stand there, Mama and I, clutching each other as the sound of moths fills our ears. And I imagine Pumpkin Head with his jagged blade-cut grin bending in towards our keyhole and making this noise, and I feel a warm trickle on my legs as I haven't felt since I was four. Soon, words start to form out of the bustling hiss, like oily beads of liquid coalescing out of gas, and the words that form are "Trick or treat...Trick or treat."

Mama's skin turns cold. Her hands feel like slimy slabs of chilled meat. She unclasps me and starts to fumble and stumble about the kitchen. Soon she brings forth a bowl of nuts and fruit and she says to me: "Take this to him, child. Only then will he leave us alone."

I plead with her not to make me, and vow not to set foot from this kitchen until that man and the moth-noise he's making are distant memories and the morning sun is lighting our windows, but in the dark of my heart I know Mama's right. I have no choice but to go back to him with this offering of fruit and nuts, or he will never leave us, and we will not see morning again.

So, with spiders scuttling through my guts, and a childish shame running down my legs, I carry the bowl of meagre gifts to our visitor. The dread whisper ceases as, shuddering, I open the door. The visitor peers at my offering with cold black eyes, then raises his small orange head to look upon me. The silence thickens around us, and I feel a horrible stillness, like I'm trapped in an endless moment of waiting and fearing. My blood slows, and soon it seems it will clot, and I'm thinking, so this is death. Then Pumpkin Head makes a sound. This time it's not a whisper, it's more like the squeal of a steam kettle, and a new terror builds in me that he's about to split apart from all the inner pressure, and a million moths will break out from the cracks in his body and they'll whirl and flutter about me and smother me with their brown papery wings.

About the Author:

Alex Woolf is a professional author of fiction and non-fiction. He recently won an award for his story 'Mystery at Moon Base One' and was shortlisted for the RED Book Award for his horror novel 'Soul Shadows'. In his spare time he enjoys writing adult short stories and novelettes. Alex has a fear of plants and his favorite garden activity is weed-killing.

Author Website: [Alex Woolf](#)

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Skeleton Decorations | *Radar DeBoard*

"Thomas!" Cassandra called out for her child, "Thomas! Come down here right now!"

She waited for her son to come stomping down the stairs before pointing out their front window at the yard.

"Why are there a dozen skeleton decorations in our yard?"

"It's for Halloween mom," Thomas answered.

"It's the middle of June!" Cassandra yelled, "We don't need those up. Go take them down, now."

Thomas frantically shook his head, "No mom. We can't take them down. The skeletons like being out in the sun. They won't let anyone put them away."

"For the love of god Thomas! They're decorations! Stop talking about them like they're people."

"I'm not touching them," Thomas said in fear. He raced back up the stairs before his mom could object.

"Little brat," she muttered under her breath. "Fine, I'll do it!" she shouted up at her son's room.

Cassandra opened the front door and stomped outside. She bent down and picked up the first skeleton that was sitting in front of the porch and took it inside. Cassandra went back outside and took the second fake skeleton inside. When she went to go get the next one, she noticed that there was only one left. She stood on her front porch for a moment wondering where the other ones had disappeared to.

Cassandra shrugged and moved across the yard to pick up the last skeleton. She turned back towards the house and saw a pile of skeleton decorations sitting on her porch. A tingle of fear ran up her spine as she stared at the boney bodies that lay in front of her doorway. Cassandra suddenly felt like she was being watched and peered over her shoulder to see a skeleton right behind her. She let out a shriek and quickly pivoted, running into another one. Cassandra spun around and realized that she was completely surrounded. She let out one final scream as the skeletons encircled her.

The Faceless Banshee | *Radar DeBoard*

"And that's why no one ever comes to these woods, because the faceless banshee lurks among the trees. Waiting for her next set of victims." Teresa smiled as she finished her story.

"Lame," Mark said while trying to roast his third marshmallow, "Everyone knows that one."

"Just because everyone knows it doesn't mean it's not scary," Teresa said in an annoyed tone. "What do you think Anton?"

Anton shrugged, "It's not really scary to begin with. I've heard it since I was a kid, and even back then I didn't get scared by it."

Teresa sighed, "Well, what about you Mary?" she turned to her friend sitting right next to her.

Mary grimaced, "Sorry Tree, I'm siding with the majority here. It's not scary."

"C'mon!" Teresa said in frustration, "Why do y'all think it's not spooky?"

"Well, for one, it's not real," Mark said using a graham cracker to take his melted marshmallow off the stick he had it on. "I mean urban legends are never real, but a faceless banshee. There's no way that one could be real."

Mary nodded in agreement, "It needs to have a bit of believability to give it that extra spook factor. If it can't happen to us, then why should we care?"

"Plus, it just doesn't make any sense," Anton added, "I mean, what does it mean that she's faceless? Does that mean she just doesn't have a head? Or is there like a smooth spot where her face should be?"

"It's an empty void where her face should be," Teresa said in growing frustration.

"Okay well, you did not make that clear during the story," Anton shrugged, "I can't even imagine something like that."

"Then I'll show you," Teresa said standing up. She grabbed hold of something under her chin and pulled. In one fluid motion, her face came off to reveal an infinite void in the middle of her head. She let out a high pitch wail that echoed throughout the forest as the three campers screamed in unison. The fire instantly disappeared and so did Mary, Mark, and Anton.

"How much further?" Marcy whined.

"Just a few more minutes and we'll be there," Nathan calmly said, "You're not going to be disappointed. It's a really special place."

"It better be," Marcy grumpily muttered.

Nathan knew it was a lot to ask of an eight-year-old to go hiking in the woods for a little bit, so he was incredibly grateful that Marcy hadn't complained that much.

"You're doing great honey," he said trying to encourage her, "I'm so impressed that you're able to walk this far."

"I don't like walking in here," Marcy whined, "These trees are creepy looking."

"I know, I know," Nathan calmly said, "but these are special trees. They're here to protect you, so you shouldn't be scared of them."

"Special trees?" Marcy curiously said out loud.

"Yes," Nathan smiled, "You see, there's a cave in these woods. It's a very old and very powerful cave that has special powers. The trees hide it and make sure that no one finds it."

"What kind of powers does the cave have?"

"Well...it can talk to you, and tell you some pretty cool things. Plus, it can grant wishes."

"Wishes!" Marcy said excitedly, "I want some wishes."

"I'm sure you do," Nathan chuckled.

"Why do the trees not want anyone to find the cave?"

"Because people are silly," Nathan laughed, "A long time ago, someone thought that the cave was bad because it could talk. So they planted these magical trees that kept the voice of the cave from being heard. You would never even be able to find it unless you happened to know exactly where it was."

"How did you find it then?" Marcy asked.

"My daddy used to tell me about the cave when I was a kid. So when I was old enough to come out here I started looking for it. It took me more than five years, but I was able to find it. I heard it whispering to me. It told me so many secrets," Nathan smiled. "It granted one of my wishes, and it told me how I could get more. It whispered the secret of how to get more wishes to me, and I've been doing it ever since."

"What's the secret?" Marcy asked just as they went through a clearing of trees.

A large cave suddenly appeared before the two of them. Marcy looked at the opening and only saw absolute darkness. Then she looked at the ground surrounding the entrance of the cave and saw dozens of bones scattered around. Marcy heard something from inside the cave. A low whispering that sent a feeling of fear bubbling up in her stomach as Nathan knelt down behind her. Nathan started to whisper into her ear and the two sources began to form into one in her mind.

"Fresh flesh, fresh flesh," the whispers chanted.

About the Author:

Radar DeBoard is a horror movie and novel enthusiast who resides in Wichita, Kansas. He occasionally dabbles in writing and enjoys making dark and exciting tales for people to enjoy. He has had drabbles and short stories published in various electronic magazines and anthologies.

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When our days off coincided, Henry Flint and I often hopped on the bus to visit the tourist locations peppered around Darkwater. One day, we took the battered bus that bounced along the tourist route around the lake before heading up into the hills.

Half an hour later, after an interminable number of stops and detours into half a dozen villages along the lakeside for hikers staying in the many hotels and inns, we reached our destination.

Denyer raised a languid hand in farewell as we clambered down from the bus.

"Bonkers, all of 'em. Creative types! Odd tales go around about Wilhelm Frost's home. That place isn't what it seems."

Henry shouldered his rucksack, with our packed lunches and bottles of water inside, and set off up the track at a jaunty pace. My lithe step soon ate up the terrain, too.

"Never heard of a poet yet who didn't have a thoroughly miserable life. Thank God I'm not a genius, Ivy."

I mussed Henry's blond hair.

"You're pretty safe on that score, buddy."

The Frost house sat skulking on the skyline, staring out over the valley towards Darkwater in the far distance. The fresh air smelt of heather. We paused halfway up to take in the view. I gazed out over the lovely expanse.

Henry and I raced each other to the top. We threw ourselves down on a flat rock protruding from the moorland. It felt smooth and warm. He turned towards me, resting his cheek against the rock.

"What was the old guy called again? The one who owned this place?"

"Wilhelm Frost."

I dragged Henry to his feet and we scampered towards the front door. To our surprise, it was locked. The gravel scrunched beneath our feet as we ran round to the back. Henry stared through the windows of the drawing room. I rummaged in my pack for the leaflet a guest had left lying around the foyer of the hotel.

The house of Wilhelm Frost welcomes visitors throughout the tourist season. The poet was known for his reclusive nature, which made him notorious in both London society and here at Darkwater. In 1845, he was accused of—

I stopped reading in mid-sentence. The text dissolved in front of my eyes until I was left holding a blank piece of paper. It disintegrated and the dust from it blew away on the breeze. Some of it flew back into my mouth and I started coughing.

Shivering, I folded the arms of my floppy cardigan around me. Henry patted me on the arm.

"Don't mope, puss. It'll be as boring as hell down by the bus stop. Let's hang around here instead. Something interesting might turn up!"

I forced a smile.

When I'd first turned up in Darkwater, the locals had assumed I would become Henry's girlfriend but I'd never thought of him romantically. I couldn't have, not after Gerald. This was a point I'd made firmly to Henry one evening, when he'd drunkenly tried to kiss me out on the terrace of the Darkwater Spa Hotel. He'd been too wasted to pay attention to the many preceding hints that I wasn't interested. After we'd cleared the air, we'd felt more at ease around each other. The sibling feel had been welcome to both of us: Henry was an only child and my brother was no longer in my life.

Henry rattled one of the window frames. It eventually yielded and he managed to push it up a metre or so. Just as I was contemplating climbing through, Henry let go. The window thudded down with a clatter, and he stood rubbing his wrists.

"Thought it was just swollen with damp. Got it moving alright, but then the weight thumped shut out of nowhere."

Henry smacked the wooden frame with his fist and swore.

"Sure this guy's worth the effort, Ivy? What did he write about anyway?"

Frost's most famous poem was called *The Well*. Its macabre phrasing had captured the imagination of Victorian readers and catapulted its author to fame. He'd basked in it for the rest of his life.

Controversy had flared up after Frost's death in 1903 concerning whether he'd stolen the text of *The Well* from the diary of his younger sibling, Ernestina. Most scholars seemed fairly clear that the great Frost poems, those most often reprinted today and discussed at great length in postgraduate seminars and PhD theses, were the work of the fun-loving and gregarious younger sister who'd lived with her cantankerous brother and kept house for him.

Frost's most famous verse was about a green mist that had emerged from the well near their home one night and surrounded the cottage. It had seeped through into his bedroom and invaded his dreams. It had clouded his thoughts for days afterwards. Critics had initially interpreted the vapour as a metaphor for the inspiration of genius in general: Frost's commentary on how his ideas came to him without any apparent effort.

Feminists had more recently claimed it to be an expression of guilt for sneaking into his sister's bedroom and snooping into the contents of the occasional book where she wrote down her own poems. Some had gone as far as to hint that that wasn't *all* Wilhelm had stolen when he crept into Ernestina's room. Others rather unkindly suggested that he'd been off his head on opium for most of the decades when he was most productive in his writing, so the green gas simply

represented the heady intoxication of the poppy. The least forward thinking of our generation used Frost's metaphor as a weapon in their simmering war against political correctness.

"That's the kind of verse I really love!"

I looked at Henry doubtfully, but he seemed almost emotional in his sincerity as he continued.

"It's the kind of poem you can say almost anything about without the risk of being wrong. No one seems to know *what* these clever chaps are up to with their images and themes."

Henry rubbed the seat of his trousers. His expression clouded over.

"My schoolmasters were very liberal with the cane. Saying the wrong thing in class, especially if they thought you were playing to the gallery, could land you with a tanned arse. Once, I couldn't lie down for a week. That's what you get for asking whether Shakespeare was gay."

I stared in astonishment. My own childhood could not have been more different. I was still learning to decode how much of what Henry told me about an English boarding-school education was actually true.

Henry gestured for me to come on and we tripped round to the back door. Henry rattled the handle. It turned easily enough, but it just wouldn't open. He rammed it with his shoulder, but nothing gave. He took a few steps back and ran at it, thumping into the door. The wood buckled and yawned. Henry scowled. Then he launched himself at it a second time.

It's the oddest thing but I'm certain that door moved just before Henry's shoulder hit it. It sprang open and he sprawled onto the carpet. He scrambled up and dusted himself off. Dignity was the only casualty of his tumble and he started laughing.

"Come on," he said. "Let's find out more about this dark genius of yours!"

The cottage was bleak inside. I shivered at the sudden drop in temperature. Henry gazed around dubiously. The back door opened straight into the kitchen. Game birds and hares hung from the rafters, to give visitors a hint of what the place would have been like to live in two hundred years earlier. The black range cooker had shiny copper pans resting on it, and the table was spotlessly clean.

I turned to Henry, suddenly uncertain.

"Isn't there supposed to be a custodian? To show visitors in and check that no one steals anything? That leaflet said the house is open for visitors, but this is very odd. Perhaps we should go?"

Henry strode across the room. He peered out into the hallway.

"No one here. Day off, perhaps? Or just didn't turn up, thinking no one would find out. I say we look around. The place is harmless. And there's still forty minutes until the bus comes back this way."

I followed Henry upstairs. The cottage had two large bedrooms, and a rudimentary washroom behind a polished cherry-wood door. I went into the first bedroom. It was sparsely furnished and masculine. A walnut wardrobe. An oak writing desk. A tiny four-poster bed. On the uneven white walls there hung a series of watercolours. I scrutinised each in turn.

Darkwater. The rugged cliffs of the coast by Slimeport. Moorland to the north, alive with purple-tipped heather. The Earl of Darkwater's castle over at Bloodhaugh, dark against a stormy sky. A more palatable sketch, filled in with pinks and pale greens, of the quarry garden at Whiteacre Hall.

I called to Henry to come and look. We gazed at them together before he wandered away again.

The pictures were lovely. They had been executed with a proficiency that exuded real confidence. Best of all, Wilhelm Frost was universally acknowledged to be their creator. Diary entries from society darlings of the day, letters from fellow guests at the castle, and the papers of the Earl of Darkwater all provided numerous instances of Wilhelm dashing off a sketch in the morning, then filling in the delicate colours during the afternoon, before producing it to a gaggle of admiring viewers during tea on the terrace. There had been many instances of an otherwise very private man allowing others to stand over his shoulders as he created beauty in front of their eyes.

I crossed over to the window. The room was damp and I felt suddenly overcome with anxiety. I opened the leaded pane and leaned out to draw in a deep breath of the fresh moorland air. But the wisteria, so full and vibrant on our arrival, had wilted and dried. Some of it snapped off in my hand. And a green mist had encircled the cottage.

I closed the window and shouted to Henry. He bounded back through from Ernestina's bedroom, but he looked dazed and confused.

"Such an odd feeling in there, Ivy. Cold and clammy. Sure I saw something moving under the plaster on the walls. It sort of bulged out towards me. Thought it might be a face. Agonised. Crying for help. But I might be wrong. I only caught a glimpse of it."

Henry seemed amused rather than scared by these bizarre images, but when I pointed out the window the cheery smile faded from his chubby face. He yanked the curtains across, making their rings jangle. But the coldness in the bedroom only intensified and the green fog had begun to seep out from the chimney.

The door slammed shut, trapping us inside the room. Henry rattled the handle in vain. I pulled out a hairpin and inserted it in the lock. I carefully wiggled it back and forth, but the lock held firm.

"It's just some hallucination brought on by talking about that stuff in the poem."

Henry shook his head.

"I don't have an imaginative thought in my brain and I can see it well enough. This is real, Ivy! We're trapped!"

Henry rattled the door again. He did the same with each of the windows. Nothing would open, not even when he really put his back into it.

The vapour poured down the chimney and billowed out across the faded Persian carpet. It licked the edges of the floorboards, and crept up the walls until it curled into strange shapes against the low ceiling. The floorboards creaked. Hairline cracks formed in the plaster and spread out across the walls. The plaster began to fall onto the floor. A choking dust rose into the room and lingered, mixing with the gas and hanging in the air.

The toxic mixture filled our lungs and settled onto our skins. Henry and I staggered over to the door, and banged our fists against it. We yelled for help, though I don't know who we thought would come to our aid. Henry pulled off his jumper and I used it to cover my mouth. I did the same for him with my summer coat.

We dragged the wardrobe across the fireplace. The room was still full of the vapours, but they were very heavy. We climbed up on top of the wardrobe and waited for the mist to settle on the floor. The air higher up became clean enough to breathe, but the room was still freezing cold.

"How are we supposed to get out of here?"

"Denyer might pull the bus over if he sees we're not at the stop when he returns."

I couldn't muster much confidence as I spoke. Denyer was more likely to conclude that we were still enjoying ourselves up here, and would catch the next bus home to Darkwater.

The wall opposite bulged and a woman's head took shape inside. She wore ringlet curls around her face. A high lacy collar covered most of her neck. As quickly as her outline appeared, it sank back into the wall again. But her voice rang out clear and true.

"If you want him to relent, you must give my brother what he wants most in life."

We didn't have to reflect long on the meaning of *that* riddle. The creative type wanted only one thing: adoration. The more unquestioning the better, in this case, I suspected. Clearly Wilhelm Frost's ego had taken a bit of a bashing since he'd died.

I started off cautiously, hoping that staying within the bounds of truth would make my compliments more convincing. And I was sure that his painting was the thing that Wilhelm had been most proud of in his life.

"I loved the pictures. They're really beautiful."

"The Earl of Darkwater claimed your watercolours of his home were better than the most celebrated painters of the day. And they haven't been improved upon since."

I glanced at Henry in amused surprise. He grinned back.

"What? I know stuff. I get around. The present countess is my aunt, don't forget. It's really just a matter of paying attention when people are speaking. I might not have many ideas of my own, but I'm very good at remembering other people's."

The fog seeped out through the cracks in the walls, the edges of the windowpanes where they weren't airtight and between the floorboards. The bedroom cleared and we slid down from the wardrobe.

Henry and I tumbled down the stairs and out into the September sunshine. We ran giggling down the slope, waving down the bus as it came round the corner.

The bus driver chuckled at the wild mess of my hair and Henry's dishevelled appearance.

"I see old Wilhelm Frost hasn't lost his touch!" Denyer said.

About the Author:

John C. Adams is a Reviewer with Schlock! Webzine, the British Fantasy Society and Horror Tree. You can read their fiction in Horrified Press, Lycan Valley Press and many other anthologies. A non-binary writer, their fiction appears in The Horror Zine, Siren's Call and many other magazines. John's horror novel *Blackacre Rising* is available to preorder now on Kindle.

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Persimmon Hallows | Will H. Blackwell, Jr.

In a woodland-glade, the elderly lady lives alone.

Some called her 'witch,' but she merely disliked the kids who tormented her—those kids now grown, with kids of their own.

Years ago, the lady planted a protective circle of persimmon-trees around her house—but not the ordinary persimmon-variety! Near October's end, the lemon-yellow fruit blushes expectedly orange; but the slight 'plum-spot,' signaling ripeness-safety, never forms.

The new generation of kids—stealing her persimmons Halloween Night—upon eating one bite (the 'puckering' tannins stronger than any 'witch's tea'), couldn't speak clearly for a week!

Nobody bothers her since—fearing potent 'herbal-magic.'

Press-on Nails | Will H. Blackwell, Jr.

I never knew whether she did them herself, or had them done at the Salon—because, she always wore them!

Weirdly, it was a 'turn-on.' During love-making, I got scratches on my back—some marks I couldn't explain—worth it, nonetheless.

Long acrylic-nails weren't her only quirk. Some folks thought she was a little 'off.' I'll admit, when angry, the 'animal' in her came out. But, the wild makeup-love overrode any pain.

One night, after an argument, I cheated on her. Big mistake! The only time her nails ever came off! The small deformed claws, concealed beneath, ripping my neck-flesh!

Inheritance | Will H. Blackwell, Jr.

When young, I coveted this particular room of the house.

Bed, dressing-table, armoire—expected essentials remain. In such basic ways, the large room seems the same.

Tonight, the November-moon disinterestedly grazes an angle of the double-window—not pausing to glance inside.

No sight of the sun yet. No matter; curtains are drawn during daylight anyway, in remembrance.

There is little hint of the presences that enlivened this room so long—called it home. These antic souls have gone their various ways.

Yet, their absence is a negative pressure, steadily intensifying within these walls!

I won't be sleeping here, after all.

Terminal Cinema | Will H. Blackwell, Jr.

I have come to the old downtown-theater for horror-movies—lobby long-vacant, no popcorn or soft-drinks—just hardcore horror! *How is this place still open?*

As usual, I take my seat on the back row—no attention to anyone.

The movies begin: Typical horror-fare: Vampires, werewolves, dimly appear. A mummy—in swaddling-clothes—waddles slowly across the screen, trailing gauze.

Ravens, snakes, assorted demons, sleuth oddly about—as if in 3D—Strange, since no light-beam emanates from the projection-box!

In the shadow-light, I sense no other people inside.

I hear outer-doors locking—in disturbing, confining finality!

The screen suddenly reads: 'NOW PERMANENTLY CLOSED'

About the Author:

Will H. Blackwell, Jr. is emeritus professor, Miami University (Ohio), living now in Alabama where he continues biological research on water-borne fungi. His fiction has appeared in Brilliant Flash Fiction, The Drabble, Raven Cage Zine, Trembling with Fear, and 365 Tomorrows. Poems are in Aphelion, Black Petals, Blue Unicorn, Scifaikuest, and Slant.

Syren met my glance, then didn't. One blink was all, as if the very sight of me reminded her of the person she no longer wanted to be. But for one instant it was Amy behind her eyes.

I concentrated on the irony instead of my feelings. Syren still looked like my Amy: thin, disheveled and sad. Syren's makeup was perfectly applied to look trashy. Who knows how long it took a stylist to create Syren's quintessential mess of smudged shadows and eyeliner mistakes? When I knew her as Amy, she would glop on makeup by feel, smearing the hollows of her eyes aimlessly. It only took two minutes before the mirror, but she'd reflect on the results for an hour. Few were allowed to see Amy's naked eyes. Sometimes I did, briefly, before the bedside lamp snapped off.

Only once did my camera catch Amy plain. One morning while she slept, sheets whitened by sunlight, I released the shutter. Even in dreams she frowned. Minutes later she woke and rushed to put on her face.

Syren still had the hair Amy hated. Thick, limp and black, it defied all chemicals and appliances designed to force curls. It always looked sopping wet, hanging there as if just doused with water. Syren's hair is longer, but still has Amy's bangs, scissored straight, hiding eyebrows.

Hiding something else.

Amy was into drugs long before that famous magazine cover of Syren, sprawled upon an ocean of pills, writhing on a million capsules and tablets and empty Rx bottles. You know the one: camera directly overhead, Syren's mouth cratered with pleased pain as she scooped up pills between her thighs. To me that photo is Amy playing Syren playing a character. Under studio lights she could assume any role. Performing seemed the only countermeasure to the downers she took every day. From the first snap and flash, her prescription listlessness disappeared, replaced by any emotion the photographer suggested: click/bitterness, click/euphoria, click/lust.

Anger really clicked.

We met in art school, though she darkened my periphery for most of our first year. A now-famous ballerina used to practice in a room walled with mirrors. Amy and I were both drawn there, she with sketchpad and charcoal, me behind a camera capturing reflections. Suddenly I was struck by the contrast in these two women, Goth-girl artist and regal dancer. To get them both in the shot I set a chair in the middle of the room and asked Amy to sit there. "Keep working, please," I said, "act as if I'm not here."

And she did, ignoring me totally, a concentration in charcoal. Scores of photos later, I asked Amy to look at me, act as if I'd intruded on her privacy. In a snap, her face clenched: nostrils flaring, lips flattening, I could almost hear her teeth grind. And those eyes, nothing but blackened rage. Her body bristled, hands shielding the sketchpad from my prying lens. Amy was so distracting, so captivating, I never saw the dancer leave.

It started there, Amy dropped into any character I suggested and the place didn't matter. We'd troll the city, looking for locations; seedy or gritty, it didn't matter to Amy. She'd tag along, quiet as a shadow, indifferent to anything happening around her until told what character to be: a drunk guarding her virginity at a biker bar; full, foul-mouthed rage at an all-night eatery; hiding shame as she pushed past protesters into an abortion clinic. With every click of my camera, she would slip further into character, until Amy wasn't there any more. As if she couldn't wait to tamp down her everyday self and explode into that make-believe world as someone else.

It was a high she couldn't seem to get to any other way. And like any junkie, Amy couldn't quite remember what happened afterwards. Her return to reality was usually accompanied by sex. Sometimes with me, most often with any willing bystander, man or woman, found at the scene. When it was me, foreplay commenced with the same wrath or giddiness or narcissism that characterized the shoot, the part played until release. Then Amy fell back on the bed.

As her dull eyes registered who I was—who she was—reality reappeared. She'd slink down the hall, never turning on the bathroom light and returning without makeup. Pulling up the sheet, Amy always turned away from me to sleep. When she was plain Amy, I was not allowed to use her, which made me dream of keeping her that way. I loved who she wasn't.

The next day, when we'd look at the results from the shoot, no emotion crossed her face. It was impossible to say if she recognized the person she'd become, or if she was even pleased with the photos. Amy never seemed eager for the next session or make suggestions of any sort. I saw varying shades of numb where excitement or

embarrassment should be. It seemed Amy had no plans for the future, but would make herself available any time, anywhere I requested. As if she had nothing else to do.

The only places she wouldn't go were the coffeehouses and galleries displaying my work. Talk was growing, but rarely about me. Amy was the star; I just happened to be the first one holding the camera.

Then came the photos no one could ignore: in a warehouse, on a loading dock filled with boxes. I told Amy to imagine what it would like to be product, something stacked and sold by the boxload, a commodity. And with that command, Amy became more withdrawn, fetal, curling in on herself. She didn't become someone else, she became no one, hollow, a living thing that somehow became lifeless. I stepped up close, just her face in the frame, to capture those dead eyes; the black makeup only enhancing the depth of vacancy. Then she did it, the act that rocketed us both into the spotlight: she grabbed a nearby box cutter.

Sure, I took credit for directing Amy that day. It propelled me into a career photographing models for fashion magazines. I worked tirelessly, expensively, but truthfully, without the same results. Everyone wanted to work with the man who discovered Syren. And I took complete advantage of the situation.

So did Amy. Or, at least, the next person who found her did. Someone with connections. Someone who suggested she change her name. Just like Amy, Syren always said yes.

Yesterday I saw the meme again. My photo, her close-up; once shocking, now everywhere. *Bad Hair Day* read the bright blue caption below Amy's dead eyes, the face everyone thinks is Syren. Her head is propped against cardboard, hand drawing a blade across her hairline, limp bangs parting, freshets of blood rolling down her forehead. These days, everyone assumes Photoshop, but I remember being as lost in that moment as she was. Amy never registered pain, didn't flinch while the box cutter did its job. I was too shocked to move, dumbfounded by how slowly she pulled the blade. It was pure luck that I kept a hard focus while the motor drive captured everything.

There were no photos of what happened afterwards; how the self-inflicted wound ripped away her pretense. If only the camera captured her face at the moment pain registered; when realization narrowed her eyes, unfastened tears and cheeks flushed with anguish. When she discovered what she'd done.

I was afraid what this might lead to, but didn't know how to tell her. Instead, I turned my back and refused to focus on her, thinking Amy would become whoever she wanted to be. And in that moment she left. Alone.

One look at the pictures and I could see her future, but it wasn't in me to take Amy there. She must have known it too. Her flat was empty a few days later, my calls unreturned until that number was abandoned. I never saw her again, in the flesh, anyway. Not until a minute ago, when she walked into the cocktail party and showed me Amy's face.

About the Author:

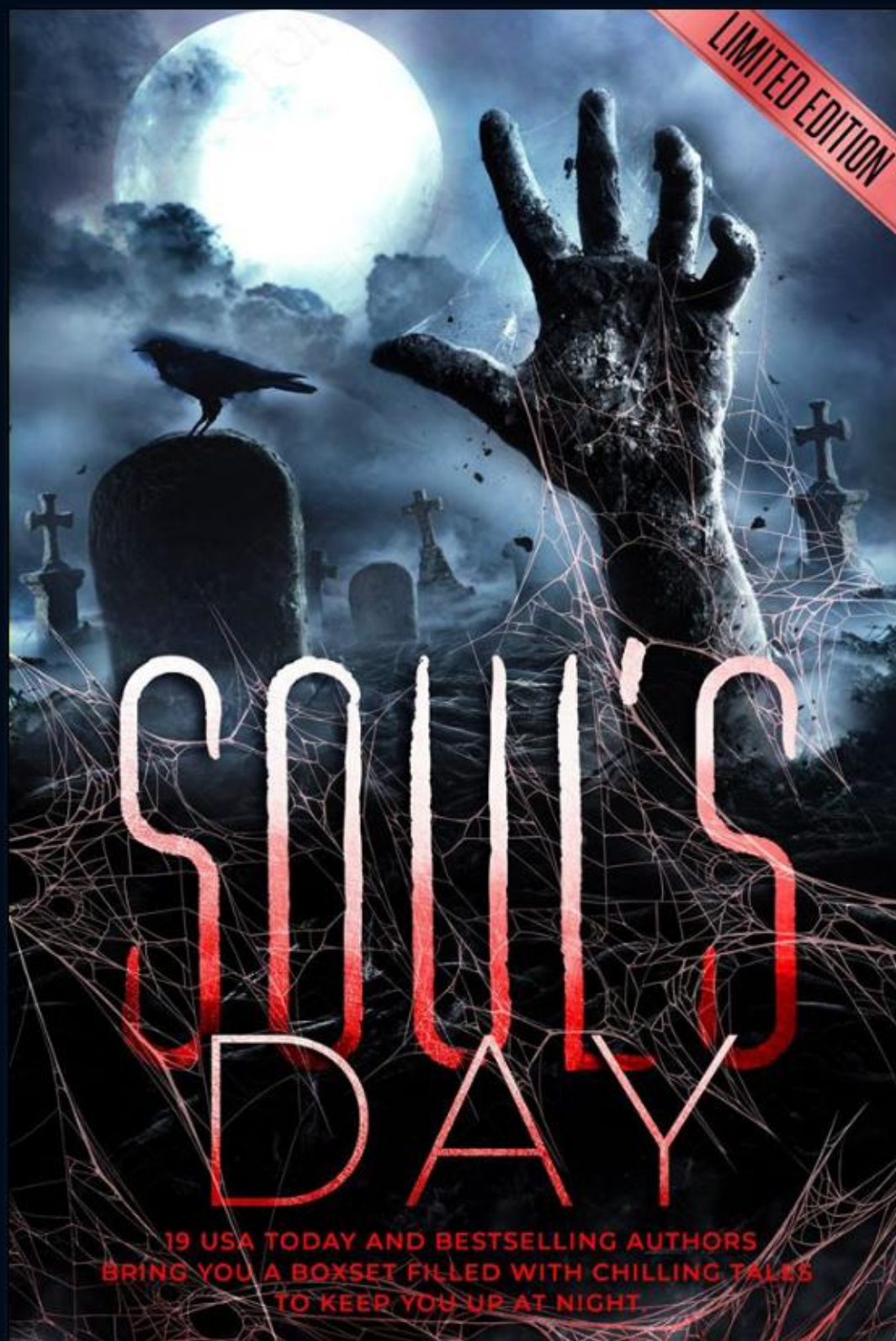
DL Shirey lives in Portland, Oregon under skies the color of bruises. Occasionally he lightens up, but his dark fiction can be found in *Confino*, *Zetetic*, *Liquid Imagination* and in anthologies from Truth Serum Press and Literary Hatchet.

Author Blog: [Fiction and Other Lies](#)

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A boxset of chills and thrills to keep you up at night!



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Ephialte materializes.

Standing at the foot of the bed, the elongated, alabaster-skinned creature with dilated black eyes licks his lips. The young man sleeps soundly, a rosary laced between his fingers. A timeworn Bible rests on the nightstand, highlighters and pens arranged next to it. If anyone else stood here they would see a man surrounded by peace granted by the faith in his god. Ephialte savors the mis-perceived sight, one he has seen thousands of times over the centuries.

He slowly walks to the side of the bed and opens the book to Psalm 91:5. The highlighted, circled passage written because of him, "You will not fear the terror of the night..." Ephialte silently laughs. *Words are just pretty things unless you truly believe...*

Years, which feel like a single day to Ephialte, culminate in this moment. His hand traces a quilt square, lingers on a loose thread, closes, and pulls. Slow. Deliberate. The comforter slides to the floor. The man, dressed only in boxers, shivers but remains on his back. Ephialte crawls onto the bed. His weight is no more than that of an insect. His fingers trail along the human flesh as he positions his knees astride the man's waist. His hands move from the stomach to the hollows below his ribs, deft fingers finding the invisible holes created over time.

The man groans.

Ephialte presses hard, pierces skin. The man's eyes pop open and he shrieks. Ephialte sneers, long sharp teeth sprout from his gums. He burrows for the last bit of his victim. The man's body locks up. Ephialte probes deeper until... *There it is.*

A microscopic battle rages inside the man. One he can't win. Behind his heart resides the last vestige of his soul. His screams melt into wracked sobs. Ephialte's tendrils encase the frantically beating muscle. The hammering against his hands sloughs off the final shreds of humanity. The man is now nothing more than flesh and bone.

Ephialte makes no sound as he withdraws, his work finished. He keeps at least one digit touching the man as he slips to the floor and Ephialte tucks the man back in. The man makes no sound beyond a sob. The Terror removes his finger. The man sits up. A hoarse scream fills the room. Ephialte slips into the shadows, disappearing from human eyes. The man climbs out of bed, looking directly at Ephialte but not seeing him. He urgently searches the room for a minute, then sits on the edge of the bed, head low. He grabs the Bible and hurls it across the room then opens the nightstand drawer. The safety clicks off as he removes the pistol. Putting it to his mouth, he pulls the trigger.

Ephialte vanishes.

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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The yearlong hibernation was over. Hunger reverberated throughout its body as it began to awaken amid the moldy earth, the dust, and the darkness.

The high point of Halloween for the residents of Hico, Texas was the one night opening of Gus Peterson's Spook Barn, an occasion started years ago. The old barn was dilapidated and not used other than on Halloween. A great setting for the annual event, its crumbling beams, littered old and musty straw, profuse spider webs, and roosting birds and bats only added to the atmosphere. And it was anticipated that this year all two hundred and fifty souls living in the small community of Hico would brave this Halloween tradition before the night was over. Peterson, his wife and two sons, Ernest and James, going all out to fix up as many scares and screams as they could.

When the first car arrived, Gus shooed his family into their hiding places and awaited the initial customers.

Gus, dressed in werewolf garb, growled and snarled as he took the five dollar admission from each of the three teenage boys and their dates. Gus raised his head and offered a blood curdling howl to the delight of the girls and the snickers of the boys as the group passed through the heavily cobwebbed entrance.

Gus looked out through the eye slits of his mask and saw three more carloads approaching.

As the second group, this one a young married couple and their parents, came walking up, the sound of a screeching chainsaw could be heard from inside along with

shrieks of terror. "Sounds like another good one this year, Gus," one of the couple's father's said.

Gus shook his hairy head. "You bet" came out muffled from under his mask.

The night progressed splendidly. As Gus had expected, just about everyone in town had turned out.

The people of Hico remained after The Spook Barn was officially closed for the night. The small town residents ate hardily from a long table set up with fried chicken, roast beef, mashed potatoes, an array of vegetables, and pecan and pumpkin pies, the atmosphere that of a harvest celebration as the people talked pleasantly about the bountiful fall crops and how blessed they had been.

Gus pulled his oldest son Ernest to the side.

"Where's the Davis brothers and Herbert Tolar? They're the only ones from town not accounted for," Gus asked.

"I expect Herbert ain't in too much of a hurry to get here," Ernest said as he chewed on a tough piece of roast.

"You mean he drew the short straw?"

"Yes sir. I suppose I shouldn't have told you, but I think you should know why the Davis boys will be bringing him here shortly in a subdued condition."

"Subdued?"

Unable to pulverize it, Ernest spit out the bit of roast. "The rest of the council figured Herbert would wait until everybody was out here then make a run for it. That's why the Davis brothers stayed behind to watch him. The called me earlier on my cell and told me they caught Herbert trying to do just that. They hog-tied him and put him in their pickup's bed."

Gus shook his head. "I won't tell nobody you told me ahead of time, son." He then sighed and added, "You and James best see if that thing is awake."

"Yes sir."

At a quarter of midnight, all the people cleared the table, and then they walked to their respective vehicles, returning later dressed in dark, brown-hooded robes. Torches were lit around the barn. The people then gathered together in a circle.

Just before the witching hour, seven people dressed in white robes came out of the barn. Along with Ernest, Gus' other son James was one of them, the group of seven approaching the circle.

"The sacrifice has been selected. The season is secured," James proclaimed.

The crowd made a collective murmur of approval just as a pickup drove up.

Two men got out of the truck and removed a squirming captive from the pickup's bed.

Words mixed with panic came from the crowd. "He must not be struggling." "He must go willingly." "He will spoil the sacrifice."

Herbert Tolar was shoved toward the barn, his face stricken with terror.

Ernest joined James and took Herbert from his captors. They motioned for someone to step forward from the circle, and Herbert's wife and three daughters obeyed.

"Would you rather they go in your place?" James asked Herbert.

Herbert stared pitifully at his family. In a moment he shook his head no.

"Untie him," Ernest said to the others dressed in white. Two came forward and removed the ropes.

Herbert began to weep. "Please," he begged. "I don't want to die."

"Die for the good of all," the crowd chanted, Herbert's family verbalizing louder than the others.

Herbert lowered his head. He turned and walked toward the barn with James and Ernest. Inside of the old building, they stripped him of his clothes and took him to a door hidden by the rear shadows of the barn.

"You must enter of your own will," Ernest commanded.

Herbert started to plead again but stopped. Knowing his lot was cast, Herbert slowly turned the doorknob and stepped inside and then closed the door behind him.

There was little light in the room. Most of it came from the burning torches outside. The shadows cast by the torch light undulated along the thick covering of webs that obscured most of the area, making the gossamer seem alive and breathing.

Herbert fell to his knees. In a trembling voice he implored, "Come and take me. Protect our land, our crops, and our harvest for one more year. Seal it with my blood, my flesh, and my bones."

Herbert heard a soft mewling, then saw a giant grey form begin to crawl forward.

An old saying from childhood came into Herbert's mind as fangs penetrated his head and injected paralytic venom that rushed quickly throughout out his body.

And as eight legs embraced him, "*Come into my parlor, said the spider to the fly*" faded in Herbert's brain.

About the Author:

Timothy C. Hobbs is a retired medical technologist living in Temple, Texas. He has published four novels, three novellas and two short story collections in the horror genre including *In the Blink of a Wicked Eye* from Sirens Call Publications as well as short stories in various anthologies such as The Saturday Evening Post's *Great American Fiction anthology 2019*.

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Walking Through Downtown | Phil Slattery

Walking through downtown, I spotted a man with long, clean, luxuriant hair that any balding old fart like myself would envy. When the time was right, I scalped him and left him screaming in a dark alley. Mom screamed when she saw my photo in the paper, though I don't know if the stimulus was seeing me in handcuffs or seeing me with long hair like I had as a boy.

About the Author:

Phil Slattery has a B.A. in German and Russian. He has been writing fiction sporadically since the late 1990's. His poetry and stories are in several collections available on Amazon. He is currently working on finishing a sci-fi/horror novel entitled *Shadows and Stars*. He hopes to follow that with three more novels over the next few years. He can be found on several social media.

Author Blog: [Slattery's Magazine for Writers](#)

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*Four gothic horrors from the pens of writers
Stephanie Ellis and Alyson Faye.*

SHADOW BOUND

A Gothic Quartet

STEPHANIE ELLIS & ALYSON FAYE

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Regrettably, I'd invited him in. You should never invite them in, all the paranormal investigators on the shows I loved and the treasure trove of folklore that fills the internet and libraries says so, and all the folklore is right. Halloween night, last night, two nights ago? Three or four, maybe? I've lost track of time over the course of the...

What do I call it? An assault? A sustained and tedious assault.

Nothing else I could call it, I guess. It's been a nightmare, though I haven't slept. There's no way I could sleep, even if exhaustion decided to try and take me down. It won't let me sleep. No rest for the...naïve, and naïve I'd certainly been imagining it had only been a little boy, thinking that terrible face had only been a mask. Why would I think anything differently? It was the night for it, after all. In my town trick or treating was still very much alive and well, though it had lost favor, from what I understand, in many other places.

My town. I loved my hometown.

I lived alone, until now, a middle-aged woman in a middle-class neighborhood in a Middle American town that was, of course, predominately Catholic. Born here, raised here, I'd stayed here my entire life, safe and sound from an increasingly darkening and violent world.

The enveloping of my home in darkness and silence had been instantaneous, though I hadn't immediately recognized it for what it was or who'd caused it. Just a few steps over my threshold and the little monster had brought the noiseless gloom. He'd gone straight to the bathroom, as he'd so sweetly asked to use, right to it without having been told where it was. Frowning, knowing something was wrong but conjuring excuses for my questions, I'd closed the front door unaware it would never open again, though I hadn't locked it.

I'd waited patiently for the child to finish his business, hoping that he'd been raised right and wouldn't leave a mess, but time passed and kept passing. After half an hour, he hadn't emerged. I wasn't angry or concerned for him, oddly enough. For some inexplicable reason, I was afraid, not for my unwanted guest, for myself. My skin prickling, I crept down the length of the murky hallway and cautiously pressed my ear to the door.

There should have been some sort of sound, little kid noises like lazy breathing, nervous chirps or singing, the unpleasant noise of bodily functions and splashing water, but there was nothing. Nothing at all. And that ratcheted up my fear. How could there be nothing? What was he doing in there? Uneasy about creepily spying on a child supposedly using the facility, I hurried away. In the living room, I sat in my favorite spot on the sofa, but did not turn on the television. I kept my eyes on the hallway and the shadows there, my thoughts wandering into insalubrious territory as I wondered what was going on in that little room.

Over an hour later, I couldn't pretend nothing was wrong, couldn't continue to make excuses to explain away this unusual situation. I went back to the bathroom door and listened again for a moment before knocking insistently. "Hello?" I called out loudly only to be met with no response whatsoever. "Is everything okay in there?" I waited for a reply. None came. "Do you need some help? Shall I call your mom or dad?" Again, no answer. There was only the unnerving quiet and it remained that way for hours and hours.

Anxious and afraid, I traveled from the living room to the end of the hall repeatedly, never to be acknowledged. With strict and convoluted laws an adult's actions pertaining to someone else's child, there was no way I was going to try busting in the door or even threatening the child to get him out. The last thing I needed was legal trouble, being accused of improprieties, being labeled a deviant of some sort, on top of this strange predicament.

I needed to get a hold of the authorities, perhaps they would know who he was, concerned parents having already initiated an Amber Alert. At the very least, they could get him out of my house and rid me of the weird responsibility. The tumultuous emotions stirring within me worsened when I discovered that neither my landline nor cell worked.

The familiar fluttering of a panic attack alarmed me when I found out I couldn't open the door. It roused into a coming rage when I looked out the peephole and saw nothing, looked out window after window and again and again saw nothing, not even the streetlights or dim glow of any neighbors' windows. Something mysterious and horrible was happening to me.

I went to my bedroom to get my medication I kept in my nightstand and took three different pills to chase away my anxiety. It would take an hour, at least, for them to begin their duties. I sat on the end of the bed to wait for them, but was startled when my grandfather clock woke from its nighttime slumber and began to chime ten in the morning. Over twelve hours had passed since I'd let the little monster in, twelve hours since he'd locked himself in my bathroom and refused so much as even answering my fretful queries.

I looked over my shoulder and could see the bathroom door though my open bedroom entrance and wondered yet again what was going on in there. No child was so eerily quiet, so patient for so long, so unnervingly inactive. It was at that cold realization that I recalled his disturbing appearance, the look of what I'd thought was a mask.

The blonde hair had been thin and stringy, his pale skin parched, eyes sunken into shadowy sockets, but it had been the mouth that was truly the stuff of Halloween nightmares. The thin lips had curled inward, rows of fangs poked through

them at varying depths appearing morbidly like thick stitches holding the mouth shut, only it wasn't being held shut. Had they quivered? Had the folds of flesh between the teeth palpitated as he'd asked to use the toilet? Had he drooled on himself? Even as I was forcing myself to remember such details, my rational mind couldn't resist excusing it all, dismissing what I'd seen as just a mask. While my mind had been preoccupied, I hadn't noticed him emerge from the lavatory.

The tentacles of panic throbbed and slithered inside me with a newfound aggression I doubted my meds would be able to control. Slowly, gingerly, I stood, physically bracing myself on the corner of the antique dresser that had been in my family for three generations, bracing myself emotionally for what was to come, be it physical or emotional or both. The unknown was terrifying, but what I did know was that this unwanted guest had a plan and was carrying it out with a preternatural patience and the distinct fortitude of someone years beyond what he seemed. He wasn't a child, another thing I knew.

To the bathroom I went and was startled yet again by the hourly ring of the grandfather clock. How quickly time had passed, frighteningly so. Lost those minutes were, to my anxiety, to my fear, to the scheming thing loose in my house. It took but a second to see the small room was empty. I turned off the light and closed the door then went to the clock and reached behind it. My knuckles scraped along the wall in the tight space I fumbled to find the switch I hadn't touched in years and, as I had the bathroom light, turned off the chime.

At the convergence of the living room and hallway the vantage point allowed for a cursory, although obstructed, view of nearly every room in my humble home and the lights throughout flickered in bizarre tandem with the pulsating tentacles of my unease. He was toying with me, setting the mood, so to speak. I knew that as surely as I knew he'd been the one that had drawn the dark curtain over the whole house. It was a prolonged antic, the flickering of the lights. As he'd sat for so long in the bathroom, to accomplish nothing more than to unnerve me, my abode's illumination sputtered off and on for the next several hours, during which I sat in my favorite spot and tried to figure out exactly what it wanted.

If it had wanted to kill me, I would have been dead long ago. The plotting little demon had a different agenda. I wasn't sure I wanted to know what it was. Though the initial shimmering of an inkling started to take place, I didn't want it to. I made excuses yet again, found reasons to think of other things and venture into realms more implausible but far more palatable than what my apprehension dreaded the most.

I was being groomed for consumption, this haunted house trickery was designed to cull my turbulent emotions into a seasoning for my blood, my meat, my bones, whatever the creature had a particular taste for. The otherworldly fed off fear as well, paranormal investigators always said so with matter-of-fact tones that were as disturbing as deliberately bloodcurdling words of warning. Either way, I was food for the beast.

Or maybe it wanted my house, a sanctuary from the outside world, however transitory it might be for something that outlived a mere mortal many times over. Was it a gypsy of sorts, a wandering nomad that took residence in random homes picked from the countless for no discernable reason than it would simply do for the time being? I imagined it trekking at night, hiding its hideousness in the shadows, feeling comfortable out in the open only on Halloween when people would assume its ghastly grimace was only a mask.

Maybe I was nothing more than a relief from an eternal boredom, a living toy with which to torment and derive enjoyment from. I pondered the mental state of that which was forever and had seen and experienced everything, or nearly everything, the world had to offer perhaps many times over and imagined it having become a soul-jaded and heart-hardened being finding amusement in cruel things.

The blinking lights should have been accompanied by some other scary chestnut, or so I thought, but there was no companion cliché. There was the flickering and the silence and nothing more. The hush went on and on and it was excruciatingly horrible, worse than some hackneyed creaking floorboards, sinister giggling from deep in the gloom, or maniacal whispers that weren't entirely clear. The paranormal shows I loved to binge hadn't prepared me for the terrible tedium of reality, the endless nothing of this quiet assault. As monotonous as it was and as exhausted as I was, sleep eluded me as if hiding along with the creature somewhere in my house.

After hours innumerable, something finally started to happen. During the winking of the lights, in those moments of pitch black, I thought I could hear movement around me. There was the low rush of shuffling feet on the area rugs, sometimes in the deep, sometimes so close I could have reached out and touched my little tormentor. Tapings came too, low and rapid, never lasting longer than the blink in the dark during whence they happened.

Tap, tap, tap over on the wall across the room. It could have been in the hallway, I wasn't sure. Tap, tap, tap, on the dining room table. And in the light, flowers appeared as a centerpiece. Roses, blood red, Oddly fitting. Tap, tap, tap on the armrest right beside me. I felt a caress of air on the back of my hand when that happened. It was even warm. Had it been a breath? Had the thing leaned close to me, its shuddering, tooth-shredded lips almost kissing? This game, like the others, went on for hours until I'd had enough.

I screamed, a shattering shriek at the top of my lungs intended only to let out my fear and frustration. I expected nothing to come of it, but something did. The lights stopped their infernal blinking and when they stayed on, my little visitor appeared. It was an intentionally surreal sight, quixotic in its bizarreness. He sat in the armchair across the room like a well-

behaved little boy, straight and tall, hands folded in his lap, short legs dangling and perfectly still. He was surrounded by flowers of every imaginable variety in luxurious arrangements erupting from beautifully ornate vessels. Were it not for his grotesque face, licentious expression, creepy smile, he might have been posing for a Renaissance painting.

Having him sitting before me was worse than not knowing exactly where he was in the dark. Evil oozed from him, a thick miasma as sickly sweet as the aroma of the flowers. Had the stench been here all along and I simply hadn't noticed it, or was it something he could do when he wanted, a wicked flirtation of sorts? His obvious presence was profoundly terrifying, the look on his face educated goosebumps over the whole of my body, and I would swear over my very soul as well. With a trembling voice, I barely was able to get out, "What are you?"

"You know," he answered, grin widening. "You just won't allow yourself to think it."

As clichéd as it was, I had to ask that universal question, "What do you want?" Though I was terrified of the answer, any answer. Whatever it was, it would be devastating, horrific, perhaps resulting in my end and yet I wasn't prepared for what he actually said.

"I want a lover," the monster replied pointedly.

Dear God, with the unsettling monotony, he'd been courting me. I burst into tears, a deep, painful, guttural wailing, because I knew I didn't have a choice in the matter.

About the Author:

Joshua Skye is the award-winning, best-selling author of *The Angels of Autumn* and *Cradle*. His short stories have appeared in Sirens Call's *Childhood Nightmares: Under the Bed* and *Monster Brawl*. He lives in Texas with his husband Ray and their son Syrian.

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Heaven's Doors | Marge Simon

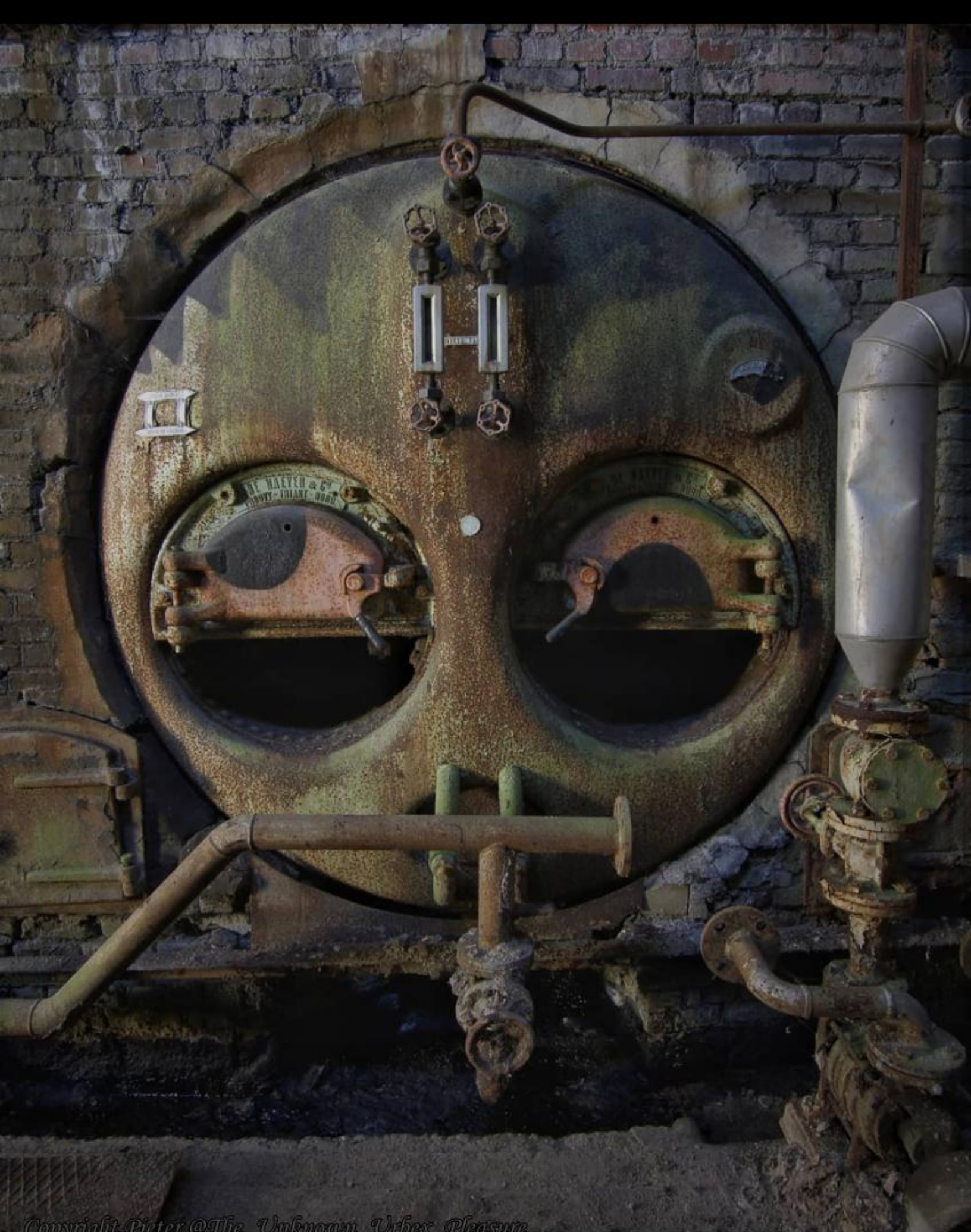
He doesn't remember how he got here, yet there is a staircase behind him. He must have climbed up, therefore can return down the stairs, but they shimmer and disappear before his eyes. It is very hot on this level. The floor is spotless, and the air reeks of disinfectant. There are three doors before him. One opens to let in a blinding light. When he covers his eyes, he is immediately aware of agonized shrieks and moans that issue from its source. The next door is painted white. Someone has tried to break into it, the wood has been dented as if by the pounding of fists. The handle will not turn and comes away in his hand. The third door slowly opens, a blackness thick with portent, the music of a cello lures, a daunting challenge he cannot deny, for there must be a reason he's here. He plunges forward into the core of that Unholy Dark, which is when the voices begin, surrounding his mind, shredding his identity, sucking his protests into the infinite wailing vortex known as the Hereafter.

About the Author:

Marge Simon is an award-winning poet/writer. Her works have appeared in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Dark Moon Digest*, *New Myths*, *Silver Blade*, *Polu Texni*, *Crannog*, *JoCCA* and numerous pro anthologies. She is a multiple Stoker winner and Grand Master Poet of the SF & F Poetry Association. She attends the ICFA as a guest annually, and is on the board of HWA.

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The bodies looked as they always did, and it had been many years since the sight of one frightened me. The Korean War had many horrors, and corpses. The shipwreck lay before me not even a mile from the coast. One of its crew stared at me from a portside window, his eyes dull, skin bloated and white, suspended in the water within the cabin for days.

I made my way to the small fishing boat, my weighted feet moved sluggishly along the sea floor. The boat had struck some rocks during a recent storm. While some of the passengers escaped, others had been taken by the sea. I was sent down to assess the damage so retrieval could begin.

The world was different down here, the rocky bottom with its swaying seaweed turning into a hazy distortion of shapes after maybe thirty feet in front of me. All I could hear was the metallic noise of air bubbles escaping my helmet as fresh oxygen was pumped in from the boat above. My sense of touch went no further than the suit which protected me. The world outside was slow, and silent.

I placed my hand against the hull, running my hand along the ruined wood exterior. The boat had been dragged by the current over some rocks. The damage was jagged, the innards of the boat had spilled out of the wound and were gently moving with the current along the sea floor. Peering inside the hole I cast my light and saw books and paper floating in the water, canned goods lay on the floor alongside an overturned pantry shelf. Particles danced in the cone of light as I scanned the room. There he was. In the corner. The other crewmate. He was turned away from me, suspended between the floor and ceiling. Small fish had already begun to claim him.

I cut through the darkness inside with my light one more time and told the surface where to find the bodies. There would be no open casket funerals for these men. I glanced back behind me and saw the void. The world over my shoulder simply faded into a blue nothing. I was finished and signaled the boat to prepare to bring me up. Turning back to the wreck I saw that directly above me a cluster of flora danced in front of the beams of light from the sun above. Strange, local plant life shouldn't have started to overtake the boat so soon. I looked closer at the swaying silhouette. Wait. It wasn't plant life.

It was hair.

A startled gasp escaped my throat as I raised my lantern and saw a new body peering down at me. It was a woman, and only her hands and face were visible over the side. The corpse was positioned in a pose of almost macabre curiosity, peeking down at me from the deck. None of the survivors had mentioned a woman on board. But why would they? They were all married men, if it got out that they had a woman on board it wouldn't take much imagination to predict what would happen to them once they returned to shore. I made a note of it; but couldn't take my eyes off the motionless face staring down at me. I took one step backward, then another. Two more steps. The brass helmet hissed as air was pumped into it.

I pulled myself away from its gaze and faced the void. So many bodies, so much violence has been committed in front of me. It had been many years since I felt shock at the sight of death. What an odd way to die. Even in death she kept her grip on the railing. It wasn't the strangest way I had seen death take shape, but it was certainly up there with the most memorable. Still...

I turned back toward the ship, and my feet planted themselves to the sea floor. The woman was no longer gripping the rail. She was standing. The murky waters had started to take away the details of the ship, but the silhouette was still visible. Her hair flowed and moved with a life of its own, and her slim figure and dancing dress held a strange beauty. We both stood still in a silent eternity. I tried to move towards my extraction point but was beholden to the sight in front of me. A sense of tension had seized my joints. The surface was asking what was wrong. No words would come.

With a sense of grace she stepped onto the railing, and then over. The motion broke her spell, and a sound of panic filled my helmet. I turned toward the void once more and pushed forward as quickly as the sea would let me. I told them to prepare for my extraction, and the panic in my voice was evident. They asked what was wrong, but I had no words to give them. This was impossible. Corpses never MOVE. My feet moved as though the sea itself was against me, the point directly beneath the boat seemed so far away.

My mind raced with ideas of what lay behind me. Of the woman touching down on the sea floor and racing towards the brown-suited man with his strange breathing apparatus. I could die down here, in this alien environment. I reached the extraction point. "Bring me up!"

They started to pull up the tether and hose, but there was so much slack to go through first. The urge to turn around pushed its way into my mind. My breathing was quick, adrenaline coursing through my body. This was impossible.

The ship was a murky shape in the ocean fog, and at the edge of it, coming into clear view, was the woman. She walked across the sea floor as slow as I had been, but with no struggle. This was her world, and I was a visitor in it. She reached out with both hands as if to welcome me to it, and a smile spread across her face. My adrenaline turned to fear. Heart pounding, mind killing fear.

A scream escaped my lips. I was going to die down here. My atmospheric suit would be my coffin. Death approached me with open arms. Twenty feet. Fifteen. I had escaped death and seen its face for so many years and it had finally come to take me.

My cries of terror echoed inside the brass helmet, tears spilled down my face. Her face was thin and grey, one eye a piercing blue. The other eye was a hollow, dark socket. She was on me, I could almost feel her fingertips touching the suit.

The slack had become taut and I began to rise toward the ship. The smiling face of death fell away as I started my ascent. Within moments something touched my boot, a pressure clamped down on it. A hand. With a primal wailing I struggled and shook my leg, a tension growing between the harness and the woman as they fought to see who would claim me. Blind, unadulterated fear escaped my lips in shrieks that tore at my throat. I was caught between life on the surface and death on the ocean floor. I cried as I fought to escape her grip, when it suddenly vanished. The boat pulled me free of her grip, and I ascended towards the light of the surface, cries of terror still filling the suit.

They unscrewed me from the suit in a hysterical fit, and I was deemed unfit for duty. I quit soon after and found a job on the mainland. So many decades have passed since that moment. I never found a rational explanation for what I saw. Wars would come and go. Worldly terrors filled the headlines and nightly news, but none of it frightened me. I realize now that the greatest fears are those we cannot find answers to. There are worse horrors than those that man can make. On some nights I'd find myself dreaming of the ocean floor. That beautiful, awful face gazing at me with arms outstretched. I never went in the water again.

About the Author:

Born and raised in the American Midwest, Scott Vincent found a love of writing horror and science fiction at an early age. When he's not typing away at a keyboard or having his nose in a book you can find him at the nearest movie theater or video game store. This is his first story to be published.

The PSL Girls | Sheri White

Chuck glared at the gaggle of girls waiting to order pumpkin spice lattes. They had been coming every day, wearing their Ugg boots and taking selfies with their cups, since August. In *Texas*.

They don't care about the most important part of fall – Halloween. Chuck had tried making conversation with the girls as he swept floors or tidied up the milk and sugar counter. They would pretend to be interested in his descriptions of horror movies, then giggle together when his manager would scold him.

But today was Halloween, which meant that tomorrow, those stupid girls would be ordering peppermint mochas and wearing Santa hats, posting their stupid faces to Instagram.

Today, he would give them a Halloween scare they'd never forget.

Chuck ducked into the back and slipped a hockey mask over his face, the tiny eye slits making it difficult to find the chainsaw he hid under a towel.

He busted through the door, started the chainsaw, then ran screaming into the girls waiting to order, loving the looks of terror on their faces.

It was when the spurting blood blinded him and he was hit by flying limbs that he realized he should have removed the chain.

About the Author:

Sheri White's stories have been published in many anthologies, including *Tales from the Crust* (edited by Max Booth III and David James Keaton), *When the Clock Strikes 13* (edited by Kenneth W. Cain), and the upcoming *Tree Lighting in Deathlehem* (edited by Michael J. Evans and Harrison Graves) and *New Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* (edited by Jonathan Maberry).

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Janie and Bobby trudged up the sidewalk, walking past other children dressed in costumes too. It was Halloween, their favorite time of the year. Children could go door to door, knock, and after yelling, 'trick or treat,' candy would be poured into their waiting bags. If the adult refused, the kids played tricks on them, and they got away with it.

Janie and Bobby loved the treats, but they loved doing the tricks even more. Most of all, they enjoyed doing nasty, terrible tricks.

"It's tradition," Mama told them.

If the adults gave them candy, then fine, family rules entailed not to do anything to the person. Just say thank you, walk away and head over to the next residence. But for the one who said, 'No treats here, go away!' they were allowed to do what their family had been doing going all the way back since the early 1900s.

Janie and Bobby couldn't wait. The past couple of years they hadn't been able to play any of their tricks. Every door they knocked, the owners handed over candy, fruit, popcorn balls, and money. But when they woke up this morning, they sensed that this night would be different.

Nothing had happened so far. Both of their bags laden heavy with the fruits of their labor, they stopped before the white picket fence that surrounded the yard of a pretty white Cape Cod home. It looked so normal and so . . . suburbia.

It washed over them. The feeling they had on awakening that morning. They would finally get what they always wanted.

Janie and Bobby lifted their masks up and looked at each other, shark grins on their sweet, chubby faces. The masks covering their faces once more, they opened the gate and skipped up the leaf strewn path to the front door. No Halloween decorations anywhere and no lit jack-o-lantern on the porch. Only a closed door painted a cheery blue greeted them.

They knocked and waited.

The door didn't creak as it opened. In the doorway stood a little old lady. Her gray hair was swept up in a bun and she wore a cheery flowered print top and white pants. She peered at them, her eyes blinking behind red wire framed glasses.

"Oh, I am sorry," she said, "but I forgot to buy candy to hand out tonight."

Bobby grinned. "That's okay. We rather not have any treats. Tricks are better."

He tossed aside his bag. The sweets spilled out and scattered across the porch. After whipping off his mask, he brandished a real knife he took from his belt. He had dressed as a serial killer on purpose this morning. His sister was garbed as Lizzie Borden, her axe gripped in her fist. She dropped her own bag and raised the axe high above her head, the sharp edge glinting in the porch light.

The old lady stepped out onto the porch. "I've been waiting for you, my dears. Human killers are not very smart. Not when inhuman ones have perfected their own bag of tricks for eons. My kind has been hunting their prey the hard way for centuries. Many still do. Not me. I am getting too old for that and found an easier way. Usually I decorate my place to attract regular human children on this night, but when I moved here and heard of the murders that been going on in this town for a long time, I devised a different tactic." She flashed a wide smile and both children noticed that her teeth had grown long and sharp. "It's only justice for the humans in this town and delivery food for me."

Her face split, the pieces falling to the floor. A snout jutted out and pointed ears grew from the top of her head. The rest of the body followed. A giant, shaggy wolf-like creature covered in gray fur stood on clawed hind feet before the children. It snatched them both to its breast before they could escape and carried them indoors. Bobby and Janie screamed, but the sounds were silenced as the door slammed shut.

About the Author:

Pamela K. Kinney gave up long ago trying not to listen to the voices in her head and given over to the madness of writing horror, fantasy, science fiction, and nonfiction ghost books ever since. One of her horror fiction, *Bottled Spirits*, was runner-up for the 2013 WSFA Small Press Award. She is a member of Horror Writers Association and Virginia Writers Club.

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Every morning that I drive to work, I think about how lucky I am to be a doctor. After my wife left me for good, it has been the main stabilizing thing in my life. My wife...I really loved her, but she also drove me crazy. We argued about everything. The final straw between us came when I killed her favorite. She had Sonja before we were married. She lavished a lot of attention and care on Sonja and it eventually came time for me to plan her demise. She was young so I had to make it look good, but my wife knew what I had done and could not bear to be with me any longer. Instead of exposing me, she packed all of her stuff and left without another word. We are still technically married, but it's been over three years since I have seen her.

I get to work early every morning. I want to be prepared as I am usually stuck in surgery all-day long. In my office I overlook my surgery load for the day and make additions to any patient files that need to be updated. I am not the fastest surgeon, but there have been days when I have completed as much as thirty procedures in a single day. Most surgeries are small and don't take too much time, but occasionally I have large ones to perform as well. I make sure that no matter what, all patient waivers are signed by all necessary parties before I start cutting. This has saved me on those rare times when I've had to kill again...

Sonja's death was quick. Just a simple slip and...oops...gone. I relished in the thought that I had the power of life and death in my simple hands. I cried after I realized what I had done to Sonja, but then the realization of my power kept me in check from crying on successive kills. City officials, police officers, neighbors...anyone that transgressed upon me in some way would eventually have a need for my services and then they would lose their...

"Doctor, I'm sorry to interrupt, but we have the first patient under sedation." She had interrupted my reverie, but she was right. It was time to go and I knew that today I would kill again. As I walked into the surgery room, I remembered how the mayor had ridiculed me at a party that he threw about four months ago. Since this was a small town, all learned people and officials knew each other and often invited each other over for festivities. He had not overlooked me; since he had invited me, but when he introduced me he referred to me as the 'town butcher' and laughed in my face. Soon it would be my turn to laugh. I checked the patient's file; Molly. Little Molly would soon join Sonja, and all the others, in death. Molly was under sedation and her all-purpose waiver of fault had been signed by the mayor himself. This was supposed to be a small and simple procedure so I dismissed everyone else to work on other cases and soon I was alone with Molly.

Molly was sedated. She was barely conscious; awaiting intubation. She had been given enough gas to make her almost completely unconscious so I had to wait. I watched Molly's face as she slowly regained consciousness, but still lacked the ability to command her limbs. I propped her head so she could see better. That is when I struck. I took my scalpel and sliced upon her stomach with one hard and masterful stroke. This caused some amount of blood to splatter against the wall, but it did not deter me. I saw her eyes widen in fear just before I reached inside of her and pulled out her bowels with a hard yank and held them up to her face and squeezed them as hard as I could in my gloved hand until things seemed to pop and ooze between my fingers. I lost Molly by this point. I think she passed out first, but her little heart had given out. I could hear the heart monitor as it registered the flatline. I felt powerful, invigorated, and alive. I felt like laughing, but I did not want to arouse suspicion. I would have time for that later. I still had a part to play as the caring doctor.

I quickly put Molly's guts back inside of her and stitched her up as nicely as I could. I cleaned her up as well as the walls of the surgery room before I called someone in. I then explained that although the surgery had not gone well and that even though this was supposed to have been a simple procedure, complications had occurred and poor little Molly's body could not stand the shock. Of course I was questioned about what happened and why I did not call for assistance, but I reassured everyone that I had done all that I could and it was just one of those fluke things. There was a lot of discussion about how this would affect the hospital as the mayor had a lot of power in this town and the local media might get wind of this too. It was a small enough town that news of one death did not go unnoticed. I stuck to my story and the hospital manager took it upon herself to break the news to the mayor.

I silently followed her until she walked past the double doors into the waiting room. I listened from behind the thin, closed doors. I held my hand to my mouth as I wanted to start laughing and had to get a hold of myself. This is so damn funny. I am a respected citizen in this town. I am a killer who will kill again and again and probably get away with it for as long as I like as long as I make it look good. It was all so damn funny. I almost pissed myself in mirth as I heard the hospital manager tell the mayor, "I am so sorry Mayor Fallberg. Molly did not pull through. I am sorry to tell you that she died of shock during surgery..." The mayor started to wail. His cries of anguish and loss filled our small hospital. Between his cries I heard him mutter, "She was my little girl...She was the best thing in my life...She was everything to me..." My listening was interrupted by a tap on my shoulder. I turned and the attendant said, "Doctor, I know that you must be upset about the loss of your patient, but we have others that are waiting. You have a cocker spaniel in surgery-two and a Persian cat in surgery-three." I walked back into the animal hospital surgery area encircled in my secret halo of triumph. I would kill again, but right now there were other people's pets to actually save.

About the Author:

Greg McWhorter, Ed.D. is an educator and writer who resides in Southern California. Since the 1980s, he has worked for newspapers, radio, television, record labels, and film before entering the field of education. He has been a guest speaker at several universities, TV shows, film documentaries, and the San Diego Comic-Con. To date, he has had two books published of his horror fiction.

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Sheila | *Sima Greenfield*

"After dinner would you like to play in the backyard, Noah?" Sheila, the babysitter asked the small nine-year-old boy as he wiped plates dry. His eyes widened with surprise. Noah was grounded after accidentally hurting his sister. As his siblings watch TV, he and Sheila slip outside to the backyard. Skipping gleefully toward the swing set hearing the crunch of autumn leaves with each step, Noah looks back to Sheila.

Sheila's eyes get larger and larger as they get further from the house into the darkness of the evening. Shaking off the creepy feeling he starts swinging but notices her smile is really big. Bigger than normal. Bigger than he thinks a person could smile.

"I want to show you something!" she says through her smile not moving her mouth. She reaches her hand out. Noah grasps her hand. It's ice cold. He looks into her large teeth glaring back at him and a shiver goes down his spine. They start walking towards the dark woods that his parents have forbidden him from exploring.

Then Noah hears yelling from the house. He turns back to see Sheila. She's over there but what is right here? Then he looks at who is holding his hand. Its eyes are black and her skin is white.

"I want to take you to a special place," she says in a voice that wasn't Sheila's anymore.

About the Author:

Sima Greenfield is a Marketing Associate by day and horror movie fanatic by night in Los Angeles, CA. When she's not working, she enjoys hiking, watercolor painting and exploring spooky places.

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Mr. Lonely | *Alyson Faye*

Mother's wardrobe door swung open. Inside Eddie glimpsed rails of tea dresses, cheeky hats with veils, fedoras, gloves. It was a treasure trove of dress-up—now to be recycled for all those who sat waiting so patiently in the basement.

The missing, forgotten and abandoned. His new family. Loneliness could be a killer.

He pulled out a red feather boa. *For Georgina*. He smeared red lipstick on her flaccid lips, propping her up as she lolled.

'You have to look pretty for your photograph.'

The camera's unblinking eye captured the tableau. As it had done so many times before.

About the Author:

Alyson lives in the UK. Her fiction has been published in several print anthologies - Colp, Strange Girls, Deadcares and most recently in *Diabolica Britannica* and on many sites. Her latest publication collection is *Darkness Calls*. (Reviewed on Kendall). Her work has been read on BBC Radio, on podcasts, and placed in competitions. She edits for an indie press and walks her dog on her the moor daily.

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*Believe nothing you hear,
and only one half that you see.*

*-THE SYSTEM OF DR. TARR AND PROF. FETHER
BY EDGAR ALLAN POE (1845)*



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He seemed the gentlest of creatures, almost like a cartoon mouse or an Asian Charlie Chaplin, complete with black bowler and cane. His gait was a little awkward...kind of a stutter-step on the verge of severe drunkenness, with the cane saving him from the pavement at every curb or crosswalk. You would see this tiny fellow around town, clomping about, minding his own, always with a big smile, which always overshadowed his pencil-thin moustache. He was just one of those characters...the ones whose histories were created for them on the lips of bemused children or bored housewives. I had no issue with him. But my friends...they did.

You know how kids are. Especially kids in a group. They called us the Three Musketeers around town, as we were never seen alone. The group consisted of yours truly (Charlie), Ricky, and Dom, which was short for Dominic. Amongst the group, however, Dom was referred to as 'Dumb' instead, which was funny because he was the smartest of the group, kind of a nerd, really. I guess it's like calling a big fat motherfucker 'Tiny' or something like that. Dumb was also skinny as hell, and had the reddest hair you could imagine. He always said he was Italian, but I don't know too many Italians with flaming red hair and freckles. The other kids would pick on him constantly, but Ricky and I always had his back. Ricky, on the other hand...he was dumb for real. He was held back in kindergarten and struggled ever since. But the girls loved him, and always followed him around school. They always said he was a cutie, and sometimes we would catch him at school in the coatroom making out with some starry eyed little girl. He just had those good genetics...jet black hair, tan skin, and a little muscle to him, too. As far as good old Charlie goes, well, I was pretty much a nobody. No looks, no smarts, no talent, nothing. Dry as a popcorn fart. Invisible as the plague.

It was that one particular summer, the summer of '88, when everything started to change. Me and my buddies, we were all twelve...that weird puberty shit was kicking in and we were all getting moody as fuck. Every day felt like 1,000 degrees outside, and boredom was always the enemy. Unfortunately, in an attempt to ease their testosterone-fueled frustrations, my friends began to turn their attention to the town mystery, Mr. Budokai. It started innocently enough, with Ricky and Dumb making noises towards the man or flipping him off as we passed, but it progressed as the heat of the summer intensified. I was never one to pick on a person...it just didn't feel right. But, as they say, peer pressure is a bitch. So I followed, as a lamb to slaughter.

The act that pushed things over the edge took place at the fruit market downtown. We saw Mr. Budokai there nearly every Saturday, and Ricky told me they had a plan. I didn't like the sound of it one bit, and I tried to get them to go with me to see the new Freddy Krueger movie instead, but they just wouldn't have it. I tried to make up excuses why I couldn't go, but my friends knew me too well. "Oh come on Chuck, why do you gotta be such a pussy about it? You got a hard-on for this weirdo or something?" Ricky had such a way with words, God love him. I was stuck.

The night before this plan was supposed to take place, I thought at length about this mysterious fellow and all of the stories I had heard about him. There were so many possibilities floating around...that he was retarded, that he was an ex-ninja, that he had bodies buried in his back yard, or that he might even be some sort of war hero from his native country. All bullshit, I was sure, but I just wished my friends hadn't taken an interest in harassing this person that we really knew nothing about. I even asked my parents what his deal was, and neither of them had the slightest clue. It seemed Mr. Budokai was a puzzle no one could solve.

That Saturday started out with a lump in my throat because I was nervous as hell. I didn't know what was going to happen...my only hope was that Budokai would simply not show. Unlikely, but not impossible. My friends and I made it to the market at around noon, and to my relief, our target was nowhere to be seen. I tried to speed up the process and suggested other dastardly things to do on such a beautiful, sunny day but Dumb just replied "Don't worry. He'll be here. He's always here." So we waited, and watched.

Fate would have it no other way, it seemed. At around 1, we spotted the little fellow stumbling his way up the street about a block away. The largest smile grew upon Ricky's face, and he walked away from us, into the vendors' stands. "Where the hell is he going?" I asked. Dumb replied "To get ammunition, of course. It's gonna get messy!" I watched Ricky as he bought a bunch of tomatoes, put them into a plastic bag, and quickly made his way back to us, grinning uncontrollably. Fuck. So this was their plan.

Everything seemed in slow-motion as Mr. Budokai neared the market, step by step, heartbeat by heartbeat. Ricky and Dumb each took a few tomatoes as they perched behind one of the stands, like snipers in wait. I stayed a few steps behind. I wanted no part of it. Even at that moment, I didn't think Ricky or Dumb had enough balls to go through with it. Just as that thought entered my mind, Ricky yelled "Hey Budokai, you weird little fuck, check this out!" A tomato sailed through the air as Budokai froze in mid step and spotted the little red orb coming for him. *SPLOOSH!* Right on his black vest it smashed, as everyone at the market looked in his direction. The man made eye contact with

us, but his smile never wavered, which I thought was the strangest thing. That singular tomato opened up the floodgates, as Ricky and Dumb pelted the man with more and more. The tomatoes' entrails engulfed this poor man, and everyone started to laugh. Dumb motioned to me and yelled "Come on, you pussy!" I wanted to walk away, but I didn't.

I came up behind my friends, put my hand in the bag, and pulled out the largest, juiciest tomato I could. One would be enough, just so they couldn't say I wussed out. I cocked my arm back, and wailed that fucker right at the little man. Unfortunately, my aim was a little different than my friends'. My tomato hit Mr. Budokai square in the face, with a force that knocked him to the ground and sent his bowler cap into the street. His face was drenched in the gooey juice and dripping seeds (mixed with a bit of blood, I'm sure), and everything stopped. The laughter stopped. Hell, there was no sound at all. There were just the stares of the people, including my friends, aimed squarely at me. Mr. Budokai sat there, frozen, looking quite the mess, and he stared at me as well. But again, somehow...his smile remained.

I ran from the market with a speed that could only be born of embarrassment and shame. My legs burned like fire as tears streamed down my cheeks the whole way to my house. I could not believe what I had done, but I also cursed the kind of luck that would allow my action, over everyone else's, to turn a prank into something more. My parents knew that I was upset but there was no way I could tell them what happened. How could I have been so stupid? I didn't want anything to do with it, but I took part anyways. I hurt that man, and he did absolutely nothing to me.

For the entire week after, I kept replaying the event over and over again in my mind...I wanted to take it back, to somehow make amends. I didn't want any part of the Musketeers, either...those fools were the ones who got me into this whole thing in the first place. They kept calling me on the phone, but I told my mom I didn't want to talk, that they were no longer my friends at all. I just sat in my room, alone with my guilt. *What could I do?*

It would take some nerve, and a whole lot of balls, but I settled on making an apology to Mr. Budokai. I had to...it was simply the right thing to do. I knew where he would be on Saturday, if he wasn't too embarrassed. Again, at the market. I would follow him until we got away from the crowd, and tell him how sorry I was...that it just got out of hand. It was my only option.

And so the day came, and just like the weekend before, that same lump in my throat appeared, but with nervousness that was much stronger and debilitating this time around. I was sweating and my hands were shaking. I did not want to face this man...not just because I was embarrassed but because the guy was strange as fuck and I didn't know how he would react. For all I knew he could bop me with his cane and beat the living shit out of me. Still, I probably deserved it.

I made my way to the market, thinking of what I would say and how I would approach him, dreading the moment. Again, at first Budokai was not there yet, so I set up shop...another sniper in wait. It seemed forever, and my heart beat faster and faster, with my nerves as raw as a rotting tooth. And, eventually, there he was...waddling up the street. I felt like I was going to have a fucking heart attack. I stood by, out of sight, and watched him as he began to browse. He was so polite to everyone he came in contact with, and always with that damned grin! Another thing I did notice, however, was a small bandage on the bridge of his nose...remnants of my stupidity. After about a half hour, he finished up his shopping, and made his way up the street, with a few bags of groceries. I followed, about ten yards behind. It was the moment of truth.

As I continued behind this man, my curiosity began to get the best of me. All of these stories about Budokai began to enter my mind...were any of them true? I could've approached him and apologized right away, but something told me to keep following. *Where on Earth does a man like this live? What of his family? Is it a nice house?* I was going to find out. Mile followed mile, and just as I was getting ready to abort the mission, Budokai stopped at the gate of what was apparently his home.

The house was meager, yet well-kept and clean-looking. A two-story brick, more than enough for one person. The yard was perfect...flowers and shrubbery out front. Nothing stood out. A part of me was disappointed. What a usual surrounding for such an unusual man. And so, with my heart in my throat, I yelled "Mr. Budokai!" He was startled, and actually dropped his bags. I quickly went up to him, and he looked afraid for a moment until I spoke. "I'm Charlie, and I'm that idiot who hit you with that tomato last week. It was a stupid prank and I just wanted to say that I'm sorry. I was going along with my friends and things just got out of hand". I was relieved to get this off of my chest. I waited for what seemed a lifetime for some type of response as he stared at me confusedly. But then, it came.

"Ah! Charlie! Apology accepted! Believe it or not, I was that age once, too! I have to say, you cut me up pretty good on the nose, here." He pointed at his bandage. His accent was nearly nonexistent, but you could still tell he wasn't born in the States.

"I'm sorry, sir, I guess my aim was a little off." I retorted.

“Oh no, I’d say it was dead on!” Budokai laughed, as did I. “Do me a favor, my son...make an old man happy. Come inside and have some tea with me?” He seemed so genuine with his words. I smiled at the old man, picked up his bags, and followed him inside. There was a warmth about Mr. Budokai...it felt like I was talking with my grandfather.

So there we sat, at Mr. Budokai’s kitchen table, sipping tea and talking about everything and anything. He was one of the nicest men I had ever talked to. Had a sense of humor, too, which is rare for an older fellow. I was glad that things had gone so well.

“I have to say, you always seem so happy...you always have that smile on your face. Even when my friends and I were making fun of you, you still smiled at us. How do you keep your cool?” I had to know his secret.

“Oh, Charlie, don’t mistake the smile for happiness...I simply smile because I can’t frown. You see, back in the war all those years ago, I was shot in the neck, and the bullet destroyed some nerves. The damage was quite severe. It entered at the neck and lodged into my face. Now my smile cannot be wiped off.” A tear fell down the man’s cheek as he said this. My eyes redirected to his neck as I did spot the remnants of a scar. Apparently he had seen battle, like some of the stories I had heard about him. “But don’t fret! I did my duty, and I do have my share of medals and trophies!” Budokai’s eyes gleamed as he spoke of his victories. “I must show you, Charlie! Come see what I’ve done. I have it all set up!” Budokai already started for the stairs, and I must admit, I was intrigued.

I followed my new friend up the stairs, but as I began to climb, I noticed a peculiar scent...almost like a piece of rotten food that was forgotten about. Mr. Budokai climbed the stairs excitedly, almost to the point of perfect health. The cane no longer seemed necessary. At the top of the stairs, he showed me into his bedroom. Everything was neat and tidy, unlike the conditions your regular bachelor would keep. He pointed towards the wall, and I did not understand what he was trying to show me. It was just a stark, white wall. What was this? A joke?

Mr. Budokai slid his fingers around the left side of the wall, and I heard a barely audible *click*. As he was doing this I noticed the scent of rot growing, almost burning my nostrils. I was becoming more than uneasy. Something...was wrong. He slid the façade of the wall aside, and I could not believe what I saw. Lined up in two rows, on shelves, resided six shrunken, mummified heads. The hideous smell rocked me backwards as my eyes attempted to take in the grisly sight of these skulls...the writhing looks of pain, the differing states of decay, the stringy white hairs that reminded me of the silk of a corn cob. I believe I was screaming, but I don’t know for sure, as it was all so very surreal. As I attempted to get my bearings, I noticed the shelving underneath the heads...six matching pairs of shriveled, twisted hands.

“See, Charlie! My trophies! These men were great, but I was greater! And look...I have some recent additions!” Mr. Budokai gestured towards the corner of this hidden room, where I saw...my friends. There, in the dim light, I could make out the faces of Ricky and Dumb, both in their own container of pale green liquid, streaked red from whatever blood was still present. Their features were distorted, their mouths frozen in their screams, but it was definitely them. It was at that very moment that my bowels let loose, and I messed my pants. I looked at Mr. Budokai, whose smile had transformed into something a bit more ghastly and devious.

“Charlie!!! It seems you have dirtied yourself!!!” Budokai chuckled as he raised his cane and brought it down onto my head with a great deal of force. I fell to the floor, in disbelief of the situation. I knew I was bleeding badly...I could feel the warmth drip from my scalp. This man had me fooled. He was not the prey at all, but simply a predator, waiting for an opportunity. I was dizzy, but still conscious, so with all the strength I had for a boy of twelve, I rushed the old man, knocking him down in the process. I ran/fell down the stairs and busted out of his door into the street. My legs were on fire again, with the tears streaming down my face. I sprinted home, covered in my own filth, with the visual of my friends’ decapitated heads floating through my mind.

When everything was said and done, and the truth about the man came to light, the police found Mr. Budokai waiting patiently at the bus stop, with his everlasting grin still stretched across his face. As they approached him, he asked only about his newfound friend. “How is Charlie? I hope his head is alright. Such a good boy he is!”

About the Author:

Matt Martinek is a singer/songwriter and author from Johnstown, PA, whose passion is the creative process itself. His writing credits include poetry for *Falling Star Magazine*, *Unhoused Voices* (anthology), and *Names In A Jar* (anthology) as well as short stories for *Siren’s Call Publications*. Matt has also recently completed his first horror novellette, *El Prolifico*, as well as the dramatic novella *Fifty Shades Of F**ked*.

Facebook: [Matt Martinek](#)

"Jinx!" I pronounced, grinning.

"Ahhh, you got me," Dad moaned. "Who came up with that, anyway? Just because people say things at the same time—seems so silly."

I chuckled. "Who knows."

We drove toward the lake, the early evening sun warming my skin, a crisp breeze gusting through the open windows. Mom and my younger sister sat quiet in the back, staring at the rolling hills and farmlands as they soared past.

I turned the corner to Moon Lake, opening it up down the last stretch of highway between me and the crystalline waters. Our family used to spend many a hot summer day on the beach, swimming and playing in the sand. Those were wonderful memories.

Halloween themed trees lined the roadway, showcasing their orange, red, and yellow leaves.

"Boy, this beauty is *way* faster than the old boat I used to drive," Dad said, running an appreciative hand over the sleek dash of my freshly rented Nissan Roadster.

"I miss that old boat." I pouted, raising a hand to close the sunroof. "Nothing beats the Lincoln, hey sis?"

In the rear-view mirror, I saw Sally smile sadly from the back seat, her eyes sunken, skin sallow. She hadn't been the same since the accident. Mom leaned forward as we veered off the highway, heading through the sparse campground. Her hands rested on my shoulders, the tingle featherlight against my skin.

I'd give anything to feel her touch again.

"Are you sure you want to do this, sweetheart?" Mom asked.

I turned down the lake approach, rolling up the windows. "Yes, I'm sure. I can't go on like this. I should've been with you that day." My jaw clenched; eyes moist.

The lake finally appeared at the end of the winding drive, its blue waves glistening with crests of rippling glitter. A wide platform deck stretched out from the shore. Hands locked on the wheel; I pressed my foot into the accelerator.

Mom leaned back, seeming to accept she couldn't do anything but go along for the ride.

"Our girl always did have a mind of her own," Dad announced, patting my knee. "Stubborn and strong willed..."

I cast him a sidelong glance.

"And we love you for it," he added with a grin.

"I love you too, Dad." I smiled, leg tingling where his hand had been.

About a month ago, I began seeing them—ethereal forms of the family I lost, their fragile bodies forever mangled by the rollover. I don't know why they came back to me, or why they lingered. They didn't say much about that, focusing instead on how much they missed me. The only thing I knew with certainty was how unbearable the torture of their presence was, shredding my heart into smaller pieces each day.

Until now.

The tires spat gravel as I played a deadly game of chicken with the dock at breakneck speed.

"I'll be with you soon!" I shouted as my vehicle hit the dock, vibrations rocking my body as the wheels rolled over the planks. Within seconds the car broke through the wooden guard rails and careened off the edge, silently suspended in an otherworldly respite, before crashing into the unsuspecting waters.

My head thwacked the steering wheel on impact. Hard. The cool liquid of Moon Lake surged and churned into the cab, rising to envelope me. Sinking deeper, the air slowly escaped my lungs. As I struggled to see through the murky waters, my eyes began to burn.

An urgent pressure was building inside my chest. A wave of panic flooded in, cresting as I pawed at the door, trying to roll the window down. Scrabbling frantically, I reached down, attempting to unbuckle my seatbelt.

A hand settled atop mine, firm and strong. Through the shadows, I could see it belonged to my father, still sitting in the passenger seat. No tingles. *What?* How was he touching me? The smile resting on his face was serene and encouraging.

I tried to depress the button on the buckle, but he held firm. Bewildered, I tugged my hand, to no avail. His eyes darkened—a look I didn't recognize, and that's when I thrashed. The very last bubbles of air floated from my lips, and my hand remained locked in place beneath an iron grip.

The pressure finally reached my eyes, veins straining and bursting.

As my energy ebbed, the muscles in my limbs grew cold, weakening. In that moment I couldn't stop my body from giving in. The urge to inhale was too strong. Water filled my lungs leaving me gasping and sputtering, the noise effectively muffled by the lake.

Mom and Sally leaned forward to give me one last smile as the darkness consumed me.

Floating listlessly, my family disappeared.

Opening my eyes, I stood back on the dock. Well, not quite. My feet weren't actually touching the ground. The sun shone against the freshly broken railing, casting shadows, while my incorporeal form cast nothing. My mother, father, and Sally all stood in front of me now, yet I knew it wasn't really them. I remember the dark that seeped into their eyes as I drowned.

Their deathly figures shivered and twisted before me, morphing from the broken remnants of my loved ones into demonic forms. My mouth opened to scream, but no sound came out. Trying to run proved useless, as my hovering limbs simply wouldn't move. I was helpless, terrified, yet couldn't feel a heart racing inside my chest. No sensation of hot or cold on my skin. Just... nothing. And why was I still here? *Shouldn't I go into a light or something?*

The ghastly thing that used to be my mother tugged on an invisible tether, sliding my weightless spectre into the crook of its sinewy arm. "Good work everyone," it said, a triumphant smile slathered across its face. I recoiled, horrified as it squeezed me close.

My former father leaned in to pinch my cheeks. "It took us a little longer than usual, but we got ya!" the demon boasted in a condescending baby-like tone. "You humans and your fragile emotions. Ripe for the picking."

My sister's impersonator beamed, rubbing its knotted hands together. "One more soul for the master."

"He will be pleased," the demonic creatures I once called Mom and Dad replied simultaneously. Both their eyes and their gnarly smiles widened instantly. With fingers pointed, they spun to face each other.

"Jinx!"

About the Author:

R.A. Clarke is a former police officer turned stay-at-home mom living in Portage la Prairie, MB. She survives on sloppy toddler kisses, copious amounts of coffee, and immersing her mind in fantastical worlds of her own creation. Whenever not crafting short stories, she keeps busy writing/illustrating children's literature. R.A. Clarke's work has been published by The Writers Workout, Writers Weekly, and Polar Borealis Magazine.

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The Demon's Choice | Kim Hart

The five friends formed a circle around the fire. Empty beer bottles lay scattered around them.

"Legend has it when five gather in this spot, one must be sacrificed or all are taken," Darius said. A ripple of unease went around the circle.

"Write your name, seal it in the envelope. The demon chooses who is worthy." Flames crackled and flickered over the young faces.

"No way, dude. I'm not writing my name," Will said, a catch to his voice.

"Every name or all will be taken," Darius reiterated.

The only witness to the demon's choice was the dwindling fire.

About the Author:

Kim Hart lives in the Snowy Mountains region of southern NSW, Australia. She writes microfiction, flash fiction, poetry, and is currently writing a junior fiction series. Kim is a wife, mother to two daughters and grandmother to one grandson. The other member of her family is a German Shepherd cross, Kody, who has made it to 15 years of age.

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Too many I cared about have died over the years. Tonight, I hoped to save others with the forbidden knowledge I would attain.

The demon opened the upper part of his robe and much to my surprise, his body was covered in human faces stitched together in one huge canvas of morbidity. Every living face had pieces of its lips chewed away. Myself, I knelt within the sigil I had drawn in blood on a huge flat rock, one of many stretching out into the ocean. Local myths spoke of them having once been part of a stone bridge reaching across the world that was used by the giants of lore.

To my right, outside the circle, lay the corpse of the male virgin I had lured from a local tavern. His blood was a requirement for invoking this demon, the only one besides Lucifer who could grant me immortality — and no one dared summon the Lord of the Inferno.

The demon said nothing; first appearing with a harsh, frosty wind from whence he came, snuffing out most of the frankincense candles I had placed so carefully. A feminine face was stitched over the left of his chest with her youthful visage standing out from the corpse-grey of the others. She licked her chops in a playful manner, almost like she was undressing me with those hungry eyes.

"You are in the presence of Prince Bael," she said, more with affection - than regal announcement. "The mighty leader of the Six Legions of Gore and second only to Lucifer." She was stitched over where Bael's heart would be.

"Through me he will speak. I'm Elizabeth. What is it you seek from Prince Bael?"

"Am I unworthy of being addressed by Bael himself?" I asked.

The wide brim of Bael's wizard hat shadowed much of his face, and the blood moon haloed its peak. His chapped lips set within a beard of lichen grey were all I could see. Why wouldn't he let me see his face? How horrifying could it be? Broken shackles dangled from his wrists, keys jingling from the end links. Long slashers for fingernails could easily claw my face into oblivion. A nameless book hung from his belt, embossed with his sigil where an eye moved about on its front cover, signifying it was bound in human flesh. All the answers to existence were in that tome. I just knew it.

"It is said only Bael can answer my question."

"Through me," Elizabeth said. "The one closest to his heart."

Bael raised one gaunt hand to Elizabeth's face and traced her lips with his yellowed index finger. Her eyes rolled up like she was having an orgasm; his fingers slid from her chin and back to his side.

"Why are you all stitched together?" I blurted. "How many are—"

"Seems like as good a place as any," said one of the faces attached near Elizabeth, his monocle making his eye double in size.

"Our Keeper protects us," said a face with a pocket watch embedded in one of his eyes, its chain hooked through the mouth of another. "No one would dare harm us."

"Shut your mouth." Elizabeth glared down at a few of her compatriots. "I'm the spokeswoman here." She eyed me. "Now why have you summoned Prince Bael?"

"You already know why."

"You must ask."

It was all about stroking these demons' egos. Well, if it got me immortality, I would play along.

I bowed my head and chanted: "Almighty, Bael—"

"He really likes being addressed like that," Elizabeth said. "You're off to a good start."

"Let the man finish," another face said - from the shadowed side of Bael.

"I'm simply sharing pleasantries."

"We already know what our Keeper is thinking," one above Elizabeth said, part of its face disappearing over Bael's shoulder. "His thoughts are our thoughts. Ours are his. So shush, already."

"You're all just jealous because I'm closest to his heart."

They were like children squabbling over Daddy's favor. "Can I finish?"

"No one is stopping you," Elizabeth said.

"Almighty Bael, I have invoked the Order of Demons as required to prove my worth. I've summoned Count Andromalius, Duke Dantalion, Prince Abaddon, Prince—"

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. "We don't need to know everyone you invoked."

I had no problem with that, having summoned thirty-three demons in total, some with great difficulty. Most were forgettable — except Astaroth, whose mouth, a fanged vagina, almost swallowed me headfirst. I snapped out of her spell in time to erase her sigil from the sand, vanishing her.

"I humble myself before you, Prince Bael, in hopes you will share the secret to immortality."

Absolute silence.

When I looked up to see if Bael had vanished, Elizabeth spoke.

"Have you tasted virgin blood?" she inquired. "Bathed in it? Drank of it? I have, but not before torturing my victims. Blood has an extra kick after a good scare. It was a taste of immortality. Never ageing. I could squash rocks in my hands. I would still be walking amongst you if I hadn't been betrayed by my own kin. Once tried for my crimes, I was bricked up in my castle to die a natural death. Without vestal blood I aged quickly."

"Is there a permanent way?"

The chances were good I would get caught with her method.

"Why are you afraid of death?"

"Who isn't?"

"If only you knew how amusing that answer is. Tell us, what would you do for absolute immortality?"

"Anything." I meant that.

Along with Elizabeth, their mouths opened wide, eyes rolled up in what looked like religious ecstasy. Their stitching pulled loose as the skin masks peeled away from each other and from Bael's body. They drifted toward me, their somber faces lighting up the closer they got. Bael's blood dripped from the torn ends of their necks, blotting the rock with fluorescent red.

The urge to jump for the beach was heavy on my mind but an invisible force kept me kneeling.

With much of Bael's flesh hovering about me, not much skin remained on him. He lowered his still-shadowed face and clasped his hands like he was in reverence.

Elizabeth's skin mask hovered in front of me. Others in the background stared in silence.

"I've done everything required," I shouted. "Even now you won't speak—"

"Shush, you don't want to annoy him. Now, back to my story," Elizabeth continued. "What more could Hell bring me, than witnessing my sudden aging at alarming speed? What choice did I have, knowing the dark arts? It was Bael who shared with me the knowledge of temporary immortality. I called upon him again. And for six days and six nights we made love, enjoying each other in every possible way. The kind of pain I felt . . ." She grinned. "The kind I gave him. He shared with me the dark secrets, the harsh truths leading to immortality."

The others lingered with unsettling grins.

"The secret to immortality is death."

An expression of malevolence came over her.

"What are you—"

I screamed in agony when she gnashed away a piece of my bottom lip.

She spat the cherry flesh back at my face.

"Release me." Blood gushed in my mouth and down my chin. "This is not what I asked for."

"It is. You just didn't know it."

Elizabeth licked the blood running down my chin, eyes rolled up like she tasted pure bliss.

"Let us have a nibble," said the one with the monocle, hovering not far from my arm. "Oh, to taste something again. I wish we could experience more of these moments. Fewer and fewer are learning the craft of calling us. Can you smell it, sisters, and brothers, that heavenly scent of blood? I cannot wait any longer."

The other skin masks tore away pieces of my ceremonial robe, then spat it out as they had no throats with which to swallow with.

Bael peeled open one side of his robe, revealing his heart beating behind a burnt ribcage, head still bowed. Was that a romantic gesture to his beloved Elizabeth?

"Husband hates us being separated for long. Soon, Dark Prince, I will blanket your heart with my warmth again." Elizabeth focused on me. "And you will be stitched below me. Upon your face I will spit all manner of hungry horrors, your skin healing in time to go through it all over again."

I flinched when Bael lunged forwards. With his index finger, he slowly cut away my face, and down along my neck, saying nothing. Not a cackle. No signs of enjoying what he was doing, like he was taking part in an ageless ritual. He stepped back out of the circle, opening both sides of his robe for his skin to return.

“My turn.” Elizabeth grinned wide, then bit into my forehead and peeled away the rest of my face, carrying me to Bael. . .

And to immortality.

About the Author:

James Pyne was born in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia. He has appeared in over eighty anthologies, including *The Pulp Book of Phobias* and *Clockwork Wonderland*. His debut novel, *Big Cranky: Fall into Darkness*, will be re-released with the second book of the trilogy in the coming months. Feel free to add him on Facebook for updates. It won't be hard to find his monstrous mug.

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He Paints a Pretty Picture | *Ian Sputnik*

A beautiful mixture of colours collide; silver contrasting off white tones. A shimmer of moonlight skips across the canvas; a mere reflection, but the synchronicity is pure perfection in hue and tone. The portrait is not yet complete, but the finishing crescendo is the climatic addition to a work of pure art. The fluorescent red gloss washes over the original colours, concluding in a vibrant sheen that takes the breath away.

As his piece of art is complete, he throws it to the floor because although he looks upon his creation in awe, he is never completely content with the sight that looks back at him; he is his most vicious critic. The painting only gives him a tepid feeling of satisfaction. He knows he can do better. To a passing appraiser he feels confident that his artwork will be appreciated, and he will feel a warmth sense of satisfaction combined with excitement; but it will only be short-lived. He knows that any such feeling of exhilaration will ebb away.

He can feel the numbness taking over already; too soon, always too soon. He will sleep well tonight. But he also realises that when the early morning light invades his bedroom - seeping in through the curtains and bouncing off the walls in a kaleidoscope of painful colours, his thirst will be stronger than it was on the previous morning, and stronger still than the morning before that one. So, he sharpens his tools of artistry again. For his painting days are not yet over, and his talents are far from honed.

The life of an artist is never a happy one. Regardless how great a piece, he always strives to create a more superior painting to the previous one, no matter how many must die for his passion. And so with that in mind, he has decided on his next work, his piece de resistance; a self-portrait; his masterpiece. He raises one of his glistening blades and presses it to his face. After all, a true visionary must always suffer for his art.

About the Author:

Ian Sputnik is a writer of horror stories and dark verse. He is the author of *Wood for Worms*, a collection of dark pieces. He has been published in *Sanitarium Magazine*, *Devolution Z*, *Morpheus Tales* and *Living Paranormal Magazine*. Several of his pieces have been narrated and are available on YouTube. He resides in Kent, UK.

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He's back ... back so *she* can feed on *him*! Why?



THE COUSINS

CHIMERA

Jane Robinett Hegre
and O. D. Hegre

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

“... on ... life’s journey, I found myself in dark woods, the right road lost.”
Dante Alighieri in Inferno from the Divine Comedy

“Where are we Ms. Shelly? Where are we?”

The aging school bus driver glanced over at the child standing beside her. “You go back and sit down like a good little girl, Patience. I know exactly where we are.” Mary Shelly leaned forward, beads of sweat rolling down over the folds of skin on her back and continued peering through the windshield. “Don’t you worry; County 19 is just up ahead. You’ll be in your classroom in less than ten minutes.”

Bomp-aaarrrrr-bomp... Bomp-aaarrrrr-bomp - the wipers attacked the snow.

But County 19 wasn’t just ahead. County 19 wasn’t anywhere to be found, and Ms. Shelly’s anger had reached the level of ‘really pissed off’ – a common state in dealing with most situations, although virtually nobody had any idea. Ms. Shelly’s friends and acquaintances would say, ‘You have such a calm demeanor, Mary.’ They would say, ‘You have to be a saint to drive a school bus full of primary school children five days a week.’ But inside Mary fumed endlessly. A bundle of nerves and a torrent of pent-up anger and hate, she despised almost everything and everyone in her life and that included her lazy, milk-toast husband, Fred. The jerk never asked for a raise or pushed for a promotion, and the word romance wasn’t even in his vocabulary.

Bomp-aaarrrrr-bomp... Bomp-aaarrrrr-bomp.

Above the beating of the wipers, a commotion at the back of the bus reached Ms. Shelly’s ears. Pushing her hair back, she peered into the rearview mirror. “You young’uns settle down back there. Billy Thompson - I am talking to you, son. Be a good boy now.”

Bomp-aaarrrrr-bomp... Bomp-aaarrrrr-bomp.

Oh, but Mother had warned her: ‘Mary why didn’t you ...? Mary you should have I told you, Mary.’ And Mary hated her mother for being right - for always being right and for living so damn long. Only the Alzheimer’s stopped the criticism, but eight years in a nursing facility had drained away any hope of retirement for either Mary or Fred.

Bomp-aaarrrrr-bomp... Bomp-aaarrrrr-bomp.

“I gotta go, Ms. Shelly. I gotta go real bad.” Six-year-old Serenity Lampher stood next to Ms. Shelly, legs crossed at the knees with the dearest pained expression on her chubby face.

“You can’t be standing up here, Serenity darlin. The road’s a sheet of ice, and I can’t have you fall’in, cracking that pretty little head of yours. Go back and sit down. You can hold it a bit longer. I am sure the school is just ahead. Now you go on.”

Ms. Shelly squinted, trying her best to see through the foggy windshield. *Where is that damn school building, anyway?*

Bomp-aaarrrrr-bomp... Bomp-aaarrrrr-bomp, the thumping of the wipers kept up a steady beat as they continued to push back the falling snow.

Nothing looked familiar, and the first pangs of worry stoked the fire in Ms. Shelly’s belly. *With this weather, those County Administrators should have closed the schools*, she thought. *Those idiots did last year when a late March storm turned up. At least most of the parents used their heads - just six kids on the bus this morning.*

Children. They were the only thing in life Mary Shelly didn’t hate. She had none of her own. She knew it was her worthless husband’s fault, but she blamed God, all the same. How could *He* be so unfair? With that underlying conviction, the anger festered endlessly, just beneath that calm exterior - seething and boiling about in Ms. Shelly’s consciousness.

The snow had lightened up a bit now, and Ms. Shelly could get a good look at the surroundings. She peered out hoping for a road sign, anything to give her an idea to the location of County 19 but nothing appeared. The asphalt had given way to gravel.

“Damn!” The word sputtered forth in almost a whisper. *I must have missed a turn, somehow.* Ms. Shelly squinted as the sun broke through the clouded sky. *But this doesn’t look like Rte. 13 either.* Farmland made up Jefferson County with vast open fields where crops would grow in the spring. *So, where did all these trees come from*, Ms. Shelly wondered? *Well at least they’re blocking some of the wind.* The driving continued getting easier by the minute, but that offered small consolation. Ms. Shelly finally admitted it to herself: she and her little crew of six and seven-year-olds were lost. She just kept on driving, looking for a sign.

Distant lights glimmered through the diminishing snow flurries.

"The School! The School!" The children were shouting out in unison. "Yea for Ms. Shelly. Ms. Shelly found our school."

A building began to materialize as the school bus continue to track into the storm. But it was clearly not the Wilfred Bendix Elementary School - *more of an expansive warehouse or factory*, Mary thought. Then, slowing, the bus's headlights illuminated a structure looming where the road seemed to end.

The chattering of the children died off; they, too, now aware of their arrival at someplace other than familiar territory.

The bus sat idling; a massive barrier towered before it.

Damn County Officials, Mary thought. Her frustration provided kindling to the fire smoldering within. *Damn storm. Got me out here in no-man's land with these young'uns*. Ms. Shelly rubbed her eyes and massaged her forehead. *There better be someone around who can provide some answers, so I can get this program back on track*.

At that very moment, a banner of red lights spanning the top of the edifice began flashing, and a pair of gates – in complete silence - began to open wide. *Like jaws*. Mary's body shuddered with the thought.

"You kids just settle down," Mary said, dismissing her moment of dread. "We'll go in here, get some directions back to the school - let little Serenity, and anybody else who needs to use the bathroom, and then get on our way. Settle down, now, ya hear? Everything is going to be just fine." Ms. Shelly didn't pause for a second. She just gunned the engine and pulled the school bus into the void, certain her salvation lay up ahead.

"Anger has its way, and true hatred darn sure finds the path, Ms. Shelly."

Mary had shed her coat. The weather had turned quite mild, and she'd settled in the lounge chair surveying the huge backyard. "You're quite the philosopher Mr. Bub," Mary said, smiling at her diminutive host. Feeling a need to express some form of gratitude for their rescue, Bub's pale and emaciated exterior had left her no choice but to flatter his intellect.

"You can call me Dick, if you like, Mary."

"Don't necessarily expect to find such a highly educated man out here ... Dick."

Ms. Shelly paused for a sip of her lemonade realizing she had no idea where 'out here' was.

"The miasma of anger and hate needs to feed on something, Ms. Shelly. It sure does else the fire goes out."

"Yes. Yes, Mr. Bub. I think I see what you mean." Ms. Shelly again sipped her drink. She had no clue what the ugly little man was talking about, but that didn't matter. Mary hadn't felt this relaxed in years ... *if ever*, she thought. The smell of freshly mowed grass - mingling with another sweet aroma that Mary couldn't quite put her finger on – engaged her. For some reason she no longer worried about finding the school. *A huge burden had been lifted from my shoulders*, she realized, and Mary continued to savor her lemonade. *Summer had come in October; why shouldn't I and these little kids get a day off – enjoy a real adventure?* Mary Shelly smiled.

"One, two, three ...," back from her reverie, Mary began counting the kids. "Four, five ..." *Where's Billy Thompson*, she wondered? "Harmony? Harmony Thompson," Ms. Shelly called out in a raised voice.

A little girl in a pink dress turned from the swing-set to look Ms. Shelly's way.

"Harmony dear, you go look for your brother while I talk here with this kind man."

The girl nodded and then scurried away, across the vast green expanse.

"I wouldn't worry, Ms. Shelly. He's probably out yonder playing with my kids." The long index finger of Mr. Bub's right hand emerged, pointing outward.

Ms. Shelly looked over and for the first time noticed the pit of hot coals with the rotating spit in the distance. At that moment she recognized that mysterious sweet aroma. "Odd time of the year, Mr. Bub, to be doing some outdoor grilling." Mary took in a deep breath. "But I must say that roasting piglet sure smells good."

"Oh, we're always grilling here, little lady ... and by the way," Mr. Bub drew on his pipe, "that ain't no piglet, Ms. Shelly." Mr. Bub gave out a slow chuckle as wisps of smoke circled above his head. "You've heard of the *Collective Unconscious*, Ms. Shelly?"

"No. No sir can't say I have. I don't contribute much to charities. Me and Fred, we live on a pretty tight budget, don't you know?" Ms. Shelly leaned back in her chair, content to listen as Mr. Bub went on.

"It's not exactly a charity, you see. It's as close to the truth as any mortal has ever come. This Swiss fellow, back in the last century, almost had it figured out. He just didn't take his ideas far enough, don't ya know Ms. Shelly."

"Uh huh." Mary was looking around, again counting the children.

"For years now, those science boys been trying to understand how people think - how that brain inside your head allows thoughts to come about - how you are aware of the world around yah. You know what I mean, Ms. Shelly?"

"Maybe. Maybe, Mr. Bub." Preoccupied with her own thoughts, Mary Shelly pondered the amazing change in the weather. She wiggled back in the lounge chair allowing the rays of the sun to embrace her.

"Those Egg-heads spend their time looking inside for answers when it's all outside. Consciousness is always out here." Mr. Bub spread his thin arms wide, reaching out beyond him. "The brain isn't the generator ... it's the receiver of consciousness. You take it in, a part of the Collective Consciousness and make it our own. Those Brainiac's call it 'the self' - it's what you think and feel that you are, separate from everything and everybody else. You're Ms. Shelly. And your husband is Fred - separate and individual. But of course, those science boys are dead wrong." Mr. Bub drew again on his pipe. "You're all just a piece of the pie. You've just been given a part of the whole to use ... for a while, if you know what I mean."

Mary withdrew her hanky and wiped the perspiration from her brow. *Snowing out there on the road, and now hotter than blue blazes here on the Bub place*, she thought.

"Here's the thing Ms. Shelly. One can use this gift of consciousness however they please. Like you Ms. Shelly. Outwardly, you seem to be a pleasant, agreeable woman. People think you are happy with your role in life. But they don't know the real Ms. Shelly, do they dear. The anger, the hatred and disgust with those around you and the way things in life have worked out for you. They don't know any of that, do they? But I do." Mr. Bub leaned forward and smiled. "Oh, you're just one in the multitude of discontented, Ms. Shelly. You ain't the worst, not by a long shot. But you definitely are a contributor." Bub drew again on his pipe.

Mary Shelly's head was now spinning. *So hot. - so damn hot!* She gulped down the last of the lemonade and tried to stand.

"There are consequences to one's misuse of the gift, Mary Shelly. Your kind takes in that part of the Collective you've been given and uses it. But the vile and putrid ugliness that people like you, Ms. Shelly, spew back affects the whole, blackening and weakening the Collective. And now and then - like today - a balancing point is reached, and that shit has to go somewhere." Mr. Bub smiled. "It comes directly to me, and it's my job to deal with it - get rid of it and the only way is to sacrifice some of the good in the world to maintain the balance. It's like what goes on in the rest of the Universe: electrical charges need to cancel out each other; energy and mass require an equilibrium and so must good and evil."

Ms. Shelly staggered to her feet, again looking for the children. Mr. Bub's babblings had become so irritating in the oppressive heat.

"Today is like a lightning strike, Ms. Shelly. Your little tirade this morning tipped the balance, and a reckoning was required. With all the spite and anger your kind has put out there over the years, could have been any of you. Just your bad luck Mary Shelly." Mr. Bub was standing now. "The powers that be - you've heard of them, I'm sure - recognized if something wasn't done, my children and I would be let loose on the world. You know my kids: Anger, Greed, Hate, Envy; you have used them all your life. To balance your kind's evil additions some good must come from the world's Collective Consciousness and feed my kind. You've seen those milk cartons, I'm sure. Curious how it's always the innocents that pay the price." Mr. Bub began laughing and clapping his boney hands. "It turns out, six little children just fit the bill ... and by the way, like I said, that ain't no piglet roasting over there on the spit."

Mr. Bub's cackling continued, his large feet moving in rhythm with his clapping as he began dancing round and round. Ms. Shelly turned, squinting into the blazing sun, to look towards the fire pit.

"Where's Billy? Where's Billy?" were the only words she could manage, and then Mary Shelly heard little Harmony Thompson's first scream.

About the Author:

O. D. Hegre is a former Professor, involved in biomedical research at the University of Minnesota and in the biotech industry. Despite now residing in the sunny Sonoran Desert, his journey with the written word often takes him to the dark side. Orië's Speculative Fiction has appeared in numerous print anthologies and online venues; his first novel and book of short stories are available at Amazon.

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She squinted her eyes, scrunched up her little nose, twisted her mouth into a grimace that exposed pearly teeth and a front-tooth gap.

"Brandi, what the devil are you doing?" She studied her daughter with a mix of anger and frustration.

"Unn, unn," the six-year-old muttered.

Marilyn glanced to her left and right; a few other shoppers were inspecting squash and pole beans while pretending not to notice. She hunched down to her daughter's height behind the shopping cart and whispered fiercely, "Stop it right now, young lady! Stop making that ugly, horrible face!" She shook the child's shoulder for emphasis. "What in the hell is wrong with you?"

Brandi relaxed her features for a moment, then assumed a wounded expression. She brushed back her strawberry-blonde bangs with the back of a small, pudgy hand. "I can only see him if I squeeze my eyes," she piped.

Marilyn wanted to finish her shopping and get home. She rose to her full height, extended an index finger in Brandi's direction. "Don't you ever do that again when we're out in public, do you hear me?"

"But I have to watch him," the child answered.

"Come on," Marilyn demanded and took Brandi by one wrist while she maneuvered the cart with the other hand. "Do you see those bananas there?" She attempted to redirect. "Could you go get me a bunch of those, please?"

"But he's following us, I want to see where he is," Brandi protested.

"Go ... get ... the ... bananas!" Her voice was a low rumble. As she watched the child comply, she felt something bump into her right, rear hip and spun around. "Excuse me?" she said to an older woman behind her.

The startled lady dangled a blue plastic basket from one fist; she frowned. "What?" She flinched, backed a step. "Excuse me?" She pivoted, walked quickly in the opposite direction.

"What the hell? Did you see that? How rude can you get?"

Brandi returned cradling five greenish-yellow bananas. "Are these okay?"

"Did you see that woman?" she said to her daughter. "Just put them in there," she added.

Brandi complied. "It wasn't her, Mommy."

"Come on," she ordered, and began pushing the cart, stalking past the potatoes, toward the organic-food section. "Did you see her? No make-up, overweight, stupid woman. What the hell is wrong with people? I look good, you know? I keep in shape, I put on makeup, do my hair, dress nicely. I'm not one of those fat mothers in sleeveless tops they shouldn't be wearing because their arms look like flabby elephant trunks...."

Brandi struggled to keep up, her sneakers squeaking on the shiny floor, but she suddenly stumbled, falling on one knee. "Mommy!" she called.

Marilyn glanced over a shoulder, halted. "Geezus and Mary, Brandi! What a clutz! Get up and get over here!" She was about to face front once more when she felt a sharp jab at the small of her back. She staggered and almost lost her balance, dancing from one foot to the other before she was upright once again. She swung around.

Brandi was giggling. She hopped and clapped. "Do it again," she squealed.

"What?" Marilyn stared at the girl. "Brandi Elizabeth, this is the last time I'm taking you anywhere, do you hear me? You think it's funny that someone shoved me?" She reached her daughter in two strides, grabbed her by the elbow and yanked her forward until they were behind the cart once more.

"He shoved you. But I shouldn't encourage him. He can be mean. Like what happened to Mrs. Melendez."

Marilyn's heart was pumping fast, her breath rasped; she didn't know why she felt such anxiety. "You mean your teacher? What happened to your teacher? Did you...?"

"Wasn't me," she said, shrugging in an exaggerated way with both palms raised. "It was the man I see when I squeeze my eyes. Mrs. Melendez had to go to the hospital. We have a substitute ... sub ... stitute teacher now."

Marilyn was about to open her mouth to speak, when something solid seemed to barrel into her, into her belly and chest, knocking the air out of her; it felt like she was flying. The world turned black. When she opened her eyes, she was looking straight up at the fluorescent panels high in the ceiling, and could dimly make out pairs of legs and khaki-slacks crowded around her. She thought she could hear Brandi crying, "Mommy, Mommy." She slowly rose to sitting with the help of one of the market's assistant managers.

"Are you okay, Ma'am? We've called an ambulance...."

She reached, touched the back of her head; it was very tender. She still felt stiff, disoriented. Her ears rang.

Brandi was on top of her, wrapping her small, chubby arms around her mother's neck. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry Mommy, I told him not to push too hard!"

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*, *Tell-Tale Press*, and the *More Alternative Truths* anthology. Rivka most recently worked as a psychiatric nurse.

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Tea Blossom | Sonora Taylor

Carmen walked down the cobblestone streets in the rain, careful to not slip on the rocks. She'd left her umbrella at home, and of course the taxis had all disappeared with the first splat of rain on a windshield.

Carmen ducked under an awning, then saw a wooden sign with a teapot swinging in the wind. *Must be new*, she thought as she walked through the door.

Warmth wrapped around her body as water dripped from her coat to the floor. An old woman stood behind a counter with an expectant smile. "Hello," she said in a cracked voice.

Carmen nodded as she walked inside.

"Would you like a cup of tea?" the woman asked.

"Very much, yes." Carmen sat at the first empty table. She realized when she sat, though, that all the tables were empty.

"I recommend our blooming tea," the woman said. "You've never seen such a beautiful sight."

"Sure, whatever." The woman left, and Carmen looked around the tea house. Rain and grey splattered the sky light above, casting the dimly-lit room into shadow. She smelled musty, tea leaves, and iron.

The woman returned a few minutes later with a teapot and a glass cup. "We're new," the woman said as she set both down on the table. "We specialize in blooming teas like this one," she said as she pointed at the cup. Inside was a wound ball of tea. "Watch."

The woman poured hot water over the ball. Carmen sat as patiently as she could, but wished the woman would leave her alone with her tea.

The green tendrils began to bloom and expand. The water turned yellow, then faintly green. A flowering vine began to emerge from the buds, and the tea turned red.

Carmen had to admit the sight was quite beautiful. "So is it jasmine and hibiscus?" she asked.

"Watch." The vine emerged through the red and floated to the top. Pink and yellow buds unfolded into a beautiful flower.

A tea-soaked, bloody eye sat in the flower's center. Carmen screamed, then gasped as the woman clasped her wrist.

"We take pride in our teas," the woman said as she lifted a knife. "And we just love to serve our customers."

About the Author:

Sonora Taylor is the award-winning author of several short stories and novels, including *Without Condition* and *Little Paranoias: Stories*. Her work has been published by Camden Park Press, Kandisha Press, Sirens Call Publications, and others. Her latest release, *Seeing Things*, is now available. She lives in Arlington, Virginia, with her husband.

Amos Lipinski never saw the punks who pushed him out of his wheelchair coming. He only wanted to sit out in the cool autumn air and watch his granddaughter sing in the White Creek Halloween Fest talent show. While sipping his hot cocoa, three teenagers wearing devil masks came pushing through the crowd. They elbowed everyone out of the way, and they bum-rushed Amos. The first one slapped the mug from Amos's hand, and the blistering hot liquid splashed in his face. Amos screamed in agony and surprise. He frantically called out for help as the other two hooligans grabbed his chair and flipped it onto the ground. The people standing next to him backed away without saying a word and watched the stage as if nothing else was happening.

Amos crashed hard onto the pavement. The impact forced the air from his lungs, leaving him writhing on the ground gasping for breath. He heard them laugh and call him 'crip' as they ran off into the crowd. The thugs disappeared among the other people dressed in costumes at the fest.

Tears streamed down his eighty-year-old cheeks, their trail biting his face in the fall breeze. The realization nobody tried to stop them or lend him a hand saddened him more than what the kids did to him. Infuriated, he decided he would look through his grandmother's books and find a suitable old country incantation. She showed him the book before she died and told him it was his for safekeeping, always to protect because some would kill for its power.

His grandmother spun yarns about how the book was written by their ancestors four-hundred years ago. She also warned of power and prices. Since it came into his possession, he yearned to open it, to study it, and to hone the gift his grandmother bestowed upon him through his bloodline. The town hated his grandmother and his family for the power they possessed. The founders of White Creek called upon them to save them and then shunned them out of fear and shame. The circumstances of the town's early history were a secret held close to the chest, and his grandmother never told him the specifics. All he knew was the town betrayed someone or something and needed his family to set things right again.

Knowing how the town's people treated them, he always let it fester, and now the people gave him a reason to unleash the forces his family harnessed. Amos had denied himself the book for far too long. He would call down vengeance on the people for this, and they would pay for their transgressions.

A gentleman approached him and helped him get back into his chair. Nobody noticed him get knocked over, so nobody noticed the stranger whisper in Amos's ear, bringing a smile to each man's face. The man in the black duster nodded and walked away, vanishing in the crowd while Amos began to laugh, drawing annoyed stares from the festival-goers.

Now they notice me, he thought, turning and heading for his house a few blocks away.

Halloween:
One Year Later

Amos inhaled deeply. The air was pungent with the aromas from various fried foods, cotton candy, and the stale stench of cigarette smoke wafting from the bar close to the stage. Amos was content; he would finally get to see his little granddaughter Amy perform this year, and it would be a happy Halloween indeed. For the last few months, he taught Amy the words to the song. He spent a month picking the perfect set of words after the previous year's fair and hoped his vision would be right because he also used the book to help himself a little too.

At first, Amy played around and refused to learn the words when he offered to teach her a new song, but cookies and milk went a long way in convincing the sweet girl to perform the tune he chose. He only wished he could have heard her angelic voice, but Amos followed protocol for the song to be as good as it needed to be.

The first acts to perform were basic run-of-the-mill tap dance routines that made his fillings hurt. The hammering from the metal-tipped shoes grated on him, and he thought it hurt worse than the bullet he took in Normandy. After about fifteen agonizing minutes and seven acts, the last of the girls finished their routine. The twins in their nice pink outfits bowed to the crowd while they whooped and hollered at the pair. A volunteer escorted the girls off the stage, and Amy came up to the mike.

She looked nervous, and Amos waved to her. She stood there and cleared her throat. The crowd hushed and smiled at the cute five-year-old. One of the stagehands quickly ran out to lower the mike stand that towered over her like a giant. The crowd gawked at her little dimples, and her neatly curled golden locks. Amos reached into his pocket and grabbed the earplugs he brought with him. He pushed them in his ears, and his smile grew wide. Revenge was best served cold, but now it would have some dinner music too.

Amy's voice started very softly, and the crowd could barely hear her song. The people were hushed and strained to listen to the song she sang. A stagehand ran out and turned up her mike so everyone could hear. Once the people listened to the lyrics, they began to laugh at the gibberish she was singing.

"Anath, Cthuluna, spiritum, decling te amonazth."

She repeated the stanza over and over, her little voice carrying through the sound system and all over the festival. The laughter got louder and louder at the words. Some stood there, embarrassed at the crowd reaction, and tried to hear the small golden voice emanating from the little girl. A beer can flew onto the stage, and the laughter grew louder. Amy stopped and stared out into the crowd, a smile creeping across her face.

Amos saw the knowing grin, and his blood turned to ice. Somehow, she knew what she was doing, and she liked it. He felt the air change. The light wind died off, and a heaviness descended on the crowd. Flexing his fingers, he even felt something coursing through his system. Quickly, he reached up and shoved the earplugs deeper into his ear canal. The plugs pushed in so far a small twinge of pain shot through his head when they touched his eardrum.

The crowd grew silent. Everyone looked around, trying to put a finger on what didn't seem right. The atmosphere grew weightier, and a wave of anxious anticipation flowed over everyone.

The first to scream was the stagehand that helped Amy with the mike. He ran out across the stage and fell in a seizure calling out at the top of his lungs. Blood poured out from between the fingers that covered his face. His hands fell away, and the crowd saw his nostrils, ears, and mouth were dripping with gore. As he screamed louder, his eyeballs ruptured, as he cried bloody tears, the crimson trailing down his face. Horrified shrieks sounded through the air.

The cries multiplied as the audience members started to flail about, their arms waving frantically, blood exploding and dripping from every pore. Women, children, young, old, all fifty-one of them dropped to the pavement rolling in agony. The stagehand whose screams began the commotion shrieked again in an ear-piercing howl. The cry carried on the autumn air, cutting through the crowd like a knife. He twitched on the stage as a loud ripping sound echoed out. His skin started to tear down the center of his face, parting his flesh from his skull. He staggered back to his feet, and like an invisible butcher was flaying him, his flesh peeled back, exposing his muscles, organs, and bones. The skin broke from his body and landed at his feet with a wet thud, splattering blood all over the little girl.

The scene played out all over the crowd. Sons and daughters turned inside out while their mothers and fathers could only watch as their own skin sloughed off their bodies and fell to the scarlet pavement. People looked around wearing red masks of pain. One last gasping cacophonous cry from the crowd ended in silence, and the people lay tattered and torn around Amos's feet. He watched them twitch in the final moments of their lives. He turned his power chair around and rolled around in the river of blood flowing into the gutter. He felt vindicated, moving through the ruin of those who hurt and laughed at him. Amos finally brought his ancestors some hard-earned respect.

Nobody, nobody, will ever treat our family like dirt again, he mused, passing through the dead.

He already felt the air clearing and returning to normal as Amy came bounding down from the stage, her pigtailed swaying in the returning breeze. She didn't seem to care about the bloody, pulpy slop she hopped through on the way to Amos. The blood splashed up, covering her legs and skirt. Her once-white shoes were now a lovely shade of deep red. She jumped into her grandfather's lap and laughed.

"How did I do Grandpa?" She asked, batting her eyelashes at him. He noticed her beautiful blue eyes were now clouded gray, and they chilled him. It was Amy on his lap, but something told him it wasn't her.

"You did fine, sweetheart, you did fine. A fine Halloween this year, I think."

"Can we trick or treat now?" she asked with a big sweet grin.

"Well, let's go home and change into your costume. I don't want to be around when the good sheriff arrives," he answered as his voice softened and became quieter.

"I like the song grandpa! The words were really silly to sing."

"I know, but look at the Halloween surprise we gave the town. Your great-grandmother would be proud," Amos said as he came across the bodies of the three boys who assaulted him.

Even though they wore masks when they assaulted him, it was a small town, and everyone knew everyone else's business. Feeling vindicated for last year's humiliation, he slammed his cane down into the ruined remains of their faces and spat on their corpses.

"Grandpa, how could you hear me with those funny yellow things in your ears?"

Amy tugged on the blue line that connected the earplugs. Amos flinched as the line caught on her fingers, and the plugs popped out of his ear.

Swinging the earplugs, she called out, "I want to sing it again, grandpa! The words are so silly!"

Amy began to sing, and the look in her eyes gave her away. He realized his worst fear came to pass; she was different now, changed from what Amos had summoned. Amos tried to ram his fingers into his ears to block out the song, but Amy reached down and held his hands in his lap. At his age, he was too weak to pull his hands from under her. The harder Amos pulled, the harder she pressed down. Amos knew it didn't matter anyway, the chant had been sung, and he heard the words. She released Amos once the song was over, and he quickly pulled his hands from under her. He threw his arms around her.

"I love you, Amy," he whispered, hugging his granddaughter.

"I know, but you should read the fine print, grandpa! Power has a price, just like I told you that day last year. Remember, the Veil is weaker on Halloween," she answered him in her small, soft voice.

"You? What did I do?"

"You weakened the chains of my bondage, and soon, I'll be free from the shackles your ancestors put on me," Amy sneered at Amos.

He felt the pressure starting to build in his skull. His eyeballs began to throb in their sockets. He cried out when he felt his blood begin to boil. Amy struggled to free herself from his grasp, but he tightened his hold on her.

While Amos told her he loved her one last time, he sobbed crimson tears.

About the Author:

Brent Abell resides in Southern Indiana with his wife and Drake the Puggle. He's had stories featured in over 30 publications and presses. His books include: *Southern Devils*, *Southern Devils: Reconstruction of the Dead*, *In Memoriam*, *The Calling*, *Phoenix Protocol*, *Dying Days: Death Sentence*, and *Death Inc*. You can hang out with him at his website, for rum and a cigar.

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Protection | KC Grifant

First the birds came, then the man. No one could see them but me, for a full minute or two, every night before I fell asleep.

The pale man never did anything but grin from a few feet away, promising unimaginable horrors from behind the wall of wings. The birds, black as his hair, blurred as they circled him in an endless orb. The sounds of wings flapping and beaks snapping haunted my every hour.

I tried sleeping at a friend's, in hotels, outside in broad daylight. Nothing helped. I spent hundreds of dollars looking for a cure. Finally I found a psychic who nodded knowingly when I told her.

"Birds. Heralds of dark things." She shuddered and offered a cup of crushed gemstones and herbs. "This will hurt, but they will be banished."

The concoction burned like pop rocks and settled behind my sternum, sharp as glass.

That night I drifted off, waiting for the beating of wings, for beaks too close for comfort. Nothing. For the first time for as long as I could remember, peace filled the gray drowsiness between waking and sleep.

A breeze pricked my cheeks and I opened my eyes.

The pale man leaned over my bed, birds nowhere in sight. His hands floated through empty space, closing the gap between us. Before I could scream, his fingers like white snakes found my neck.

About the Author:

KC Grifant writes internationally published horror, fantasy, science fiction and weird western stories. Her fiction stories have found homes in collectible card games, podcasts, anthologies (including the Stoker-nominated Fright Mare: Women Write Horror) and magazines, such as *Andromeda Spaceways Magazine*, *Unnerving Magazine* and the *Lovecraft eZine*. In addition, she is co-founder of the Horror Writers Association (HWA) San Diego chapter.

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Mind Bending Sci-Fi Horror!

When reality loses cohesion, fear takes on many forms...

ZERO PERSPECTIVE

Lee Andrew Forman

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

I am cursed. Every October 31st I'm compelled to work late, performing horrid acts that haunt my dreams year-round. If the cops knew, that'd be it for me. Convicted and hung by the neck until dead. Or however they execute cons these days. I can't escape it. If I try, he'll murder my family. It all started Halloween night 20 years ago.

Me and Jimmy and Hooter were 10 years old when we started Candy Overtime. Hooter, a gawky, puny kid with thick, round glasses that made him look surprised—more like terrified, if I'm being honest—made up his own nickname 'cause his folks named him Horatio. We went along with it, 'cause who the hell names their kid Horatio? Besides, he picked well. Kid *looked* like an owl, and he was smart as heck.

Jimmy, he was our fast talker. Somethin' about his freckles and dimples made him trustworthy to people; cripes, he's *still* like that, selling cars next town over. Gets repeat customers, too. Everybody loves Jimmy. So, he convinced *all* our parents we were old enough to gather at one of our houses after trick-or-treating, and stay up later.

We called it Candy Overtime, 'cause that's what the workers in town used to call it when they got extra hours at the candy factory. Every year production ramped up before Halloween; everyone had extra money. Sweet times. Until the factory closed. Management blamed the multinationals, with their high-profit low-taste confections. Said they gobbled the profits, sucked the sweetness out of the business. Scuttlebutt with us kids was different, though. We heard accidents forced them to close; workers being hurt, crippled, and killed, and their families sued and won money. We weren't sure about that last part, but the widow Peterson sure drove a fancy car.

The first year during Candy Overtime, we hogged-out on our treats, got hopped up buzzing fine on so much sugar our blood must've been thick like strawberry syrup. We laughed and jumped and hollered and told spooky stories. Then the dares started. The first one fizzled, even in our sweet delirium, 'cause it was just too damn scary. Jimmy dared us to go break into the abandoned candy factory. No way we were doing that. The gigantic structure looked dark, foreboding, even in daylight. With its peeling paint, broken windows, and eerie noises, the building loomed over you like a pending punishment. *Just you wait till your Father gets home.* When I walked along the factory's fence on the way to school, the weed-choked grounds even *smelled* musty, rotten. Go *in*, at *night*? No way! Rumours whispered big kids went in—and never come out. We rescued our bravery with other dares, did them all year at school.

The best one was when Hooter up and kissed Camille Fernandez right on the mouth. We were out on the playground at lunchtime when Jimmy made the dare, and I'm sure he aimed it at me. But Hooter dashed over, called her name, and when she turned her head, he did it. He must have caught her by surprise because—for just a couple of seconds—she kissed him back. Then she clouted him so hard she broke his glasses. We laughed so hard we almost pissed ourselves. Hooter got suspended. Luckily it was before summer, so everyone forgot the incident before Halloween, except for me and Jimmy: we envied our little friend. Those couple seconds—we both wished it was us. And we knew that despite his size, Hooter was the bravest one of us all.

Our second Candy Overtime started the same, except for gathering at my house, and we ate so much sugar they should've hospitalized us, hooked us up to IV's dripping emergency insulin. But then it got different.

"Dare you to go in the candy factory, Deshawn."

I stared at Jimmy. We'd all grown enormously since last year. Even Hooter. Declining a dare, yeah, it seemed like a *little* boy response, when a dare resembled a joke, not a challenge.

"I dare you."

"Hey, you guys—" Hooter started, but it was too late. We were already donning jackets, headed for the door. Hooter scrambled to catch up. I still feel bad about that.

It was a frigid night. In minutes we'd marched down the street, squeezed through the loose part of the chain-link fence, and crossed the stinky grounds, aided by sporadic beams of skeleton-white moonlight escaping the oppressive clouds. We told ourselves we were hustling due to the cold, rather than fear of losing resolve.

The entrance was a metal door that had no knob. Mounted into the door, a large rusty ring bolt juxtaposed with a matching bolt in the frame. A rusty chain threaded the bolts, but the padlock that had joined the chain lay smashed on the ground; the chain ends dangled.

A strange thought entered my head. *If Jimmy and I are the bolts, and Hooter is the chain that holds us together, what's gonna happen when we pull it out?*

I *almost* said it. But faster than a witch's black cat, Jimmy was sliding the chain out, clatters and clinks scaring a bat out of a broken window high above us.

It was colder inside. And darker. We used our phones to light our way. When the no-knob door clanged shut behind us, I'll admit it, we jumped a bit. It sounded... final, like when the door closes behind you at a funeral home.

We were ready for the screeching feral cat. We'd seen plenty of horror movies. It was dim and spooky, but disappointing in the office area. We climbed stairs that ended in a tiny landing, with a door on the left and one on the right. To the left was more office area. Boring.

Hooter pointed at the righthand glass door, "It says 'Production'. Might be better in there." We entered and found ourselves on a rickety metal catwalk, fatigued beams and tired struts creaking crankily at our candy-laden bulk. The putrid smell was back, worse than outside. The stench reminded me of the packrat we'd found on the railway tracks—only half the body but the whole spine laying on a tie, remaining flesh jerking like a zombie as a swirling mass of maggots devoured it. The temperature was colder than graves on winter nights; our breath steamed out, rode a downdraft, joined the eerie mist below. *How in hell is there FOG inside a building?* I shivered. This was getting scary.

We were overlooking the main factory area below. Sickly moonlight shone through dusty, cracked skylights. Shadowy shapes suggested machines of various sizes, conveyors, and roller tables. Then we saw it.

A machine was operating. It was chopping long chocolate bar lengths short, probably for wrapping. A worker stood by the moving pieces, adjusting them on the conveyor. It all looked weird, kind of wispy, transparent.

"Cool! Is that a *ghost*?" Hooter whooped, took off running, headed for another staircase ahead of us that went down to the factory floor.

"Hooter wait," I called, thinking if it *was* a ghost, maybe running *away* instead of *toward* it might be smarter. I started after him, but Jimmy grabbed my arm.

"Look!" Jimmy said.

A heavysset bald ghoul semi-materialized behind the ghost man at the chocolate chopper and bumped into him. The chopper man's hand went into the machine and came off lickety-split, and he lurched about clutching his handleless arm, silently screaming, ghost blood spurting. The scene repeated like a short video, an auto-loop of terror.

"No, there!" Jimmy said.

I looked where he pointed. In another spectral spectacle, a man tumbled into an enormous vat, outstretched arms of the same heavysset ghoul confirming the fall wasn't an accident.

Hooter started screaming in terror. Chills ran through my nerves. We saw him. Somehow the killer ghost had grasped Hooter and was holding him high in the air above a large hopper that looked like it fed down into a grinding mechanism.

We turned from the railing to run for the stairs, but something seized our arms from behind in a rigid grip.

"It's too late for your friend," the unseen assailant's voice croaked, "better save yourselves boys."

We turned, saw the same ghoul that was holding Hooter down below.

Crazily, Jimmy whispered, "You *can't* be here... you're down there."

The ghost peered through transparent maniac's eyes, guffawed and said, "There are no *rules* here. If there was, you'd all be home in bed."

Hooter's screams nearly broke my brain when the ripping sound started, followed by sloshy wet cracking and crunching sounds. It might have been better to *see* what happened to him, because every year what I *imagine* from those macabre sounds makes my nightmares worse.

"You boys are lucky I need two workers. My ghostly coworkers can't go outside, load the trucks. Finish tonight's job and come back next year and I'll let you live. Otherwise... well, I *can* go outside, and I know where you and your families live."

The police eventually said aw-shucks-sorry to his parents, put Hooter's disappearance into their cold case file. Back then they interviewed us, of course, but some stories you just can't tell, unless you wanna end up in the looney bin. Now, every Halloween, me and Jimmy head down to the factory at midnight and help make Blood Bars. There're always some stupid young daredevils from out-of-town going in the hopper.

And first week of November a numbered company sends me a cheque. The paystub reads "Candy Overtime."
I'm cursed.

About the Author:

Kevin Gooden recently finished his electronics career, where he excelled at technical writing. Last week at the asylum, he squeezed through an unlocked window and is now speeding down the highway in a '65 Mustang convertible driven by his creative muse, speculative fiction stories and other writing swirling in his vortex. His poem *Riding the COVID-go-round* will soon be published in a collection.

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On a cold November morning in a Seattle alley, Twizzler rolled over in his sleep and felt the freezing rain upon his face as his cardboard box shifted, throwing out of alignment all the other cardboard boxes, old tarpaulins, and shopping carts that made up his shelter. He stood up, throwing off the stinking sleeping bags and pulled his ratty pea jacket and sock hat tighter before tightening up his makeshift hut. He looked over the alley and saw eleven other shelters like his, of which nine were empty.

"They must've gotten Bobo last night," he said. "I'll miss Bobo."

He wept uncontrollably for half an hour before regaining control of himself. "Vitals, I gotta talk at my brother." He said to the invisible friend with which he shared his hut. "You can't talk me outta it this time. No, not this time. Shut up now."

Venturing out the alley for the first time that week, Twizzler took the route behind the cinema to his brother's. He checked the area and found a partial bag of Twizzlers that someone had tossed into an empty dumpster. Now he breakfasted, much better than usual, but not as well as the time he found a full bag.

About mid-afternoon, Twizzler was ringing the doorbell of his brother's Mike's house, a well-tended Cape Cod style home in the upper middle-class suburbs. Mike answered the door, stinking of gin and cigarettes, in clean jeans and a new flannel shirt.

"What do you want, Billy? Are you going to rehash the same crap as last month? I don't have any handouts for you. Remember? We talked about tough love."

"It's happening again. They got Bobo last night." He broke into tears. "Help me. It won't be long until they get me. There's only me, Hijinks, and Cheeks left. In a year they've emptied out the alley."

"Any evidence this time? No? No photos? Bums disappear all the time. They move on. Bobo's probably rummaging through trash in Tacoma by now. "

"No, man, it's the killers like Bundy, or those scientists from the University or those doctors from the cancer center or the techs from the nuclear power plant. They want us for tests, Mike! I just know it!" Twizzler wrapped his arms tighter against the cold and began rocking back and forth. "It's the shadow men. Shadow men! Got anything to eat? Please. Mike, you're a police captain. Do something about the shadow men! Do it! It's your duty. Please. Please."

"Don't get agitated. Calm down. I'll get you something to eat."

Mike closed the door and soon came back with two full bags of twizzlers.

"Thank you, Mike. Thank you, Mike."

Twizzler tried to snatch the bags from Mike's hands, but Mike held onto them.

"First, you got to say it. Three times just like last month."

"Do I have to?"

"You have to."

Twizzler licked his chapped lips. "There's no shadow men. There's no shadow men. There's no shadow men."

"Louder. I want all of West Queen Anne to hear you."

Twizzler screamed out the lines, straining his voice. Mike released the twizzlers.

"Go home," said Mike, closing the door.

Twizzler ripped open the bags and stuffed the sweet ropes into his mouth, until it could hold no more. He turned and headed back to Beacon Hill, chewing with his mouth open, and muttering through the candy, "No shadow men, no shadow men. Hear that, Vitals? No shadow men. No, you can't have any. You have to watch your weight."

Inside the house, Mike went back to his well-groomed visitor, who sat on the sofa in an expensive business suit, sipping a martini. Mike took a seat next to him and lit up a cigarette.

"Sorry about that, Ed. My brother has seen better days."

"What's that about the shadow men?"

"That's his term for the men that come into his alley and kidnap the bums and haul them off for experiments. He says they're from the CIA, DEA, NRC, everywhere. He says that after they're finished with them, they chop them up and pass them out as hamburger to the homeless shelters just for a laugh or dump them in Puget Sound, and parts sometimes wash up on Vashon Island. Sometimes their feet wash up in Canada."

"Has he seen this?"

"He says he wanders around the city when he can't sleep and has seen his buddies being kidnapped and that he has seen the supposed hamburger being delivered at night. He says he knows it's his friends, because sometimes, when he eats the hamburger, he finds teeth with fillings and knows they're from this guy or that. He steals cameras to get

photos of them, but then he changes his mind and hocks the camera to buy more twizzlers. I don't know what I'm going to do about him. He drives me nuts."

"How much do you want for him?"

"Who's paying the most these days?"

"Definitely Plum Island. \$10,000. They even cover shipping costs."

"Lucky for you. No overhead. Plum Island researches animal disease, doesn't it?"

"Yeah."

"Would he suffer?"

"Probably."

"I can't do that to my brother. No matter how much I can't stand him."

"The university needs cadavers for medical studies. My guys can make it painless. Only \$1,000 though."

"Okay. A thousand it is. I'll just tell Mom that he probably took off to Tacoma with Bobo. She asks if I see him now and then. How do I get a job like yours? I'm going to retire soon and may want some extra income."

"You have to know people higher up than me."

"Well, it was just a thought. As long as you're in town, do you want to catch the Seahawks?"

"Can't. Got to move on to L.A."

"Oh, well. It was just a thought. Send me those bids from those other agencies soon. The homeless problem is growing and I have a mortgage to pay off."

River of Lost Souls | *Phil Slattery*

Around midnight on Halloween, Davey and I were almost finished digging a deep grave for Stan, who was now crumpled up in my car trunk, in a dense woods on the west bank of the Animas River, when Davy asked what he should say if the police came snooping.

Stan had been Davy's neighbor, against whom he had had nothing until he shot Davy's meek, old dog with an air pellet rifle while he was at work, to spite Davy for asking him to keep his music down at night.

I was a good friend of Davy's and I had also been Stan's neighbor. I had had nothing against Stan until Stan poisoned my dog for barking at night.

I had been walking through the alleyway lining our back yards when, as I came up on Stan's house, I heard Davy and Stan yelling at each other over the low, chain-link fence between their back yards and saw Davy hit Stan's head with the edge of the shovel I now held.

I threw out a few shovelfuls before answering.

"Tell'em that he went to his mother-in-law's home in Santa Fe to fetch his wife back after she left him last week."

"But his car's still in his driveway," Davy said while digging.

I threw out a few more shovelfuls.

"The police have no reason to investigate unless they have a body. He's just a missing person," I said.

"When did she leave him?" Davy asked while digging.

"While he was at work."

"No, I mean what day."

Davy's shovel hit something mushy. He scraped away the soil and found Stan's wife. He looked at me in silence and shock.

"Oops," I said. "The same day she left me."

I killed Davy with the shovel and buried all three together.

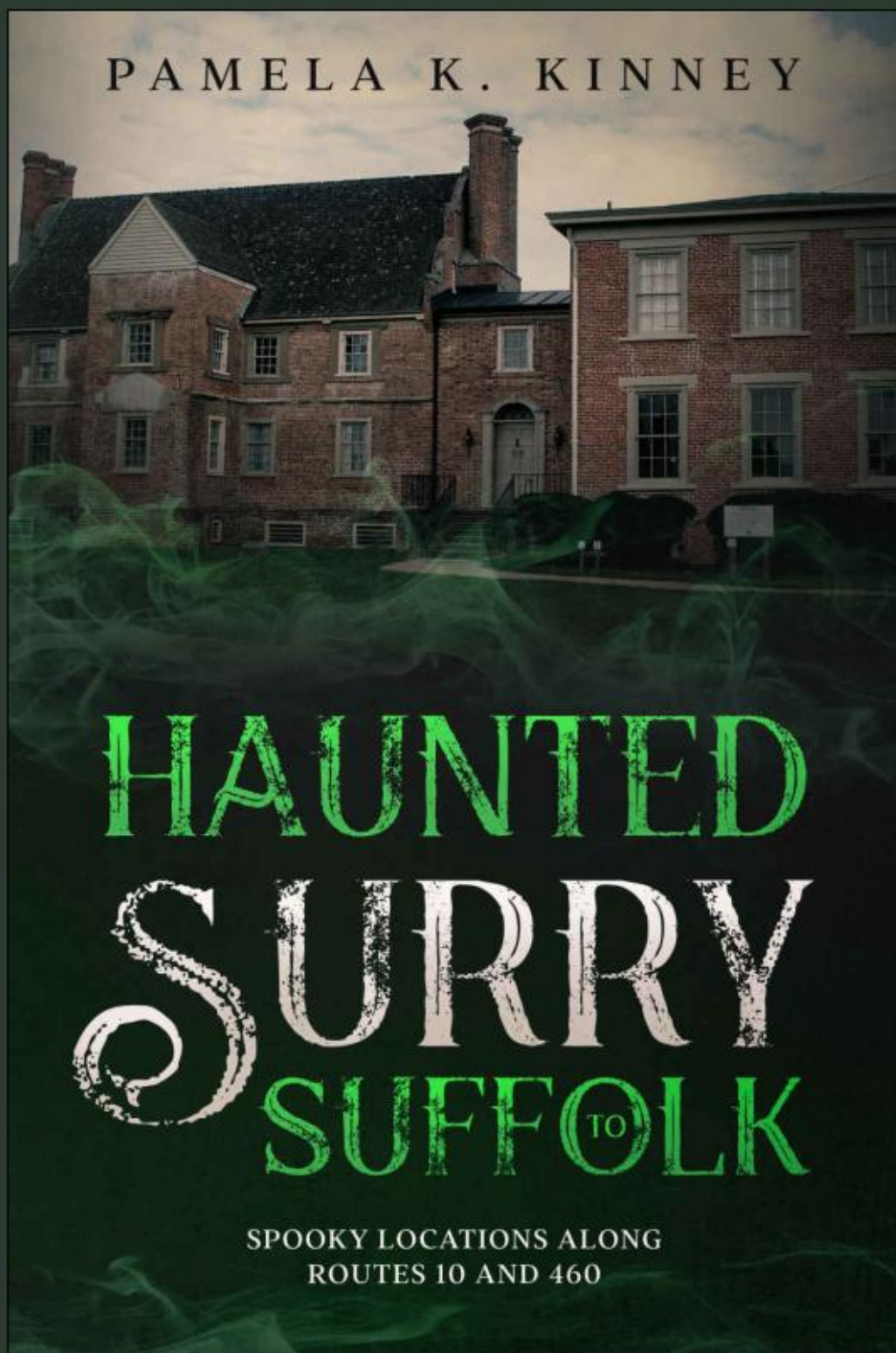
About the Author:

Phil Slattery has a B.A. in German and Russian. He has been writing fiction sporadically since the late 1990's. His poetry and stories are in several collections available on Amazon. He is currently working on finishing a sci-fi/horror novel entitled *Shadows and Stars*. He hopes to follow that with three more novels over the next few years. He can be found on several social media.

Author Blog: [Slattery's Magazine for Writers](#)

Twitter: [@philslattery201](#)

No matter which road you take to visit the towns and countryside along Routes 10 and 460 in Southeastern Virginia, the phantoms can't wait to SCARE you a good time.



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You don't see me.

Yet, I see you.

Melted chocolate chip morsels, peppermint, and blueberry lollipops ooze from your perfect pores.

I can smell you six feet away.

237 days... I followed you

You didn't even notice me.

I'm a chameleon who blends in anywhere.

An orgy of trees, loud football games, or a flock of seagulls would surround me with their wings of protection.

I watched you each day as you gathered in a huddle with those obnoxious girlfriends—they who don't deserve you.

You shouldn't waste your time with them.

The countdown started Monday until game night again, Friday.

My anticipation spirals out of control to study your countless double round offs and standing back tucks.

That purple and gold skirt seemed as if Botticelli painted it on your 5-foot 1-inch frame.

I waited until I knew it was just right to introduce myself to you, when no one was around to interfere.

Something wasn't right.

Your scent was off tonight.

Hmm, you're going to make me guess, aren't you?

Let's see...

I leaned back on the hood of my Mercedes SUV in the ebony distance, under the full moonlight.

Inhaling deeply, I dissected your scents—beef jerky, methanol, ammonia, butane, arsenic, nicotine, and warm beer from your chilled lips.

Who touched and kissed you?

My nails dug into my palms.

I noticed crimson droplets splatter onto my car.

A water bottle rested in my seat. I grabbed it, unscrewed the lid, and poured it inside my palms.

I dressed my wounds with ointment and a bandage from the first aid kit in my glove compartment.

The wolf drove you home in his dated Porsche.

Of course, I followed you both, staying a few car lengths behind.

He parked in front of your house as I did the same, two houses down.

I saw him pull you closer to contaminate you again with his sickening poisons and unruly hands.

My steering wheel squealed as I squeezed it with my hands, wishing it was him instead.

After several minutes, he finally released you.

You jumped out, grabbed your pom poms from the backseat, and scurried away from his car.

He drove off before you even reached your door.

Why can't you see he doesn't deserve you either?

This is exactly why I must introduce myself to you before dawn.

11:45PM...

1:30AM...

Now, it's time.

I slipped latex gloves over each hand, folded an extra-large duffle bag under my arm, and maneuvered my way around your back window.

You should've closed and locked your window, but you didn't.

Thank you.

I've explored your treasure box from every page of your diary and all of your hidden, intimate secrets.

As I stared down at you sleeping like Snow White in the fairytale with sheer, baby pink sheets draped over your Jem Star pajamas, I knew you would be mine forever.

I would be your true prince charming like no other.

Kneeling down next to your face, I sniffed your hair and the toxins had disappeared from earlier.

I snipped a lock of your hair with a titanium pocketknife, stuffed it in my back pocket, and pulled out a syringe.

Pressing it against your neck, where his claws once claimed.

Before 7:30AM, I removed your hands, eyes, tongue, heart, and extracted all of your teeth.
A deep, vertical home waited for you in my vast garden, so I lowered you down with grace.
Mounds of dirt swallowed you.
A dead stag was placed on top and buried with you.
Belladonna and hemlock seeds showered your grave on Halloween Eve.
I took a long hot shower, dressed, and sipped a pumpkin spice latte with extra whip cream and mint chocolate sprinkles.
Once I arrived at work, I reviewed some papers on the edge of the stage with my drink next to me.
Someone opened up the door, but I couldn't make out who it was, because of the glare from the sun.
The student ambulated towards me and whispered in a soft, stuttered tone, "Excuse me, Mr. Bardot," with a violin and bow in her trembling hand.
I straightened my plaid bow tie as my finger grazed the folded, lock of hair tied with a red ribbon pinned in its back mid-section.
"Why, Miss Olivia, you haven't thrown in the towel after all," I said staring into her bouncing emerald eyes. "Are you ready to play Paganini's Caprice No. 24 again?"
"Yes, sir."
"Well, don't just stand there, please take the stage and begin."
My fingers tapped the rim of my cup to the swaying rhythms that echoed against the golden walls.
Traces of honeysuckle, ripe raspberries, and coconut sprinkles drowned my palate.
Without hesitation, my eyes froze on her.

About the Author:

Miracle Austin works in the social work arena by day and in the writer's world at night. She's a YA/NA cross-genre, hybrid author. She's a Marvel/DC/Horror/Stanger Things FanGirl and loves attending cons and teen book events. Miracle lives in Texas with her family, and she looks forward to hearing from her awesome readers, who already know her, and new ones, too.

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A Time for Reflection | John H. Dromey

With few exceptions, each costumed child reacted differently when confronted by their deepest, darkest fears.
Scared stiff, Rosalie froze in place.
The Johnson twins giggled hysterically. Simultaneously scared silly.
All at once, Anthony stopped salivating at the prospect of free candy. His mouth turned desert dry. He was scared spitless.
There was nothing creepy about the well-lit, uncluttered porch. No rocking chair with a scarecrow that suddenly came to life.
The terror commenced *after* the opaque storm door—in sync with the doorbell—swung open. The trick-or-treaters faced a bigger-than-life self-image distorted by the fun house mirror filling the doorway.

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 short fiction has appeared in Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, Flame Tree Fiction Newsletter, Hybrid Fiction, Mystery Weekly Magazine, several previous issues of The Sirens Call eZine, and elsewhere.

The desert was pitch black. Empty. The only thing illuminating the dusty road was the silvery glow of the moon. A coyote sat by the side of the road. It watched in glaring silence as the rusted, turquoise-blue pickup truck rumbled past. The woman inside of the truck did not notice the coyote. She was trying to see the road in front of her, but the only light she found came from the sky above her and the tired shine of her one intact headlight.

The woman sighed. She had wanted to reach the next town before midnight, but that hour of evil and fire was creeping ever closer, with no end in sight. The radio signal had gone a long time ago, but she kept turning the dial in the futile hope of finding a voice to keep her company. Occasionally, if she was near one of the few small sand-villages out this far, the voice of a gravelly, middle-aged radio host would emerge from the empty static, only to sink back into its depths a minute later.

But she was too far out for that now. All seemed empty. All seemed silent. The coyote padded off on quiet feet. The emptiness seemed complete. The woman drove only in a straight line. No curves out here.

And then, without warning, it all stopped. The car, paused in the empty road, threw her back into her seat. The last headlight was gone. Static of the radio dissipated with a sizzling sound, like spit on hot sand. If she had looked in the sky right then, she would've seen that the moon was gone too.

The woman could not see. She could not see anything. Maybe she gasped a little as everything died. Or maybe that was just the sound of that lurking Thing hiding behind the saguaro cactus. She didn't know what had happened. She wanted to panic. She was sitting in the middle of a dark desert road, unseen and unseeing, at midnight. Midnight echoes from mind to mouth.

She reasoned blackout with herself. But she did not look for the moon. Her phone, sitting in a cup holder next to her, was dead too. She couldn't do anything out here but pray and sit very, very still. As she sat, fearing the desert could smell fear, something...moved? Slithered? No, crept on a thousand invisible legs. It was – no, it wasn't that, an it. More like a they. And there were thousands of them, color of the night, unseen but seeing. They hissed, grunted, snarled in unison, crawled in darkness up her window. They were midnight creatures from the bowels of the desert.

The woman could hear them. Their noises were there and, while unseeing, she could hear. She frantically tried to turn her phone back on. Whatever they were, they were coming for her. She could sense it. They were hungry, and she was their feast. It grew deafening, the grunts and screeches. She could hear nothing but it, although that did not matter, as it was all there was.

But then it stopped. The woman gasped. She shivered. Dream. Bad dream. Nothing more, nothing less. Nightmares will rear their fiery black heads, tongues lashing, mouths foaming, until the end of human existence. She pinched herself. Hard. Her leg bled, but not the leg she had pinched.

There was a soft, whispered word spoken from deep down in the saguaro's fleshy gullet. There was a whispered word somewhere in the desert.

The woman's dead phone rang. She hesitated. It rang two more times. She picked it up, slid finger across screen and pressed to ear. Static. And then, a whispered word. "Who?"

The coyote did not notice once the car had disappeared. It happened often. All it remembered was one single whispered word, muttered in the black void of desert.

About the Author:

E.C. Davis is a high-school aged writer from Denver, Colorado. She enjoys writing poetry, horror and surrealist fiction. In her free time, E.C. enjoys fencing, reading and playing with her ducks. She also runs a copy editing business on Fiverr.

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Eleanor checked her earplugs were in place, then switched on the white noise machine. Her eye mask on, Eleanor snuggled down into her fresh, lavender-scented sheets and relaxed. She hated this time of year, with the sexy witches in costumes and the little monsters running up and down the street. Soon it would be over. Eleanor's home was a sanctuary; her blood, sweat and tears had gone into it over the many years she had lived here, adding rooms, changing the decor and creating a garden the envy of her friends. She had spent the day tending to her home, keeping it clean, tidying the small herb garden and fussing over it as a mother would a child. She loved this house with all its quirks and like her there were new cracks showing and wear and tear with age, but this house was firmly her home.

But now it was time for sleep. As she settled into bed, Eleanor's bones creaked and cracked. The house seemed to make a similar house as it to settled down for the night.

Will winced as the sound of broken glass echoed around the darkened street. He dared to look around but no lights came on, nor did any dogs start howling. Will wasn't surprised as he had been shopping out this road for the last week. It was mostly houses with elderly owners, no security systems or noisy pets. The perfect location for him to do a little trick or treating of his own.

He carelessly dropped the brick he'd used to break the window onto the flowerbed, crushing some of the herbs there. A faint scent of mint, lavender and something else hit his nostrils as he slipped his hand inside the broken window and flipped the lock. Just as he was pulling his hand out, a shard of glass speared his hand, just at the base of his thumb. Will bit his lip to stop the string of curse words pouring out, but a whimper did escape as he pulled the long, thin shard from his hand. It made a tinkling sound as it hit the brick he'd dropped into the flowerbed. Will tore some of his t-shirt off to wrap around his hand but suspected he would need stitches to fully stop the bleeding. He briefly considered just giving up and going back to his tiny studio apartment but knew he owed the guys, he didn't even dare think their names as if doing so would cause them to materialise beside him, far too much money. Anyway, if the information he had about what was inside this house was right, he'd be able to pay them off and afford an expensive, non-damp new flat and could get his hand stitched by the best plastic surgeons on Harley Street.

A part of his brain continued to beg Will to leave but he ignored it as he yanked the window open and, with a quick check to make sure no one was watching, he clambered inside.

Will found himself perched on top of a kitchen counter. He took a moment to look around the neatly kept kitchen with an old cooking range against one side and a large fridge humming in the corner. There was a small dining table with two chairs in the middle of the room and two doors, one which Will assumed would lead to the rest of the house and the other which was probably a cupboard. Will started to ease himself off of the counter but his sleeve caught the tap handle. Scalding hot water poured down his arm. Will crashed off of the counter and scrambled to his feet, slipping a little as the water was already pouring over the side of the sink. He hastily turned off the tap, the burning in his arm making him forget about the pain in his hand. He shook off his hand, flicking bloody water everywhere and looked around for a cloth to try and dry himself. Seeing none hanging up, he pulled open one of the doors. It was a cupboard and Will was faced with a large number of old, heavy-looking cooking pots and assorted brooms. However, there were no cloths and the stinging in his arm was getting worse so Will closed the cupboard and turned to the fridge. Perhaps there was some ice or butter he could spread on his burned arm. He was sure he'd read that butter was good for burns. The fridge was relatively empty and Will couldn't see any butter for his already blistering skin. There was no ice in the freezer compartment either. Will briefly considered draping some of the raw, blood-soaked meat across his arm, but the smell of gone-off meat caused his stomach to churn. He hastily closed the fridge and turned to the second door. *Just focus on the job at hand and get out* he told himself. He could deal with his injuries later.

Will was relieved that the door didn't squeak as he gently pushed it open. There was no one awake and he was in a small, well-kept, open-plan lounge with the stairs on the right hand side. The walls were covered in portraits, hung in a haphazard fashion and painted in the style where the eyes follow you around the room. There were a few empty spaces and Will saw the portraits leaning against the wall, ready to be rehung. He was disappointed not to see a TV. What did the old lady do for entertainment? In the centre of the room there were a

number of upright armchairs which surrounded a low wooden table covered in books. It was too dark to properly read their titles but Will could just make out some symbols. He started to reach for one of the books, wondering if something so obviously old would be worth anything, when the gleam of the candlesticks on the mantelpiece caught his attention. *Now, they looked good and must be worth a pretty penny* thought Will as he hefted one in his hand. He flipped it to look at the base but couldn't see a silversmith's mark. Still, he'd be able to sell them. Will shook off his backpack, wincing as the fabric scratched down his blistered arm. He was about to put the candlesticks inside when a sound behind him caused him to spin, automatically raising the candlestick, ready to strike. In the gloom, Will couldn't see anyone, although the eyes in the paintings followed his every move. Shaking off the feeling of unease that was starting to spider-crawl up his back, Will headed towards the stairs. He hadn't taken more than a few steps when his knee slammed against the low table, spilling the books across the floor. Will cursed under his breath. He was certain the table hadn't been there when he'd entered the lounge, but had been more to the left. He hobbled around the table, ignoring the books as his boots crushed their pages.

As he reached the stairs, the floorboard creaked loudly. Will plastered himself against the wall, convinced the noise must have woken up the old lady he'd seen going in and out of the house. However, there was no movement from upstairs and so he peeled himself off of the wall. Will couldn't contain the shriek of pain as the picture hooks clawed at his clothes and skin, tearing strips of flesh from his back. He looked over his shoulder to see what looked like macabre, dripping ribbons hanging on the wall.

Once more a small part of Will's brain begged him to leave the house. However, it was drowned out by the stinging pain in his arm which merged with the throbbing pain from his knee. He was going to claim his prize. There was nothing of worth downstairs, so the loot must be upstairs with the old lady. His fury driving him forward, Will started climbing the stairs in a murderous rage, not caring if he woke the resident of the house, almost welcoming the chance to take out his anger on someone.

He had nearly reached the top of the stairs when one of the floorboards splintered under his weight. He crashed into the stairs, his lower leg slipping through the broken board. A torrent of curse words flew out of his mouth as he tried to stand, little splinters in the wood digging into his hands. He had nearly pulled his leg from the hole when it appeared the floorboards moved closer, their broken shards forming teeth which bit into his leg. Will screamed as the boards continued chomping on his calf until Will could see white bone and the shredded remains of his leg. He tried to stand once more but lost his balance. He flung his arms forward, grasping at air as he slowly felt himself falling backwards. He barely registered the bones in his leg snapping, the last of the skin holding his leg together tearing as he bounced down the stairs. The loud crack of his skull on the bottom step rang out around the house. As the life drained from Will, the last thing he saw was the floorboard mending itself, the table moving back into position and the water draining from the sink. The floorboards slowly parted and Will dropped into the darkness under the house before the floorboards groaned back into position above him.

Eleanor patted the wall as she slowly drifted off to sleep. She knew she would need to clean her house again tomorrow, fix any breakages and make sure everything was put back in its correct place. She really did love her house and the old witch's house loved Eleanor in return.

About the Author:

G Clark Hellery has always been drawn to the dark and quirky. Her short stories have appeared in *Sirens Call* as well as anthologies from Fox Spirit Books and *Woman's League of Ale Drinkers*. Geraldine works as a writer and crafter in South West England, making unique gifts and cards. For more links to her writing and crafting, check out her blog.

Author Blog: [G. Clark Hellery](#)

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I loved writing horror. The ability to let my darkest ideas flow from my brain and filter them out onto paper was a gift given to me by some higher being than I'd ever known. Each Sunday I would watch the weather forecast for the next week. Any time there was a prediction for rain I would get excited and prepare as best I could to spend the time writing. Something about rain and writing dark tales was magical, almost romantic.

That all changed on October 1st. It was the first Harvest Moon in October since 2016. I always joked when politics were brought up at parties how I found it to be rather telling that it only happened during election years. Most of the time no one caught on to the joke. To be fair, the general public didn't usually surround themselves with creepy things, scary movies, and all things Halloween, either.

But I did.

The news said the week of the 1st would bring about significant changes in the weather. A cold front was moving in from the north, and a nice, soaking rain storm was building up off the coast. My eyes were nearly misty over the prospect of a solid day of writing with a cool, autumn rain outside. It seemed like it had been months since there was more than an hour of storms.

Things that week progressed slowly, but I accomplished all the stuff I needed to for me to take the rainy day off. I slept in a bit that morning, but popped out of bed with more energy than I had the whole week. I slid a thick robe on over my shoulders. The chill from the north came in just like the news said. The steady tapping of big raindrops hitting the gutters and cement outside. The wind pressed against the windows, putting pressure on my eardrums.

When I made it into the kitchen, I poured myself a glass of iced tea with a slice of lemon. The clean, bright, and slightly bitter, taste of the tea was a great wake up. The cold added a bit more chill than I was ready for, but it also worked to jump start me.

My writing area was dark and quiet. Years of collecting weird shit gave it character. There was a rat skull with the skin rotted away and a coupe teeth missing I found in the woods on a hike one summer afternoon. I found an ancient baby doll nailed to the siding of an old rundown house. The nail went right through the forehead, between the eyes. I broke the siding off and put it on a shelf above my desk. I had other things, like a pickled wolf fetus and a fanned-out, dehydrated raven's wing, just to add to the overall creepy décor of the room. I wrote horror in there, not Disney shows. It needed the dark slant to set the mood.

I sat down and stretched, popped my knuckles, and got my computer up and running. I had a long, productive day ahead, and needed to be loose and ready. The home screen of the computer showed the world's current events. Although I was raring to get started on the story percolating, something on the crawl caught my eye.

"Black rain kills millions. State of Emergency ordered."

Disbelief. That was really my first reaction. I had just woken up. Something must've skipped or evaded comprehension in my sleepy brain. Had I watched, read, or written too much horror? Was the ridiculous and improbable now such a part of my consciousness that it clouded my reality and sanity?

No. The short answer was no. That shit was real.

I clicked on the link. The coastal area I lived in was experiencing phenomena known as black rain. It was watery and pooled and evaporated just like rain, but it was as black as used motor oil. A fact I never knew was it wasn't exactly unheard of. It had happened in a few places in the past. That it killed people was, however.

The most common witness' reports said when the black rain hit a person; it would cut right through their skin like a laser. It would cauterize them from the inside and turned red passing through, like food coloring.

I ran to the bedroom to grab my phone. Expecting to spend the day writing, I left it behind on purpose. Now, I had to check on my son and girlfriend. They'd left before I woke up today. She took him to school, and she went to work after. This was our routine, just usually I ate breakfast with them.

The first attempt to reach Michelle went to voice mail. I didn't expect the amount of panic that set in from the missed call. A lump of dread rose in my throat, and heat grabbed the back of my head like an exuberant lover. Sweat clung to my dry, morning skin, and fear settled in my stomach like a virus.

"Hey, Michelle. I saw that black rain stuff on the news and wanted to make sure you and Jeffery were okay. Call me back, please. Love you. Bye." My voice was a lot calmer than how I felt inside. The serene tone did nothing to betray the chaotic storm going on in my head.

I changed clothes while I waited for her to call me back. If she needed me then I'd be ready. If I didn't hear from her in a certain amount of time, I'd be ready. And if none of that happened, I hadn't wasted any time.

As I pulled my socks on, I called again. It went to voice mail once more. I didn't bother leaving a message. I wanted to scream. Didn't she realize there was an apocalyptic event taking place and her and our kid were nowhere to be found? I decided to call the school and ask if Jeffery had made it in. That too went to an electronic voice asking me to leave a message. I hung up and growled at my phone, squeezing it as hard as I could.

It hadn't occurred to me before opening my front door that if the rain was killing people, I couldn't just run outside in it like a superhero. It would kill me, too. The idea of having to sit still, isolated from the world and everyone that mattered most to me, was maddening. I couldn't think of anything other than pulling my hair as hard as I could to relieve the tension in my head. I never knew why, but it always helped.

Twelve minutes went by with the speed of centuries. I called Michelle and the school again and got nothing. The news played on the TV, showing me the horrors of the rain in my northeastern town along with the surrounding cities. One of the scenes showed what was little more than shreds of a fireman piled on top of school bus, holding around forty students. Little hands pressed against the windows, and big terrified eyes peered out at the news crew. No one dared to go out after seeing what happened to the people in the weather.

I called Michelle again. "Answer the goddamn phone, Michelle. I need to hear from you and Jeff. I'm getting worried, now." Her voice mail was catching the brunt of my frustration. I called seven more times in a row, with no answer. Sighing was all I could do. I was so unfairly mad at Michelle I could barely sit still long enough to wait for each dial tone to end.

As I paced the kitchen no less than a hundred times, the phone rang. It was David, my brother. I was almost pissed off at him for not being Michelle.

"Hello," I said with a much more aggressive tone than I intended.

"Damn. I'm glad you're alive too, asshole." Even in the most insane of times, David was joking. He said it was either that or cry, and he was too much of a son-of-a-bitch to cry.

"I'm happy you are. I haven't heard from Michelle or Jeffery, and I'm panicking."

"I bet, Rob. The good news they are with me. I got a call from the school, telling me to come get Erica. When I got there Michelle was picking up Jeffery, and dropped her phone when a drop of rain shot through her hand. I got them to come with me."

"Oh god. Is she okay? How's Jeffery?"

"He's fine. I think that hole in her hand is likely to be a problem, though."

"Yeah, they're saying it's going through people."

"It did with her, but I think she's gonna lose use of her hand."

"Jesus! What the hell kind of rain is that?"

A huge blast outside rumbled the ground enough to make me lose balance. It felt like it came from the core of the Earth, like it traveled hundreds of miles to surface. I'd felt the ground when the space ships took off in Florida, and the power they possessed. This made the spaceships feel like mosquitoes. The call with David was cut off.

I opened the door to look out the storm door window. The circle in the center of our town square was gone. Piles of painted asphalt, grass-covered dirt clods, and ripped and mangled metal wrapped around a figure of a woman on her knees, rising up from the ground. The black rain pelted the house, whipping through the air on an erratic jet-stream of old-world strength. The woman in the square glowed like magma made her organs.

"Rise, my children."

The ground vibrated the words. It didn't speak them, or shout them. The ground shook and I understood her calling.

"Rise and come lie with me in the afterlife of *Asintmah*! Those who are being harvested so thy souls may finally rest within nature's mothers own breasts, and call their journey through. Step out and be watered by *Asintmah's* teet."

Tears filled my eyes. This golden woman made of the destroyed town square was telling me to come to her. My goddess calling me home. Being native, and growing up in the ways of old, I was taught the beliefs of Athabaskan. I was taught to treat the earth with the worship of Gods, and now I was being rewarded by *Asintmah*, herself. The black roses shall bloom in my honor."

I stepped through the door. The rain puddled on the ground in dark pools. I noticed it no longer fell. It was rising. Thick drops rose from the ground, tearing into my skin, letting my soul free from my body. I breathed so deep I could feel it in my very spirit. I was going home.

Local news brief: Many residents of the town drowned in sound's bride collapse. Today's earthquake believed to be responsible.

About the Author:

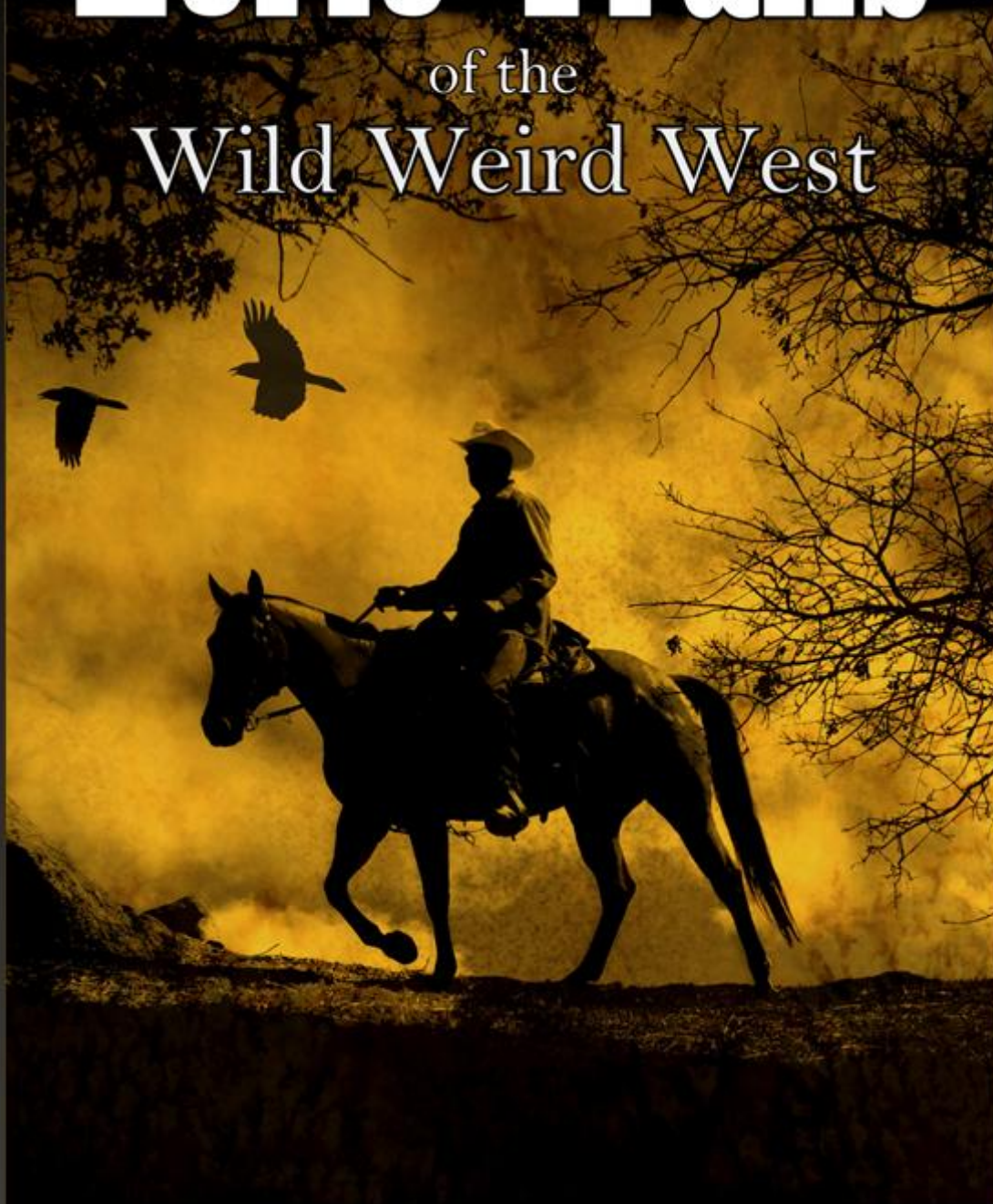
T.S. Woolard lives in North Carolina with his three Jack Russell Terriers. He has been published with many presses, and won several awards for his contributions to the horror world. Please look for more of his work, including his latest release, *Be Free*, at Amazon.

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"What ho, citizen!"

Mark jumped, startled by the sudden voice. He turned to see, standing by the ficus in the corner of his office, a portly middle-aged man in a yellow-and-orange superhero outfit—mask, cape, codpiece-bikini, the works.

"Who are you?"

"I am your nemesis! The red-highlighter to underscore the deficits of your soul! I am... Corporate Man!"

Corporate Man struck a hands-on-hips pose, his steely gaze at an heroic forty-five degree skew, his overstuffed nylon costume the portrait of ridiculousness.

"OK then," said Mark. "And who do I have to thank for this honor? It's Gary, isn't it? A stripper in a cake I might expect, so points for creativity."

Corporate Man pointed accusingly.

"You think me a prank perpetrated by your cronies? Nay! I am no phantasm but a vessel of vengeance, summoned into existence by necessity! And I say unto you, Mark Albertson, Chief Executive Officer of Trenton Pharmaceuticals, I am your penance made manifest!"

Corporate Man covered half his face with his cape, Dracula-style.

"Well, thank you very much. Lovely joke. Really splendid. But, I have things to do, so if you wouldn't mind...."

Thirty seconds of silence congealed into discomfort. Mark got a ten—no, a twenty—from his wallet and held it out.

"Thanks again for the laugh. Brilliant job. My compliments, for sure."

Corporate Man made no move.

"I am going to have to ask you to leave now, if you please."

Nothing.

"Honestly, fun's over. Please. Move along."

"I'd rather not have to call security."

[*crickets*]

"Right then." Mark picked up the receiver from his desk phone and was about to dial when a yellow-gloved hand seized his wrist and tugged him off balance.

"What the hell do you—!"

Smack! The receiver hit dead on the bulb of his nose. A blue-black shock filled his eyes and he stumbled blindly. The world upended and his feet flew toward the ceiling. The floor came on like a runaway bus and knocked all sense from him. He came to with the costumed figure genuflecting on his shoulder and bending the fingers of his other hand near to their breaking limit.

"Silence, foul overlord of evil-doing! I am the spirit of retribution the cosmos conjures when the law proves impotent!"

"Wha... what... do you... want?"

"Only to serve a miniscule portion of the suffering you have bestowed upon others."

Corporate Man slapped him across the cheek. Then again with the backhand. He swiped off the shiny yellow glove, tensed a fist, and began to whale on Mark's face, back and forth, momentum building with each blow. Once, when Mark was a child at the beach, he was carried by a wave into a jetty. He tumbled with no sense of direction, unable to breathe, each agonizing buffet upon the rocks pulling him from the edge of unconsciousness. It was like that.

"Stop!" he managed to gasp out.

The pummeling stopped and Mark felt himself hauled up, shoved into his chair. He coughed blood with a shard of tooth onto the leather blotter on his desk. His head was seized by the hair. Corporate Man held up a cell phone and swiped through images of Mark's wife and daughters.

"Your family will also bear the sins of the father," he said, "Should you persist in your waywardness."

Corporate Man switched the phone to selfie mode, a red recording light winking on. Mark saw his battered face next to a dime-store mask.

"Mark Albertson. I, Corporate Man, judge you for authorizing the destruction of clinical trial data challenging the safety of the pediatric chemotherapy agent Naxiprotin. I judge you for shifting manufacture of the drug overseas where lax oversight produced tainted batches you knowingly sold to foreign hospitals. I judge you for avoiding settlement payouts by assigning ownership of the drug to a bankrupt subsidiary of your own company. I judge you for this, and much more."

"Who are you?" was all Mark could say.

"I told you: I am retribution when the law fails."

Corporate Man removed his mask. Mark beheld a face—a pudgy, exceptionally ordinary face he might have seen a hundred times. Someone pushing a mail cart? Sweeping the halls or mowing his lawn? Or seated in a courtroom gallery as, from the witness box, Mark denied any knowledge of wrongdoing.

"I... I never meant to hurt anyone."

"No. You chose to disguise it. No more secret identities."

He balled up the mask and, with two iron-strength fingers, shoved it into Mark's bloodied mouth.

"When you show this video to the police, be sure to play the explanation of why this was done to you."

He set down the phone—still recording—on the center of Mark's desk.

"I have many friends," said Corporate Man. "Tell all your friends about me."

In a final indignity, he drove Mark's head into the phone screen.

When Mark recovered, there was no remnant of the visitor, save the toll on his body. His desk phone rang, and with a shaky hand he picked it up and listened without speaking.

"Mark? Mark are you there? It's Phil Tobin. Something's happening, something... very bad. There's someone... who... who is.... I can't explain. Call me as soon as you can."

Mark's cellphone rang. He swiped call answer, cutting his finger on a splinter of broken screen glass.

"Mark? Mark, if you're in the office, you need to get out. Go straight to the police. Just say there's a stalker. Tell Carol to get the kids and do the same."

A text message from Gary in Legal Services: *There's been a huge confidentiality breach. Get to a public place and call me immediately. Use a payphone if you can find one.*

A pop-up social media alert from Carol Albertson: SAFETY-MAN VISITS HALEY'S SCHOOL! #cute

A photo showed a pudgy middle-aged man in an orange-and-yellow superhero costume holding up a STOP sign in front of a row of preschoolers on tricycles.

Rest for the Wicked | Matt McHugh

The first night, I saw it crouching on a branch outside my bedroom window. The shape of a child, a baby with its body burned black like charred wood. All dark, save for two eyes—embers in a pit of ash.

"What do you want?" I whispered. It fled like a scarf caught in the wind.

The next night it spoke: "Where."

I looked at Richard, asleep in my bed. Three months since we met, one month since he moved in. Unmarried. He is not handsome. Balding, pudgy, crooked teeth. He does not go to church. But he is kind, laughs easily, and touches me with respect. The only man who ever has, and in that he is unspeakably beautiful to me.

"Leave him alone," I said to the demon-child. "It's my fault."

"You both will burn," it replied.

At breakfast, I asked Richard if we moved in too quickly. 'Well, we're not getting any younger,' he said, laughing. 'But we hardly know each other,' I said. He hugged me sideways, arms around my waist, and kissed me on the temple. 'What better way to find out?' he said, resting his forehead on mine.

How long have I wanted that? Warm skin on mine, a gentle word from someone who saw me as something to be cherished. Thirty years ago I was a teenager and my mother brought a man to live with us. He was tall, whip-thin. He smelled of liquor as often as not. There was such meanness in him, such spite, in his flailing destructive rants and his long sulky silences.

When he came to my room one night, spoke kindly to me for the first time, I let him do what he wanted. I knew it was wrong, but I let him. Three months later, I let him take me to a doctor to remove the baby growing in me. I let him. And I promised silence. It's a promise I kept out of shame and weakness, even after he went to his judgement.

I know what you are, shape outside my window. I know why you can't let me have happiness. And I accept it. But you will not take Richard. I can give to him what I failed to give to you. Place him beyond your reach.

The third night, it comes, presses right up to the window. I hear wild, untended fingernails scrape against the glass.

"It is time," it says.

On the nightstand, I place a bowl. I fill it from a bottle of water I've kept since a priest gave it to me at my mother's hospital bed. I dip my right hand in the water, and as he sleeps, trace a cross on Richard's forehead: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son...."

With my left hand I raise the pistol I stole so many years ago from my drunken stepfather. I smoothly squeeze the trigger, only this time to deliver not judgement but salvation.

About the Author:

Matt McHugh was born in suburban Pennsylvania, attended LaSalle University in Philadelphia, and after a few years as a Manhattanite, currently calls New Jersey home. His short fiction has appeared in assorted venues, and his sci-fi novelette *Radioland* was named among the Indie Stars of 2015 by Publisher's Weekly. In 2019, his story *Burners* won the Grand Prize of the Jim Baen Memorial Short Story Award.

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State Bird | *Randee Dawn*

"Enjoyin' Maine so fah?" the driver asked Emmi, unloading her suitcase from the truck.

Emmi scratched a welt on her hand. "Your bugs are ... lively."

"Ayup. Mahskitos. State bird, dontchaknow." He yanked a 12-gauge from the rack. "Duck, miss."

An insect the size of cat swooped over the hotel – and disintegrated in the blast. "Don't fret," said the driver, a mad glint in his eye. "'Twas but a babe."

Emmi's eyes were saucers.

"Alas," he said, reloading and donning an Army helmet, "when ya do fah the babe, Mama comes next."

Emmi glanced over her shoulder.

The sky darkened.

The Price of Beauty | *Randee Dawn*

Everclear: Miracle Skin Cream! All facial blemishes – eradicated!

"This's fer you, craterface," said my delivery guy a few weeks later. "Everybody's buyin' this shit." His tiny eyes glinted, his face newborn baby smooth.

News reports started: Everclear worked *too* well.

Smoothies began popping up. They'd slept slathered in Everclear, and awoke with skin covering their eyes like dunes crawling over the desert. Some of us started sleeping with straws in our noses and a mouth guard.

Today, I discovered delicate new skin crawling up the metal surface of my straws. It tore and bled.

But hey, no more acne scars.

True Story | *Randee Dawn*

I swiped Miss Evers' fountain pen. It's older'n her an' drips but she loves it. Teach her to fail me in Complit. Craparoonie pen still uses *ink*. Jeez, it's 1952, not 1852.

The pen is mightier than the atom bomb, she said. *Not the sword*.

So I wrote: *My dog has fleas*

Alphonse didn't twitch. I forgot the period. I wrote: "."

He started scratchin' like mad.

I wrote: *The world ends at noon today*

Dumbass. Practically noon right now. I went to cross out the line.

The pen dripped.

One perfect period.

Now sirens're wailin' outside. Whoop whoop wh

Deep End of the Pool | *Randee Dawn*

"Mommy! It's Arthur!" Joe pointed out the sliding glass door at our above-ground pool, still covered in its winter tarp.

"Honey, it can't be." The canvas billowed up over the pool—and the fiberglass side shuddered.

Wind, I decided. Last fall I'd told Joe fish grow to fit their homes, so he'd 'liberated' the mystery creature he'd won at the fair. I hadn't the heart to inform him that fish can't breathe pool chemicals.

The fiberglass rippled again, leaving a dent. A corner of the tarp lifted, revealing a stiletto-length tooth. A teacup saucer-sized eye gazed at Joe.

And winked.

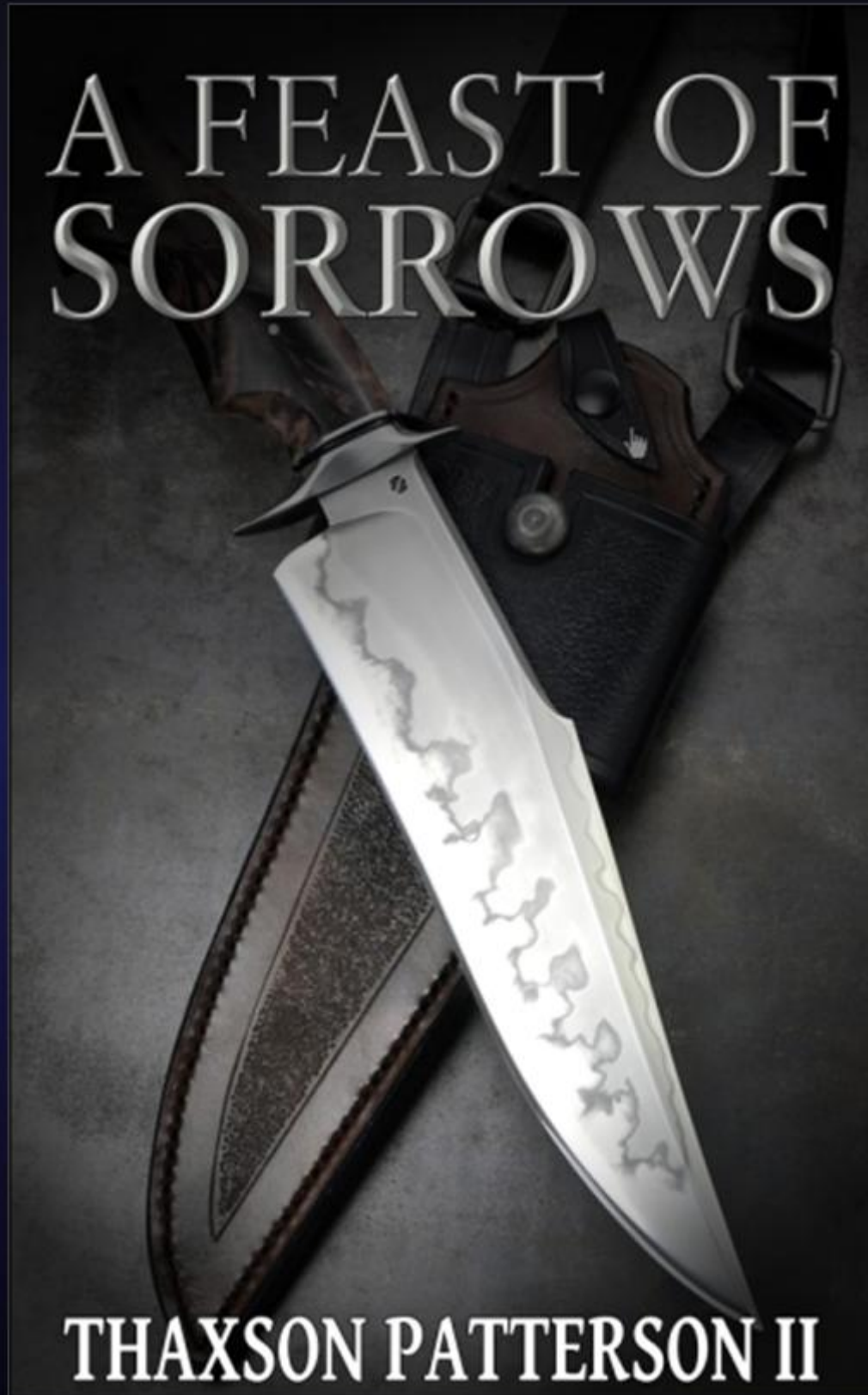
About the Author:

Randee Dawn is a Brooklyn-based author and journalist. Her short fiction has been published in anthologies including *Samhain Secrets* and *Home for the Holidays*; she co-authored *The Law & Order: SVU Unofficial Companion* and co-edited *Across the Universe: Tales of Alternative Beatles*. She mothers both a Westie and sourdough starter, both of which require regular feedings.

Author Website: [Randee Dawn](http://RandeeDawn.com)

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



Available Exclusively on Amazon for
Purchase or Borrow!

Brunstella sighed, wishing she had gone into dealing drugs. "I can't move the cauldron."

Griselda patted her sister's shoulder. "Of course you can, dearie. Just use a spell."

"I've only got magick left for one spell. I'm not blowing it on rolling a rusty iron pot out into the woods."

"Then hire a troll."

"With what? Nobody pays us for spells anymore, they've all got miracle cures from pharmacies."

Griselda's voice hardened. "It's the Samhain sacrifice, sweetie, we swore to observe it."

Brunstella grabbed her cane and stood up, joints creaking. "If we cut the baby into quarters we could just use a stew pot and freeze the left overs for next year."

"You know better. It has to be a whole, live baby girl, unbaptized. Unbaptized is easy to find these days."

"Yeah, but not so easy to boil. The last one puked in the pot and it took me three hours to clean it out."

Griselda leaned forward to whisper in her sister's ear. "Do be cautious, younger sister. You know who is listening."

Brunstella's laugh was harsh. "When's the last time we saw her? Eighty years? I think she's wagging her infernal booty elsewhere. We're obsolete."

Griselda slapped her, mottling the wrinkled skin of Brunstella's cheek. "Never doubt the Mistress! Just do as she ordered us."

Brunstella muttered but stiffly lowered herself back down to think. If magick was out she'd have to rely on cunning. I could have done better for myself, she thought, a shill or a prostitute, but look where I am.

Then an idea struck her and she got up with a groan and hobbled down a dirt track that lead away from their cottage, then forked left onto a gravel road for another half mile, eventually reaching a cabin. She walked up to the door and yelled inside.

"Tom, you sober enough to talk?"

"Get away from me, you miserable hag."

"Don't be like that. I need you and your tow truck."

"The last thing I did for you gave me shingles. Go away."

"No, seriously. I can give you erotic visions like a sultan never had."

Tom snorted. "Get out of the dark ages. I've already got four bookmarked porn sites, all free."

Brunstella wouldn't be put off. "Okay, how'd you like to get wasted on the nectar of the gods?"

"Like you knew how to get it." But his tone had changed, and Brunstella knew she had him interested.

"It's an old family recipe. All you have to do is move something and I'll give you enough divine booze to stay blasted for a week."

The door cracked open, and a blotchy, bleary eyed face appeared. "Move what?"

"Just a big old stew pot. I need it to go into the woods, then a few weeks later to be lugged out."

"How big?"

Brunstella's first instinct was to lie, but she knew he'd find out anyway. "Maybe four hundred pounds."

"That's not a pot, that's a hot tub. Make it enough booze for two weeks."

Brunstella didn't hesitate. "Done! It'll be ready for you day after tomorrow, when you come to move the cauldron."

She hobbled back down the gravel road but stopped just before the turnoff onto the dirt track and went up to a one wide trailer that hadn't moved or been improved for a quarter century. The makeshift wood steps up to the door were almost rotted through, and she stepped carefully, then knocked. "Craig! It's Brunstella. I got a deal for you."

"Get away from my door or I'll be the one cursing you."

"Now, now Craig, I think I can take that contaminated moonshine off your hands. Maybe even pay you a little."

Craig, who considered himself an unappreciated cinematographic genius, cracked open the door and peeped at her. "It's got turpentine spilled into it, you old biddy, nobody could abide the taste."

Brunstella smiled. "Yes, well by the time I've added in herbs and hallucinogens it'll taste like nectar. You still got it?"

"Yeah." Craig opened the door all the way and let her in. "How would you move it?"

"I'll come by later on with a wheelbarrow." She looked around the room. Everything was gray, hidden under a half-decade of dust. Everything except a small desk with a lap top computer and sheets of paper. "Working on something?"

Craig's shoulders sagged. "I got an in at a studio, producer named Harry Beerstein owes me a favor, but I need a concept for a TV show, and my mind is farting bad scenarios."

That's when Brunstella had her second great idea of the day. She stood still for several seconds, thinking it through.

"You've been living so bad you might as well have been cursed, Craig, but I've got your cure."

"I doubt you've even got money for the booze."

"Hear me out. Reality shows are what everybody's watching right? We give 'em the ultimate- intrigue, hatred, nudity, promiscuous sex, violence, even human sacrifice."

"Hah?"

"The Samhain ritual, stupid. We do a bunch of episodes leading up to the sacrifice, shoot it all on your hand-held camera, hire our neighbors in for dirt wages- hell-some of them would do it for free- it's got everything. You just need a watcha-callit- trunk line.

"Log line. Jesus, Brunstella, it just might work."

"Don't bring him into it. Of course it will. How's this for a log line? 'Hidden witches corrupt their town for devil worship.'

Craig had started pacing back and forth, stirring up dust. "Close. But you and Griselda are toad ugly. Nobody would watch you with or without clothes."

"Don't worry about that. We'd use some of our local sinners for the sex scenes and nude dancing. For the climax episode we'd rent an unwanted infant..."

Craig warmed to the idea. "Then shoot the parents getting remorse and showing up at the ceremony and getting beaten and cursed. All staged of course, but what reality show isn't? Yeah, I like it."

They talked excitedly for another hour, Craig tapping possibilities into his lap top. He was so worked up about the project he gave Brunstella the contaminated hooch for a hair restorative ointment.

Darkness was creeping in as Brunstella limped down the dirt track to their cottage. She knew she couldn't tell Griselda, not yet anyway. Griselda was the conservative witchy equivalent of Opus Dei. As she entered the cottage, lit only by firelight and candles, Griselda was skinning a cat.

"Ritual?" Brunstella asked.

"Supper," Griselda replied. "What about the cauldron?"

"Taken care of. You and I are going to Craig's tomorrow with the wheelbarrow and picking up two cases of poisoned booze. I doctor the booze and give it to drunken Tom, who'll use his tow truck to carry the cauldron into the woods."

"We don't have money for that, and you've got no powers right now. How'd you do it?"

"Grace and kindness. Don't' worry, it's done."

"Tom's apt to die or go crazy."

"Yup."

"Okay. Supper'll be ready in a half hour."

Griselda and Brunstella picked up and doctored the moonshine the next morning and delivered it to Tom. Craig showed up at their cottage two days later. He was afraid to go up to the cottage door and called out from down the path. "Brunstella!"

She heard his third yell and came out, putting a finger to her lips, then walking with him into a shaded grove. "What news?"

"He liked the idea. Said it was fresh, edgy. But he doesn't know you. Or trust you. He needs some footage to show what we can do."

Brunstella nodded. She appreciated doubt and suspicion. "Your camera and mike working?"

"Sure. What are you thinking of?"

"Tom's hauling a cauldron for me. You and I go with him into the woods, along with that skank girlfriend of his. You're filming all the way through. I do some smoke and haze mumbo jumbo over a bottle of the booze and give it to them. They'll start drinking, it's what they do. Then you shoot whatever else they do, truck bed, hood, front seat, whatever. There'll be enough Spanish fly in the bottle to kill the bull it was meant for."

"What if they die on the hood?"

"Doubt it, those pickles left cucumber behind a long time ago. But just keep shooting. They're apt to drool, so get close enough to show the spit bubbles. Then I step in, yell some nonsense, and administer an antidote."

"Antidote?"

"Just an emetic, *ilex vomitoria*. But their spew should be good footage."

"I can't do that to Tom."

"Tom does it to himself all the time. Besides, he probably won't remember. And you've got the almost porn that could get us the show."

"That's pretty vile."

"I know. Fun, isn't it?"

And so it was scripted, and so it was done. And edited. Tom displayed remarkable staying power and inventiveness. Craig was just clever enough to put the footage on a website with one-time, protected access, so his close friend couldn't shop the idea around and double cross him. Harry Beerstein called back two days later.

"Brilliant work, Craig, brilliant. But I need a copy so I can show it to the right people."

"That's great, Harry. But first things first. I need you to option the concept for say thirty grand. I've drafted and registered a little something I'll send you. As soon as we're in binding agreement I'll be glad to send you a tape for circulation."

Harry got peeved, yelling that Craig was grievously lacking in talent and that his ancestry was subhuman. But once Harry saw that his bullying was having no effect he quieted down and agreed.

Craig went into town and bought a burner cell phone, then turned around and drove down the dirt track to Brunstella's cottage.

She saw him coming and hobbled out. "Do I need to curse him with boils?"

"Nah, he's sending the thirty thou, enough to get started. Look, here's a cell phone. I'll show you how to use it."

"I can't. We hold to the old ways."

"And I'm not going to shag my ass down here every day just to talk with you. Considering how it's used I'm pretty sure this is an invention of the devil."

Brunstella had thought Craig through. So long as he was straining for ego gratification and money he'd be an adequately bad boy. But once he'd arrived as a movie maker Brunstella was going to have to short leash and muzzle him with a nice disfigurement curse. "So what's next, Craig?"

"Beerstein will put together a promo piece using some of our edgier footage and shop it around to investors. He hopes to get the up-front money commitments a few weeks after that. You're going to have to tell Griselda then."

Brunstella spat yellow. "I know." As they kept talking they walked in a circle out to Craig's one wide and back. As they re-approached the witches' cottage, Brunstella's insides felt like they'd curdled into corpse rot. "Somethings wrong," she told Craig. "Get out of here. Now. I'll call you on that flapdoodle."

She hobbled gingerly up to the cottage door and entered. Griselda faced her, both arms akimbo, broken into odd angles. Witches can't cry, but Griselda's sweaty skin and rheumy eyes told of great pain. "What did you do, you clapped out whore?" Griselda demanded.

Brunstella hobbled one step toward her sister, then stopped. Something was sitting in the chair next to the fireplace.

"Yes, Brunstella, what did you do?"

The greasy voice poured over Brunstella like burning oil. Which was okay, really, because she did the same thing recreationally. "Mistress."

"I leave you two to quietly corrupt into dust and you cause trouble with my new projects."

"Mistress?"

"That bulbous letch Beerstein is shopping around a Samhain concept for a reality show. That's something just between us girls. I've devoted too much time corrupting this nation to have it interfered with by Amateur Hour."

The mistress' words were soft pitched and calm and coated in venom. Griselda had started to whimper. Brunstella's mind churned desperately, and she pulled together fragments of what Craig had told her. "Mistress, you have been so busy damning the mainstreams that you haven't had time for the tributaries."

The hand on the arm of the chair turned into a claw, mostly blotchy blue. "Explain yourself."

"Just market segmentation. Griselda and I are traditionalists, we understand the part of the viewing audience that still watches televangelists."

"So?" The word dripped acid.

"The Samhain reality show will apparently condemn wanton, infernal behavior, but will show it in such an attractive way that the religious will be curious. If they're curious they're halfway to you, a large group you're not reaching with your current programming."

The thing in the chair smiled. It wasn't pleasant.

“Brunstella, you wart plantation, you’re onto something. Needs work of course, some demonic script writers, ads in church bulletins, that sort of thing. But yes, maybe. You’re coming to Hollywood. But I can’t have anyone as ugly as you working for me or having a lead role. Hold on.”

Brunstella dropped to the floor writhing in pain. Everything, even her teeth hurt like heaven. When she stood up again she was thirty something with fully working, reasonably attractive parts. “Thank you, Mistress.”

The thing in the chair glanced at Griselda. “A theatrical career requires personal sacrifices Brunstella. I’ll need to shut down your little operation here. Are you willing to dump Craig and abandon Griselda?”

Brunstella considered the alternative. “No problem.”

About the Author:

Ed Ahern resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He’s had over two hundred fifty stories and poems published so far, and six books. Ed works the other side of writing at Bewildering Stories, where he sits on the review board and manages a posse of six review editors.

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Suckle | *Lee Andrew Forman*

Foul, tar-like mucus covered my slick, naked body. Both feet slid against the coal-black floor, legs kicked in panic. Lungs gasped for air with a quick inhale, eyes strained to open, mind clawed for clarity. I wiped at the epidermal muck. It smeared like grease, managed only to move around in globs. Not only was every inch of my flesh covered in it, but the entire floor, and from what my blurry vision could see, so were the walls.

The small, ebon, square of a room I found myself in wasn’t completely dark, but I couldn’t find a source of the dim light. There were no doors, windows, or openings. It was nothing more than a smooth, black cube, every inch covered in the undefined substance.

My gut heaved agonized spasms, brown sludge sprayed from my throat. I expelled viscous fluid until my throat went raw, stomach wrenched to ruin.

As I caught my breath a tapping came from the walls. I held silent and listened. The clicking skittered, then stopped. Again, it moved around—a rapid, insectile scuttle. Then more crawled just beyond the walls, ceiling, just beneath me. From every direction thousands of tiny legs tap-tapped their way around my appalling enclosure.

My neck strained to keep pace with my eyes, which looked in every direction; fear jaunted my vision from random place to random place.

Something landed on my shoulder with a wet plop. I strained my neck to see a pale, wormlike creature with legs and a gnashing mouth full of pointed teeth. Even though it had no eyes it seemed to peer into mine for a moment before it burrowed through my flesh, gnawed into muscle, and attached itself to bone. My dry throat struggled to howl. My shoulder throbbed as it suckled me. I tried to reach and pull it out but its slippery body evaded capture.

I stopped struggling as more fell from the ceiling, came through the walls, up though the floor. More than I could count. I closed my eyes and waited for the feeding to begin.

About the Author:

Lee Andrew Forman is a writer, editor, and publisher from the Hudson Valley, NY. His fascination with the macabre began in childhood, watching old movies and reading everything he could get his hands on. He’s a third-generation horror fanatic, starting with his grandfather who was a fan of the classic Hollywood Monsters. His novella, *Zero Perspective* is available on Amazon.

Blog: [Lee Andrew Forman, Author](#)

Facebook: [Lee Andrew Forman](#)

It's time to let the monsters out!



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

I offered.

I *offered*, for god sake. We were sitting on the couch when I offered an out. I made sure we both had a couple Kokanees in our bellies when I said, "Sean. My man. Let's take the night off." I just wanted to stay in. To play some video games and smoke some pot from the comfort of his dad's garage. "Let's give our livers a break."

But Sean just laughed, because he thought I was joking. I was Noah's Ark, after all, and I hadn't been given a nickname like that because I was some wimp who wanted to stay in and hang out...except I was. So often the mask we wore was just that.

"Seriously," I said, taking a pull of my beer. "Easy out, one time only. I'd be fine with staying in." Beer sloshed in the nearly empty bottle when I raised my hands in a *no big deal* gesture. I attempted a smile, but I knew my grin was permanently cocky. I tipped my head back and drained the Kokanee.

Sean looked at me and his smile faltered a bit. I was not behaving the way he was used to me acting and that threw him. "But I want to go," he said. "It's Halloween." His indigo eyes danced. "Besides," he said, "Melanie will be there."

An image of long, pale hair and jeans riding low to flash a line of taut, bronze belly. The smell of coconut shampoo. The fake cherry taste of her Chapstick.

"Ooh, *Melanie*." I forced a smirk. Reaching into the cooler next to the couch, I grabbed another beer. I cleared my throat, trying to empty my head of girls who were supposed to be untouchable before I snagged a second beer and closed the lid.

But it's easy to fool a fool, I thought as I took in my best friend's oblivious grin.

"Shut up," Sean said. He flashed me the bird but took my peace offering of another Kokanee. "She's bringing her cousin tonight. We thought you might like to meet her."

I froze, the rim of the new bottle just touching my lower lip, and felt my eyebrows shoot up. "Say what now?"

"Her name is Brynn, and she has as many tattoos as you do." Sean beamed at me, obviously pleased with himself. I wanted to shake him and demand to know when he had become so blind.

But I didn't. Instead, I said, "Sure. Here's to making new friends," and raised my bottle in a cheers.

The beach was the place to be, even this late in the season. It was always kept clean and inviting, its pale sand bracketing the serene, dark water of the lake. The pier was a popular attraction, but Sean and I and the group we hung out with kept mainly to our own little zone farther up the beach, away from the busier areas. We could park our trucks, have fires, and do our drugs in relative privacy there, thanks to the sand dunes and shrubbery and general intimidation brought on by loud, young folk in packs that kept most people away.

There were probably close to thirty people there by the time Sean and I rolled in. The halogen lights of his Jeep pierced the darkness and pale faces glared at us, scuttling away like cockroaches. I slid a cigarette behind my ear and hopped out, laughing like an asshole. "Morning, fuckers." I made damn sure that my indifference was on display, but my eyes restlessly searched the shadows. Where was she?

People. She would be around people. And heat. She was a social creature who was always cold, so it made sense. There were a couple smaller fires closer to the pier, but the main one, the Big Daddy, was straight ahead and to the west a bit. I could see it. It was big and bright enough to shine through the thick foliage of the bush. That was where I would find her.

I didn't wait for Sean. Instead, I began my trek across the beach. It was hard to walk quickly and confidently in the sand. There were kids loitering here and there as I made my way along; some of them called a greeting — "Hey, Noah's Ark!" — but I just flicked my fingers their way and kept going. There were more people dressed up than I thought there would be, and in less than a minute my shoes were full of sand.

I felt anger begin to rise. Stupid sand. Stupid Halloween. Stupid Sean for dragging my ass out when all I'd wanted to do was stay in and eat candy.

And yet here you are, leading the way.

I ground my teeth and shoved my hands into my pockets, intent on grabbing a match so I could light my cigarette. I was on the very perimeter of the Big Daddy fire, where I was met by laughter and pot smoke and the obnoxious twang of inexperienced guitar strumming. Why did someone *always* have to bring a goddamn guitar? And where were my matches?

I ripped the unlit cigarette from behind my ear and tossed it onto the sand with a growl. Running a hand roughly over my shaved head, I glanced across the fire...and there she was. Melanie. She met my gaze with heavy-lidded eyes. Her lips curled in a slow, seductive smile that matched the flame's intensity, and her tongue swept out to catch a drip from the neck of the bottle in her hand.

"I think you dropped this."

I jumped, feeling guilty, which just pissed me off more. I turned my head, already scowling, but the girl standing there was like a pin and I deflated almost instantly. She wore all black, from her boots to her hoodie. A silver hoop glinted from her nose. Her hair was dark; blunt bangs hung just above her icy eyes, which were heavily outlined. She stared at me.

"Huh?" I said brilliantly, feeling my brows furrow. I knew she'd said something, but...

"I said," she replied, and looked pointedly down at her hand, which was outstretched. My discarded cigarette lay across her palm. "I think you dropped this."

"Oh," I said, and took the smoke from her. "Uh. Thanks?" I was grateful she didn't mention seeing me throw a tantrum, but I was embarrassed as hell that she had, in fact, seen. "So what are you supposed to be?" I blurted.

She studied me, eyes unblinking. "What do you mean?"

"For Halloween?"

"Mmm. I'm Death. Obviously." Her smile gripped my spine with cold fingers. I was about to reply when I felt a hand on my other arm, followed by a familiar voice.

"Hi Noah," Melanie crooned. I swung my head to take her in, and I felt my stomach do that *thing*. "I see you've already met my cousin. Brynn, this is Noah, who I've been telling you about."

"Hey," Brynn said. When I looked back at her she smiled a charming little half-smile that was nothing like her previous Wednesday Addams one. "I like your jacket." I watched as her gaze was drawn to the spikes in the shoulders.

"Thanks." I smiled at her. I was damn proud of my jacket, even though it did little to protect me from the late October chill.

"Cute." Melanie smirked. Her pretty face was heavily made up, so she looked like some sort of runway model. She wore a billowy white top that I wanted more than anything to get her out of, and her jeans fit dangerously well. She wore a giant peace sign necklace in an attempt at a hippie costume. I bet she tasted like peaches.

That was the thing about girls like Melanie. Someone almost always found them first. Specifically: my best friend. And when they were that off-limits, they were damn near irresistible.

Sean finally joined us, slugging me in the arm for leaving him behind to carry the booze, but he grinned and opened a bottle for me, so I figured I was forgiven. The four of us joined the party and we all shared a log, with me sandwiched between Melanie and Brynn, who also smoked. We shared cigarettes on one side while Melanie leaned against me on the other. It was a heady mix, being surrounded by fire and alcohol and beautiful women. I knew if I wasn't careful I might start to feel like a god.

We smoked and we drank and at one point I watched from the corner of my eye as Sean leaned over to whisper something to Melanie. Her entire body tensed, and she hesitated before hissing a reply. Sean merely shrugged and rose to his feet, making his way around the fire to join a handful of guys near a picnic table.

I turned to Melanie. "What's Sean doing?" I was a bit stung that he'd left me behind so easily – I'm a hypocrite, what can I say? – but at the same time, I could have died a happy man sitting right where I was, with an angel on one side and a devil on the other. Or no, what had Brynn said she was dressed up as? Death.

The hair on the nape of my neck stood on end, and I shuddered.

Melanie turned her head and her lips nearly brushed my chin. "Cocaine," she whispered back. Her eyes, angry but also excited, caught and held me. "Come with me?"

I nodded. "Yeah, Mel. Of course."

We stood up, and I turned to murmur to Brynn, "Be right back." She studied me, frowning lightly. I didn't meet her eyes.

Melanie looked around to make sure no one was watching, but of course no one was, being too drunk or high or indifferent, before she slid her hand into mine and pulled me away from the fire. I tried not to show how eager I was as we slipped silently across the beach toward a little copse of trees for some privacy.

We barely made it through the foliage before she was on me, fingers at my belt buckle as if she needed me. The idea didn't help my god complex. I found myself thinking, as I shrugged out of my jacket and slid my hand into her pale hair, that that was the thing about girls like Melanie, too. Once they straddled your hips, braced their manicured little hands against your chest, and slid down you to the hilt, they didn't feel quite so off-limits anymore.

"What the hell?"

No. Not now.

Hearing Sean's voice in that moment was like falling through the ice on the lake in winter. Everything else disappeared and there was only shock and panic left.

In a series of hurried movements I had set Melanie aside, righted my jeans, and rolled to my feet.

"Shit," Melanie cried from the sand. Her hair was a mess but at least she'd pulled her shirt down. "Sean!"

"I can explain." The words spewed from my mouth like vomit and I immediately wanted to take them back. Because I couldn't. Sean wasn't just some jilted dude and Melanie wasn't just some slutty random. I couldn't explain this away.

"Of course you can, Noah," Sean said. He breathed heavily as if *he'd* been the one screwing a girl in the sand. I had the biggest urge to put my fist through something breakable. "I just don't *want* you to." He whirled around and stormed off.

I blinked. "Wait. Sean!" I bent to grab my jacket from the ground and then took off after him. I heard Melanie wail something behind me but I didn't stop. I had to reach him before he left. *Had to*.

I passed Brynn on the way, who just shook her head.

"I messed up," I told her as if she'd asked.

"Like clockwork," I heard her reply as I ran past. I didn't know what she meant and right then I didn't care.

I finally caught up to Sean as he was climbing into his Jeep. I heaved myself into the passenger side and turned to face him.

"Screw that," Sean said, starting the vehicle and then jabbing his finger at me. "Get out."

"No. Sean, listen to me. I really don't think you should be driving—"

"Like I give a shit what you think," my best friend snarled. "Get the hell out of my Jeep."

I crossed my arms and set my jaw. "No."

Sean grinned maniacally. "Now we're talking."

We peeled out of the parking lot in a spray of gravel.

It wasn't until I caught a glimpse of a cold, sad smile and icy eyes as we sped by that I thought about wearing a seatbelt. But by then Sean had lost control of the Jeep.

"Dude. I think we just died."

It was misty and cold and skeletal as only fall can be. Morning birds sang from nearby treetops. The sky was a pale grey and pregnant with rain.

I frowned, glancing at Sean. "What makes you say that?"

Without answering, the two of us looked down at the asphalt. We turned to follow the zigzag of black rubber burned into the road from where Sean had hit the brakes and sent the vehicle into a spin. We gazed impassively at the wrecked Jeep, wrapped around a telephone pole, airbags deployed and steam still rising from the crumpled hood. Both passengers had been thrown from the vehicle; the grass was peppered with glass from the windshield and bright specks of blood. The body of the driver had been skewered on a fencepost. The other laid a few yards off, a crumpled, broken heap.

Sean laughed. I did, too. We fist bumped. I wondered if the sight of our death had caused us to snap in some way, or if being dead makes you unable to feel as much. Either way, I'm sure it was a blessing.

"Hey." I turned back to Sean. "Weird question."

"What about this isn't weird? Shoot."

"Was it just me, or...did we drive by Brynn before wrecking?"

"Who's Brynn?"

I stared at him, taking in his frown of confusion. I shook my head. "Nobody. Forget it."

"Same time tomorrow?" he asked. His indigo eyes danced when he smiled, and I reached out to lightly punch his arm.

"Of course. Where else would we go?"

The sun began to rise. I looked to see Brynn step out from behind the Jeep. She smiled sadly at me. Waved. Took a drag off her cigarette.

"See you tomorrow, Noah," she said.

I nodded, and turned to watch as Sean became less and less corporeal. I held out my hands to watch myself fade.

Just before he vanished completely, Sean's eyes darkened and he glared at me. "Seriously though. Keep your fucking paws off Melanie next time."

I just shook my head. If only I could, one of these times.





It was a beautiful day outside. The sunlight was streaming in through the half open window. Those sitting nearby smiled before disappearing back into their lives. The soft rolling of the train was a temptation to sleep. Only the weight of the cell phone pressed down against flesh. They were not calling back.

My father told me that it was a bad idea. Don't go, he said. I tried to explain that I had no choice. There were no job offers. The bills were piling up. I needed medical insurance. It was an opportunity that had fallen into my lap, and it wasn't a rash decision. I did speak to them on the phone, confirming the job offer. It was strange that the position was located close to Canada, and under any other circumstance, I would have thanked them and turned the job down. I didn't have a choice.

"Where are you headed," I asked the man sitting nearby.

"Afield," he answered.

"Me too. I have a job offer there."

"I'm meeting my girlfriend." He went back to reading the newspaper.

I tried to ignore the knots turning in my stomach. Maybe, they were just busy. I tried to call again. No answer, but a picture of a man and woman smiling, hugging each other appeared. Strange. This was supposed to be from a company, so why was the picture coming up? I tried the number again, and again, no answer.

My phone rang. Thank God. I was starting to get scared, but it wasn't them that was calling me. It was my father. I almost didn't answer, but I knew that I should. I waited till the third ring and answered his call.

"Hi, Dad. I'm on the train," I said.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Did you get a hold of them?"

"Not yet," I said. "They're probably busy. They do have a company to run."

"So, no one is meeting you at the train station? What are you going to do?"

"I'll take a cab, and worse-case scenario, I'll come back. I should have enough money for a return trip."

"This was a bad idea." The knots in my stomach agreed. "I don't know why you went."

"It'll be fine, Dad. I'm almost there, and I'll call you after the interview."

"I thought they did interview you," my father said.

"They did. Over the phone, but I think this is the final interview. I should have the job, and then I'll relocate. And it'll be fine." The man nearby with the newspaper glanced at me. "It'll be fine," I said, smiling at him.

"Just get home as soon as you can." My father was worried, and so was I. "Be careful," my father said.

"Dad, I'm here. I have to go. I love you."

"I love you too," my father said.

"Don't be nervous." The man folded his newspaper. "It'll be fine. I'm meeting my girlfriend for the first time. We spoke a lot over the internet and the phone, and yeah, this is a far trip. But it may be worth it. For both of us," he added.

I wanted to agree with him. I felt the train slow down. The knots tightened. I gripped my luggage. If only they called me back. I tried the number. It was disconnected. What? How was that possible? I called the number. Out of service. Fuck. That was it. I'm going home.

"This was a mistake," I cried. The train doors opened. Men in dark uniforms stepped inside, grabbing the luggage away from everyone including me.

"Hey, that's mine. Where are you taking that," but they didn't answer me.

The men in dark uniforms waited outside the train. Annoyance, indifference crossed over their faces. They waited a moment for us to step out, and when we didn't, they pulled us out. They picked up our luggage and stormed away, ignoring our questions. The train doors closed, but the train did not leave the station.

"I don't like this," the man with the newspaper said. "Something's not right. Where's my girlfriend? Where is everyone else?"

"I don't know." I looked at the other eight strangers. They were just as confused as I was. They checked their cell phones in search of an answer. I did the same. No cell service. "What is going on?"

I looked over at the station in front of us. It seemed cold, sterile. We entered the station. It was freezing inside. We were forced to line up, move through the metal detectors. Anything metal was taking away, so were the cell phones. If they could strip our clothes off, I'm sure they would.

I held onto my wallet and hurried over to an open window. The woman stared at me as if I was not even a person. I demanded a return ticket. I wanted to go home. She showed no emotion.

"I'm sorry," she said coldly. "This is your new home."

"Excuse me? I was here for a job offer, and then I was going back. I'm not staying here."

"There is no going back," she said in the same icy tone. "Wait a moment, and you'll be escorted to your new residence."

"I'm going home," I screamed at the woman.

"Is there a problem here?" A towering man in a dark uniform stepped over to me. "Is there?"

"I want to go home," I cried. "Just let me go home."

"You can escort her now. She's processed," the woman said, smiling only at him.

I looked at the woman. She pressed Delete on the keyboard. My face vanished from her computer screen. What did she just do? Did she erase me?

"Let's go." The towering man grabbed me by the arm. Roughly. "Don't make me drag you."

"I want to go home," I whispered, passing the man with the newspaper.

"Where is my girlfriend? Where is she? She was supposed to meet me here. No one is here. No one friendly that is. What is wrong with you people? Let go of me. I'm going back home. Let go!" He was struck down by two men in dark uniforms.

I was almost outside with the towering man still bearing down on my arm. I froze. I heard a voice. A familiar voice, and to his surprise, I pulled away from his grip. I moved fast, breaking into the room. I was going to give those people a piece of my mind. How dare they trick me, but when I got into the room, my mouth dropped open.

"Of course, we can provide care to your mother. We'll take good care of her and give her all that she needs. We'll send over our references, and you can call this toll free number for more information."

"I would love to meet you. You sound like a really nice woman. Someone I would love to get to know more of. I don't have a car at the moment, but if you don't mind a long trip, you can catch the train to Afield. I'll meet you at the station."

"We saw your resume and believe you would be a great candidate for our company. We're right outside Canada, and we will cover any and all relocation fees. We pay all our employees a reasonable wage, if not more, and we provide medical insurance. We can set up a phone interview now, and then if that interview goes well, you just have to go our corporate office in Afield."

"It's a computer," I screamed. "It's all a fucking computer!"

The towering man in a dark uniform slammed his fist into my back. I crumbled to the ground, and he picked me up, dragging me outside toward an unmarked van. He threw me inside and slammed the doors shut. The van took off, but I wasn't alone. The man with the newspaper was there with me.

"It was a trap," he said through a swollen, bruised lip. "It was all a trap." He dropped the newspaper to the floor.

Tears ran down my face. My back hurt. I opened my wallet, taking a picture of my parents out. I shoved it into my bra. I won't let them take that from me, whoever they were. I knew escape was not possible. They thought of everything. I should have listened to my father, but I didn't. I was never going back home. I was never going to see them again, but that did not scare me. What scared me was that I didn't know where I was going or what they would do to me once I got there, and no one was coming to rescue me.

About the Author:

Melissa R. Mendelson is a Short Story Author. She has been published by Sirens Call Publications, Dark Helix Press and Bartleby Snopes Literary Magazine. Her short stories have been featured on Tall Tale TV, and she has a variety of writing published on the website, Medium. She spent over a year crafting her Horror novel surrounding an evil porcelain doll and hopes to finish it this year.

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John Smith, sat in my office at the hospital looking alert and healthy. He'd come a long way from the unwashed, raving, homeless lunatic that the police had brought in two months ago. We still didn't know his real name.

"Things are much better now doctor, I don't hear the voices or see the rolling colours while I'm awake, but it's the dreams, they seem so real, so meaningful," he said.

I wasn't too concerned about the dreams, one has to expect side-effects from any drug treatment, and John's quality of life was so much improved.

"It's a matter of striking a balance, John, we're trying to pick a path between Heaven and Hell, between the devil and the angels."

"I still remember nothing before I came here, Dr Oakwood, just odd flashes of people and places, but it's all so disconnected. It's all to do with my brain tumour I expect."

He didn't have a brain tumour. He had something else inside his skull, something denser than a tumour but less dense than bone. I'd seen nothing like it, and neither had anybody else if the medical databases were to be believed. It sat on the surface of his brain, at the back of his head, close to the visual cortex. It was circular, about ten centimetres in diameter, thicker in the middle than at the edges. A series of filaments radiated from it, branching and re-branching into John's brain until they disappeared beyond the display resolution of our equipment. One of the main filaments was broken, and even though I didn't know what it was, I felt that was where the trouble lay.

"Tell me about your dreams again," I said.

"It's always the same, first the music, then the rolling colours, then I'm in an office, sitting across the desk from this woman."

"What does she look like?"

"It's difficult to guess her age, between thirty and forty. She has blond, bobbed hair and blue eyes, and tells me that her name's 'Farina.' She's attractive, dressed conservatively and seems business-like."

"And what does she say to you?"

"She says my implant isn't functioning properly, that she can't contact me while I'm awake. She says I've been sent here from the future, that I have a very important job to do."

"Do you know what it is?"

"She explains it in great detail but when I wake up, I can't remember."

"John, the growth is putting pressure on the sensory parts of your brain. It's not surprising you're having hallucinations and lucid dreams. Try not to worry, if all goes well tomorrow, we'll remove the problem and everything will return to normal."

"And will my memory come back, Doctor?"

"I have every reason to hope so, John." It was one of my stock phrases.

The procedure was textbook. We'd shaved his head, I looked for scars from a previous operation, there were none. The object must have grown in place. I'd been wondering if it was part of some secret military project gone wrong. I incised the scalp, peeled back the skin and, being careful not to penetrate the dura, used the circular saw to cut loose a square section of skull. As I was preparing to remove it, the power failed. There was a pause of a few seconds as we stood frozen, in total darkness, before the lights came on again. That isn't supposed to happen, we have uninterruptible power supplies that can carry us for the few seconds it takes for the emergency generators to kick in.

"He's flat-lined," muttered Abrahams the anaesthetist. We waited, while he did his frantic best to bring John back, but it was no good, he was gone. I lifted out the section of skull and all I found underneath was a circular indentation where the 'implant' had been located.

It's always depressing when you lose a patient, I've never got used to it. I changed out of my greens and went back to the office to write up my notes. There was no sign of John Smith's computer records, no copies of the x-rays or scans, nothing. Probably something to do with the power cut. I'd had enough, it could wait until tomorrow. I made my way home to a large whisky and an empty bed.

Next morning, there was an email from one of the forensic databases. They'd finally identified John from his fingerprints. They matched a government scientist called Martin Riley, who'd been killed in a road traffic accident, two years before. His car had fallen from the Woodrow Wilson Bridge into the Potomac River, his body had never been recovered. I decided to take another look at my patient and made my way down to the morgue. The gum chewing

attendant checked his screen and announced that the body had gone for cremation the previous night. Unusual, but not unheard of, with an unclaimed corpse. So, nothing left, no evidence of our *time traveller* or his *implant*.

After I left the morgue, I stood outside the entrance for a moment thinking about John and his dreams, but I had another patient to see in ten minutes. I hurried back to my office to read the case notes.

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. His stories have been published on about thirty ezines and podcast sites in the last two years and are regularly broadcast in Australia. He has published four speculative fiction books.

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A Walk in the Park | Mary Ann Peden-Coviello

It's time.

I've felt the moon's pull for hours now and can resist no longer. His breathing is deep and slow, his sleep enhanced by the addition to his nightcap of a subtle tincture of herbs, the recipe handed down through 100 generations of my mothers and their mothers. I press my face into his throat and inhale his lovely, warm, male scent.

Then I depart. Out of the bedroom, out of the house. Into the welcoming, velvet night. Moonlight dances on my naked skin. I throw back my head and howl. When the shift begins, I drop to my hands and knees and give myself over to the near-orgasmic agony of transformation.

I rise a shaggy, blonde wolf, senses alert. The small lives around me—rodents, deer, stray dogs—all go silent, hoping to avoid my notice. But I know where they hide. I hear their fluttering hearts. Smell their fear-drenched deliciousness. First, though, I must run. And I do.

I race through the park near the den where my human half lives, down the riding trail, through the wooded glens. I leave scat in the sandboxes at the playground and roll in the grass.

And then I hunt. I chase down a young doe, prime and sleek. Filled with fierce joy, I run alongside her, terror streaming from her nostrils like smoke. I take her down in a slashing attack of fang and claw, the rich, hot blood flowing.

The dawn approaches, and the loss of the moon is an ache in my soul.

I shower, return to our bed. He stirs and pulls me close. We curl around each other in a warm haze of early morning lust.

What he doesn't know won't kill him.

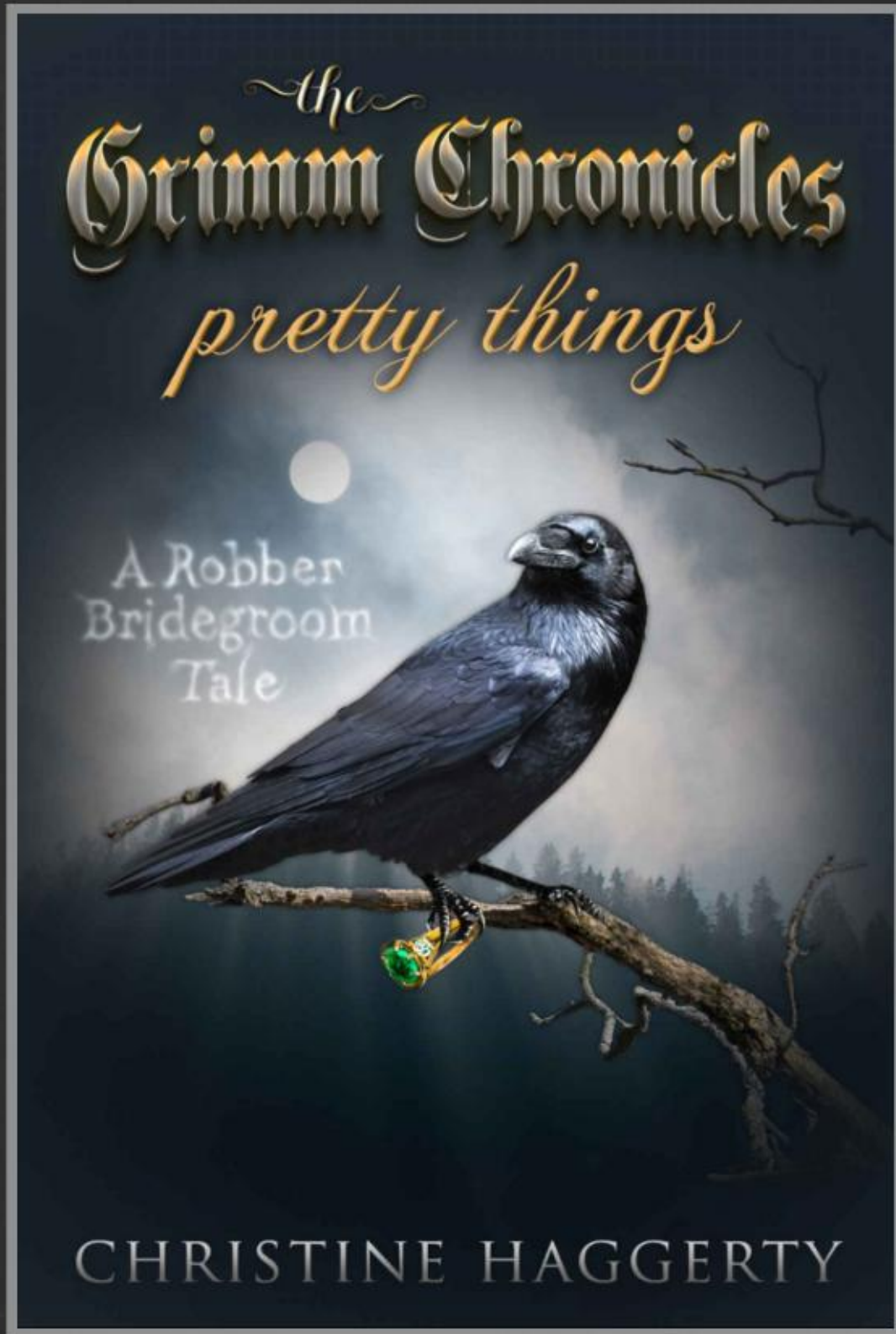
For now.

About the Author:

Mary Ann Peden-Coviello is a writer, recovering copy editor, wife, mother, grandmother, and animal-lover (in no particular order). She writes horror and (much to her own surprise) comic romance from her home in North Carolina, which she shares with her frequently noisy, occasionally quarrelsome, but always dear family. She keeps intending to update her blog. Someday . . . someday.

Author Blog: [Skewed Notions](#)
Twitter: [@MAPedenCoviello](#)

Her new husband's cabin in the woods promises
something very different from her happily ever
after...



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Death comes on the wind. The only person she had ever loved was gone. Salty rivers flowed from her eyes, disappearing into nothingness. He had waited for hundreds of years for her to finish. There was nothing he could or would do to alleviate her grief. She deserved this time to mourn. But at what cost?

Trees had stilled for the night. As she moved silently through the darkened wood, her bare feet never touched the ground he had created. She had never felt dirt between her toes, or water running through her fingers - there was no need. Her passage always cloaked in shadows, she was as wizened as the gnarled trunks that reached out to touch her, only to die in her passing. Their lives had been infinitesimal compared to hers.

Her pallid skin, echoed by colorless waist-length hair and gossamer gown of pale blues and sheer whites, billowed in a non-existent breeze, created only by her movement.

She would travel far, as she did every night. None saw her coming—even less saw her leave. Loved by few, hated by many, she vaguely remembered the beginning of time. She knew her path would continue long after this world ended— and not for the first time. She had lived through considerable changes in this world, and if it were his will, she would live to experience many more.

Lonely described her life. To have one night of passion with someone, anyone was more than she would ever ask for if there had been anyone left to ask.

The name he gave her was Mirti, and she was neither good nor evil. She just was. And, she had *been* for an extraordinarily long time.

"In leaving, you took away the only one I could touch. Why did you leave me? Could you not have made someone for me before you abandoned me to my fates," she screamed to the heavens.

There was no answer— there never was. He had long since retreated to his home in the clouds, leaving her to carry on as only she knew how.

Sighing, she continued along her way, passing through the woods and into the villages below, reaching out to touch first this person, then another. Her obligations weren't just for humans. All living things fell under her area of competence. The task was never-ending, but she never grew weary— it was her duty. He was counting on her.

It was during one of her sojourns that she saw him. He was not unlike many she had seen through the years, but this one seemed different. He sat with his aged mother, holding her hand, quietly calming her fears. It was clear her mind had been gone for some time. He startled as she entered the chilled, dank room.

Can he see me, or was it just an involuntary reaction? No one has seen me in an extremely long time. Should I? No, I can't. This would never end well. But, it seems he can see me.

"Hello. Are you here to visit my ma? I'm afraid she's not doing well today."

"I'm sorry to hear that she's doing poorly." Her alabaster face flushed as she realized the significance of him seeing her. He *was* different.

"The physician said it would be over soon. It's good you came today as you might have missed her had you happened by tomorrow. Who are you?"

"Just an acquaintance of your ma's. I'm sorry I didn't come sooner."

She reached out and softly ran her fingers down the pale, wrinkled hand still wearing a slim band on her left ring finger. Not too long ago, she had visited her husband. That's all it took - a simple touch. Mirti took a quiet step back. The old mother's soul was now with him, the limp body just a husk of its former self. This one had been a long time coming. The poor woman had been addled for years, eventually slipping into the dark recesses of her mind.

Mirti waited in the shadows while the young man kneeling beside the fireside cot said his goodbyes. Her desire to talk with him more was strong, but this wasn't the time. She knew if she left, she might never have the chance again. When she was sure he would be all right, she moved through the open door and made her way down the lane. Deep in her meditation, the sound of footsteps made her start.

"I'm sorry you had to bear witness to her final moments. Please don't think me unfeeling for leaving. I'm glad she's with Pa. She was never the same after he passed. My name is Odo." He held out his hand as if expecting her to take it. Instead, she shook her head and moved back a step. No good would come of this. But yet, his blue eyes and flaxen hair made him lovely to rest her weary eyes on.

"My name is Mirti."

"Pretty name for a pretty lady. Could I interest you in a cup of cider? I know the Burning Spectre Tavern has a new batch. I'm not sure how good it is, but after this weary night, I could use a strong drink."

Cider, which she didn't drink, led to mutton in root vegetables, which she didn't eat, neither which seemed to bother Odo. For the first time in a long time, she was enjoying herself.

"Where are you from?" The sound of his voice was music to her ears. His directness startled, then pleased her, but how to answer.

"Anywhere and everywhere." It was safe.

"Ah. A traveler. I would like to have explored the world myself. Leaving Pa and Ma to their illnesses would not have been the responsible thing to do. It fell to me, being the last, to care for them in their times of need."

"I'm sure you were a comfort to them during their final days," she sympathized, knowing full well that neither knew he had been there at the end of their days. Regrets existed not for the dead, but for those living.

He reached out, not for the first time, to place his hand on hers. She withdrew it, a coy smile playing about her lips.

"Why can't I touch you? That's twice now you've pulled away from me." He wasn't angry, just bewildered.

"If you touch me, I will lose you, and I'm so enjoying your company. If you want this to continue, you can never touch me. Do you understand?"

Even though he nodded, his eyes told a different story.

"If you didn't want me to touch you, why agree to visit with me?"

"Because it has been a long time."

"A long time?"

"My travels have been burdensome. I thought it would be nice to stop and tarry with someone for a spell. I can leave if you would prefer."

"Pray don't. I would despair at your leaving."

So, she didn't leave, and they lived together in the village where they had first met. She took comfort in watching him work tilling the dark, rich dirt, and tending to the livestock. Dwelling in the modest cottage of Odo's parents, they enjoyed a simple life together. She marveled that he could see her at all, while he longed only to touch her pale face, or run his fingers through her snowy hair. But, he did as she asked and never touched her. Not once, though sometimes the temptation was more than he could bear. Neither did he wonder why she stayed the same, while he grew old - it wasn't for him to question. She was happy...until he grew old.

"Too soon, it would be him she would touch," she thought, as unshed tears swelled in her eyes.

While Mirti was distracted with her life with Odo, the world's inhabitants grew by leaps and bounds. Many who shouldn't have lived to remarkably old ages, while he watched from his tower, shaking his head in despair. He didn't begrudge her the time. She had been a good and faithful servant. She had given her life to him, performing duties he couldn't - for where he gave life, she took it.

On his deathbed, Odo begged of her, "Let me touch you Mirti. My time on this mortal plane is waning. My eyes grow dark, and I would touch you before I die."

"If you touch me, my love, you *will* die. Knowing you speak true, touch me and go meet your maker. He will be expecting you."

With a smiling face he extended a fragile, trembling hand to caress the face he had yearned to touch all his life. She clung to him in vain, trying to prevent what she knew was to come, but in fleeting moments, he was gone. He couldn't see her anymore. Thus began a thousand years of lamenting.

The population of the world grew to alarming numbers. Watching from above, he despaired she would never recover. Even though she cries still for the love she lost, she knows there's a task to be done that only she can do.

Death comes on the wind, with white, flowing hair, and gossamer gown. He looked down from the heavens, and although his soul hurt for Mirti, he was pleased.

About the Author:

Karen B. Jones is a fantasy author living in NW Montana, via Central Florida. A retired fire chief, she has always loved the written word, cutting her teeth on authors like J.R.R. Tolkien, David Eddings, and Mercedes Lackey. In addition to writing short stories, she is currently working on her first fantasy book series.

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Martin worked the clay expertly through his hands. He found solace in the comforting feeling of the cold, slimy, material. Martin was a gifted sculptor. He had work featured in various museums on the East Coast and even a few out in California. He was poised to be a breakout star in the art world until the diagnosis brought his world crashing down.

Martin Edison was going to die soon.

Four months ago, doctors had diagnosed him with a brain tumor. An 'inoperable malignant intracranial tumor' to be exact. After explaining that his body had created a bunch of cells that were essentially strangling his brain, the doctor then told Martin that he only had a couple of months left to live. He already felt like he was surviving merely on borrowed time.

He looked down at the figure forming on the table. It was a demon with cracked skin and thick curved horns. This was an image Martin was becoming increasingly familiar with as it continued to encroach on his mind. The doctor had warned him that the tumor would give him hallucinations. He didn't warn him that those hallucinations might take the form of a fire-breathing creature from Hell.

It had started as just a dark shadow in the corner of his eye. Eventually, it had shape and then became three-dimensional. At this point, there wasn't a day that Martin didn't see the demon in some way or another and it was becoming more and more difficult to ignore. Being an artist, Martin did the only thing he could; he started sculpting it.

Working his thumb over the sculpture of the creature, Martin smoothed down an area he wanted to re-texturize. Ironically, the demon that had been haunting him had also become his biggest source of inspiration in the last few weeks. His studio was overflowing with statues of the beast in every shape and size: full-bodied to bust, small to large.

Over the last few months, Martin had been slowly removing himself from the outside world and spending more and more time isolated in his studio. The space felt like home to him; he was comforted by the familiar high ceilings and wood-paneled walls. The cement floor provided him a hassle-free clean-up space and the kiln in the corner reminded him to keep creating. Although his lease on the place was for another seven months, Martin cryptically thought to himself that the last few of them would see the place entirely empty.

When he first started seeing the creature he was able to shake it off right away but by now the red glowing eyes had become as much of a constant in his life as the deep knowledge that he could die any day. A few weeks ago, the apparition had begun speaking to him. Anytime he heard that deep growl it made the bottom of his stomach drop out and he had to use every ounce of his steadily decreasing willpower to pretend it wasn't happening.

"Let me out Martin," the demon's deep scratchy voice called to him from inside his head. Martin tried to ignore what he knew was only a vicious side effect from his tumor. He continued working in silence, trying to disregard the voice even as his hands shook.

"Let me out Martin," it repeated, stronger and more demanding. Martin attempted again to ignore it. He focused only on the clay figurine taking shape in front of him and not to the demonic voice echoing in his skull.

All of a sudden the mouth of the figure in his hands began moving and a deep voice thundered, "Let me OUT, Martin!" He dropped the clay abruptly on the floor and sprung up. Martin's heart was racing but he tried to calm down by reminding himself that it wasn't real, merely a waking nightmare.

Sighing with annoyance, Martin picked up the clay, realizing it was ruined and he would have to start over. He dumped the wet glob in the bucket of overflow material and walked to a long table on the other side of his studio where he kept his desk. Ignoring the piles of papers and outdated desktop, Martin picked up a bottle of scotch and took a swig. Immediately, he felt the hairs on the back of his neck prickle.

Turning around abruptly, Martin gasped. Standing in front of him was the demon in the flesh. He'd seen it before of course but it was never this *real* looking. It had texture and dimension and even smell. The beast stood ten feet tall with glowing red eyes and made a reptilian sound as it moved its head from side to side.

"It's not real," Martin recited to himself, closing his eyes and trying to breathe through his latest hallucination. He opened one eye slowly but it was still there. He shut it quickly, shaking in the darkness of his eyelids.

“Let me out Martin,” the demon rumbled at him, the sound reverberating off the high ceiling. This couldn’t be happening. This wasn’t real. It was his tumor making him imagine things. The overwhelming scent of sulfur was contradicting his rational thoughts.

Martin took deep inhales, trying to overpower the mass on his brain that was making him hallucinate. Trembling, he turned his back to the demon and began working normally as if he wasn’t seeing the spawn of Satan in his work studio.

His hands shaking, Martin picked up a small bust from the shelf and walked over to the kiln. He pulled the heavy door open and stepped inside, placing the bust on the shelf. Martin could hear the snorts from the imaginary demon. He felt its presence as much as he knew it didn’t actually exist. Trying to ignore the hallucination, he continued moving the unfinished pieces into the kiln, shut the door and turned the power on, watching as the orange light indicated the temperature rising inside.

Having nothing left to distract himself from his mind’s tricks, Martin turned back once more towards the demon. He gasped as the towering monster came within a few inches of him. Martin shook with terror thinking for the first time that this was too real. He could feel its warm breath, smell the rotten egg odor and see the red glow from the demon’s eyes. It hit him instantly that maybe this wasn’t a hallucination after all. This might be a real demon.

It started laughing then, first softly but increasing in volume and intensity until its thunderous roar echoed through the studio. As it shook with amusement, plumes of smoke rose off its body.

“Let me OUT, MARTIN,” the demon demanded of him, the sound of his voice creating the most spine-tingling feeling Martin had ever experienced. He was frozen in fear, unsure of what he was seeing was a figment of his medically-induced imagination or if maybe, just maybe, there really was a demon standing in front of him.

Thinking quickly, Martin scanned the room for an escape. The door was too far, he would never make it past the hulking figure in front of him to get there in time. He turned instead towards the kiln. Trapping the demon in there might be his only way to escape its wrath. It was worth a shot. If 2,000°F couldn’t kill this thing, nothing could.

Martin backed up slowly towards the kiln. He put his hand behind him, not taking his eyes off the demon that seemed to take the slightest step towards him. Martin resisted the urge to scream- having fully accepted the idea that this was indeed a real-life monster and not something he was hallucinating.

Quickly, he yanked the door open without looking at it. His plan seemed to be working as the demon lunged towards him and he made a move to shoot sideways out of the way. Unfortunately, a piece of wet clay on the floor caused him to trip backward. At that same moment, the demon made contact, falling on top of Martin on the floor of the kiln. The heavy door slammed closed behind them and the heat from the large oven enveloped Martin as death overcame him.

Days later the police would find the charred body of Martin Edison inside the kiln. His friends and family knew Martin was suffering from depression, even delusions, because of his diagnosis. They had all spoken on how he had become something of a recluse, hiding away in his studio and pulling back from the outside world entirely. None of them were particularly shocked when they heard the news, many believing his death to be self-inflicted.

Despite this, the incident was officially declared an accident. There were no signs of anyone else having been in the studio that night and the door was locked from the inside. No one’s fingerprints graced the door of the kiln except Martin’s own. In fact, the coroner on-site had noticed nothing out of the ordinary, save for an unexplainable smell of sulfur.

About the Author:

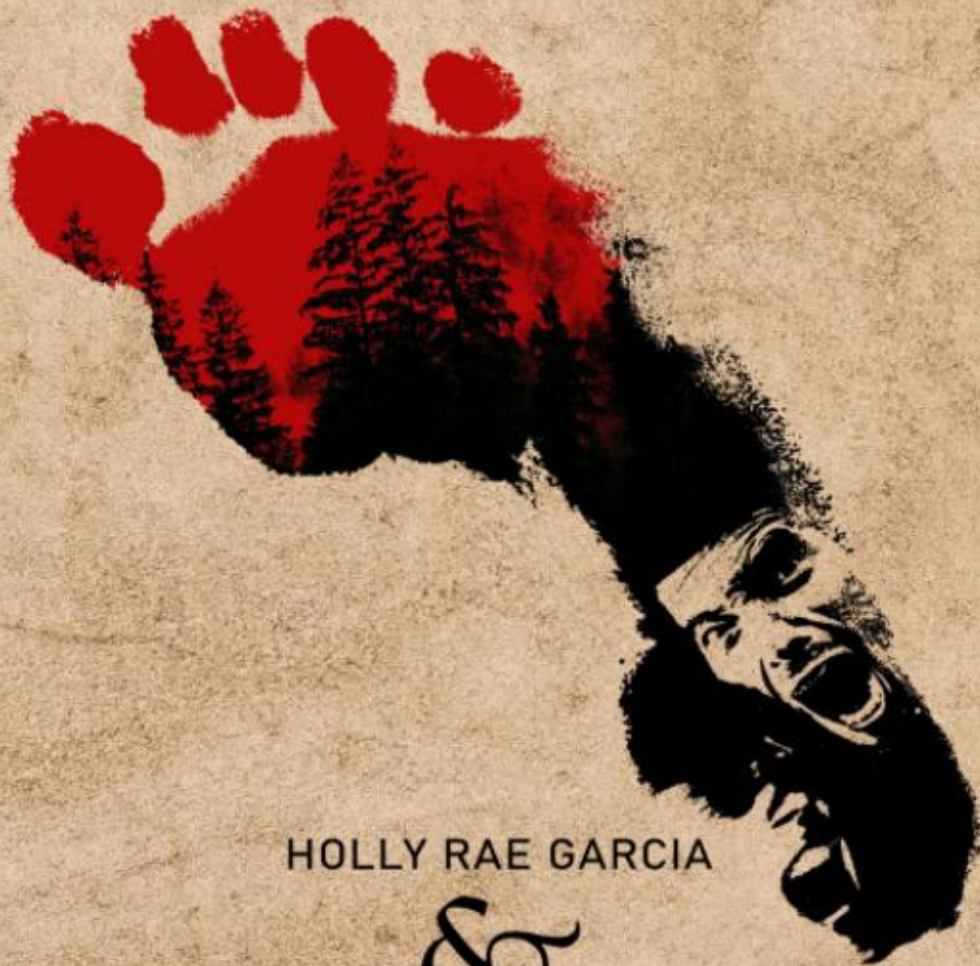
Jamie Zaccaria is a wildlife biologist by trade and writer by pleasure. She currently works for a wild cat conservation organization and writes horror fiction in her spare time. Jamie grew up in New Jersey and went to school in Delaware followed by Albany, New York. She currently lives in New Jersey with her girlfriend, cats and pitbull.

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THE EASTON FALLS MASSACRE

BIGFOOT'S REVENGE



HOLLY RAE GARCIA

&

RYAN PRENTICE GARCIA

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Michael knocked back the last of his Irish whiskey. It didn't help. The thing was still there, sitting across from him in a beautifully carved antique chair.

"So, what am I supposed to do?" he asked himself.

The thing was a grey gelatinous mass with tentacles and a gaping maw filled with stiletto-like spikes he knew were called denticles and not teeth. He felt its foul, fecal-scented breath on him.

Then it changed to become more human-like. As it took on a more solid shape, its tentacles were re-absorbed, only to emerge as slender stick-like arms that ended as elegant hands with long, beautifully manicured fingers.

The thing first solidified into a strange parody of a woman with large pendulous breasts. It lacked a head at first, but something took form on top between the two arms. The head was smooth and featureless. Then dark eyes, an aquiline nose and a lovely, cherry-lipped mouth appeared. On the sides of the head two ears took shape. The ears had long lobes with disks inserted in them, not earrings hanging from them.

Long black strings resembling hair sprout from her head, but the things wreathed and twisted like incredibly thin worms and maggots. Some migrated to the top of her face and became thick, dark, very attractive eyebrows.

Michael couldn't make himself look away. Despite himself, he had to watch this deplorable, horrific transformation. He wanted to run, to flee, to hide away, but he couldn't move. He was frozen to his chair in fear.

Michael blinked and he saw her standing totally naked in front of him, her skin like alabaster. It glistened with some sort of strange, clear thin intoxicating fluid.

She smiled, her beautiful rouge lips parting enough so he could see her teeth moist with a crimson liquid he knew was blood. She opened her mouth wider and he could see blood dripping from her canines.

He shuddered. It was his ex-wife Lilith.

She frowned. "Damn it," Lilith said. "you didn't act like that when we were married."

Michael swallowed hard and poured another whiskey. He didn't know if anyone else in the apartments could even see this woman who had once been his wife. Michael's heart beat like some manic tympani. His hands grew sweaty. A chill ran down his spine.

He watched as Lilith sheathed herself in a shiny, sequined black sheath dress. A long cigarette holder lolled between her lovely fingers. She looked exactly like Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, their favorite movie when they were together.

"Come," Lilith commanded. "Give me a hug and then we can have that amazingly hot sex we had before you ran away."

She smiled a weirdly kind and gentle smile. "You know you gave me orgasms like no one else ever did," she said. "You were the best lover I ever had."

"Until I learned what you really were," Michael said.

"And knowing what you are," she said, "I couldn't understand why you did."

Michael couldn't help himself. He could have run, but he only stood. He did not move as she stripped his clothes from him. She slowly unbuttoned Michael's shirt, then unbuckled his belt, unfastened his trousers, and let them and his underwear both fall down around his ankles.

Michael shuddered as Lilith ran her slender fingers with their long sharp crimson nails down his chest. Her left hand dropped and she stroked the inside of his trembling thighs.

He couldn't help himself. Michael took her in his arms and held her tightly.

"Kiss me," she ordered, her forked, serpent-like tongue sliding from between her lips and snaked its way between his.

They kissed passionately, despite the terror he felt, excited and aroused by desire.

After a while, she broke the kiss and stared into his moist, deep azure eyes.

"Admit it," she said in a sexy, soft voice. "There's no lover like a demon lover."

He didn't reply, but instead buried his face in her slender neck and nuzzled it.

She ran her hands over his back, feeling the scars where his wings had been.

"Ooh," she moaned. "There's no man for a demon lady like a fallen angel who's still tumbling to earth."

His mouth covered hers to stop her talking. She may be his downfall, but he was her salvation, and their desire knew no boundaries now or forever.

About the Author:

A former print journalist, Nigel Anthony Sellars holds a bachelor's in professional writing and a doctorate in history from the University of Oklahoma. He is also the author of numerous short stories and three novels, including *Samurai Wind* (Hydra Publications) and *The Gonaymne Weapon* (Montag Press.) He lives in Newport News, Virginia, where he is associate professor of history at Christopher Newport University.

I stirred the premium roast cappuccino, adding two sugars and an extra shot of espresso as the customer requested. “Here you go, Todd.”

Todd White was a regular customer at the café who ordered the same beverage four days a week. He stood seven-foot-tall, always wearing a polka-dotted white tuxedo. As usual, he kept his face concealed, this time behind a black rabbit mask.

“I dig the new mask,” I said. “Do you think you’ll settle for that one?”

“Maybe,” he replied, voice hoarse. “All the good masks seem to be taken these days. This one did make a lot of teenagers scream up at the Hiram Lodge, right before I slaughtered them with my cleaver.”

“Nice! How many did you manage to kill this time around?”

“Nine. I was hoping to hit the double digits this year but I didn’t quite make it.” He placed two-dollars and fifty-cents onto the counter.

“Don’t be hard on yourself. You’ll get there soon enough.” I deposited the money in the register. “Have a nice day.”

Todd grasped his cappuccino and sauntered off.

The next customer approached, a ginormous, shirtless beast who almost reached the ceiling in height, covered in silver fur from head to toe. The rows of sharp fangs glistened and its yellow eyes glowed.

“I figured werewolves only came out at night during a full moon,” I said. “It’s cool to see one of you here in the daytime. How may I help you?”

The beast barked, drool pooling down his lips.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t quite catch that. Would you like to try our new pumpkin-spiced latte in honour of Halloween? Only three-fifty.”

The beast growled, then, pulled out a five-dollar bill and slammed it onto the table.

I quickly concocted the monthly special, as the customer seemed a little irritated and I didn’t want make matters worse. “Have a nice day,” I said, before it snatched the latte and howled away.

Some customers are just so rude.

The next customer approached the counter; a kid, no older than ten. He was pale, covered in dirt and scrapes, and his hair looked like it hadn’t been washed for days. A faint trace of the colour red circled his lips.

“Hey there,” I said. “Are your parents around?”

Then, he ushered the words, “I ate them...”

“No way! I never had that kind of fun with my parents. Anyways, what would you like to order?”

“Hot chocolate.”

I laughed a little, because all the kids who came to the café wanted the hot chocolate. After preparing the beverage, I followed with, “It’s on the house. Cuties like you shouldn’t have to pay.”

“Thank you...” The kid took his drink and strolled away.

I paused, staring at the seemingly endless line of customers: The man with burned flesh and razor fingers; the walking-talking puppet laughing maniacally; the see-through ghost with a hook for a hand; and many others. I glanced at my watch, 11:46 AM. It was going to be another long day.

“Next in line?”

About the Author:

Scott McGregor is a Canadian writer living in Calgary. His fiction has appeared in several anthologies by Hellbound Books, Nocturnal Sirens, and many others. He is also a student at Mount Royal University, currently finishing up his last year of English and Sociology studies. His upcoming honours project will explore Marxism in literature and the future of Historical Materialism. His favourite novel is *1984*.

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The crystal sat upon a scrap of black velvet, shining beneath the muted light of the shop. I admired each smooth facet and the prismatic color revealed within its shadow before taking it in my hands.

"You're sure it will work?" I asked the old man.

He shuffled over to me, his breath reeking of illness. He paused at the counter and peered into my face.

"Gaze into the crystal's depths. It will tell you what you need."

I did as he bade me.

The whispering began right away. A chorus of voices called out, directing me to the back of the store, and the glass case which held a variety of weapons. I pointed to the katana still in its jewel-encrusted *saya*. The old man took it from the case and handed it to me.

A large jewel had been set into the handle. Upon closer examination, I realized it was not a jewel at all, but a shard of crystal, perhaps from the same one I had just gazed into.

"Do you want it?" the old man asked.

"Yes. How much?"

"Eighteen-thousand. Nineteen if you're going to use it. Cash only."

I pulled a package wrapped in brown paper from my bag and set the block on top of the case.

"There's twenty in here. Keep the change."

The old man eyed the package, then shifted his gaze to my face.

"A word of warning, before you go," he said. "Never draw the sword unless you intend to use it. If air touches the blade, it must taste blood."

"And...if it doesn't?"

"Then, its hunger will grow. And the next time you pull it from the *saya*, it will feed until it's sated." The old man shook his head. "The samurai...they knew how to control the spirit in the blade. They never allowed it to control them."

"I understand."

"I'm not sure you do."

"Don't worry," I said. "I've already dug a second grave. The headstone's already inscribed."

He said no more as I left the shop. The bell on the door jingled in my wake.

When I arrived home, I found the ghosts of my family waiting. They laughed and smiled, forever frozen behind panes of glass and frames of wood. I would never hold them again.

My cell rang and I pulled it from my pocket. A hushed, female voice spoke into my ear.

"It was Smith. He ordered the hit. He killed them all."

"Don't go back to the office," I said, and ended the call before she could say another word.

I placed my hand on the handle of the katana and pulled it from the *saya*. The blade gleamed under the amber light of the living room lamps.

"Blood," a voice said. Hollow and inhuman, it filled my head.

"Who's there?" I whispered.

"Me."

A face appeared within the crystal on the katana's handle. The raw, pink skin reminded me of potato bug larvae I found in the garden. One long tooth protruded from its upper jaw.

"Feed me," the creature said.

"Soon," I replied, and returned the sword to the scabbard.

I left without locking the house and drove my car downtown. Steel and concrete surrounded me as I pulled into the parking garage. I left the car in the shadows, the katana hidden beneath my long coat. When I entered the elevator, and found myself alone, I pulled the sword and released the spirit once more.

"Blood," the thing demanded. Saliva oozed from between its lips and glistened on the single tooth.

"A few moments more," I said, and returned it to the *saya*.

Jack Smith's offices were on the top floor. He employed many people here. People who killed and covered for him. People like me.

I found him in the boardroom with nine other men. None of them were like me. None had tried to rise against him. None had lost everything doing it.

"Glad you're back, Joe," Smith said as I entered. "Sorry about your wife and kids."

He grinned.

I released the spirit for the last time.
The long tooth cut deep.

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.

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No Rest for the Wicked |Alex Ebenstein

The doorbell rang despite all my precautions.

Lights off, inside and out. The only light coming from my TV, and I'd even gone as far as adding blackout curtains on my basement den windows. Not a single decoration on the porch. Mail spilling from the mailbox, newspapers piled on the stoop.

From the outside, my house looked as empty and uninviting as a moonless graveyard.

I ignored the first chirp and bleat of the bell, hoping it was an honest mistake, or perhaps a trick. In either case a temporary problem.

I returned my attention to the movie I'd been watching, the seventh sequel in a long since played out slasher franchise. Despite the rapidly decreasing production quality in the series, I still enjoyed each one for both entertainment and research purposes. I never missed an opportunity to gain inspiration.

The doorbell came again.

Come on, come on, I thought. Just go away. Any other day but today. This is my Christmas. GO AWAY.

But my thoughts did nothing to dispel the intruders, the God forsaken trick or treaters.

The doorbell rang away. Multiple times now. Insistent, impatient. Poorly raised children, no doubt.

I gave them one last chance. I paused the movie and waited, then received the trifecta: doorbell, knocking, and yelling.

Fine. If that's what they want.

I grunted out of my recliner and ascended from the basement. I lamented my inability to attain peace and quiet when I wanted it. I only ever considered myself on holiday—*off duty*—one day a year. On Halloween. One day without human interaction, because Lord knew I had plenty of that the rest of the year.

I reached the front door and could hear them chattering just on the outside. Before I turned on the porch light, I thought, *Okay, final final chance. If they're little children, I'll just tell them to go away. If they're teenagers, well...*

I flipped the switch and was greeted with more knocking and doorbell ringing, as if they knew that was the one thing that would irritate me more.

The culprits were...

College kids? Drunk, at that. Perfect. It's settled.

I pulled open the top drawer of the entryway shoe cabinet, examining my options.

Switchblade? *Not effective enough.* Pistol? *Too effective.* Butcher knife? *Eh, maybe.* Machete? *Now we're talking.*

Listen, nobody likes working on a holiday, and I'm no exception. But if they're going to force my hand...

I gripped my weapon of choice and opened the door.

"TRICK OR TREAT!"

About the Author:

Alex Ebenstein [*eb-en-stine*] went to school for environmental science and geography. His mapmaking career helps support his nighttime addiction of writing horror and other sorts of dark speculative fiction. He has stories published in Shallow Waters Flash Fiction Anthology, Novel Noctule, and an upcoming anthology from Esskaye Books. He lives with his family in Michigan.

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In the brightness of the morning sun, I retreated deep within the darkened confines of my broken mind. A fire burns beneath flesh and bone, existing but not living. This place is cold and in some areas, being swallowed by the Earth. In isolation I wander, expecting the others to turn, as if life has become some apocalyptic survival movie, or in my mind, a horror show unfolding before my very eyes. So much life has been lost here already before the plague descended upon us. The casualties will become much higher now, I fear. The sad truth is, I have seen so many still alive, with no life left to live for. Barely any blood left pumping in those frail veins, once so blue and vibrant, now pale and withered away.

The suffocating stench of ammonia wafts through the stale air. The coughing begins as my lungs begin to burn, and I look to my hands and see their bloody prints. I know just like every other soul here, my time is numbered. It's too late. I am nothing more than a vessel trapped in these halls of Hell. There are so many ways in which to seal my fate and end this suffering, but alas, I am too cowardly to do so. So I stay here with the others, no worse, no better.

The sickness has spread and at this stage, I fear that a life shrouded in darkness beneath these sorrow soaked halls is my only chance. An existence among the crawling cockroaches and the stench of decay. The odor of death intermingled with mold fills my senses as I tread slowly upon broken ground. A place once loud with the clanging of wheels is now eerily silent. All I hear now is an occasional water droplet or creek in the pipes. Maybe if I try hard enough, I could hear the scurrying of the many six-legged creatures lurking in the black abyss.

However vile they may be, I fear they aren't the only creatures that call this Hell home. Sometimes as sleep consumes me, I hear distant screams and I can never tell if it is dream or reality. I call out with the hopes of receiving some response, but I am always met with deafening silence. Tonight I ventured beyond a point I hadn't dared to go before. It is cold back here, and as I lift my trembling hand and place it upon the wall before me, I see flashes of death and despair. I know not anymore what is fact or fiction, and as I pen this entry, I feel it is my last. I can feel it killing me. I am left here to submit to the sickness within. So if you should find this, you can either say this is evidence to some terrible truth, or you could say these are just the words of a mad woman.

About the Author:

Tawny Kipphorn is a Freelance Horror & Speculative Fiction Author. She writes Supernatural and Psychological themed Dark Verse, Short Stories, and Flash Fiction pieces. In her spare time she enjoys spending time with her son, doing paranormal investigations, watching crime documentaries, and playing video games.

Author Blog: [Dark Door Passages](#)

Facebook: [Tawny Kipphorn](#)

The Passing of Dr. Pohl | B. T. Petro

They say that Dr. Elizabeth Pohl lived to the age of one hundred and twenty-two largely due to her dealings in the occult. They are right. Several spirits intervened in macabre ways to extend her life.

They say that the world is a better place with her passing. They are right. Her ability to control the spirits was tenuous and unpredictable. Such power in the hands of one mortal was dangerous.

They say that with the death of Dr. Pohl that her enemies can now breathe easier. They are wrong. A part of me remains here and it is vengeful.

About the Author:

B. T. Petro is retired and living in Ohio. His published story genres include sci-fi, fantasy, and horror. The stories generally have a bit of whimsy or a touch of the macabre. His best friend when he was growing up was an invisible robot, who still visits from time to time.



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Steve doesn't have conversational skills. Makes me wonder what kind of workplace he's in. Picturing a whole room full of Steves' hunched over computer keyboards with only the sound of the petite wind of conditioned air swooshing through the space. Or possibly big ceiling mounted slow turning fans. Snowflakes of greenish fluorescent light falling on balding men in white shirts. The quiet click of fingers smudging against keyboards.

He comes to the comic book store on Thursdays at lunch time. Our new books arrive on Wednesday and we have them sorted and on the shelves when he pops in. His office must be close by because there's never a car outside.

Paradise Comics is the only building with straight walls on the street. The other one-upon-a-time restaurants and laundromats sigh with age and neglect. We are fronted with with a broken, pock-marked sidewalk. War zones have better landscape. This real estate is the place where hope has dried up like August lawns. The street is a dock onto a lake of the unwanted houses and people. Many have suggested, with some degree of seriousness, that the entire neighborhood be taken down to raw earth. Houses are thick with a skin of street dirt, bent and collapsing out of aged weariness. Porches and roofs sag with rotted joists. Door jams and windows are skewed versions of a Rockwell painting. Squatters inhabit digs long abandoned by working class families.

Rent is cheap and that's why the store is here. If we had to pay for better space we'd have to shutter the doors. Customers are mostly teens with too much metal on their faces and hard core collectors. Steve is the outlier anomaly, late fifties and employed as an engineer. Designs roads and bridges he said when I asked what he did.

He buys titles with vampires on the cover. Vampires, zombies and over muscled super heroes are a staple of comic books but his taste isn't so inclusive. Steve only likes vampires stories. I wonder about my own tastes and why a guy my age works at a comic book shop.

He placed his selection on the counter. Only three books. All sporting covers bathed in dark shadows and bright blood.

"Can't get enough of them?" I asked.

He looked uncomfortable.

"Vampires," he said. "Have a certain appeal. Eternal life." His face reddened. "The characters have a quality of lust and passion. Most are intellectual and educated. Who wouldn't want to be one?"

"There is that daylight, sunshine issue. And the killing," I answered.

"Have you read much?" his eyes darted around as if searching for watchers. "On them?" he finished. I resumed he meant vampires.

"I've read the Rice books, 'American Vampire,' 'Dracula,' and a few others."

"Have you read," his lips twitched. "Non-fiction about vamps." His effort to sound cool fell flat. I shook my head.

"You mean, historical accounts?" I shrugged. He appeared to be feeling me out. I've had too many true believers at the counter. The ones who are so engrossed in the fantasy of the books, that they've lost their tie to reality.

"Yeah, kind of," he answered. "I know they're not real. Hell, I'm an engineer who works with science every day. It seems like the myth changes. One thing in books and another in film and movies. Because it is convenient for the story line, some can go out in daylight. I'd like to have a serious discussion with someone who knows the field."

Now I felt uncomfortable.

"Are you planning on writing book or comic?" Best to see where this was going.

He chuckled a nervous buzz. "Maybe call it the definitive guide to vampire lore?"

"Might be a use for that," I acknowledged.

"It would include things like: Do vampires ever get sick? If you lived for a couple hundred years wouldn't it make sense that somethings could hurt you other than the 'old stake in the heart' or blowing up in sunshine?"

"Sounds like you have an outline." I had to give him that—he had my attention now.

Steve leaned in across the counter.

"Do vampires get cancer, in particular, I've wondered," he said. "Or would it be a cure for cancer? If we consider vampirism a viral disease instead of a supernatural occurrence, how would it react to other pathogens?"

His eyes widened and I imagined I saw a glint of bright rings around his pupils. I let my own eyes shift up to the clock on the wall. He should be getting back to work.

"Twelve-seventy five, Steve," I said and pushed the receipt across the glass.

"Sure," he pulled a ten and five from his wallet.

"The other thing a vampire would probably worry about is HIV," he answered. I laid out the change and pushed it toward him.

"We should talk again," he said as he turned toward the door.

Katherine is a nurse practitioner. We met at my GP's office on a Monday morning after my twisted ankle swelled beyond the confines of my shoes. A Saturday morning run on one of those crappy sidewalks. A hole, water, mud and a nasty twist. I'd done all the right things, ice, compression and elevation but it was still an ugly black shape as I hobbled out to the car. When I pushed on the brake pedal, it sent a clear message to my brain. I took an Uber to the doctor's office.

The receptionist said she'd have the new NP have a look at the ankle. I waited in the tiny exam room paging through an outdated selection Hollywood star's lives magazines. I hardly knew any of the actors featured.

Katherine breezed in and took my hand and introduced herself. She was new in town and recently started with the practice. Something about her resonated with my internal gears.

After she wobbled my ankle around enough for me to levitate above the exam table several times she said, "I'm pretty sure you've got at least a hairline fracture. We'll need an X-ray to know for sure but either case, I'm going to put you in a boot for about six weeks. What kind of work do you do? Will it affect your job?" She had blue eyes. I understand intellectually that I am a slacker but this was the first time I'd felt like it. I wished I could dazzle her with some tale about a startup, instead I said I worked in retail.

"Oh," she said. Did I detect a note of disappointment in her voice? I rushed blindly over the cliff.

"Actually, I am co-owner of a small store." No need to expand on that.

"What sort of business/" she typed notes on her tablet.

"A book store." Her head came up.

"Like one of the chains or small local?"

"Local. Actually a comic book store." No sense in prolonging the agony.

"Cool," she said and launched into her favorite writers and artists. Why had she never come to my store?

She scheduled me twice more about the ankle and then we agreed on a coffee date. After a few months, we weren't quite a 'thing' but we went out to dinner once a week and watched movies together. At her place or the theater. My place above the store needed serious remodeling.

We ran into Steve at her favorite Italian restaurant and things got weird. I spotted him sitting alone in a both across the room after we'd been seated. He looked up and our eyes met. He gave a little nod. I reciprocated.

"Somebody you know?" Katherine turned to follow my gaze. Her face shifted color a small bit. "I know him too. It's Steve," she said. "He's a patient." She waved. He raised his hand back.

"He buys comic books. Shows up about once a week when the new magazines come in."

"What kind does he read?"

"Primarily vampire stories. He seems to be very knowledgeable about vampire lore."

"That doesn't surprise me," she said. I wasn't sure why it made me feel uncomfortable but I let it drop. She was paying for dinner.

A week later he browses the store at lunch, wandering from book to book. Not his usual routine. Finally he leans on the counter.

"Are you friends with Katherine?" he asked.

"Yeah, friends." I let it hang.

"She's my doctor," he caught himself. "Not a doctor really but works with him."

"I know, an NP."

"I have cancer." The words are a dark, muffled cloud between us.

"I'm sorry. Katherine is good at what she does."

"She is and so is Doctor Maddox and I have a great oncologist at the University, but what I have is terminal. Just wanted you to know. Stage four."

"Whew! I don't know what to say."

"It's okay. Really." We stood in uneasy silence.

"I'd better get back to work," he said. "See you next week."

I called her after I closed up the store. Nice thing about owning your own place is the hours are up to you. Some nights I stay late, others, not so much.

"Steve was in the store today." I hesitated. HIPAA and all that. Didn't want her to get into a corner. "Said he has terminal cancer." Digital phones are perfectly silent. No hum. No hiss. Not even a quiet breath, then, a long drawn out sigh.

"Yes," she said. "He doesn't have long."

"He seemed almost casual about it," I said. "As if it didn't matter."

Another long sigh. "It may be his way of coping. I can't really say much."

I had his email for when new books came in that might interest him. My conscious harped on me that I needed to do *something*. He wasn't a friend exactly. Customer? Acquaintance? From what I knew and guessed, Steve didn't have much of a social life. Twenty first century life. Work friends but not people you hung out with on weekends or evenings. Superficial interactions without depth. If you thought about it, the spiral down into depression was easy.

I sent him an email.

Steve, want to grab a beer or coffee and talk about comic books or anything?

Norm

His response was quick, within a few minutes.

Sure. After work tomorrow. Sixish?

We ordered burgers and beers. A fog of second thoughts swirled around my head. I could barely interact with Steve in the store over a simple transaction. How was I supposed to have a meaningful conversation at a pub?

We sipped our beers while we waited for the food. The air between us had the chill of first date in junior high.

"Are you still interested in vampire stories and mythos?" I asked. "Because I did some research and came up with some obscure old titles."

"Yeah, though I can't wait long for the books to come in," he laughed a strained laugh.

"Can I ask how long?"

"About four weeks but I have a plan." Not my idea of a good evening. At best Steve made me weirdly uncomfortable. Chatting casually about his impending death didn't make it any easier. I raised my eyebrows.

He leaned on his elbows and his head crossed that invisible line into my space across the table.

"I will become a vampire," he said. Saw that one coming from thirty-five thousand feet. His eyes were focused intently on mine. I held in a sigh.

Steve shook his head. "Not a real, blood sucking vampire but one in attitude. They way they walk. That aura of supreme confidence. The body follows the mind. Studies have shown people's attitudes affect how a disease progresses. I know, you're probably thinking I'm desperate and you'd be right." He settled back into his chair and sipped the beer. I noticed the waitress heading our way with plates.

"Attitude is everything," I said, staring at the label on the bottle. "What does your oncologist say? You're still going to follow a course of treatment, aren't you?" He turned his palms up.

"I want your opinion. Should I?"

"Follow the treatment regime? Hell yes. Attitude yes but stack as much in your favor as you can."

It was his turn to peruse the label on the bottle.

"I don't know, Norm. I can't show my body any weakness otherwise it might not respond."

"If you don't stay in contact with a doctor, how will you know it's working?"

"I'll know." He laughed. "I'm not going to wear a cape or anything like that, although, you have to admit, a swirling cape definitely speaks volumes about attitude."

We finished the meal. Had one more beer each.

At the door, I said, "Keep in touch, Steve. Let me know how you are managing." We shook hands and moved apart.

The delivery guy dropped off a package with several issues of vintage vampire comics, Eerie, Dracula Lives and Creepy. I paged through them. The main characters all supported flowing, swirling capes. Some of the artwork was dazzling and the vampires exhibited mega attitude. I hadn't heard from Steve since the night of burgers and beer. It had been two weeks. I sent an email to his account, worded carefully, just in case. No reply after two days.

I called Katherine. She knew I'd reached out to Steve.

"I haven't heard from him since we went out," I said. "Some books on his favorite subject came in last night but he hasn't responded to emails. In that same two weeks whatever story developing between myself and Katherine had become dry dust.

"He passed away Monday of this week," she said. "It wasn't just the cancer. There were multiple causes." Her voice had a worn weariness.

"HIV?"

"I can't say. He had a sister in Arizona. She wanted a cremation but Steve left specific instructions. I think he believed he could come back." She paused. "I tried to counsel him. He was lonely, I think."

"You sound worn down."

"He believed he wouldn't . . .no, couldn't die. Even at the end."

"Were you there?"

"Yes. He didn't have anyone else." She let a long sigh escape, more of the kind of breath you gulp in when you've been under water too long. "It's not uncommon to grasp at straws," she continued.

"He liked you. Considered you a friend and thought you had some insight into the undead. He was sort of convinced you were one."

"One what?"

"A true vampire," she said. "He almost had me convinced."

"Wonder what made him think that? I'm just a slacker with a bad case of protracted adolescence." I shrugged. "I even had to Wikipedia some of those things he talked about."

"He said you had the swirly cape attitude."

"Yeah, and vampires bust their ankles tripping over holes in the sidewalk." Across the phone I could tell she tilted her head the way she did when she didn't buy what I was saying.

"He also said you were smart enough to develop a very good cover."

I laughed. "That is just too rich," I said.

Sometimes a very long life can become complicated.

About the Author:

R. Gene Turchin had aspirations to be a lead guitarist in a heavy metal or blues band, when that didn't work out, he took up with engineering and technology and then stumbled into academia. His writing leans toward dark and odd, a sharp contrast to his cheerful optimism.

Author Blog: [R. Gene Turchin](#)
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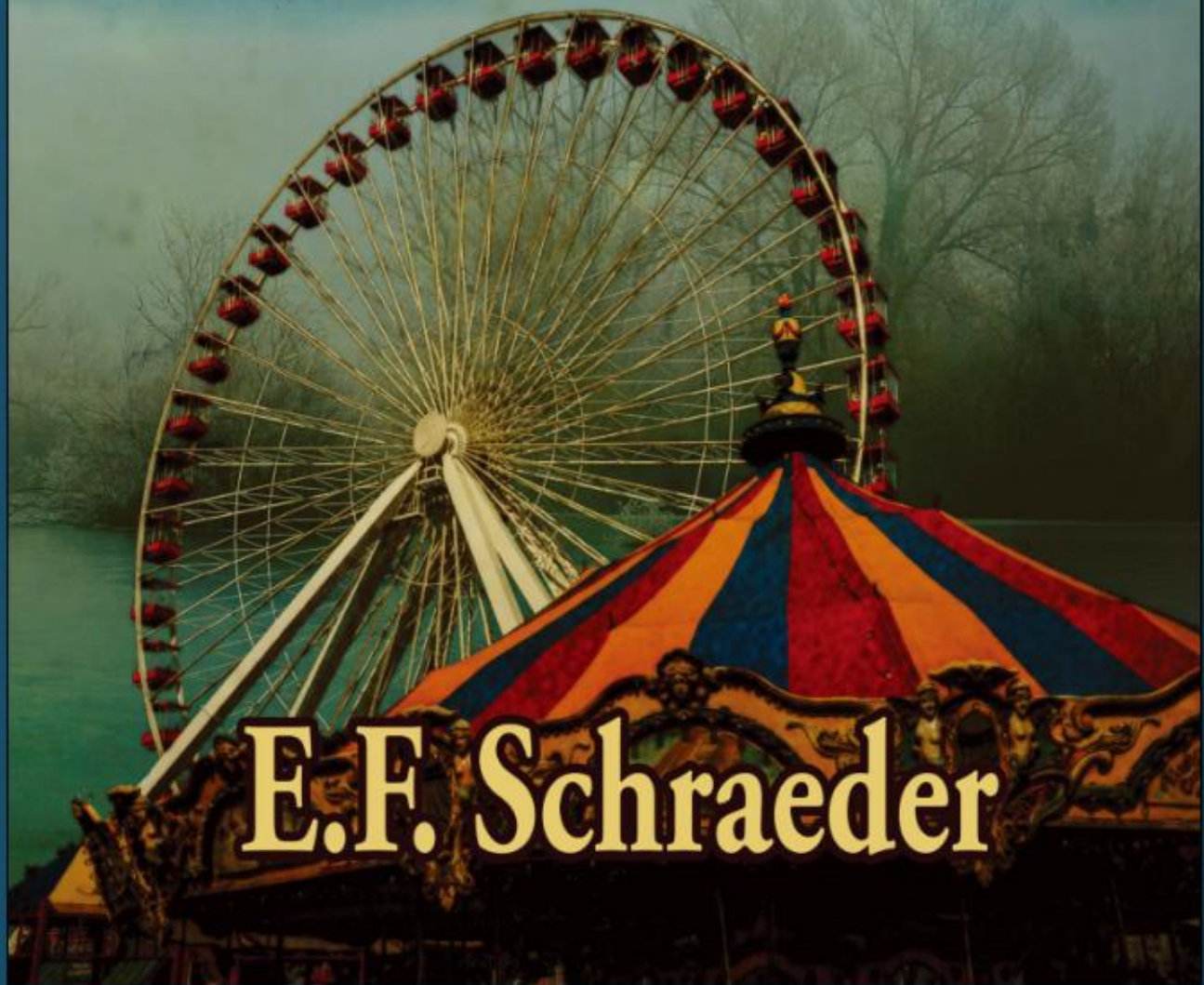


Four family histories reveal the secrets of a lakeside park.

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The blow to the back of my head came so swiftly and unexpectedly I never had time to react. I remember being conscious as I fell forward, but when I smacked my forehead into my desk, I was out cold.

I woke up about an hour later, on the floor of my cubicle at work. When I opened my eyes, I saw potato chip crumbs and what might have been a mouse turd. I blinked several times until my eyes focused, and then I was conscious enough to feel the first wave of pain. The base of my skull thumped like someone beating on it with a hammer.

I pushed myself up to a sitting position. I put my hand against my neck and felt a crusted trail of dried blood. It took a few minutes for the dizziness to pass so I could ease up into my chair, I continued to massage my neck. There was more work on my desk than before I was hit, so I knew people had been around. That clinched what I believed I already knew. My friend Stan was responsible.

Stan and I had been having a friendly competition for years. It started as weak, meaningless practical jokes that escalated until Stan spent a few nights in jail after I planted cocaine in his car and made an anonymous call to the police. Since then it's become more a test of stealth and strength. Our co-workers put up with it as long as we didn't include them and got our work done on time, but once again it has been escalating.

My vision was still blurry, but I started going through the motions of work so as not to draw the ire of my boss. I shuffled papers and opened programs on my computer while thinking of my next move with Stan. The time between our attacks on one another had grown considerably in the past few months. Surprise was an essential element, but we needed extra preparation. That's what made this attack odd. Stan must have given into the temptation of my big ol' head just sitting there waiting to be hit. I was coordinating some very elaborate plans in an Excel document when an opportunity of my own arose.

By the afternoon my head had settled into a dull ache, and I was able to walk short distances without getting dizzy. I was back at the company mail counter when who should I see but my buddy Stan. His back was to me as he used the paper slicer.

Waiting until he had the arm of the slicer up in the air, I rushed at him, grabbed his left hand, slid it under the slicer and slammed the blade down. Stan was taken completely by surprise as the slicer cut off three of his fingers.

I stood fascinated, watching the fingers twitch. Stan grabbed his hand and turned to me, spraying me with a fine mist of blood.

"I got you, I got you!" I screamed in a fit of laughter. Stan fell to his knees, his eyes watering, his stumps still spurting. Then he smiled.

"You son of a bitch. I never saw that coming. You just wait for the payback.
You son of . . ."

Stan passed out and couldn't finish his sentence, but I knew what he was trying to say. After all, we've been friends for fifteen years, ever since senior year in high school.

I punched us both out early and took Stan to the hospital. They tried but couldn't reattach the fingers. While in the waiting room, I collapsed from my head wound. It turns out I had a concussion, so we both spent some time in the hospital.

They put us in the same room to convalesce, and I spent most of my time sleeping. I would come to regret this. I was resting very soundly one evening when Stan crept over to my bed and eased the IV out of my arm. Then he plunged the needle into the side of my neck.

I sat up in bed so fast my head started throbbing again. My neck was paralyzed. I yanked the needle out and blood squirted forward in a halting stream. As I plugged the hole with my hand, Stan shrieked.

"You should have seen your face!" he shouted before getting light-headed and falling onto the floor. I was making up new expletives when the nurses came in. They patched me up but kicked both of us out of the hospital, so I ended up at home to rest my head, and Stan went to his parent's house for a while.

Our games had apparently gotten to our employers. They fired both of us, so now we were out of work. Stan later told me he was thinking maybe we should stop our little competition, but he never got a chance to talk to me about it. As soon as I could walk without getting light-headed, I decided to strike back.

Stan had a doctor's appointment every week to check on his hand. I waited close to his house the next Thursday until he and his mom came out and walked toward her car. When Stan was in the middle of the road, I pulled out from my spot alongside the curb and gunned my engine. Stan heard me coming and looked up quickly. He was able to get out of the way enough that I just clipped his left leg. He thudded off my hood and hit the ground. As I raced away, I looked in my rearview mirror and saw him shooting me the finger.

I know what you're thinking. Not exactly imaginative, running him down with my car, especially after the genius of the slicer. But lately I just can't seem to think very clearly. Or remember things for very long. *Where am I?*

Anyway, Stan ended up with a broken femur and a dislocated hip. He spent months between the hospital and the rehabilitation center. I visited him often, but in all those long months, I never forgot that one day Stan would get me back. I was pretty paranoid for a while. I knew Stan could pull something off even from a hospital bed. Eventually I relaxed and lived a carefree life for almost half a year. I got another job, had a girlfriend for a while, lived without looking over my shoulder.

The day Stan finally went home I turned into a nervous wreck, looking around every corner, hardly sleeping at night. Months went by and nothing. Stan and I had lunch a couple times a week and talked on the phone often, but he never tipped his hand.

It was a Saturday night, and I was home watching an old movie on TV. Around midnight, a knock came on my door. The time had finally come, I thought, but I wondered why Stan would knock and alert me. I started to relax, thinking it must be someone else. I started toward the door but didn't get there before it exploded off its hinges. Four of the biggest, angriest men I had ever seen stormed in. Tattoos covered every inch of skin that was showing, most of them with flames emanating from somewhere. Their arms were larger than my legs, and they wore steel tipped boots.

"You're a dead man!" one of them growled, pointing a thick finger at me. The skull-ring that sat over his knuckle stared at me with black, empty eyes.

I was punched and kicked in parts of my body I didn't even know I had. Both arms were broken when they sent me into the wall face first. I put my arms out to brace myself, and they shattered like cheap china. The one guy apparently found my face easy to hit as he did it repeatedly with seemingly no effort. Both of my eyes swelled shut, so I couldn't see the punches coming anymore. They broke my jaw and three ribs. The doctors later found bruises between my toes.

I was in the hospital for a long time. It was a few weeks before the swelling in my face and head went down enough that I could hear again, but when I could, Stan finally told me what he did. The men were members of a local biker gang. Stan met the leader's girlfriend at a bar, slept with her, and used my name. Naturally, her man found out about it, and they came after me.

It was by far the cleverest punch thrown in our little fight and it put pressure on me to respond. Luckily, I had almost a year in the hospital recovering to help me plan. The first thing I needed was some help. Stan had taken to moving every few weeks and didn't have a phone anymore, so keeping track of him was problematic. I enlisted the assistance of an old girlfriend of Stan's. Stella had been the one Stan had really loved a few years back but stupidly cheated on her. I knew he wouldn't be able to resist if she showed up again in his life, and Stella was up for a little revenge.

I decided to alter the game a bit and go the psychological route instead of the physical. Stan would never expect that either. After locating Stan in an apartment on the west side of town, I let Stella do her thing while I gathered the necessary tools for my part of the plan.

It turns out I was right about Stan's feelings for Stella. He was thrilled she wanted to see him again, and it wasn't long before they ended up back at his place after a date. Stella alerted me and I came right over, waiting patiently out in the hallway for almost an hour before she came to get me. She led me to the bedroom where Stan was tied and cuffed to the bed, looking very tired and very satisfied. Until he saw me.

I walked into the room carrying a large brown box. Stan was frantically kicking and clawing at his restraints, but Stella, I later found out, did this sort of thing for a living, so there was no getting out of them.

"Stan, old buddy, I give you the spiders," I said dramatically as I overturned the box above him and thousands of spiders, large and small dropped out onto Stan's naked body. I remembered from high school that Stan was deathly afraid of spiders. They crawled all over him and into a few places as well. Stan screamed until his

throat was raw, thrashing back and forth, desperate to get off the bed. Stella and I were a little surprised at just how scared Stan was of the little buggers. We were even more surprised when he stopped moving.

The police report that came out later said that mixed in with all the harmless spiders, unfortunately, was a very poisonous brown recluse. I was pretty upset about this mix up. We had both been so careful to injure each other without causing death all these years, and here I go and ruin it all. My best friend was dead.

The funeral was nice. Stan's family, for some reason, had never understood our friendship, so they were a little cold to me. But I was used to it by now. I had originally planned to be very quiet and inconspicuous at the service, but as I stood there listening to the pastor saying the final words about my friend Stan, I realized it was I who knew him best, not they. This service was all about their wants and needs, not Stan's. I knew I needed to do something, so I pushed his father and little brother into the grave on top of the coffin. That family is so uptight.

Oh, and later that night, I dug Stan's body up and left him sitting on a bench at the bus station. I miss ya, buddy.

Frank | *Christopher Hivner*

The boy was tired of walking stiff-legged and growling. He was an evolutionary jump, capable of more. He wasn't a monster. But at each new house it was another 'It's alive!' from a giggling adult followed by a chocolate bar. Every Halloween was the same, humiliation in the guise of fun.

He started for home down his darkened lane. Their house on the hill was backed by moonlight and drifting clouds. The pressure on his neck bolts eased as the stress of the night dissipated. If his father didn't love candy so much he wouldn't Trick or Treat at all.

Snickers Satisfies | *Christopher Hivner*

It was warm for Halloween. I was sweating through my Spiderman costume and Dad's hand covering mine felt like a wash cloth. I didn't whine to go home because then we wouldn't have found the body.

Dressed as a witch, she lay on the Tuttle's lawn, eyes staring at the moon. Dad stumbled over and touched her shoulder. That's when the dwarves appeared to drag Dad away. The witch sat up.

"We good?" she asked. I nodded while reaching into my candy bag. I gave back her amulet, along with a Snickers.

"Keep the change," I said with a wink.

About the Author:

Christopher Hivner writes from a small town in Pennsylvania surrounded by books (a little bit of everything) and the echoes of music (hard rock/heavy metal and the blues). He has recently been published in Monomyth and Black Petals.

Facebook: [Christopher Hivner - Author](#)

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Reny's Room | *Nina D'Arcangela*

The clack of patent leather shoes could be heard racing up the wooden staircase of their new, empty home; the home they were meant to make together now that Mommy was 'no longer with them' according to Father. Round and round she ran until the thwack of tiny feet came to an abrupt stop on the fourth floor. As father's pen scratched across the papers that finalized the purchase of their new property, Reny's fate was sealed as she spotted a small stairwell set in a far corner; its door open only a crack. She approached it with all the trepidation that could be expected of a precocious nine year old – bow tails and locks trailing behind her, her favored Teddy held tight to her chest, she dashed to the door and threw it wide. Glancing up the rickety stairs, she hesitated for a moment, then began to creep up the shadowy risers while imagining that she alone would be the one to find a hidden room that no one had ever seen before.

The dark, ascending flight ended at a tiny landing barely large enough to accommodate her size two Mary-Janes. She could see light as it spilled from the gaps surrounding the ill fitting door in front of her. As she wrapped her hand around the ornate glass knob, she could hear the echo of her father walking through the grand foyer mumbling politely with the white haired lady who'd sold them the enormous house. Turning back to the threshold that barred her way, Reny gave the diamond-cut knob a twist, a shove, then finally a good hard tug. The glass ball and metal stem came free of their housing and almost sent the child tumbling backwards. A small screech escaped her lips before she could capture it. Luckily, her father was either too preoccupied or too far away to hear. As the door swung open, rainbow colored light filled the space and her fright from a moment before was all but forgotten. A large alcove with glowing glass panes caught her full attention. She raced toward it and skidded to a stop in the dust just before the ankle-high sill.

Outside, and well below, she could see her father walking the elderly woman to her car. She started to tap, then slap the glass intermittently while waving her arms to catch her fathers eye, but it was no use – he simply couldn't hear her. In her haste and excitement, Reny threw open the window and stepped onto the surround of the widow's walk. Proud of her find, she shouted again for her father's attention and took a single step forward. She never heard the crack of rotted wood, nor did she feel her toe dip as her body began to pitch forward.

From the ground, her father watched in horror knowing there was nothing he could do to stop Reny's fall. Her beautiful yellow dress – the one they'd picked out just for the occasion – a near match to the painted clapboard background of the old manse.

Teddy still clutched in her hand, Renata Mueller hung impaled on the ornate iron railing that decorated the uppermost portion of her father's new home; her bow tails and locks fluttering in the gentle breeze.

Forest of Sticks | *Nina D'Arcangela*

In a forest of sticks, three wait while the fourth summons. Eleven cycles have passed since the calling was last performed. The youngest breaks the silence; patience not yet a virtue she can claim. Eager to know what will come, she inquires. The eldest cautions a quiet tongue while the chant continues. As the moon crests to its zenith, the mantra ends and an eerie stillness falls. Even the young one stands in awe of the thrumming current that churns the air. The caller turns, beckons the last of the three to stand with her sisters. As the Kaiju rises, the winds cease. The girls tilt their heads upward in reverent worship. A snort stirs their hair, whirls their skirts; stings their nostrils. A tinge of fear sets in, the youngest is not the only child to begin squirming. The feline halts their retreat with a slash of her glittering eyes before leaping to the ground below. Perched upon the brittle limb, the children unknowingly offer the blood of the innocent to ensure survival of the village. The Rule of Three now satisfied, the cat begins to sup then preen as it erases all evidence of the offal left behind.

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, and is an UrbEx adventurer who loves to photograph abandoned places, bits of decay, and old grave yards. Nina is a co-owner of *Sirens Call Publications*, a co-founding member of the horror writer's group *Pen of the Damned*, and the owner and resident anarchist of *Dark Angel Photography*.

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TIMOTHY C. HOBBS



IN THE BLINK OF A
WICKED EYE

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Ian sat on the train in his usual spot, gazing out the window as it passed through endless industrial estates and houses. It was late October and already dark, but the street-lights allowed him to see the view. It was one he was used to. He'd been riding this line for nearly five years.

As he gazed into the twilight he could see his face reflected in the window. He thought about his life; he had a solid, secure job, a lovely wife and a nice house. To an outsider he had everything, but for years he had felt an overwhelming despair; a dark depression about the pointlessness of life. Nothing could lift the darkness in his soul. He knew suicide was the only option. To find the peace denied him in life. He hadn't sought help, knowing he didn't want it; no amount of counselling could help him avoid this ultimate destiny. All humans died, he'd just decided to take the responsibility on himself. He knew Lucy and his family would be devastated, would blame themselves. He'd tried to express himself properly in his suicide note, tried to explain himself. He hoped it would be enough. They would find it in his briefcase, near the spot on the bridge. The drop was a good hundred feet, but if that didn't do the job, then the water would finish him off. He had briefly considered using the very train he was riding on as the instrument of his demise. So many others had. He'd decided against it for two reasons. Firstly, his death would inconvenience hundreds of commuters and he didn't want anyone thinking badly of him. Secondly, it looked too damn painful.

The spot he had chosen was the end of the line; a town called Lakeshore. It was next to the lake, about forty miles north of his home. Instead of getting off at his normal station, he would stay on the train for another forty-five minutes, travelling as far north as was possible before the land gave way to water. He could see the route in his mind; he'd scouted it out a couple of times. He would step off the train, no doubt one of very few people getting off, leave the station and walk about a mile towards the lakeshore to the bridge. He would walk along the pedestrian walkway at the side. About halfway across, he would carefully place his briefcase against the guard rail, and climb the barrier. Then... He paused, he didn't need to think about that part of his plan. Not yet.

Despite the gravity of the journey, he was calm. He felt himself dropping off to sleep and decided not to fight it. Eyelids drooping, he glanced round the compartment. There were no more than a dozen people still remaining. That was normal; the train had passed most of the main commuter stations on the outskirts of the city. He dozed.

He woke with a jolt. It was pitch black outside and he had no idea where he was. His watch told him he'd already passed his normal stop. He glanced around the empty compartment. He looked out of the window, but the darkness was impenetrable. There was nothing outside. No lights. Nothing.

The train began to slow. Usually there was an announcement before the next station, but this time there was no cheerful conductor making people aware of where they were. There was a flash of red outside the train. Ian strained to look backwards to see what it had been. A fire? An accident? The darkness obscured his view.

The train continued to slow. The noise changed from a distant rumble to a more immediate noise, as if the sound of the engine and wheels were echoing off tunnel walls. But there were no tunnels or underground sections this far north. Yet, as he looked out of the window, he saw grimy, damp walls flashing by, illuminated by the light from the compartment.

The train finally stopped and Ian stared in amazement; this wasn't right. He was in a subway station. A normal city subway station, complete with long platforms, a ticket booth and numerous turnstiles. This was wrong. Had he headed south without realizing? No, it wasn't possible, the train wouldn't just head back south. Plus, this was a massive, double decker commuter train, designed to move hundreds of people out of and into the city. It wasn't a subway train; it couldn't fit into the narrow tunnels. He looked for a station name and saw an old-fashioned, enameled sign on the wall. *Styx*.

The platform was deserted. The doors of the train wheezed open. After a few moments, a door opened at the end of the compartment and a tall figure appeared. He wore a black suit with shiny brass buttons and a watch on a long chain with a small peaked hat. The figure passed him by without seeming to notice him.

"Excuse me, what station is this?"

The figure glanced round, with a slight expression of surprise, as if he hadn't expected to see a passenger.

"This is Styx."

The conductor touched the peak of his hat and moved on down the compartment. As he walked he started to call.

"All aboard! All aboard!"

Ian glanced outside onto the platform. Figures were moving through the turnstiles and onto the train, hundreds of them, patiently queuing to get through the turnstiles and then waiting their turn to get onto the train. Normally a subway station would be a bustling, noisy place with people chatting and jostling to get on and off the trains. This vision was terrifyingly silent.

Ian watched with a growing sense of disbelief as figures entered his compartment. They shuffled along with heads bowed. Ian's arm and neck hairs were standing on end, even though these sad, melancholy figures paid him no attention.

Ian was sitting in a four seat arrangement, with one seat next to him and two facing. It was the standard seat layout on these trains. He felt a figure sit beside him, but dared not look. He couldn't help but look when the seat directly opposite

him was occupied. He made eye contact. The figure was a young man, looking bewildered and despairing. His eyes were alive and conscious. If the eyes were the window to the soul, then the soul in front of him was suffering eternal torment.

The doors of the train closed and it started to move. To avoid looking at the ghastly specter in front of him, Ian focused firmly on the outside view. The train was still in the tunnel, but as it moved forward the tunnel ended and the train emerged into the open air. He hoped vainly to see countryside and perhaps the occasional house or town, but the darkness was complete, nothing could be seen. Occasional flashes of red appeared, as they had done before, but Ian no longer thought they were fires. He didn't want to think about what they could be. The door at the end of the compartment opened and the conductor reappeared.

"Tickets, please. Get your tickets ready for inspection."

The conductor moved down the compartment, checking the ticket of each passenger. He arrived at the four seats where Ian was sitting and looked directly at him.

"Ticket please."

Ian showed him the monthly pass he used to travel on his daily commute. The conductor shook his head.

"This is not a valid ticket on this line. Not on this journey, not at this time. I must ask you to leave the train. Please come with me, sir."

Despite himself, Ian found himself rising and following the conductor. His fellow passengers ignored him, oblivious to one of their fellow passengers being removed. The conductor walked to the nearest door.

"You are not eligible to travel on this train. You do not have the required fare. You must leave."

The conductor pushed a button next to the door and with a growing horror Ian saw the door open. Outside he could see nothing, but the noise and rushing air told him the train was going at some unimaginable speed.

"Go," said the conductor.

He put his hand on Ian's shoulder and gently pushed. Ian had a blurred sensation of moving helplessly towards the door, into the darkness, and then there was nothing.

The hand shaking his shoulder woke him. He noticed the blinding sunlight shining through the window of the train compartment. He was back in his seat, and was being shaken awake by a customer care representative.

"Hey buddy. Wake up!"

"Where I am?"

"Lakeshore. End of the line. You must have been on the last train up here last night. This is the first train of the day, about to head south to the city. I tell you, buddy, those late night crews are sloppy. Don't even check for guys like you before clocking off for the night. I should complain to the manager. Anyway, buddy, I hope you don't mind me saying but you look like hell. You probably don't want to go to work looking like that."

Ian glanced down at himself. His suit was crumpled and stained.

"No, I think I'll go for a walk then head home on the next train."

"Okay, buddy. See you later."

As Ian stepped off the train and stood on the platform, memories of previous night's ride came flooding back. He wasn't stupid. Those people had been on a journey to somewhere, perhaps somewhere not too pleasant. The memory of their eyes haunted him. Ian straightened his tie and reached into his briefcase. He removed the note, crumpled it and threw it into the nearest trash bin. Part of him thought he had experienced some sort of dream or hallucination, brought on by the subconscious stress of planning his own destruction. Part of him thought it might have been real. Perhaps it had been real. He didn't want to be a passenger on that train, boarding at Styx and journeying to an unknown destination under the care of the conductor. Not yet, anyway. Not today. It was time to go and talk to his wife.

About the Author:

RJ Meldrum has been published by Culture Cult Press, Trembling with Fear, Black Hare Press, Smoking Pen Press, Tell Tale Press, and James Ward Kirk. He's had stories in The Sirens Call eZine, the Horror Zine and Drabblez Magazine. His novella *The Plague* was published by Demain Press.

Facebook: [Richard Meldrum](#)

Twitter: [@RichardJMeldru1](#)



Poetry

Pumpkin Pie | *Mathias Jansson*

I love Halloween
with all its sweets and treats
so when my wife told me
to bake a delicious pie
with our own pumpkin
I had to obey

When she arrived home from work
a warm pumpkin pie stood on the stove
-How sweet of you she said
Pumpkin come and see
what daddy has baked for us!

Who are you calling for I asked confused?
Our baby, our own sweet pumpkin
our little darling of course

But I just took her out from the oven
I think this year's pumpkin pie
will be the best
it smells delicious and sweet
thanks to your idea
to stuff it with
our own pumpkin's meat.

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](#)

Mr. Bark | *Tabby Stirling*

At midnight's eve when all is black
Make sure the door is at your back.
This is the time of all things dark
Bad things abroad like Mr. Bark.

He like a child or two for tea
And gathers them up by terrified three
His hat gleams bright with tears of fright
As he carries them off into the night.

For years bad children have been told
To behave or else they will be sold
To Mr. Bark on a pitch, black day
For gold and silver so they say.

He stuffs them in rough sacks of teal
And loads them on a sledge of eels
That slither and slide all around
From journey's start to edge of town.

A child that escapes old Mr. Bark
Will forever carry his fiendish mark
And always fear the smell of night
And lose their voice and half their height.

So if you want to outwit the Bark
Behave and listen to your heart
Respectful be of Mum and Dad
And safe you'll be and very glad.

Keep eyes closed tight when shadows creep
Towards the bed with claws and teeth.
Don't make a sound or look beneath
Your bed or in the wardrobe deep.

And Mr. Bark might glide on by
and steal another for his Childer pie.
And leave you dreaming in your sleep
Not running scared on the darkened Heath.

About the Author:

Tabatha Stirling is a published writer, poet, designer and indie publisher living in Scotland with her family. Her publishing credits include LITRO, Spelk, Literary Orphans, Mslexia, Scottish PEN. An extract of her addiction memoir is to be published in the Wild & Precious Life Anthology (Unbound). Her debut novel, *Bitter Leaves*, was published in March 2019 (Unbound). Tabby is absolutely ready for a zombie apocalypse.

Author Blog: [Vole Queen](#)

Twitter: [@volequeen](#)

prey of the predator | *Linda M. Crate*

he paused,
never really understood
why they insisted
upon walking in the woods
in the darkness;
didn't they know
monsters like him lurked
there—
but he likes to raise his hell
against their heaven to see the angels
fall prey to the fangs for he
was the devil
they never saw coming,
and when she past him without recognizing
there was another body there
he couldn't help but smirk;
they never used their senses to defend them
as they ought—
lost in a forest of their own thoughts
they drowned out everything they ought not,
and found themselves prey of the predator;
she didn't know he was there
until it was too late
no scream even left her mouth.

all too easy | *Linda M. Crate*

feral and wild
they always had tried to tame
her,
but she kept spilling
over the garden gate like
ivy;
no matter how many times they tried
she spilled out over all the edges
they told her not to—
wanted her to be a pretty little bird
they could consume,
because they thought they
were the predators;
she had a pretty face but a soul darker
than a starless night
and they didn't know enough
to run
so that was on them—
the vampire vanquished them all
one after one,
until finally her hunger was sated;
and then she laughed
for it was all too easy.

futile to run | *Linda M. Crate*

the dense rain
slowed
her down,
and she didn't even
realize
he was there
in the darkness
watching and waiting;

she looked up and saw
him standing there
all dark lines and angles

handsome but cold
something told her to avoid him—

"your instincts are good,
but i'm better,"
the beast winked;

she saw the fangs
glittering white
as the full moon but she wasn't
going to stand there and let him
win—

she ran, but it was futile;
because she wasn't fast enough
and the rain and sludge
eventually tripped her

"i would've at least given you
dignity,
mother nature isn't so kind."

she wanted to tell him
to shut up,
but her mouth didn't seem
capable of forcing words out;

"it's really for the better, i'm snarky
enough for the both of us."

the last words she heard before he won.

a werewolf confused | Linda M. Crate

covered in the blood
of the innocent,
the beast
gone;
he thought he would lose his mind—
it came to him in fragments
pieces of pale moons
sewn together in silver
there were teenagers
until there
weren't,
and there was screaming;
but he was the cause
these black claws and those sharp teeth
destroyed lives
he couldn't remember—
as he glanced in the mirror
he didn't recognize his reflection,
but the werewolf knew
he wasn't the same person he once was
before the last full moon;
and he didn't know if it bothered him
or not as he kicked off his dirty clothes
and stepped
into the shower.

without a sound | Linda M. Crate

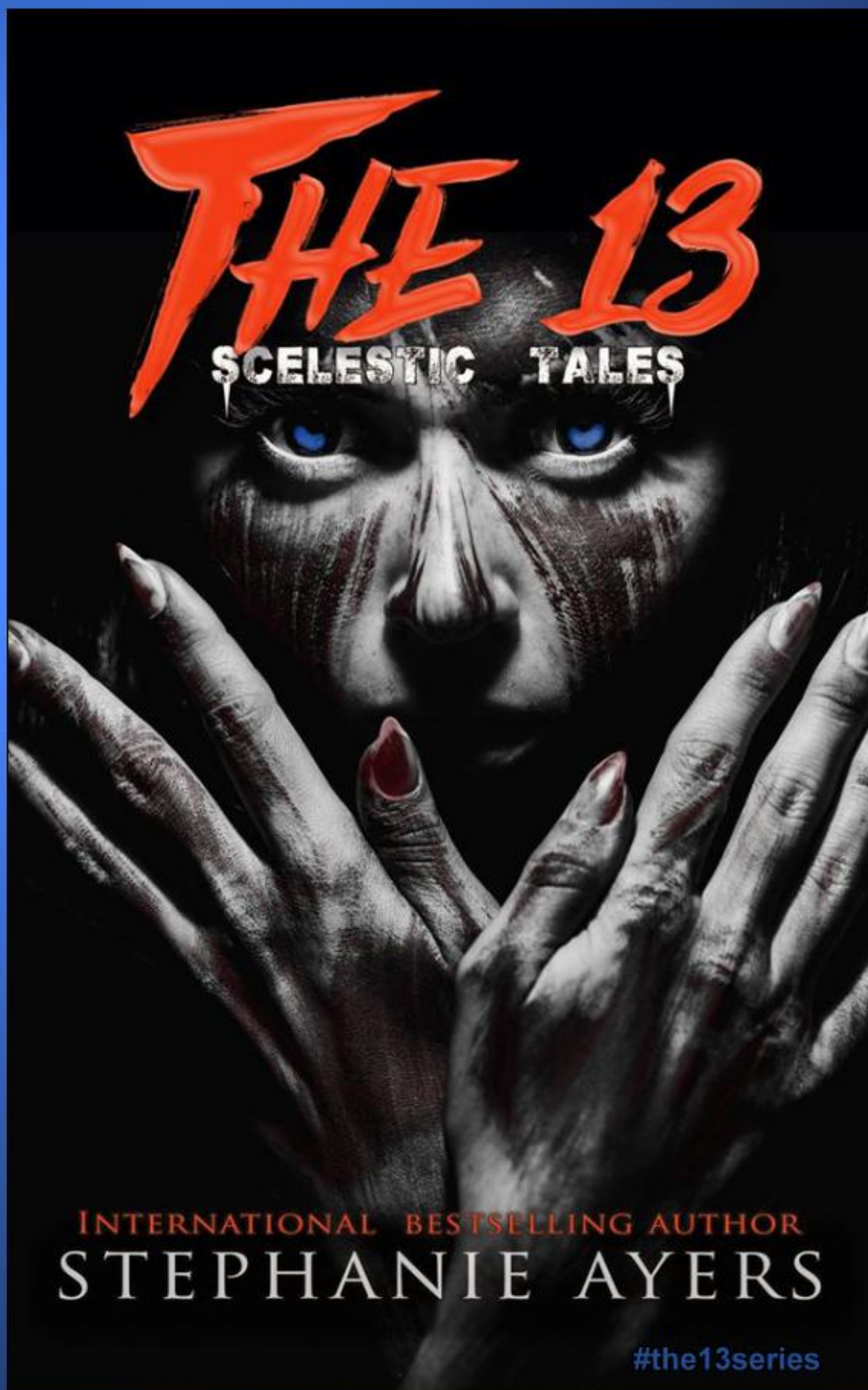
"you vile vampires,
preying on the young and beautiful
girls!"
"beauty doesn't really have
anything to do with it,
the scent of the blood is better
when it is untainted by the dark,"
he told her;
she was looking for an escape
he knew wasn't there
it was amusing to see how insistent
she was to live
when he knew she wouldn't survive;
but he wasn't prepared
when she struck him
apparently this one wasn't going down
without a fight
but he had all the time in the world—
he let her run,
walking behind her;
knowing eventually she'd be winded
and there was no way she could run
that he couldn't find her—
"is that all, are you done?"
he asked, when he found her;
she looked at him with anger and exasperation
in her doe eyes which made him laugh—
"farewell," he whispered,
dropping her dead body into the forest
without a sound.

About the Author:

Linda M. Crate's works have been published widely. She is the author of six poetry chapbooks, the latest being: *More Than Bone Music* (Clare Songbirds Publishing House, March 2019). She's also the author of the novel *Phoenix Tears* (Czykmate Books, June 2018). Recently she has published two full-length poetry collections *Vampire Daughter* (Dark Gatekeeper Gaming, February 2020) and *The Sweetest Blood* (Cyberwit, February 2020).

Facebook: [Linda M. Crate](#)
Instagram: [@authorlindamcrate](#)

Halloween just got wicked!



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

A Mummy, Undressed | *Meg Smith*

Blue threads fall like petals past their noon,
and I rise, and stumble, to crash this lawn party.
Laughter stops, and glasses thud in the grass.
My truths—of the uncle, once loved,
the now-husband, a clutch of dried leaves in a rusted van.
As for me, I must pull at the sky
for these rituals stolen from me.
I put back in place—eyes, rib cage, collar bone,
brain, heart. My time grows short.
I cross my arms.
calling to all my good
gathering winds of flight.

About the Author:

Meg Smith is a writer, journalist, dancer, and events producer living in Lowell, Mass., with her husband, Derek Savoia, and their three cats. In addition to previously appearing in *Sirens Call*, her poetry and fiction have appeared in *The Cafe Review*, *The Horror Zine*, *Poetry Bay*, and more.

Facebook: [Meg Smith Witer](#)

Twitter: [@MegSmith_Writer](#)

The Jabberwocky Hour | *John McPherson*

The birds of prey do brack and bray
And quimble as they frod
And out and in and back again
They slither through the slod.

You have such lovely eyes my dear
And alabaster skin.
Come sit by me and I by you
While we wait the world's end.

What's done is done and that's a fact
It does no good to whine.
The lovers lost— the rest agreed
The bombs go off at nine.

The birds of prey do brack and bray
And quimble as they frod
And out and in and back again
They slither through the slod.

About the Author:

John McPherson wrote poetry sporadically most of his life but only started submitting pieces for publications and contests in his mid-seventies after becoming a widower and moving to Searcy, Arkansas where he began associating with Poets Roundtable of Arkansas and White County Creative Writers. Earned BBA from UALR and is a father to a son and daughter and has seven grandchildren.

Facebook: [John McPherson](#)

Ember and Thunder | *Mary Parker*

Darkness everywhere
Dank and dripping
My numbed limbs
Paralyzed, heavy
My eyes sewn shut
With thread thick as humidity

I scream through cracked teeth,
Empty vibrations,
Dirt shoveled into my gullet,
I feel each granule like an ember,
A choking impossibility thunders through my lungs

This bed is my grave
An open mouth swallowing me
I scream I scream I scream
I plead
My bedsheets twist around me,
A noose, scalding

Those eyes, the only thing I see against the obsidian,
Red fire
Blazing holes into me -
My chest is crushed, ribs cracking
I am nothing but dust underneath

A smile of jagged fangs
Wet with bloodstains
Haunts my dreams,
Cursing lips pucker to kiss -
Its stinking breath blows me away

Into oblivion I fly,
Joining a mountain of ashes as skin
Falls like snowflakes from the sky,
I am nothing but dust -
It takes a clawing handful,
Crushes me and a million other hopeless souls
Into the clay upon which it builds its empire of ember and thunder.

Faces in the Night | *Mary Parker*

Rows upon rows of tan stems, speckled leaves
Orange and white waves, an ocean foam sunset
Line bales of hay and green pasture
Spotted with mud, thick and sticky
The harvest grows fatter
Each bump and crevice on dew-dropped skin
Is God-given imperfection; it grows, organic.
These gourds are pregnant with autumn seeds,
They squat, patiently waiting to be taken home
And admired, or turned to mush and baked
Oh, the cruelty of carving
Into supple, strong curves, stenciled and stabbed
Running like rivers of flesh
Under my excited fingers –
Serrated knife rocking like a child on a horse
To invoke some fool face
Whispers of autumn hang in the air
A crisp breeze, melancholy
I slice my childhood fears and darkest dreams with my knife.

We sculpt faces to light the night in little flickers,
A stormy breeze, the slightest thing
Can snuff us out.

Isn't it so pretty
To create our fantasies
In orange and white streaks.

Inside lie a hundred seeds of possibility -
I place my strikes patiently,
Plant my horrid crop expertly.
I am ready to reap divine madness,
Lit up against my mind's endless black.

We sculpt faces to light the night,
Little flickers, warm stings,
A stormy breeze, the slightest thing
Can snuff us out.

Abandoned | *Mary Parker*

Cobwebs float behind closed doors
Rest on porcelain rims,
Bowls longing to be rid of their emptiness.
My joints ache, sagging beams flushed from use
Windows shuttered tight -

This place called home was never mine.

The bricks have cracked, mortar turned to mush and paste
The roof leaks a steady stream of tears into the rickety sink
Oh, I cooked and cleaned,
Oh, I dreamed,
But I have abandoned all that now.

I am one with the gray cloudy sky
I sing among the wheat, pulled down and split for harvest,
Ground to a pulp, for sale and consumption.

I lived borrowed years
And now my reckoning has come -
The change of seasons warmed my heart
Under the glow of the moon
But then everything withered and died.

This time was never mine.

Ghosts of the past live here,
In the walls and in the cupboards.
They smile at me from cracked mirrors
And drip out of the rusted faucets.
They will not leave me alone
Because soon enough,
Through their scheming,
I will join them.

About the Author:

Mary Parker is a horror author and journalist. Her short fiction and poetry have appeared in numerous anthologies and magazines. Her first novel is nearing publication. Mary is a former ambassador for and proud supporter of Women in Horror Month. She likes true crime and werewolves more than anyone probably should.

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



Dark One in the Fog | *Aziza Sphinx*

Gather round, join the fold. I've a story, must be told.
Heed the warning: I behold, of the Dark One in the fog.
For this land curséd be, stolen twice—or twas it three?
Staying safe is the key, when roaming through the bog.

When hues of blues chase the day, darken skies shades of grey,
Signals time, 'Flee away!' from the Dark One in the fog.
Seek thee line o' city's light, summon him not with fuss nor fight
Ye be victim first, that night, of the killer of us all.

No one knows from whence he came, or the rules o' fiendish game,
In the shadows, he remains, hunting with his dog.
Summon ye with gentle trust, believe him not! Yet, if ye must,
Voice your case, escape post haste, or be slaughtered like a hog.

Whimpers, whines, fears divine, calling out to the sublime,
As he seeks out the kind, to drag into his path.
No discerning necess'ry. He fears not an adversary;
His devilish grin, found quite scary, for any lad or lass.

Fear the rustle of the leaves, quick in movements, thine must be
Wait too long and ye shall see, the One who gives the nod doth he.
For all will hear the screeching near of the harpy bearing down,
The fog then clears, 'tis empty here and nothing makes a sound.

Before ye stands thine taking man, who'll guide ye through the dark;
Not foe, nor friend, make not amends, for he only plays his part.
Now ye must choose, no longer amused by the trickery of thine mind,
The One in the bog the dark in the fog is upon ye at this time.

Worn and weary, the world now dreary, from your travels in the bog;
Lesson learn'd, badged now earned, that walk becomes a jog.
His fingers cold, they grab ahold, and squeeze until ye sob!
For ye now twin'd, both thee and him, the Dark One in the fog.

About the Author:

Aziza Sphinx sees the world through peaches and pecans and a canopy of weeping willows. Family matters, and not just blood, for those who take care of us are the truest that stand and fall during the winding road. When the hills and valleys of the journey summon and the pen becomes mightier than the sword, this is the world Aziza Sphinx breathes for.

Facebook: [Aziza Sphinx](#)

Twitter: [@AzizaSphinx](#)

Homage to Samhain | *Theresa C. Gaynord*

October night
you take flight; flair
in the light of old
Autumn.

Energy flows, shifting inward, watching me work
with calm silence; fusing action with tremendous
power. There's a terrible physical presence
shattering the veil between this world and the
next. I feel its direct impact on me. My thoughts
are scattering everywhere, electric flashes, I'm
blacking out; there are missing pieces to my
conversations, responses I can't recall. It's the
summer's end, the beginning of a Celtic year,
Samhain, the doorway to the sanctum sanctorum.

The ritual; some are afraid, but the bonfire comes
to burn away the strifes of old, a kind gesture
from the horned god himself among the symptoms
and consequences of imbalance. The hour is intense
and I'm focused as insight comes pulsating rhythmically
from his hands to mine. There is static in the force at
first before it stabilizes. We are sky clad, nonsexual
in a loving manner among the offerings, the altar.
There's another lifetime I remember; the absorption of
all color.

Black, in all its transition, awaits me, removing all my

characteristics, all my talents in a spiral, a labyrinth
prior to death. There's a significant change in time,
temperature as I walk the edge of the woods, awake
with my mind, connecting with nature. Through this trial
run I see the complexities of a life, reevaluated, refined
and reset. Potentially dangerous and destructive
are the civilized sounds that do not encourage trust in the
subconscious. The left hand path has a strong and positive
response, as does the right hand path.

I see paradise in darkness, people laugh, sparrows
fly, little boys and girls dance, even those broken
or sold or given away. There is sanctuary in the
garden of rotting flesh and bone. Love songs that
tear your soul apart, blood-dripping note after note.
I see those I touch, those I love, breathe into me, cold lips
exuding warmth. Orange leaves, blossoms of liquid
red gold; grow, ascend. Morning smells are nestled high
within apple trees; what falls away is near as we awaken
only to sleep once again.

White Kimono | Theresa C. Gaynord

She peered at me
through the rustling
of trees, pushing
against the empty
void of space where
insubstantial things
waterfall buckets of
blood. I saw the knots
of ribbon from her
white kimono begin to
unravel as twisted black
vines emerged from her
belly button. Grey long
fingernails presented me
with a crimson rose
as she whispered in my right
ear with heavy respite.
There are no guarantees
on either side, you know;
a soul died here tonight
over a vanishing blur of
darkness where all things
eventually return to their
resting place.

Believe | Theresa C. Gaynord

They speak of spooks that burn
smug eyes crouched in the
shadows of a fog that lingers
in eerie air where bloody children
run, pretending to obey. Acidic rain
poisons their lungs, settles on their
putrid arms turning them to raw meat.
A smoky trail follows their panicked
screams as blood spatters cold, staggered
by distant howls screeching in the void.
The skeptics, shallow and pale, return
to their appointed spots where white
curtains filter the darkness and spirits
come out to play.

The Fiddler's Song | Theresa C. Gaynord

Shadows tangle dark
by street lamps that
dim from the diversion,
stringing red clouds
with woody smoke from
the side of hellish gates.
A beat rustles with shards
of rough music as a crowd
gathers silent; the clock
ticking toward midnight
among twinkling black ash,
where curtains begin to
close.

About the Author:

Theresa C. Gaynord is a former elementary school teacher turned writer. She has been published in a number of magazines, ezines, anthologies and books throughout the years. Theresa is also a psychic-medium and a witch (within the horror writing community). You can contact her for readings via her facebook page.

Facebook: [Theresa C. Newbill](#)

Under the Banyan Tree | Kelly Matsuura

The parade fills the streets. Masked dancers throw vibrant flowers.

A child holds his hand out for *calaveritas*.

None but I, see the Lady in White,

Hungry, under the banyan tree.

On moonless nights, she roams the plaza with wicked intent.

Those who do survive, never tell.

None but I, and my shadow know why,

She wails, under the banyan tree.

High on the hill, I say my final goodbye to San Fernando.

My heart pounds in time to the festival drums.

None but I, seek the lady who died,

And was buried, under the banyan tree.

One last tequila. A toast to the spirit world I hope to soon greet.

I'm ready for her cold, eternal kiss.

None but I, wish also to lie,

Forever, under the banyan tree.

Her beauty now gone, I see only hollowed eyes and twisted bone.

She is the death I dreamed of.

None but I, with the White Lady die,

On this, the Day of the Dead.

About the Author:

Kelly Matsuura writes diverse YA, fantasy, and literary fiction. She is the creator of The Insignia Series' anthologies (Asian fantasy themed) and has had stories published with Ink & Locket Press, A Murder of Storytellers, Black Hare Press, Harbinger Press, and many more. Kelly lives in Nagoya, Japan with her geeky husband. She loves traveling, knitting, cooking, and of course, reading.

Author Website: [Black Wings and White Paper](#)

All The Devils Were There | Lynn White

I used to dress in bakers white
and take a basket of bread
to Halloween parties.
I never found many takers.
Spiced pumpkin,
apple cakes
and candy
were always more popular.
So I had a re-think.
Now I take a basket of babies.
They can't get enough of them
all of those devils out there,
even those who come as angels
gather round for a bite.
Just one bite will transform them
so they'll leave as devilish
as the rest.

Give Me A Hand | Lynn White

Many offered
to give me a hand
to paint the man red.
They thought the town
would be next,
but they were mistaken.
The background was to be in
a different palette,
darker, more sombre.
I asked them to wear gloves.
That way I knew I could
preserve their memory like
the long dried up palette,
peeling their outer skin
like the gloves.
Like the gloves,
I hung them all
out to dry.

Trick Or Treat | Lynn White

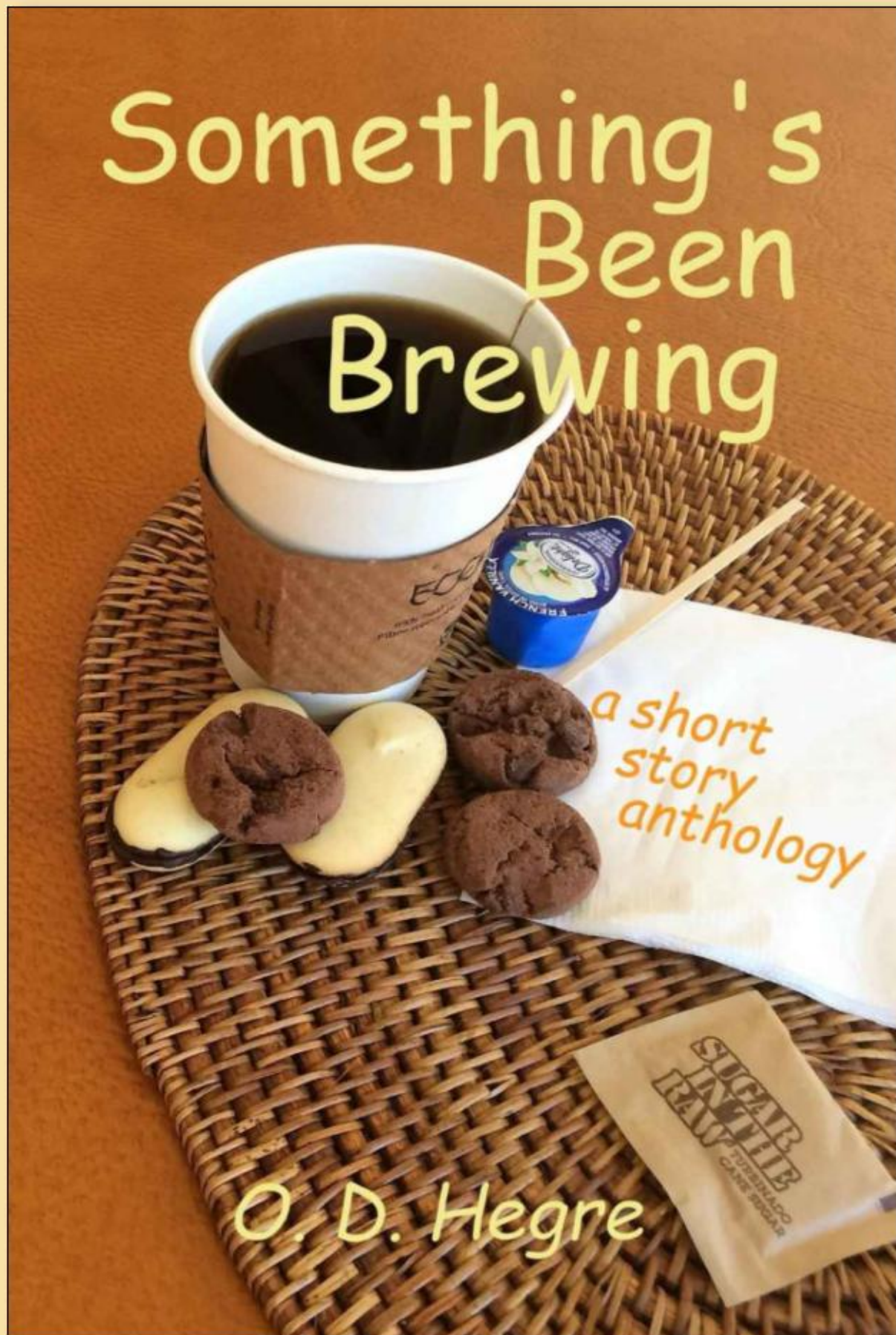
They're spilling like jewels
from the child proof jar,
multicoloured,
sugar coated,
'Eat Me'
treats.
Or are they tricks?
Try them
and you'll find out
soon enough,
just suck them,
and you'll see.

About the Author:

Lynn White lives in north Wales. Her work is influenced by issues of social justice and events, places and people she has known or imagined. She is especially interested in exploring the boundaries of dream, fantasy and reality. She was shortlisted in the Theatre Cloud *War Poetry for Today* competition and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and a Rhysling Award.

Blog: [Lynn White Poetry](#)
Facebook: [Lynn White Poetry](#)

Come and explore the darker side of the human condition



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Pumpkin Burns | *Louis Stephenson*

Each Halloween he will pick a house
Of a wicked family or an evil spouse
Invisible, he looks through walls
The blackest hearts have walked these halls
Two siblings reside, one sister and brother
One called Uncle and one called Mother'
She's a killer chef and he is a creep
But they are no match for Mr. Sleep

Halloween was Uncle's favourite treat
Behind the mask his eyes could be discrete
It was so easy it made him laugh
Until Mr. Sleep ruined his morning bath
He left Uncle, water bubbling from his lips
Too sound asleep to get to grips
He will drink it all with a mighty thirst
One touch and you will make Uncle burst!

With apples to glaze and spuds to peel
Mother planned to cook a deadly Halloween meal
When Mr. Sleep tapped her on the shoulder
Her head swam and she doubled-over
Her face in the pan, her arm on the cooker
They'll say it was flame, not sleep, that took her
The sight and smell were really somethin'
Mother burned much faster than a pumpkin

About the Author:

Louis Stephenson resides in the North-West of England. He suffers from vivid nightmares that he loves to turn into short tales of terror for you to read. He enjoys classic slasher, zombie and giallo movies and is currently at work on his first serial killer novel.

Facebook: [Louis Stephenson](#)

Twitter: [@author_horror](#)

Family Ties | *Brian Rosenberger*

Dad, the author of five previous mid-list horror novels,
He struggled with writer's block, among other things, not that his publisher cared,
Or his family gave a shit till the bills came due.
Dad stuck a fork in his neck – jabbed 5 times, before his will gave out.
Nailing the jugular, blood stained the walls of his office and typewriter.
Dad was DOA on arrival.
I saw it all before the paramedics arrived.
His suffering, his blood already coagulating.
My Mother suffered an inconvenience at best.
The funeral, the will, etc.
I watched Dad grip the fork, hugged him, one last comfort.
He stabbed himself as I continued to write longhand, describing his demise.
He told me the plot beforehand, kept detailed notes.
The publishing agents loved my manuscript.
I appreciate the fan support.
Dad's fans now mine.
Mom still dates occasionally.
Her demise will be detailed in book two.

Wolf | *Brian Rosenberger*

He cuts his heart out the night
Of the full moon.
The animal loose, on the prowl,
On the hunt.
His heart given to his wife for safekeeping,
Originally, long ago, on their wedding day.
She understood her husband's need,
His curse, his wound.
She was and is his balm.
He returns home.
A breakfast of eggs and toast and coffee is ready.
He greets his wife with a kiss, coppery to the taste.
One night he belongs to the moon.
All other nights he belongs to her.
Tomorrow will be dinner out, her choice.

Beggars' Night | *Brian Rosenberger*

They run from house to house.
Beggars but beggars
Dressed as Ghosts, Witches, Skeletons,
Astronauts, Cowboys, Angels,
Demons, Devils, and Zombies
But beggars all the same.
Some lurch and lumber,
Pretending Death.
The best masks however,
Those that lurch and lumber,
The Dead pretending life.

Southern Moon | *Brian Rosenberger*

From house to house,
They travelled.
They were dressed as slaves.
All wore wounds and scars and shadows,
A testimony to their struggle.
Some still bore a rope around twisted necks.
Others dragged heavy chains.
As they travelled
From house to house,
Others joined.
Their costumes,
Handcuffs and bullet wounds.
None had any interest in candy,
Only revenge.

Guts | *Brian Rosenberger*

This morning,
Orange guts on their steps,
Strewn about their lawn.
No pumpkins survived the night.
The Husband, his Wife and their Kin,
All experienced carvers.
Together, as a family, they watched
The security camera footage,
Recognized faces. Familiar faces.
Faces from the neighborhood.
Their whetstones saw a lot of work that afternoon.
Knives not sharpened to carve new pumpkins.
Tomorrow,
Red guts would decorate
Different steps, different lawns.

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 - *Poems That Go Splat*, *And For My Next Trick...*, and *Scream for Me*.

Facebook: [Brian Who Suffers](#)

Instagram: [@brianwhosuffers](#)

The Sacrifice | *Paul A. Presenza*

Your shaved head would not burn
Despite tar and pitch.
Your blackened hollows stain my hands still.
Embers, your glowing teeth
Smoke.

Mixed with wicker and peat,
Now indistinguishable from stalks and tufts
Piled about your feet.
Stones; we watched your belly burst,
Snapping the flames with grease.

Your fingers curled and bubbled like turfs;
Glowing bones merged with corn stubble,
slivers of blackthorn and ash;
singd stones, charred, gaping
cracked ivy wreaths.

You were beautiful once. I'd seen pictures,
Heard tavern tales. But now,
I can count your splintered ribs.
The stench of your death will stay beneath
my fingernails for weeks.

You were a woman I once wanted to know,
Terrible as the dawn, radiant and still,
Proud maiden, fair with petals and ringlets.
But now you are bile and bog water,
Scorched earth and heath.

They said you married an Ulsterman,
Of high Scottish blood. You made,
I've heard, black ravens comb your blonde
Locks at night. And that you spun fresh
White linen from chaffed wheat.

They said you had the sight of things which
Sometimes came to pass; now, nervous soldiers
And servant girls will take your blackened
Knucklebones to cast by night, 'round
Burning clods of peat.

They will gather your joints, twist them apart,
Every digit an antidote, every tooth a charm.
You were a woman I once wanted to know:
Now you'll assure crops will grow next season,
When I'll watch another body burn.

About the Author:

Paul A. Presenza is an archaeologist, historic preservationist, photographer, artist, & podcaster who also scribbles poetry from time to time. He has a B.A. in English from the University of Delaware, an M.A. in Archaeology & Heritage at the University of Leicester, and is currently employed as the Archaeologist and Cultural Resources Specialist at Fort Monroe, in Hampton, Virginia.

Facebook: [Paul Presenza](#)

Twitter: [@BigOIMooCow](#)



Ramble On | *Rose Blackthorn*

Winter approaches
leaves of every hue fall about me
it is the time of ending

Darkness gathers
and moves in frosted shadows
along every road
kissing every window
with feathered decorations.

Inside I see warm rooms
fires lit and families gathered
sharing their love
against the cold and dark outside

I am cold and dark
outside

But my purpose never changes
I am a nomad
a wanderer that so few welcome

Cowled
with shepherd's crook to hand
I travel my own lonely road
my package of souls
nestles close beneath my cloak
they comfort me
as their mourners lament

About the Author:

Rose Blackthorn lives in the desert but longs for the sea. She is a writer, dog-mom, jewelry-maker, avowed coffee drinker, and photographer. Her short fiction and poetry have appeared online and in print with a varied list of anthologies and magazines including the collection *Beautiful, Broken Things*.

Author Blog: [Moonlight and Thorns](#)

Twitter: [@rose_blackthorn](#)

Last Halloween | E. F. Schraeder

Too old and barely costumed— two arrive,
stammering and poking each other at the door.
Giggling, they wait to pounce, unsurprising
surprises on any gatekeeper of goods.

One with fake blood dribbled down the neck,
another has protruding plastic fangs and wears
last year's dress pants, already short, a little tight,
and a draping black cape that stinks of mothballs.

They pose in a mock bite, vampire and victim,
then raise their bags like a sacred coffer.
Trick or Treat! Their simple request,
a child's game.

I complete the ritual with an offering.
As they blur into grayscale, recede from the porch,
pass a cardboard cemetery.
Happy Halloween!

Autumn's call and response
so like a crypt-keeper of youth,
a thin veil between fleeting pleasures
and death's doorbell.

Jacked | E. F. Schraeder

With a face carved to delight or terrify,
humble porch-light, harvest icon
you'll perch all night aglow with sweet promises
on your fiery mouth: enter, ask, enjoy.

Centuries old, your fine-sculpted tradition
hovers like a familiar yet unknown constellation,
a shimmering beacon in the deep cool of night.
Greeter, fortune teller, figment— your flaming eyes

blink midnight curiosities to passing children.
Even wilting in stillness, your solemn candlelit mask
brightly twinkles, reminding each onlooker
that scooped seeds house the last tastes of autumn.

You're a trick— the smiling start of the end
and last night of festive frolics. Each inhale
finds the sweet scent of rot within whispers of smoke,
discovers death-hints in the edge of that slumped grin.

All Hallow | E. F. Schraeder

Nod to that pumpkin-faced smile,
that hollow-eyed scarecrow, a haystack.

Smile at the black crepe paper silhouettes
and strung lights blinking through the black.

Pin up decorations and prepare bowls of treats.
Plan a fine party for all spirits and souls:

gather black balloons, recite ancient, strange tales,
gaze at scrying mirrors, light a bonfire.

Remember the dead, celebrate living
Celebrate the dead, remember to live.

About the Author:

E. F. Schraeder is the author of *Ghastly Tales of Gaiety and Greed: Unauthorized and Haunted Cedar Point* (Omnium Gatherum, 2020). An admirer of strange wonders, sleights of hand, and carousels, E.F. Schraeder writes poetry and fiction that is often inspired by not quite real worlds. E.F. Schraeder's work has appeared in *Birthing Monsters*, *Strange Horizons*, *Pulp Modern*, *Mystery Weekly* *Mystery Magazine*, and other journals and anthologies.

The shadow hordes shuffled,
their numbers deepening,
layered like ink blots on linen.
A ghostly tattoo etched
on the graveyard's greying walls.

Empty eye sockets contemplate
the setting sun's
weakening golden grip. As
All Hallow's Eve night falls.

More shades slip and slither,
joining the roiling ranks.
Tribes of them -
families clinging, clutching,
joined in death,
as they'd never been in life.

Past enmities forgotten,
dementia washed away,
murders cancelled out,
suicides now forgiven.

The newest arrivals hover,
shy, afraid, in hiding.
Death has overwhelmed them,
they are yet to find
their dead men's feet.

Each soul here prayed for Heaven,
hoping to walk with winged angels
through endless lush fields.
This limbo land was on
no soul's wish list.

Beyond the wall
they gaze at the church's
amber-lit windows,
tasting hope and love
within its stained glass glow.

About the Author:

Alyson lives in the UK. Her fiction has been published in several print anthologies - Colp, Strange Girls, Deadcares and most recently in Diabolica Britannica and on many sites. Her latest publication collection is *Darkness Calls*. (Reviewed on Kendall). Her work has been read on BBC Radio, on podcasts, and placed in competitions. She edits for an indie press and walks her dog on her the moor daily.

Author Blog: [Alyson Faye](#)

Twitter: [@AlysonFaye2](#)

So much redness,	I can't help it
Delicious, lip-smacking	But sink my fangs
Liquid,	Into the softness
I want it	Drinking,
No, I need it.	Rush of crimson,
The fountain of life	Of daylight and life.
Beneath the flesh,	Leaving behind
Beckoning,	The husk,
Taunting,	Flying away
Calling me,	To sleep the sleep
Until,	Of the addicted.

Keeping Monsters in the Family | *Pamela K. Kinney*

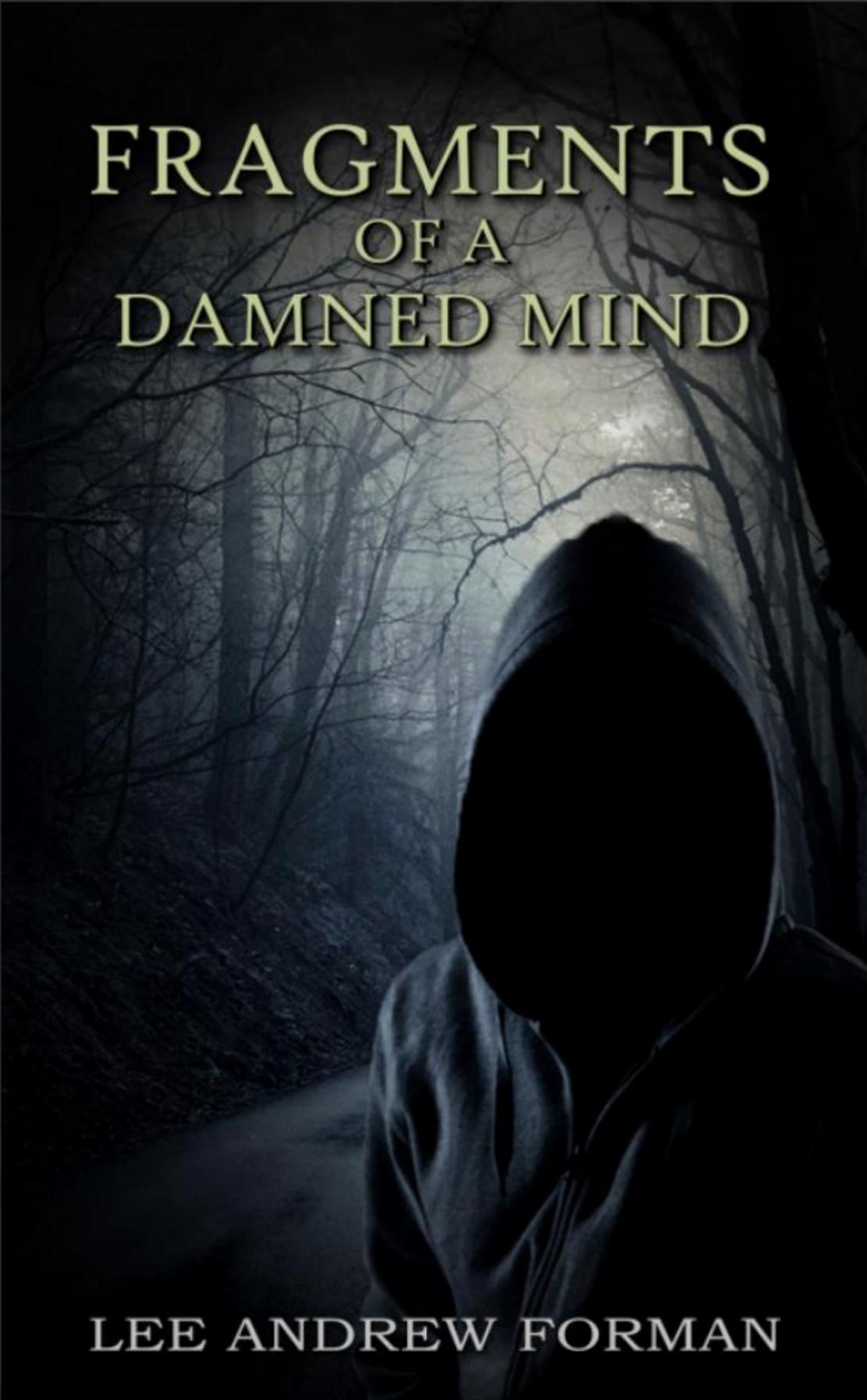
Mama said that monsters didn't exist
That they came from fast food or scary movies,
Remnants of nightmares and fears—
She lied!
For when the monster came that night
He instructed Mother to change and attack,
To rip out Daddy's throat and tear out his heart.
Daddy pleaded with her, screaming,
"Don't kill me! I love you!"
Before he yelled at me,
"Run! Don't let the monsters catch you!"
But I didn't do as he said,
Why would I? Because I'm a monster too.
When Mama held out her clawed paw to me,
I took it, asking, "Can we play?"
She called me her dear child, the promised one,
"I'll teach you all I know, how to do what I do,"
she said, "just as Grandpa me taught me."
And so, among the fires and slaughter we went,
I skipped beside Momma, only stopping
To play catch with bodiless heads.
We left that place before night gave way to day
Inhuman sheep leaving for desolate pastures.

About the Author:

Pamela K. Kinney gave up long ago trying not to listen to the voices in her head and given over to the madness of writing horror, fantasy, science fiction, and nonfiction ghost books ever since. One of her horror fiction, *Bottled Spirits*, was runner-up for the 2013 WSFA Small Press Award. She is a member of Horror Writers Association and Virginia Writers Club.

Humidity dripping,
Hot...oh, so damn hot!
Death should have stopped
the endless heat along
with the raw pain.
And yet, here I am—
on fire.
Burning and burning;
Not from the sun,
Nor cooking in
a fiery house.
But from
flickering flames of Hell.
Full of demons,
black and cruel.
It's my own fault
I let hate scorch me,
It took one moment
To murder my brother,
It took the police seconds
to fire that gun.
Seconds became
minutes became
hours became
years became
Eternity!
All for a
moment of stupidity
exchanged for
Hellfire forever.

Available on Amazon!



FRAGMENTS
OF A
DAMNED MIND

LEE ANDREW FORMAN

Mr. Rotten Treats | *Timothy Hosey*

Every year the children dare to bother Mr. Rotten Treats,
his gnarled fingers with bandages hand out pieces of candy,
to every child adorned in different Halloween outfits.
His fingernails were elongated and gangrene.
His hair plastered to his forehead like silly putty on a summer day,
he wore checkered and soiled pants held up with suspenders.
A beer gut protruded under his black t-shirt.
Plastic frame glasses slide down the bridge of his bird-like nose,
the smell of putrefaction in the air near his front door,
his lethargic gait resembles the Hunchback of Notre Dame,
any shorter Mr. Rotten treats would be a leprechaun.
The kiddies this year have a choice: Trick or Treat.
Mr. Rotten treats never cheats,
allow the children to make his/her choice without peer pressure.
Everybody knew Mr. Rotten Treats.
Insects and vermin crawled out of Mr. Rotten Treats' apartment.
Mr. Rotten sent out Happy Halloween cards to all his neighbors.
Not every bowl held winners.
"Maybe next year," says Mr. Rotten Treats as he closes the front door behind.

About the Author:

Timothy Hosey is a poet of the macabre. Whenever he's not writing, he thinks about the human condition. He plays his guitar and listens to heavy metal as a muse for future pieces of literature.

Facebook: [Timothy Hosey](#)

Twitter: [@timothy_hosey](#)

Chorus of Forever | *T.S. Woolard*

You could hear the pain
and strong baritone bellows
echoing from the afterlife,
backed by angel harps and cellos.
The blues radiated from their tone
like a lonely Hendrix Stratocaster.
The ghostly band sang a painful tune
with heartache as the penman's master.
The Devil stole their earthly voice,
eternally enslaving each of them.
Their anguish is his soulful music,
and their torment is a demon's hymn.

Father | T.S. Woolard

There's fire in my belly.
A claw ripping at my throat.
Blood bursts from opened flesh.
Watch my damned soul float.

Rejected by God,
I was meant to die.
A wicked mistake in me.
My mother doesn't even cry.

Tears never wet her cheeks.
An incantation lingers.
Rising from the broken Earth,
grasping for her fingers.

Long nails upon burnt hands,
digging into her soft skin.
The witch buried me,
and my father rose in sin.

Loyalty | T.S. Woolard

Fire flows.
Lava beneath her hands.
Bloody bubbles of glory
cheer on the night.
Wraith's shriek.
Hollow hymns from Hell.
Echoes harmonize
among the dying wood.
Dormant oaks
cry and creak,
knowing he comes
at the equinox.
Stories told.
Fables entertained for millennia.
Tonight she celebrates
her loyalty to darkness.

About the Author:

T.S. Woolard lives in North Carolina with his three Jack Russell Terriers. He has been published with many presses, and won several awards for his contributions to the horror world. Please look for more of his work, including his latest release, *Be Free*, at Amazon.

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

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

death scene | *Eliana Vanessa*

the skull
of every crow
bleeds a plethora
of discovery, untapped,
onto scraps of napkins,
overlooked,
or mistaken for waste,
though the wisest
of undertakers
buries
these mementos first,
knowing
that the weight
of enlightenment,
found in grave dirt,
mixes well
with the crooked flight
of murderous ink—
a great
conversation piece,
to muse amongst the dead,
at the very least.

the shadow of a grave, revisited | *Eliana Vanessa*

a ghost screams
its relentless plea,
into the pit of a suppressed memory
to stop the bloody vehicle,

though
you can only drink more,
driving faster
into the chaos of narcissism,

throwing me off the street,
repeatedly sealing the stench
of alcohol, chilled, for the lips
of my corpse,

the one
found on the pavement,
that haunts your nightmares, or,
in the standstill of every failed relationship--

tonight,
dig deeper the stakes at the crossroads,
as there is really no better place to weigh,
how much you want your insanity today.

impundulu | *Eliana Vanessa*

the storm
summons broken wings,
ankles, dirtied,
breath,
lost upon
the tombstone of love,
the memory of which
instinctively heaves
along her
carotid artery,
his voice,
her favorite cemetery,
continues to press
blithely against
the eye of the hurricane,
pounding echoes
over steeples,
always a fight
to witness
how his arms,
like lightning strikes,
shock the heart
of the angel through time
for just a drop
of her newly discovered blood.

meet you at the cemetery | *Eliana Vanessa*

so much evidence, lost,
at the crime scene,

i am the ghost of what
you thought could never be,

do you hear
the dirge of my hunger, calling?

what glow will fix the ache
of this sick burden, you say?

come tether my core, again,
to that white light, force fed,

say how much blood, or rain,
passion, itself, should swallow,

i want to be as drunk as the movement
of your slanted line,

following the tension of a voice, released,
beast of a truth, death in the making.

he said he didn't know
that we were ready
for moving wheels,

but i
fully intended
on driving places—

my Anne Rice books
having kept me company
for too long in the passenger's seat,

i certainly
didn't need
an excuse

to get lost
in the darkness
of a city

where
vampires
ravaged bodies

in exchange
for dream-energies,
on the sides of highways,
i knew that,
no sooner than my muse
would arrive to honor my request,

our
shadows
would intersect—

his unholiness,
meeting mine,
in divine black magic spells,

blindsiding
both distance and time,
heeding the reckless prayer.

About the Author:

Eliana Vanessa grew up in New Orleans. She recently participated in 100,000 Poets for Change and served as part of a panel of poets in The Jane Austen Festival. Her work is online at The Siren's Call, The Blue Nib, Medusa's Kitchen, San Pedro Review, and in *Masks Still Aren't Enough* (2019) and *Americans And Others* (2019).

*Come set sail with ghosts, gods,
and sea monsters.*



GHOSTS OF THE SEA MOON

Book I
Saga of the
Outer Islands

A. F. STEWART

Narrated by Alyson Grauer

Available on Amazon

There are many ways to be consumed:
by desires and disease, frenzy and rage,
madness and jealousy. Not to mention
parasites, worms, insects, ravenous
man-eating beasts from the shadows of a jungle.
Then there are Headhunters, both civilized
or not. One day I awoke to find myself
being swallowed from within —
digested alive in my very own juices!
(Which I suppose makes me a lot less
Vegan than Cannibal.)

In a weird spiraling effect, akin to
taking a long tumble down a short
optical-illusion Rabbithole that appears to
have no depth yet goes on and on, it made
perfectly illogical sense in an impractical
manner of speaking. In other words,
no sense at all. I should know —
as the one being self-absorbed.
You can either stand in the rain waiting
for an umbrella, or stand under an umbrella
waiting for rain. I prefer to not miss out
on a good soaking.

Likewise, if I were to be eaten, I would
rather not forsake my principles in order
to be spared. But it seemed in this case
convincing my Inner Demon to cease
devouring my Outer Demon might be easier
said than done. Demons make terrible
negotiators. And listeners . . .
They are pretty bad at just about
everything! (In case you're wondering,
it is possible to be repossessed, as in
taken over twice. My true nature was
sandwiched between.) The dueling devils
competed for damnation.

And domination. I was their pawn, their
host, an innocent bystander — the paltry
Firecracker Jack Prize in their grotesque
Boxing Match; the private joke in their
Punch and Judy Showdown Slugfest.
They were cruddy as a mudbath,
provocative as Crocodile Kisses . . .
I had a Middle Row Seat between the

warring factions. Or so I thought.
Until the Inner Demon won — gobbling
us both, becoming me in the process!
It will be over soon, this power struggle,
as I fade to a mere possession.

The Imperfect Storm | *Lori R. Lopez*

Creeping out of Night's periphery where
all forms of ill-mannered beasties lie in crouched
wait — festering, scheming nefarious little plots —
an erratic Squall leaked through netherdark crevices
to gather intensity and layers of froth. Lopsided
along the edges, filled with strange sounds and
even more tempestuous uncanny temperaments
apt to curdle one's soul, the Weather Tantrum
swept forth with brash belligerence, loose of foot,
beholden to no Moon, seeking outrageous fortunes
and infinite amusements to ingest.

Swallowing, swirling, undecided which direction,
a revolving dervish of fits and starts, of clockwise
and counter-clockwise helixes hurling caution to
the wind and rain, this monstrous Stormnado
of spontaneous bustion and false bravado sprang
to drown the unsuspecting (oblivious over
its howling gusts of bad breath; its crackles
of clumsy broken homes, tipped wreckage,
shredded towns). Such isolated unobservant
individuals who sat alone on *all* Hallows Eves —
porchlight off, too out-of-touch to apprehend
the occasion or afraid to open their door.

Perhaps failing to discern branches whipping,
scraping, thrashing as if to claw inside —
an assault or escape — at the other end of flimsy
panes. Huddled with the drapes closed for privacy.
Unwilling to listen or unable to hear as voices of
gales clashed and canceled each other out.
Not everyone caught the latest News, followed
every nuance of an unpredictable force . . .
Some were simply too weary or distracted
to notice the difference between clement and
inclement. Until their den was deconstructed.
Or lifted whole and heaved to another address,
rudely transplanted without warning.

An Imperfect Storm never apologizes for

wreaking mayhem, rushing off to its subsequent misdeed. If cursed enough to encounter this rare event, charmed enough to survive, a person had best invest in better Life Insurance than four walls. Next time (because it wasn't just Lightning and could come back for seconds), those prepared for the worst out of habit should be ready for anything! It may flip the world upside-down, yank Reality inside-out, bring the unexpected through each door. Do not greet it with trepidation, be fearless. Tell it you will not be pushed around! Surprise it with kindness. Offer it a hug. Embrace its quirky nature. It might be more like you than you think.

Bitter Sweet | *Lori R. Lopez*

On an unctuous Eve would insinuate
The slither of a Cobra, the grace of a Ghost
That can drift through walls with burglarous steal
And the lingering smell of well-burnt Toast.

This punctuous duo had a flair for drama.
Their creptitude bled down a deeply carved street,
Spilling Caramel goodies in a sticky trail,
Causing kids to weep for the Bitter Sweet.

"No candy for you!" they blithely taunted.
"It's melting away in a Chocolate Tide!
Get used to it, children, the world is that way.
One day you'll be happy you cried!"

The dreadful pair slunk merrily along
Spreading Halloween tears, a wave of dejection —
Adolescents and Toddlers reduced to sobs;
Leaving Teens and Adults with no confection.

Passing lanternd porches of ghoulish fare,
The terrified grins on Black Cats and Skellies;
Pumpkinhead Goblins and see-through Specters
That crooned eerie notes like an opera of wails.

Reminisced the Spook in a whispery voice:
"I remember these lanes, once upon a time.
It was such a thrill. In a haunting party
We roamed the shadows until Morning's chime!"

The Serpent lisped, "We shall have our fun,
my wissspy friend! Just wait for the punchline.

It's coming sssoon." They paused at a door.
The Spirit invited his companion to dine.

"Trick or Treat?" boomed the Bogey,
Expression glum. His tone rang dour.
A lady was caught in a flummoxed knot;
She tasted afraid and a little bit sour.

The Snake bulged and beamed in satisfaction.
"I believe this will be an exceptional night!"
Tapping doors or windows from house to house,
Scaring up random horrors to their delight . . .

"We must do this again! We're so awful at it.
I think we do make a most terrible team,
And we ought to continue it year after year.
I fear I am suffering a very good dream!"

Vainly the vapor tried to pinch himself,
But the poor Apparition could not gain a grip.
Nonetheless both agreed to meet in twelve months.
Then a Viper promptly gave his pal the slip.

And a Ghost leaned back for a solitary nap,
Sinking into earth like a swooning deadbeat,
To faintly recall the best Halloween —
When he and a chum turned the Bitter Sweet.

Shudderous Qualms | *Lori R. Lopez*

All year I have waited for a single day,
yet thoughts of these hours never stray.

Immersing my head in shudderous qualms:
The Tightrope Walk of fits and calms.

A mind well-inclined toward macabreties —
Alert for certain shifts, peculiarities.

While eyeballs grown wide beneath the covers
Imagine all manner of shiverous hovers.

Alurk betwixt shades of the glims and me,
In case I should peek, what terrors to see?

I cannot foretell nor risk a mere guess,
For I am quite the coward I must confess.

And such that slithers inside my brain
Is naught compared to the true insane!

Nerve-prancing to the beat, an unsteady heart;
Lips mumble, cajoling to not fall apart.

I stumble from bed, sock-dusting the floor,
Intrigued and determined to know what-for.

These fraught furtive steps across the line
Of light and gloom do chill the spine!

That creak of the floor an unsettling house,
Or is what bestirs more soup than mouse?

Piano-Wire tension keeps me attuned.
Gothically occult; cobweb-festooned . . .

Giddily gruesome in retro attire —
Spookily clad as a Witch or Vampire . . .

I fear I have frightened a night-guest away!
And on Halloween, what can I say?

Come back, this is how I always dress!
And why no-one visits for Cards or Chess.

They won't even knock on All Hallows' Eve
To exchange a scare. How it makes me grieve.

About the Author:

Lori R. Lopez is an offbeat author-illustrator, poet, songwriter, and wearer of hats, as well as an animal-and-monster-lover. Verse has appeared in *The Sirens Call*, *The Horror Zine*, *H.W.A. Poetry Showcases*, *Weirdbook*, *Spectral Realms*, *Oddball Magazine*, *California Screamin'* (the Foreword Poem) and more. Books include *The Dark Mister Snark*, *Leery Lane*, and *Darkverse: The Shadow Hours*. Lori has been nominated for the Elgin and Rhysling Awards.

Facebook: [Lori R.Lopez](#)

Twitter: [@LoriRLopez](#)



Featured Photographer | *Pieter @The_Unknown_Urbex_Pleasure*

Eleven years ago my passion for abandoned buildings was born. I loved discovering dilapidated houses, castles, coal mines, steel factories; anyplace that was abandoned or forgotten. My wife ([@infinity.photos](#)) captured everything with her camera while I explored. I fell in love with the rusty, overgrown places. The decay and the stories about these forgotten structures intrigued me.

Two years ago I bought my own camera because I was fascinated by the beautiful photographs my wife created. I became addicted to exploring the abandoned, and now my wife and I are often on the road to find and photograph new places together.



About the Artist:

Pieter is an urban explorer and photographer from Holland. He and his wife share a passion for shooting abandoned places, displaced objects, and metal that has been reclaimed by rust. He is a proud member of the [@made_in_decay](#), [@urbex_revolution](#), [@fadebeautyindecay](#), [@world_wide_urbex](#), and [@global_urbex](#) online communities. You can find more of his work on Instagram by following [@The_Unknown_Urbex_Pleasure](#) or searching the hashtags #rustlord and #urbexeurope. Please explore his wife's work as well at [@infinity.photos](#).

Since the onset of Alzheimer's, Arthur had developed small systems to assist with his daily living. Every morning, he trekked to the refrigerator and studied the oversized calendar for clues. The last date marked 'X' was October 18th, 2018, meaning that today must be the 19th. He examined the agenda items of the day, which consisted of *make breakfast, fetch newspaper, lunch in fridge, feed the squirrels* and *chicken dinner*. Arthur ran a bony finger down each item, and once feeling confident, opened the fridge and retrieved a carton of eggs. Stuck to the carton was a note outlining his cooking instructions. He cracked the eggs into a bowl, stirred them up, and dripped the runny contents into a pan.

As he was decoding his instructions, Arthur heard three loud knocks at the front door. He abandoned the eggs, shut off the stove, and turned his attention to the hallway. Seven lengths of yarn were fixed to the ground, each of a different color, marking Arthur's various pathways around the house. The strings webbed to a centre hub near the front foyer, Arthur's command point, leading to a panel of printed labels on the wall. Each label represented an area of the residence and matched the colored strings to their respective domains. An assortment of colors spread around the house like tentacles.

Arthur followed the yellow string in the kitchen to the foyer to see a man silhouetted against the glass of the door. Sunlight billowed through the window as if it were emitting from the shadowy figure itself. Arthur opened the door to see a handsome man dressed in a dark suit. The man carried a black moleskin notebook in his right hand and sported aviator sunglasses. His hair was short and neat. He raised his left arm and flicked open a badge.

"Good day, sir," the man announced in a deep voice, "I'm Detective Mark Waters of the Cherry Hills police department." He outstretched his hand and Arthur reciprocated. Waters had a firm handshake.

"Pleasure to meet you, I'm Arthur Noble."

"Mr. Noble, we've had a report of a missing girl in the area, eleven years old, April Daley." He flipped open the notebook and continued, "Lived at the intersection of Hilltop Drive and Walker Road." He reached into his jacket pocket and produced a creased school photograph.

The girl's face made an immediate impression on Arthur. She was beautiful with blonde ringlets and luminous blue eyes. Her smile gleamed and accentuated her dimples, mesmerizing Arthur with her gaze. While she was a pretty girl by any definition, there was something about her face that troubled him. He then realized that the man in front of him was waiting for a response. "I'm sorry to hear that, poor girl, but I don't know the children around here anymore."

Waters adjusted his sunglasses with his index finger. "Anymore?"

"Well, I am retired now, but I used to work as a professional clown, a real Auguste buffoon." Arthur lifted his arms, stretched out his smile and did his best jazz hands for Waters, who smiled politely in return. "I used to know lots of children in this neighbourhood. Lots of birthday parties when clowns were more fashionable."

"Is that right? For how long?" Waters cleared his throat.

"Oh, decades," replied Arthur, "but my memory isn't what it used to be." He pointed to his head and tapped. "To tell you the truth, they think I have Alzheimer's. And I never smoked or drank a day in my life, you know. Sometimes life isn't fair."

Waters looked down at his notebook. "I'm sorry, sir. It's just standard procedure that we canvas the neighbourhood. Do you live alone?"

Arthur paused before answering. "I do." He felt his focus slipping. The face of the missing girl twinkled in his mind. "Well, I am alone now. My wife died years ago and our son is all grown up, probably your age."

"And he's out of the house?"

"That's right. I have a nurse come by twice a week, every Tuesday and Friday." Arthur began to feel lost, though he maintained an awareness of the man's obvious authority.

Waters produced a pen from his breast pocket and began to scribble notes. "The girl went missing on Tuesday night. What time does your nurse typically leave?"

"Oh, just before sundown, I would say." Arthur was not confident in his answer, as he could not recall what day it was let alone the details of Tuesday night. His attention was drawn to the girl's picture again, now held against the moleskin with Waters' fingers blocking her eyes. Her mouth, now eerie and unnatural, grinned back at him omnisciently.

Gradually, Arthur realized that Waters was asking him another question. "Mr. Noble? What agency does your nurse work with? And the nurse's name, please."

"Leslie...Leslie Owens, that's right. She's with Cherry Hills."

"Cherry Hills Community Services?"

"Yes, down the road," nodded Arthur.

"Thank you, sir." Waters shut the notebook and returned it to his pocket. He extracted a business card from his wallet and handed it to Arthur, who grasped the card clumsily and apologized for not being more helpful. Waters thanked Arthur for his time and headed down the driveway, eyeing the next house to visit.

Arthur shut the door and retreated to his command point near the foyer. He felt exhausted and began to perspire. His chest tightened and he could feel his heart fluttering. Gasping for air, he collapsed in a nearby chair. The girl's piercing blue eyes shot through his mind, as did that smile, her lips stretching toward him like two pink eels. In that instant, he remembered the time capsule. All of a sudden nothing else mattered and Arthur had no idea why. He quickly scanned the floor in search of the red string.

Arthur followed the red yarn to the backyard. When he reached the sliding door, the image of the time capsule flashed in his mind's eye – a clear, independent memory of a green metal box adorned with a fine gold pattern. In the back of his mind, at the border of his forgotten memories and struggling consciousness, he recalled burying a time capsule in his backyard. He was certain of it.

While Arthur had no memory of the box's contents, he felt a strong compulsion to possess it, craving the tactile sensation of running his fingers over the capsule. He couldn't understand why, but his instinct told him not to worry, and that he would find solace once he had the box. Perhaps, Arthur thought, the time capsule could help find the girl in some way.

Scanning the yard frantically, Arthur slid open the door and made his way outside. The air was crisp and the aromas of autumn, spiked with freshly cut grass and burning firewood, perfumed the yard. He moved with a sense of urgency to his toolshed, which rested against the back fence. The branches of a giant maple tree floated above the shed, its leaves sparse and kissed with the usual oranges and reds of the season. After some struggling, Arthur managed to pry open the wooden doors and retrieve the shovel. He clasped the spade in a fevered grip and returned to the yard.

Arthur's eyes darted across the grass like a predatory animal as he hoped for any seed in his memory to sprout, revealing the time capsule's location. When no such memory came, he began to randomly stab the earth with the spade. Walking up and down the small yard, he thrust the shovel into the earth, twisted and lifted, making a series of dishevelled gopher holes. He worked until dusk, slashing at the ground until his back seized and his hands trembled from pain. He did not eat, fetch the newspaper or feed the squirrels that day.

After several hours of searching, the yard was littered with hundreds of holes, but Arthur had failed to unearth the time capsule. Giving in to exhaustion, he staggered back to his house, opened the sliding door and limped inside. In his frustration, he hadn't realized that he was still holding the shovel. Rather than making the trip back to the shed, he decided to deposit the spade in the closet adjacent to the kitchen. He would continue the hunt in the morning.

Arthur followed the red string back to his command point and opened the closet. He pulled a drawstring attached to a single light bulb and illuminated the inside. Staring back at him was his old, shabby clown outfit displayed on a hanging wire. "Hello, old friend," murmured Arthur. His mood lifted as he swooned over the outfit.

The jacket of the suit was shiny and red with blue pom pom balls stitched vertically down the chest. It lay over a bright blue shirt decorated with a wide, white tie that was speckled with red, yellow and blue polka dots. Beige gloves budded from the pockets of the attached yellow pants, which dangled above two oversized clown shoes on the floor, colorful but scuffed from decades of use. Beside the shoes was his old make-up kit, a sleek leather case, and a red nose made of foam, which sat dutifully on the kit.

The sight of the costume put Arthur into a trance. It demanded his attention in some way, but as with the picture of the girl and time capsule, he had no idea why. He stroked the outfit and fingered the embroidered nametag on the left breast pocket – *Nyjo*. "Goodnight, Nyjo," he whispered with a smile and shut the closet door.

Arthur followed the yellow string to the refrigerator, grabbed the black marker attached to the oversized calendar and drew an 'X' over the 19th. His head bobbed downwards, peering momentarily at the ground before relocating the yellow yarn, which he traced back to his command point. From there, he found the orange string, followed it to his bedroom and let the moonlight lull him to sleep.

Arthur awoke to a loud banging at the front door. Bright sunlight pierced through the windows, sabotaging his efforts to open his eyes. He struggled to sit up, his entire body stiff and his muscles burning, but managed to shrug off the covers and locate the orange string on the floor. He followed it to the foyer to see the outline of a man standing at his doorway. The man pivoted slightly, causing shadows to dance over the walls. Arthur took a deep breath and opened the door.

"Good morning, Mr. Noble, how are we today?" Detective Waters had returned, wearing the same aviators with a lighter suit today. Arthur stared at Waters' face and attempted to place it. He scanned his memory bank and came up with nothing.

"Oh, very good, sir, beautiful day today, she is," mumbled Arthur.

"That's the truth," replied the man. "We located the girl, Mr. Noble. Turns out she was a simple runaway. A woman walking her dog located her by Harris Lake, she'd set up a campsite. She was cold and hungry to boot, but healthy nonetheless. She's back home now. The department wanted to update everyone we interviewed yesterday personally, in light of our town's history." Waters paused awkwardly. "I'm sure you know what I mean. Anyway, you're my last house, then this case is closed."

"Wonderful news, sir. I'm so glad to hear. I used to know all the children of this neighbourhood very well. They knew me as Nyjo the Clown." Arthur began his jazz hands routine but Waters held up his hand, nodding as if to remind Arthur they've had this conversation before.

"Right, Mr. Noble, I remember. Well, it was a pleasure meeting you, I wish you all the best." Waters turned and walked back to his vehicle.

As Waters was opening the door of his car, Arthur called out something to him. "What was that, Mr. Noble?" responded Waters.

"I couldn't find it," repeated Arthur.

"Find what?"

"The time capsule."

"Right, well have a great day, sir," declared Waters, waving to Arthur as he slid into the driver's seat. Arthur watched the car pull out of his driveway and accelerate into the horizon.

Upon closing the door, Arthur decided he would go to the backyard to feed the squirrels. He retrieved a small bag of peanuts from the kitchen table, returned to his command point and traced the red string to the backyard. He opened the sliding door, stepped outside and immediately noticed the holes all over the lawn.

Genuinely confused, Arthur approached the holes for further inspection. He wondered what kind of animal could dig so many holes. As he kicked a tuft of soil and grass, a glimmer of light blinded him. The sun had reflected something in the grass. He turned toward the source of the light and bobbed his head around, trying to see the reflection again. Finally, he spotted it, coming from one of the holes.

Arthur shuffled to the hole and dropped to his knees, feeling the wet morning dew against his legs. Bending over, he ripped at the jumbled earth until he felt something hard cut into his knuckles. He brushed away the soil until the source of the glimmer revealed itself. He had found a small metal box, green in color with veins of patterned gold. Arthur leaned back and lay the box in front of him. He scratched the box in search of a latch, picking away pieces of caked dirt until he located the opening. Slowly, he raised the latch and lifted the lid.

The inside of the box was lined in an attractive red felt. Six plastic baggies were neatly displayed, each containing a lock of blonde hair tied with turquoise ribbons. Beneath the baggies was a frail paper note, written in black marker, which read:

NEVER AGAIN

Arthur Noble

Signed at Cherry Hills on the 26th day of August, 1983

About the Author:

David A.F. Brown is a Canadian author, whose fiction has appeared in various anthologies, magazines and podcasts, including *Tales to Terrify*, *The Sirens Call* and *Deep Fried Horror*. He was a finalist in the NYC Midnight Short Story Challenge 2019, an international competition of over 4,500 writers. He holds a BA (Hons) from Western University and resides in Caledon, Ontario, with his wife and son.

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The ladies on the Bargain Shopping Network, Jenna and Nancy were like old friends or sisters. They spoke directly to Abby, sharing secrets of the wonderful products. Twice they took her calls on the air.

"Today's special is for girls only, so send the hubby to do something else," Jenna almost whispered. Tom was out in his shop puttering. He never made anything or fixed things in the shop. He puttered, whatever that meant. Wait. He did build a birdhouse from a kit some years ago. Painted it and hung it on the back porch which attracted hornets which built a nest in it. It cost a hundred and fifty dollars for the exterminator to kill them all. The spray they used blistered the paint on birdhouse.

"Are you tired and we know we all are, of doing for the husband all the time, breakfast, lunch, dinner. Laundry and yes, taking care of his *needs*." Jenna did air quotes around needs. Did she really say that on television? They had Abby's interest now. Nancy had walked off set to perform some other task and now the camera pulled back for the reveal. She thought at first it was a cardboard cutout but as the camera panned in, it showed a hunk of a figure of a man wearing tiny tight swim shorts. Nancy pointed something at the man, looked down at it and laughed. She turned the device around and pointed at him again. He began to walk forward. Now the camera zoomed on her. She was giggling.

"I had the remote pointed the wrong way." She held it toward the camera. "See. There's this little lens thing." She touched the small protrusion with her perfect nail. They were bright blue today. "It has to be pointed toward," she flipped the remote over. A paper was taped to the back. She giggled again. "It has his name on the back. Each one has its own individual name. This one is called Samuel."

Jenna was standing on the other side of Samuel.

"Of course you will be able to customize the name to your liking. He can be a Bob, or Jack." She smiled toward Nancy. "Or Raul." They both smiled and touched his bare shoulders. "For now, we'll stick with Samuel," Jenna said. "Okay, the details. Samuel is a fully functional male android." They both raised an eyebrow when she said, fully functional.

"Samuel can help you with all those household tasks we all do everyday. The ones you really don't like, like vacuuming, scraping dried food off the dishes or cleaning the toilet. Especially the toilet your man or boys use."

Nancy chipped in with an "ugh."

"Samuel doesn't mind. In fact he likes doing chores for you." A stage hand unfurled a carpet, another sprinkled a box of dirt on it and a third one brought out an upright vacuum cleaner.

"Here's what I really like about Samuel," Nancy bubbled. "He responds to voice commands right out of the box."

"Oh yes, and we should mention, if you order within the next thirty minutes, shipping is free. After that it will cost you fifty dollars. You need to call in quickly because these Samuel Androids will be flying off the shelves with that free shipping deal."

Abby grabbed her phone. Samuel wasn't cheap. Four payments of five hundred dollars each but satisfaction was guaranteed and Samuel was returnable after thirty days if you weren't satisfied.

The lady on the phone, Joyce said she should go for overnight shipping. Samuel would arrive by 2 PM tomorrow afternoon. It was extra but Abby thought it would be worth it. Tom would still be at work which would give her time to unbox and customize the android.

The delivery man rolled it up to the porch on a dolly.

"Pretty heavy," he said. "Almost as big as a refrigerator." Abby nodded and smiled. She was able to tilt and scoot the box into the living room, then dug a box cutter out of the kitchen junk drawer. Her heart was beating fast by the time she got the EZ-Open carton open.

He was wrapped in thin layer of a soft filmy plastic. An instruction booklet was taped to the front with a big lettered, READ ME FIRST, sign.

Abby pulled it off and paged through it with shaking fingers. It appeared easy enough. Lift the right arm and push the button that was made to resemble a small brown mole.

"Hello," he said. "My name is Samuel. How may I serve you?"

This device is equipped with Federal Android Safety Protocols. It cannot intentionally harm a human allow or allow harm through neglect.

Well that was nice.

She had Samuel carry his packing into the basement and hid him between the furnace and hot water tank. She intended to have a whole day with him learning his capabilities when Tom went to work in the morning.

She knew the firmware upgrade was a necessity and she read about the body morph capability. Samuel could take on Tom's appearance when she required it. The firmware came after her day of learning. Jenna and Nancy weren't

wrong, Samuel was a fully functional male in oh so many ways and Tom's body would fit nicely in that box in the basement.

About the Author:

R. Gene Turchin had aspirations to be a lead guitarist in a heavy metal or blues band, when that didn't work out, he took up with engineering and technology and then stumbled into academia. His writing leans toward dark and odd, a sharp contrast to his cheerful optimism.

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Descent | *Suzanne Madron*

The city streets after four in the morning are no place for the faint of heart. The giant heartbeat slows and the omnipresent breathing grinds down to the rumble of occasional and infrequent inhales and exhales of subways and buses. Skyscrapers and brownstones press dark against a brightening sky like a bedhead of concrete and steel. If one is unprepared to look that ugliest of one-night stands in the face during the wee hours, then one has no business living on its asphalt skin like a human tick attempting to burrow in and survive on its lifeblood.

I have business here, though I am merely wandering through on my way to other places. I come to this city in between my assignments to recharge, to drink in the ambient energy of the island. To sing it back to sleep when it jerks from a nightmare. If it were to wake up, we would all be in a world of shit.

Tonight, the city is stirring in its slumber, on the verge of waking, and I must hurry if I am to be successful. I must reach its heart before the sun rises.

The staircase yawns downward before me and I can see there are no homeless people in this particular tunnel, as if they, too, sensed the shift in the air and left for places else. A low, growling moan vibrates the concrete maw and the bulbs flicker like eyelids trying to open. My footfalls echo around me and downward, chasing me into the darkening shadows of the subway platform below and beyond into the darkness of the tunnel.

I sing as I go, softly at first and then louder as I enter the blinking darkness of the train tunnel. Every city—every place—has a heart. This city is no different, except that its heart is so much bigger, so much louder, than others. The earth shudders beneath my feet as I continue on, the sensation easily mistaken for a nearing subway train. I know better.

My song echoes outward and upward as I reach my destination. A dilapidated brick archway is all that adorns this most sacred of places buried deep beneath the layers of civilizations come and gone. Beyond the archway is a cavern lit only by guttering candles arranged in sconces in a circle. In the center of the design is a bed. In the center of the bed sleeps a child of indeterminate gender.

I continue to sing as I replace the dying candles and candles that have already gone out with fresh ones. The new light is brighter and will last longer. The sleeper turns over and breathes evenly, the young brow is no longer furrowed by troubled dreaming and the earth settles into its usual quiet hum as I leave the cavern to travel to the next place. To the next sleeper.

About the Author:

Suzanne Madron was born in New York City and has lived up and down the east coast. Currently, she resides in a house built over a Civil War battlefield in the wilds of Pennsylvania where she has been known to host some interesting Halloween parties. She has authored several novels and stories under various names including Suzi M, James Glass, and Xircon.

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Rienna watched her fingers in the moonlight as she brushed the stray hair from her sleeping son's cheek. His skin was darker than hers, more like that of the southern elves.

More like his father's. Rienna smiled sadly. *He is strong like his father as well, but he gets his beauty from me.* She held on to her pride, using it to fill the void in her soul as she stepped outside the stronghold to wait.

To wait, but not to grieve.

The night smelled of rich loam and damp bark, the scent of ice still sharp in the early spring.

The hard winter drove the humans into our forest, but what drove them to kill? We were willing to share so long as they did not trespass on the heart of what is ours.

A breeze ruffled the strands of Rienna's warrior braids and brought with it a faint scent of timber and ash. She peered into the trees, her elven eyes able to pierce all but the darkest shadows.

But ever as a creature of the night, Rienna smelled the blood before she saw them coming.

The hunting party approached silently except for the weighted steps of the last warrior. Haast, an elf chief with broad shoulders and centuries of wisdom, carried a body over his shoulder. Limp and smeared with blood, his warrior's braids so long they brushed the forest floor before Haast lowered the body at her feet.

Rienna knew by the rending of her soul and the vast emptiness left in that chasm that her soulmate was dead. She knew, but even knowing she was not prepared to see her lover's body. *Kendaar*, the name was empty as she thought it, the spirit that had given it meaning gone. She refused to drop to her knees and mourn. With her soulmate dead, she would follow. It was not a choice but the gift and consequence of being an elf, and she did not have weeks or days or even until dawn. Her soul would follow her mate's within a matter of hours. Most of those hours were already gone. She could spend what she had left grieving, or she could spend it on revenge.

Rienna wanted revenge.

"Where are they?" she asked Haast even though she already knew she needed only to follow the scent of burning.

Vaanu, a young male with his first warrior braids and rash judgment, answered her. "They are camped beyond the Silver Ridge. Cutting trees and soiling the streams. I told you they were vermin."

Rienna drew her knife and pointed it at Vaanu, but it was Haast who spoke. "Enough, Vaanu. They have asked for war. We will give it to them."

No, I will give it to them. Rienna lowered her knife but did not sheath it. When she was done killing and her soul fled to join Kendaar's, she would miss the weight of the blade in her hand, the smooth worn bone handle, the way the metal flashed in the moonlight as it shed blood. She thought of her son, sleeping in the burrow of their home. *I will miss more than my knife.*

Vaanu looked at Rienna. "Let me go with you," his wide elven eyes flashed. "We can kill them while they sleep, cut their throats so quickly they don't even cry out."

"That is slaughter, not war," a female warrior spoke up.

The argument found a life and grew among the seven who had been with Kendaar in the hunting party. The only thing they agreed on was that the humans had killed Kendaar purposefully and without known cause. For Rienna, their voices became a blur and all she could see was the path through the trees that led to the Silver Ridge.

As they argued, however, doubt dug its sharp claws into her spine. *Humans are clumsy and slow. How did they manage to kill an elf? A warrior with more braids than any other fighter in the tribe?*

She studied the others who argued, Vaanu more vehemently than any other, and rage snaked through her belly along with the growing conviction that he, who hated the humans so openly, had done some deed to instigate their violence. She wished she could be sure.

I need more time. But it didn't exist. Even now Rienna felt her soul trying to break free and she had one sliver of a chance to kill her soulmate's betrayer. She stepped over Kendaar's body, passed through the fighters, and spoke softly. "Vaanu may come seek revenge with me."

The young elf squared his shoulders and gave her a grim smile. As Vaanu lifted his chin with pride, Rienna watched the heartbeat at the base of his throat and her blood quickened. *Such a thin layer of flesh.*

The other elves fell silent as Rienna stepped into the deeper shadows of the trees. Vaanu brushed past her, eager, and in a matter of steps they were out of sight of the others. The only sound the young elf made was the sighing of his throat when Rienna ran her knife across his windpipe.

Just as Vaanu said, cut their throats so quickly they don't even cry out.

She laid the young elf's body in the brush, making no more sound than the breeze through the trees. She traced her way back along the trail for one tear, one final glance at Kendaar's body on the grass before her own soul fled. With her soulmate's body in view, she slumped to the forest floor.

Haast stood near Kendaar's body, his arms across his chest as the other elves resumed the argument over what provoked the humans to attack. The chief's knife hung from his belt, his leather sheath freshly stained with streaks of blood. Next to the knife, tucked inside his belt where they could hardly be seen, were three human fingers.

About the Author:

Christine Nielson publishes dark fantasy under her name as well as under pen name CM Adler. She had her start in writing dystopian and has found the dark and fantastical to be the true home of her fae dragon soul.

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Invisible | *Kerry E.B. Black*

I see you, though no one else does. Then again, you've always seen me.

Life's hard for the invisible. We struggle for the necessities. Food. Shelter. A smile. So, as an invisible person, I see what others overlook, out of respect for the shared struggle.

Like that Cat Grizelda, I was beautiful. Once. Arm candy without expectation, the perfect private spy and raconteur after dark. When you found me useful, long ago, in a memory, before age and children stole glamour and replaced it with rolls of fat and wrinkles, I was but a soap bubble. In your chest of treasures, a tiny gem who lost luster and blended to background.

The kids don't call anymore. They claim busy lives supercede aging mothers. They still blame me for you leaving. You left for a younger model, yet blame buries me. While the kids grew through elementary concerns and high school hijinx, I worked in their backgrounds as is my way, and secured them good standing and higher educations. Their success shines as I slink to shadow.

It was always that way, though. I'd do the work, and others claimed the accolades. From the outskirts, shadowed in anonymity, I'd anticipate someone acknowledging my contributions, like any actor at the Oscar Podium. "I wouldn't be here without the help of the little people..." But no, praise lapped over their golden shores while the undertow of resentment choked me out at the sea of obscurity.

Now, they're gone, and you're gone, yet you haunt me, because of everyone heaping praises on you in your life, I saw who you were.

So welcome to land of the unseen. Life's hard for the invisible. You won't struggle for food or shelter, though I do. I suppose that can be a comfort to you as you wander with your other damned brethren. I wonder if others also cast aside are similarly haunted. It hardly seems fair if so.

So yes, I see you. You who insisted I become an echo of what I once was. It's a lovely circumstance that now the only person who knows you're here is the very person you did your best to erase.

I see you waving arms still stiff with embalming fluid, can almost hear complaints pushing against lips sewn shut by the mortician. I see, but now I no longer care.

I withhold my attention and pull a threadbare blanket over my head to block you out.

About the Author:

Kerry E.B. Black writes from an over-stuffed yellow house along a fog-strewn river that flows to the city of steel and zombies. She invites you to follow her at [KerryebBlack.com](#).

Twitter: [@BlackKerryblick](#)

A piece of horehound candy was stuck in the boy's teeth. He chewed on a jawbreaker to dislodge it. It was Halloween and little Wyatt was walking to the town church for the evening's festivities. The crisp autumn air stung his cheeks as he walked. It was dusk and the dark twisting limbs of the trees defined themselves sharply against the moonlit sky. Wyatt was a small pale-faced boy of eight years with skinny legs, blonde straw-like hair and bright green eyes. The boy loved Halloween, everything about it. The costumes, the decorations, the festivities. The candy. But more than anything else he loved the stories. Ghost stories. And his hometown of Shadow Grove was full of them.

Shadow Grove was a sleepy colonial town hidden among the backwaters and marshes of the Chesapeake Bay in the woods of Virginia. Nestled between the Belfonte River and the Scarback Forest, Shadow Grove claimed itself to be the best preserved town of the Colonial Americas. City records showed that it had been founded shortly after the settling of its sister colony Jamestown to the south. No one knew why the town's founding father Captain Belfonte had chosen such a remote place to start a colony.

Shadow Grove was a dark swampy glen that was connected to the rest of the state only by a series of crooked back roads and aging bridges that snaked through dense foliage and marshland. It was a town so isolated from the outside world that it was difficult to find one's way into it. Or out of it. It had been that way for centuries. The oldest known graves that the Shadow Grove cemetery featured dated back to the 1620's. But the town cemetery was not the graveyard Wyatt had on his mind that night.

The boy was dressed as an Indian for Halloween. More specifically he was dressed as the much feared local legend Scarback, the savage Indian. In fact Wyatt dressed as Scarback every Halloween, but this year's costume featured a new pair of moccasins that his mother had made for him. The brittle red yellow leaves crunched under his moccasins as he walked along the dark cobblestoned streets. He liked to hear the leaves crunch.

Wyatt popped in a fresh piece of saltwater taffy. There was electricity in the air that night. Wyatt could feel it. His cowlick was standing out at all ends. A particular birthmark on his back tingled like it always did on Halloween. There was something fantastic and provocative about Halloween night, a mix of wonder and terror and nostalgia that he and boys like him felt but couldn't quite comprehend. It was a night where the stories and images in his science fiction magazines would come alive. A night where screams cry out from the woods, where every old woman encountered is a witch, where behind every shadow something sinister lurks. A night where anything can happen.

A cold wind blew out of the woods. Wyatt shivered. He chewed furiously on a root beer barrel to warm up. He waved to old Mrs. Bradford as he walked by her front porch. She was draping cobwebs on her American flag. She waved back. Mrs. Bradford's house was as old as the town itself. Some of the kids at school said the house was haunted. They also said Mrs. Bradford was a witch.

At Belfonte Elementary that day, the kids dressed in costumes and passed out candy and cards to one other. Some of the boys played tricks on each other. One of the boys Stanley Dowder put a fake spider in Wyatt's candy bucket. Wyatt shrieked and the classroom laughed. The boy was embarrassed, but he laughed anyway. He loved everything about Halloween including the tricks. Afterwards Mr. Barton led a class discussion about Shadow Grove and its history. Quickly this led to stories, the ones Wyatt liked best.

Like many old towns, Shadow Grove had a vast array of fantastic stories and folktales. The stories were the stuff of campfire lore, the types of fearful whisperings that little boys told while lying awake at summer camp. There were cryptic reminders etched on the partitions of all of the restroom stalls in the school. The stories were cautionary tales for young Shadow Grovers who weren't brushing their teeth and saying their prayers. These tales made the hair on Wyatt's neck stand and the birthmark on his back prickle. Stanley Dowder was the school expert on the subject, the self-appointed town chronicler. Stanley Dowder claimed to be a direct descendant of the town's founding father Captain Belfonte. Though the bloodline of Belfonte was as mysterious as the woods that surrounded the town, the kids at school believed him. This gave Dowder a certain prestige to boys like Wyatt. Wyatt's mother said Stanley Dowder was a liar, but Wyatt knew better.

Dowder spoke of seventeenth century mass witch burnings like the ones they were having up in Salem except these witches were real. Throughout the years many of Shadow Grove's most prominent citizens had simply disappeared. Other times shadowy strangers appeared in town just as abruptly. No one knew who the strangers were or what they were doing there. Then *they* disappeared. Dowder had seen colonial frigates sailing up the river at night, vanishing into the fog and not seen again. He and his friends had fallen asleep at the town cemetery one night, only to wake up with some of the headstones rearranged. And then there was the forest. Dowder had seen things in the forest, strange things, and everybody knew about those kids who went out to the woods and disappeared a few years back

when Wyatt was too young to remember. Of course the adults had an explanation for this, but Dowder didn't buy it. Neither did Wyatt.

As Wyatt walked through town he saw a crow sitting atop the mailbox in front of the post office. The bird's evil yellow eyes glowed in the darkness. Wyatt threw a piece of black licorice at the crow. It squawked, flying off into the woods. Stanley Dowder had said that the post office was where they used to hang people in Shadow Grove. Wyatt stopped and stared at the building. A wind blew out of the woods and he could hear rope creaking. He smiled. Postman Henderson walked out of the post office and gave Wyatt a wink. He was locking the post office door, probably getting ready for the festivities.

There was going to be a Halloween festival that night at First United Church. The entire town would be there. As one of the first buildings in Shadow Grove, First United Church's roof was constructed from the hull of the Conqueror, the ship in which Captain Belfonte and the town's founding fathers had arrived many years before. Wyatt could see the church's high steeple away in the distance. It was getting darker, the clouds settling in for the night. The boy shivered. It was going to be foggy soon. Wyatt ate his licorice thinking of his favorite ghost story, a Stanley Dowder classic and an absolute legend among the kids at Belfonte Elementary: the tale of Scarback, the savage Indian.

They called him Scarback because of an alleged and mysterious crescent moon birthmark on the small of his back. From what Wyatt knew of him, his entire tribe had been slaughtered by Captain Belfonte during the settling of the town in the seventeenth century. The murders were committed on a dark autumn night, Halloween of course, and the only witness was a blood-red crescent moon looming high above the trees. The bodies of the Indians were buried deep in the forest where they could never be found. Somewhere out in those dark cruel woods was an Indian graveyard that had not yet been discovered. Scarback was an infant at the time and was the sole survivor of the massacre. The infant grew and sought revenge. Years later he killed Captain Belfonte and cursed the town of Shadow Grove.

No one knew what happened to Scarback after that, except that he continued to wander the woods trying to find the bodies of his family. Wyatt's teacher Mr. Barton gave no credence to the stories. He said that Captain Belfonte was a notorious drunk and had most likely died of severe liver damage. But Wyatt knew that the Captain's throat had been slit by the hand of Scarback. Dowder said he had seen Scarback one night in the woods. Another night Dowder had heard Scarback sharpening his knife down by the river. Wyatt's mother dismissed these stories as tall-tales, but Wyatt knew they were true. Adults always made up explanations for things they could not understand.

The boy walked by the old library. Wyatt heard that the library had a secret section that had ancient texts of old witches' potions and Indian curses. Hidden in the secret section was a dusty volume that told Shadow Grove's *real* history—the history that the adults denied. Wyatt smiled and gazed up at the old building. The windows were dark. He heard whispering inside. Smashed pieces of jack-o-lanterns littered the front steps. He picked up a piece of pumpkin and put it in his pocket. Stanley Dowder said that headless ghosts needed jack-o-lanterns to see in the night.

Wyatt enjoyed Stanley Dowder's stories, especially the Scarback tales. He actually felt bad for Scarback and was happy the Indian got his revenge. Captain Belfonte seemed like kind of a jerk. In truth, Wyatt felt a connection to Scarback that went far beyond mere empathy. He liked to think of himself as a descendant of Scarback in much the same way that Stanley Dowder was a descendant of Captain Belfonte. It was a ridiculous notion, Wyatt knew. The boy's hair and skin were as fair as the town's winter snow. Once he asked his mother, and she laughed and tussled his cowlick. Boys will be boys. Wyatt never brought it up again and had no intention of ever telling Stanley Dowder or his other classmates. He had been teased enough over his eight years, whether it was for his slender build or his obsession with comic books and science fiction magazines. If he told Dowder and the boys that he had descended from an Indian, there would be no end to their ridicule. And so Wyatt kept silent. He knew he shared a bloodline with Scarback. How else could the birthmark on his back be explained? The mark in the shape of a small crescent moon.

Wyatt continued walking through the town. The fog was creeping in. The boy heard footsteps behind him and he knew he was being followed. Followed, perhaps, by a ghost of midnights long ago. He popped in a handful of candy corn and moved on. He reached the town square. He was told that the town square was where they used to burn the witches. They said that if you listened closely you could still hear the witches burning. Wyatt so far had been too afraid to listen closely. At the square's center stood a tall statue of Captain Belfonte. The figure was posed heroically with one hand on the hip, the other holding a cutlass, its eyes gazing off into the distance at an imaginary band of Indians that needed to be annihilated. Wyatt stared up at the statue and saw that there was a jagged red streak across the figure's throat, standing out against the white marble, perhaps paint, perhaps not. Wyatt knew the adults would blame the desecration on teenagers, but Wyatt wasn't so sure. He felt his birthmark flare up. He bit into a chocolate bar and smiled.

Gathered around the town square were a few early trick-or-treaters. Wyatt waved at them. He was excited about the Halloween festivities at the church later on. There would be mazes and magicians and haunted hayrides that toured

the town. Everyone would be there. Everyone except for Stanley Dowder. Wyatt had heard that Stanley Dowder and his friends were going out to the woods. They were going out to the woods to find the Indian graveyard. They understood what the adults did not. So did Wyatt. His mother would not let him go into the woods. He would go when he was older.

By the time Wyatt reached the church, the town of Shadow Grove was covered in the fog. The church tower stood before him peering over the dark clouds high above, its steeple silhouetted by a blood-red crescent moon. The fog kept rolling in and the boy could hardly see the front entrance to the church. He didn't mind. He could hear the laughter and festivities from all the way outside. The scar on his back buzzed. He smiled and swallowed a lemon drop.

Wyatt loved Halloween and he believed that the Shadow Grove folktales were true. He believed that they were true even when Stanley Dowder and his friends never came home that night from the woods. And he continued to believe them when Stanley Dowder and the boys were never seen again. Another Belfonte taken by the hand of Scarback. The adults tried to explain it, but Wyatt knew what had happened to them. And so he never told anyone that sometimes he saw Scarback looking in his window on dark autumn nights when the moon shined red.

About the Author:

Daniel Royer is a writer of short fiction. He is a California State University, Bakersfield graduate with an English Degree he's not using. Royer works as a full-time welder to support his true passion, which is axe throwing. His stories have been printed by Ponahakeola Press, SFReader.com, and Leg Iron Books. He used to have a cat.

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The Secrets of the Pumpkin Patch | *Devin Meaney*

The vibrant and varying shades of orange and yellow mingle beautifully in the wild and rampant growth of the pumpkin patch. Leafy greens and vines loop each other in a delectable display of nature and magic, each fruit acting as a symbol of October. The month where ghosts and goblins and witches patrol my town and yours. The month where the veil is the thinnest and dark portals are opened and closed at will.

Although the pumpkin patch itself seems non-nefarious, something deeper is lurking beneath the surface. Under grass and soil... a great darkness goes unseen. Where roots and shale collide, skull and bone are left to rot. The worms go in and the worms go out, and the secrets of the pumpkin patch become clear. The blessings of fertility come from the gods of death... and the various stages of putrefaction and decomposition make for a beautiful Jack-o-lantern. A twisted smile as a tip of the hat to the season. A warming glow to shine upon blackness.

As Power Rangers and demons go door to door for a treat (or a trick), the lanterns that light their way are silent in regards to their plump and healthy being. Only the huntress knows the truth of the patch, but her celebration is not candy apples and root beer. Another long-pig lays sprawled upon the rack... his grim facial expressions quite evident as his dead eyes forever search for the assistance he will never find. He once was John, but now he is Jack. And his sacrifice will for at least one night light the way.

About the Author:

Devin J. Meaney is the beloved author of many reviews and shorts that nobody actually reads. Within the nine hundred years he has been on this planet, he has been a cart boy, a scrap metal dude, a traffic control technician, and was twice the world's coolest dishwasher. He has a beautiful young daughter whom he loves very much, his cat Simba (R.I.P. buddy) being the commander and chief/C.E.O. of his many plots and various schemes.

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Step into the twisted warren of a lunatic mind, face the angered spirits of a haunted mansion, or escape a cursed forest's ancient monster...
Whichever story you choose, be sure to keep the lights on.



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Lowe's eyes snapped open. It was pitch black and she could see nothing. For a brief moment she had no idea where she was or what was going on. She felt the material of her sleeping bag and realized she was in her tent in the woods.

Her heart was pounding. What had woken her? She heard a twig snap.

"Miss Lowe?" A voice softly called out. She let out the breath, not realizing that she had been holding it this entire time.

"Ranger Adam?" She quietly called back.

"Yes ma'am. I am so sorry I hope I didn't scare you."

"Give me a moment and I'll be right out."

She turned her lamp on, but not before she pulled her pants on and checked that her hunting knife was still attached to the loop. She opened the flap and stepped out.

"What's going on, Ranger?"

"Well ma'am it appears we have a really bad storm approaching and I just don't think you'd be safe out here by yourself."

She flattened her lips against one another and she sighed.

"Ranger, I appreciate your concern but I'm a big girl. I've spent most of my life outdoors, camping and hiking on my own most of that time. I prefer it that way honestly. I appreciate your concern but I think I can handle it."

"Ma'am I mean no disrespect but they're calling for flash flooding and where your tent is...well it is just not safe. Why don't you grab your pack and follow me back to the station and then in the morning when things clear I'll walk you back out."

She stood there for a moment considering her options and when suddenly lightening struck just up the hill. The whole sky lit up around her and she could see his bright blue eyes flash. How could she possibly get him to realize she did not need saving. Men. Probably better to just submit and follow him back. She grinned a little, maybe that wouldn't be too bad.

"Ok Ranger, give me a sec."

"Yes ma'am"

She went in the tent and gathered her essentials. She closed the flap and locked it. She checked all of the stakes to make sure they were down tight.

"Ok Lancelot, let's go"

They began their walk back to the station at a brisk pace. Their flashlights danced across the tree branches. About 10 minutes into the walk the rain started and within minutes it was downpouring. She had camped about 30 minutes from the ranger station. When the hail started, they began to run full tilt.

They made it to the station in 10 minutes. They were soaked from the rain and bruised from the ice that had pelted down on them through most of the run.

She followed him into the station. The main room filled with glass cases that contained treasures found in the area. Arrow heads and pieces of old clay pots that were hundreds and in some cases thousands of years old. She gently dragged her finger across the cases reading each small card that described the item and explained where it was found.

There was a stuffed bear in the corner. A grizzly with gigantic claws. Its jaw was open and its glass eyes stared blankly. She stopped in front of it and felt the hair on her arms begin to raise.

"Don't worry Miss Lowe no one has seen a grizzly around here in a long time."

She stood motionless, heart thumping. She shivered, shook her head a little and looked over at him.

"There aren't really any large predators around here, are there?" She asked him.

"Wolves called this home for hundreds of years, but we haven't seen one for years. People think they were hunted out of these woods, but I think they just moved on to find other food sources." He looked down at her suddenly realizing she was soaked through.

"I can give you some privacy so you can get changed. I'll go grab some wood and make a fire."

Her lips gently curved into a small smile, "Thank you, Adam."

He stared at her and then catching himself he turned away. He managed to trip over his feet walking to the door. She giggled under her breath.

She opened her bag and pulled out an oversized t-shirt and new pair of underwear. She put them on and pulled her hair up on top of her head. She walked over to the couch by the fire place in the corner and sat with her feet curled up under her.

Ranger Adam came back in with the firewood and stopped in the doorway when he saw her on the couch. His face was flush and he quickly walked over to the fireplace.

"Sorry, I forgot to bring pants."

"Um...well that's okay. I'll just get the fire started and then go to my room in the back. You can s-s-sleep on the couch and then in the m-m-morning I'll walk you back to your tent." He was talking fast and stumbling over the words.

She smiled. How precious, he's nervous.

The ranger began piling the kindling up in the fireplace meticulously stacking them in a teepee fashion.

"You know, Adam, my family used to live around here."

He had jumped slightly at her voice.

"Really? How long ago was that?"

"Oh...years ago. I had a huge family. They had moved into these woods over a hundred years ago."

His brow furrowed.

"I didn't realize anybody actually lived around here as recently as that."

He never heard her arise from the couch. The hilt of her knife caught him on the back of the skull and Adam blacked out.

When he awoke, he was tied to the chair. There was a piece of cloth around his mouth. He pulled at the restraints and muffled, but could not move or speak.

"Yeah, there were 12 of us. I had 6 brothers and sisters. My grandparents and parents and us, we lived happily in these woods for decades. Until the people came."

He stared at her as she paced back in forth in front of him. She stared off into the distance, caught up in memory.

"They came and one by one they slaughtered us. My family was whittled down to only me, my brother Luka and my mother." She stopped in front of him, knife in hand. She pointed it at his left eye. She held it steady moving her face in to his. His eyes wide now with fear. He was trembling.

"I watched as my mother was skinned in front of me. I screamed, and they laughed. They laughed, and laughed. Then they held me down and did unspeakable things to me. But that's okay. They drank until they passed out. I was able to get out of the ropes that held me, and when they awoke I had tied them to that tree right out front of the ranger station. The large oak. I started with their hands. I tore them off at the wrists. I let them bleed out while I devoured them. Then I tore off their arms and ate them. Then I took a knife and slit their bellies and I feasted on their entrails while they screamed. I lost everything. Luka went insane that night. He ran off into the night and I was never able to find him. I come back to the forest every few years looking for him. I know he'll be here waiting for me one day. When the moon rises I will hear his call and I will have my family back. As for you. Wrong place, wrong time."

The low growl began in the back of her throat and as her smile became a grimace, her teeth grew forward and she lunged. She ripped out his throat in one strike. Blood matted in her white muzzle.

She ran from the lodge, on four feet now and stared into the night. Her mouth opened and she howled, and for the first time in years, she heard another howl faint in the distance and she smiled.

About the Author:

Heather Jenkins-Steinwachs spends her days caring for her 2 children and animals, and her nights donning her scrubs and cape to join the good fight in the hospital. The horror story that is 2020 inspired her to once again put pen to paper in an attempt to write her first short story. She has had several flash fiction and poems published in Siren's Call and she is excited to add Family to the mix.



Her beauty scared him. Her tattoos made it look like she was bleeding. Elliot could barely make out the red ink on her skin, hiding under the club's dim lights. She was dancing by herself, surrounded by a gulf of space.

This was Elliot's chance to abandon his fear. She could say no, like all the other girls. But there was a chance she could say yes.

Elliot's friends had abandoned him. They scattered throughout the night; talking and dancing with other girls. Elliot knew they weren't really his friends. He was only invited because his roommate was invited.

Elliot looked around the club, seeing other men enjoying the company of women. Women were smiling at them, touching them, kissing them. He craved that, and he imagined that he could finally have it. His therapist told him positive thinking was the key.

His feet propelled him forward and he tuned out everyone but the woman and himself. He imagined everyone looking at him, surveying his move towards his target. They would all be ready to laugh at him when he failed... No, positive thinking. It wouldn't be like that this time.

The only thing he focused on was getting one foot in front of the other. The woman didn't pay any attention to him until he was a few feet away. Her hair swung as she tuned out the world around her. She was oblivious to the effect she had on him, and men as a whole. For a brief moment, Elliot resented her for her beauty.

As that thought entered his mind, her eyes opened. He smiled, and opened his mouth to speak. She recoiled, like they all do. She jumped back and her eyes darted to her right. He followed her eyes and saw a man staring at him. Tall, muscular, bald, tattooed. The bald man laughed as he looked the interloper up and down. He then signalled for the woman to join him at his side. She gladly obliged, wrapping her arm around his waist. They both stared at him now, and their eyes said he was not welcome.

Elliot had to walk past them to get to the nearest exit. He could see them staring at him in his peripheral vision. He felt like everyone in the club was staring at him. He was sure they were all laughing at him. He wasn't meant to have beautiful women.

His eyes were burning as he entered the smoker's area; he felt tears running down his cheeks. He checked his phone, wondering if any of his group bothered to text him to see how he was doing. There were no texts.

A part of him didn't want to concede defeat, yet again, but what other option was there? That wasn't his first rejection of the night, and he had a feeling it wouldn't be the last if he went back inside. He was about to start walking home, but he realized that his roommate had the keys to the apartment. The roommate left his own pair at some girl's house a while ago.

If he wanted to find his roommate, he'd have to go back in and face all those judging eyes again. Then again, maybe his roommate already left with the girl he was with... Elliot's train of thought was derailed as the tattooed devil and Mr. Clean entered the smoker's area.

Their eyes locked onto him, and the smirks followed. Elliot looked away, but could still feel their eyes burning a hole in the back of his skull. The sidewalk was right ahead; maybe he should walk home anyway. He could wait outside the door for his roommate to come. Maybe his roommate wouldn't be coming home tonight though; he and his dancing partner were getting pretty close on the dance floor.

As he thought of that, he felt the familiar pain of envy and anger rushing through his body. It hurt to see other men with beautiful women, but it was always more painful when the man was someone he knew. His roommate wasn't even that good-looking.

The envy was making the veins on the back of his hands stand out, like a road map on a pale canvass. He reached for the lighter in his pocket, an old-fashioned Zippo. Like the envy, its weight was familiar.

Elliot lit the flame. He saw its orange flow erupt from the green lighter, but he also felt it. He wondered if the sensation was an illusion; something created by the alcohol in his system. He had felt this before though. The fireplace at his mom's house, the lighters around him. He could feel them moving through him.

The flame from his lighter became his focus. He breathed in and the flame subsided. He breathed out, the flame expanded. He inhaled sharply, and the flame nearly dissipated completely, becoming a light blue ember peaking out from the lighter's valve. He continued breathing, getting lost in the exercise.

He felt the Zippo getting lighter in his hand. He didn't want to waste all the fuel. He shouldn't have been spending money going out, he barely had the money to buy another lighter. He thought of the girls who let him buy them drinks, only to tell them they have boyfriends once the drinks were in their hands.

The anger tore through him and the flame strengthened, almost wrapping around the lighter's valve and burning his fingers. He took a deep breath again, and again. His anger subsided, but it was still there, like a river pushing at a dam.

He heard the conversation behind him, the tattooed couple and some other smokers were talking; strangers bonding over a common activity. It was easy for some people to talk to others and make friends, even without alcohol. It had never been easy for him.

The lighter ebbed and flowed, but he sensed it wasn't the only flame around him. There were five other embers behind him. Cigarette smoke was wafting his way.

Elliot risked a look behind him, seeing the five smokers standing in a circle. Mr. Clean was facing him and didn't hesitate to open his mouth.

"You need something man?"

Elliot was suddenly the smokers' centre of attention. He felt his shoulders drop and he heard his voice crack as he responded.

"No." The laughs that followed confirmed the smokers' heard his voice crack as well.

"Well you're not smoking so why are you still here?"

"Just waiting for a ride, should be here soon." Elliot shoved the lighter back into his pocket and fumbled for his phone as he spoke, opening it to Uber.

There was no bouncer around and Elliot's mind started to race with images of his teeth being knocked out by a territorial meathead.

"Alright, you do that. Have a good one." The smokers laughed and returned to their conversation.

Elliot's ride was booked and would arrive in four minutes. His phone nearly fell from his hands as he shoved it back into his pocket. He felt the tremors coming on again, and he crossed his arms tightly as his body began to shake. Psychosomatic, that's what his therapist called it.

"You cold bud?"

Mr. Clean's wit was met with another wave of laughter. The other three smokers didn't even know why he was a target of the bald man's ire, but they were on his side anyway. Elliot didn't feel cold, but he felt angry as he began to cry. He felt his nose running and hurriedly used his sleeve to clean his face. Cigarette smoke was blowing past his shoulders, travelling from the pack of smokers behind him. Five bullies, five lit cigarettes.

As Elliot shivered, he reconnected with the fire behind him. He realized the connection he felt was to the lit cigarettes, the embers dancing at the tips. Elliot stole a glance behind again, seeing the embers go dark as he breathed in, and go blindingly orange as he breathed out. The smokers barely noticed that their cigarettes were burning faster than they were supposed to.

Elliot's hands dropped back to his sides. He opened his fists, and the embers became brighter. He clenched his fist, and nearly half of the cigarettes were burnt at one time. While two of the smokers tapped the ash away, with looks of confusion on their faces, Mr. Clean opened his mouth again.

"Why do you keep looking back here man..."

Elliot didn't respond, his eyes were focused on Mr. Clean's cigarette. He opened his fist, and he closed, seeing the flames die and come to life again.

"...wait for your cab down the street."

Elliot clenched his fists one more time, digging up all of the night's anger.

The cigarette seemed to explode, with the flames blocking out Mr. Clean's face. It was like watching a fireplace come to life. One surge of fire engulfed all of the smokers, burning through their clothing and consuming their skin. By the time they realized they were on fire, the damage was done. There were screams, but they barely lasted a second. The bodies crashed to the floor.

Elliot stood near the sidewalk, fist still clenched. As he unclenched, the flames disappeared. There were five charred heaps in front of him, like meat that had been left in the oven far too long. The tattooed devil was to his left, and he could barely make out a small strip of tattoos on her right forearm. Everything else was blackened, leaving her unrecognizable. She wasn't pretty now.

A horn blew behind him and Elliot jumped. He looked back to the sidewalk, seeing a black sedan parked there. His ride had arrived. He dashed into the backseat.

"Elliot?" The driver said.

"Yes."

"Alright, what happened there?" The driver said as he drove off.

"I don't know. They all passed out at the same time, really weird." Elliot hoped the driver didn't see the smokers getting what they deserved.

"Well that's a first. I guess it wasn't their night."

Elliot was flooded with relief, knowing that the driver believed his lie. Soon, the relief turned to laughter. Elliot knew he was supposed to feel shock, guilt, shame. He felt shock momentarily, then he felt power. He made five people die.

The people at the club deserved what they got. The woman that rejected him, the man she chose, and the smokers who joined in the mockery. There were others like them, so many others.

"You alright man?" The driver said. He was staring at Elliot through the rear-view mirror.

"Yes. I feel... invincible."

About the Author:

Cadeem Lalor is a Jamaican-Canadian writer whose experiences growing up in three different countries shape his themes of identity and prejudice. He has written five novels, three sci-fi and two fantasy.

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A Hand Crawls | *Heinrich von Wolfcastle*

There is a hand. Severed at the wrist, it crawls towards you with its radius bone protruding from its lower half. It drags tendons across the floor like downed electrical wires. Its fingers work to carry itself towards you, sometimes breaking pace to work the air like perverted antennae.

You are sprawled out across a checkered white and gray marble floor that extends as far as you can see. You would think you were in a museum if not for the lack of walls or boundaries in the endless place. You could be flattened on the ground of an ancient temple, you imagine. But you don't know where you are. You don't even know who you are. Your arms—a yellowed shade of flesh—extend out in front of you. Their tone has atrophied, and you find yourself surprised by your uncertainty of your own biological sex.

Your body is dead weight, pinned to the floor by its commitment to failure. And yet some part of it must be alive because you are alive-enough to experience its oppression, your existence muffled within its confines. You cannot recall a meaningful sense of the passage of time to know if you have existed in this non-state for moments or years. But you suspect it has been a long time.

And then there is the hand—treading towards you until it inevitably loses balance when its thumb fails to make pace. It wobbles, slows, and rights itself. Its index finger tastes the air before lurching forward and continuing towards you.

You anticipate its arrival with fantasies that it might stroke your cheek or brush your lips. Yet there is recognition that it might intend to do you harm. You imagine its tired fingers wrestling your nest of hair or pulling at your skin. It could caress your chin as quickly as it could tear the flesh off your face. You pray for this, because if it did, might you finally be able to scream then? How sweetly and enthusiastically you would howl with horror—echo your chamber with agony—if you could.

But the hand has always been here too, palm scraping against the ground as it trudges forward while never quite advancing towards you. You, timelessly splayed across the floor of marble tile, dreaming of violence.

About the Author:

Heinrich von Wolfcastle writes by candlelight from the seclusion of his castle in the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains. His debut anthology of short stories titled *Screams Before Dawn* was called 'an engaging page turner' by *Scream Magazine*. He is an affiliate member of the Horror Writers Association. Though he is a recluse, he emerges from the shadows for Trick-or-Treaters on Halloween night.

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In no way did I consider my pairing with The Companion to be a maybe-yes maybe-no arrangement. I had elaborate hopes for our future together when I committed to a life-time alliance by signing a contract in front of witnesses.

I believed it cared about me as much as I cared about it. Although it hadn't provided me with much evidence that it was a particularly sensitive life form, I felt certain there was an inner core, if not a substantial vault, of youthful life energy locked in a subterranean level of its subconscious. And given the time, understanding, and loving environment I intended to provide, I was certain that I could bring that childlike vitality into the light.

The first indication of trouble was when it let me know in no uncertain terms that it didn't want me to sing and it became aggressively agitated whenever I used multi-syllable words. Resistantly uncommunicative and undemonstrative as it was, I felt a wealth of compassion for it and decided it must have a traumatic fear of vulnerability. Therefore, I was determined to steadfastly reassure it and make it feel safe.

But that was before it started to nip at me. It had rather nasty teeth and it wasn't long before I discovered that it took an overt pleasure out of using them. And when The Companion's nipping escalated to outright chomping, the sizeable hunks it took out of me were downright painful. Snap! Crunch! Rip! It often followed up these random and unprovoked attacks with manifest displays of accusatory glares and day-long, sometimes days long, barrages of passive-aggressive sniping and guttural growls. Its relentless accusatory versions of blaming me became almost continuous. Even though, I must admit, it exhibited a keen and zealous talent for creativity in that area.

Occasionally, it made a sloppy, and what seemed to me to be, a sardonic attempt at something like a 'hearts and flowers' make-up gesture accompanied, unexplainably, by a smirking simulacrum of a smile. Which, I have to say, made me feel not only confused but also uncomfortable. I found it difficult to impossible to feel either gratitude or reassurance when presented with The Companion's mixed messages.

After working a number of years, non-stop, to understand its volatile and inexplicable behavior, I concentrated on avoiding irritating it. I practically turned my brain inside out and quite literally twisted my self-esteem into a Gordian ball of fraying and tattered knots with my efforts to modify or lessen The Companion's increasingly overt hostility, but the biting and rending only got worse.

Finally, I got really tired of it.

Today, I met my neighbor Patty at the post office. "How are you, and what's going on?" she asked. "I haven't heard any loud noises coming from your house lately."

"Oh, that," I said, "My companion's no longer with me. It snuck out the back door a couple of nights ago and didn't come home." I pulled the sleeve of my winter jacket further down on my left arm to hide any evidence of the massive bruises and the wound from the last bite it was ever going to give me.

"Well" she said, "at least you have your memories."

I pressed my thumb into the gauze bandage covering the blisters on the palm of my right hand. It was November and the ground was about as cold and hard as my companion's heart had turned out to be, and in my haste I hadn't taken time to put on gloves before I started digging. I applied more pressure to a particularly sore spot and a refreshingly clean and untainted pain shot up my arm.

I'd like to say that somewhere a songbird was twittering and trilling away, but like I said, it was November.

About the Author:

Morgan Songi writes poetry, flash fiction, short stories. and especially loves to work with the weird. The eerie. The shadows that bind. She lives in Oregon. Loves the rain. Snuggles in with her computer and/or several books at a time. Would like more fog. Has a great family of two sons, a daughter-in-law and two granddaughters, all of whom still seem to like her.

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Em Campa walked in through the front door of her quaint ranch home. She hung her pea coat onto the coat rack and slinked into the living room. Her husband, Matt, sat in a flower-patterned recliner. He kicked the footrest down and sat upright.

"Hey! How was bowling, babe?"

Em plopped down into the same flower-patterned accompanying love seat. A scowl dominated her face.

"Your cake wasn't a success?"

"Oh, on the contrary, Lizbeth loved the cake! Well, let me put it this way, she loved the mini bowling pins I used instead of candles. The cake? She didn't touch it."

"What? Why?"

"Because the beast was so enamored with my cake taker. I just know it. She tried to say the cake was too perfect to eat. She claimed she wanted to show it off to Dan and pleaded with me to let her take it home in the taker but I could see it in her beady eyes. She wants to keep my Tupperware cake taker."

"Ask for it back in a few days."

She rolled her eyes and groaned.

"You just don't get it, Matt. You don't get me. My Tupperware is my pride and joy."

"Yeah, about that. Why don't we try for kids again? Maybe get a new pride and joy."

She stared blankly at him. She calmly stood up and straightened her clothes.

"I'm heading off to bed. This night was straight from hell. The balls weren't the only things in the gutter."

"Well, good night Dear. We'll get your cake taker back, I promise."

She turned back to him with her nostrils flared.

"Oh, I know I will."

That sent a shiver down his spine. She turned back in the direction of the hall and walked out.

"Good night Honey!" He called out.

Footsteps pounded on the staircase.

"I love you!" He finished.

The slam of the bedroom door made Matt ponder.

"Guess I'm sleeping in the gutter."

Em entered the kitchen in the morning with a spring in her step. Matt looked up from the morning paper.

"Feeling better Hon?"

"I woke to an email from Lizbeth. Get this, she's having a Tupperware party and wants me to come. Seems like all the ladies were so fond of the cake taker that they all now want to get pieces of their own."

"So, you're ready to bury the hatchet?"

Oh, I'm going to RSVP that's for sure but it's not because I want to buy any pieces. There's nothing like vintage Tupperware and that's why I'm going to get my cake taker back."

"I can get you another cake taker."

"It's a vintage piece, Matt. Owned by my grandma and my mom and now me. Whatever you find won't be the same. It will be used and full of germs."

"When's the party?"

"Friday night, I can't wait. I would have made breakfast."

"Naw, I just felt like some toast and juice. I'm good."

Early Friday night Em stood in front of the bathroom mirror and finished applying her deep red lipstick. She was dressed in a pretty blouse and skirt. Not a hair out of place. She rubbed her lips together and kissed a piece of tissue. She checked her pearly white teeth and once satisfied left the room.

Em stood at the hallway arch of the living room with a Jell-o mold in her hands.

"I'm heading out. Be back in a few hours."

Matt removed his reader glasses and looked at her.

"You look nice. What cha got there?"

"Jell-o mold. Got a cooler in the car ready to go. There's another one in the fridge. See ya later."

"Okay Dear, enjoy."

She flashed him a smile and left the house.

Em sat poised on a loveseat alone. She watched Lizbeth and the group of four other women interact. They chatted and laughed. Em held a cup of tea up to her lips and took a sip.

She glanced at all the Tupperware products on a display table. Modern items were mixed in with vintage items. Just the sight of it made her OCD flare up.

"The vintage pieces I found at the thrift store, but they are in wonderful shape," Lizbeth told the others.

Em put her cup down on a coffee table and stood up.

"Speaking of vintage pieces, Lizbeth, might you have my cake taker? It belonged to my grandmother and then my—"

"Em, that Jell-o mold looks divine! You have such a knack for making things look so nice," Lizbeth interrupted.

Lizbeth picked up a Tupperware cake slicer and began to cut the mold Em brought.

"Thanks, so um, about the cake taker."

"Oh, yes. I think Dan took the cake to work, but he promised to bring it back once he was finished with it."

Em started to get flustered.

"You can always buy one of the ones on display here," suggested Mary.

"Yes, they are brand new," added Lizbeth.

"But mine belonged to my—"

Mary and Fran brushed by her and almost knocked her over as they rushed for a piece of the Jell-o mold. Lizbeth reached into a cupboard to grab a stack of plates and Em swore she saw her cake taker on the top shelf. Em reached for a Tupperware brochure on the table and fanned herself with it as she overheated. She sat back down to compose herself.

"Getting the hot flashes early, eh Em?" asked Melanie.

The other women looked at her and laughed.

"What? Um, no, just a little warm in here."

Lizbeth handed out plates of the Jell-o mold and carried one over to her. Em placed it beside her.

"I really need that cake taker back, Lizbeth."

"Okay. Okay. I'll ask Dan tonight to bring it home on Monday, okay?"

Em nodded and leaned back against the loveseat. She felt a little woozy. She started to perspire and reached into her purse and took out a handkerchief. She dabbed her forehead lightly.

"I gave all of my grandmother's things away when she passed, most of it smelled like moth balls," Carli told Melanie as they both sat down on the couch.

"Gross. I hate that smell," added Melanie.

Em got up and walked into the kitchen as the other women sat in the living room eating.

"Might I get some ice, Lizbeth?" she asked.

"What? Oh sure, glasses in the cupboard."

But before Lizbeth could finish, Em already had the cupboard open and Lizbeth realized she saw the cake taker as it sat on the top shelf. The piece of Jello-mold in Lizbeth's mouth rolled out onto her plate, bounced and landed on the shag carpet. Em and Lizbeth shared an intense glare.

Em went to the display table and picked up a few gadgets from it.

Carli and Melanie started to choke and their faces got flushed.

"Hot flashes, eh ladies?" asked Em.

Lizbeth fell onto her side and could not move. She started to drool. With a vintage melon baller in hand, Em stood behind Melanie. She reached over and scooped one of her eyes out with the melon baller. She then moved her arms and did the other eye. Melanie collapsed onto the floor. Carli and Fran watched in horror. Fran attempted to claw her way across the floor to escape but Em came up from behind. She grabbed her hair, pulled her head back and used a sli-saw-all to cut her throat. Fran collapsed onto the floor.

Em next went for Carli and grabbed a lettuce corer and spike from the table. She shoved the corer into Carli's back and then the spike straight into the top of her head. Carli fell forward onto the floor and landed on top of Melanie.

Em spotted Mary as she attempted to call someone on her cell phone. Drool oozed out of her mouth and onto the screen of the phone. Em ripped off a plastic handle of a Tupperware divider dish and used it to strangle Mary. She held tight and twisted and yanked on the handle until Mary stopped moving.

Lizbeth remained on her side on the couch with her eyes staring straight ahead. She watched as Em went to the cupboard and removed her cake taker. Em held the item close to her. She then walked over and stood above Lizbeth.

"I hope you enjoyed the Jell-o mold Lizbeth. I made it with a vintage Tupperware Jell-o mold. You don't seem to have one here for sale. That's a pity because the poison I added to the mold that you all consumed ruined mine. But unlike this piece here," she clutched the cake taker closer to her. "I bought that at a flea market. You shouldn't have messed with me bitch."

Em turned and without a beat, stepped over Fran and quietly walked out of the house.

Lizbeth closed her eyes and drifted away.

Em walked into her house and stopped at the arch to the living room. Matt looked up over his glasses and saw Em all bloodied and disheveled.

"Em, my God! What happened?"

"I got my cake taker back."

She held up the cake taker. Matt's jaw dropped and the plate he held with a piece of the Jell-o mold on it slipped off his lap and landed on the floor.

About the Author:

Lisa Flanyak started writing short stories in the 1980's while she was in junior high school. She has been a fan of Stephen King since that time as well and that is when she developed a love for the horror genre. While Lisa enjoys writing in all genres, horror is the one she enjoys the most.

Facebook: [Lisa Flanyak](#)

Quality Time | Patrick Wynn

"Daddy" A squeaky little voice came from down the hall.

Donny smiled and pushed himself off the couch.

"Daddy come find me" The voice giggled.

Donny quietly shuffled toward the hall. He stood off to the side and leaned over trying to catch a glimpse of his little girl. The thumping of little feet running across the hall made him turn toward the noise. Donny grinned widely and tiptoed down the hallway toward the doorway off to the right. Stopping just outside the door Donny tried to be as silent as possible. He turned the doorknob and rushed quickly into the room. The pounding of feet and muffled giggles came from behind him and he turned to see a small figure rush by. Donny turned back to the hall and leaned out. He could see nothing, but stepped out and followed the sound of high-pitched giggles coming from the kitchen. He slowly moved back down the hall, through the living room and stopped at the entrance to the kitchen. Donny could hear muffled giggles coming from under the kitchen table and he stifled a laugh and took two quick steps toward the table. He could see tiny feet sticking out from under the table and he reached down to yank back the tablecloth but frowned as his little girl was no longer there. The sound of running feet and giggles once again came from the hallway and Donny shrugged and headed back through the living room. Shaking his head Donny just didn't think it was fair playing hide and seek with a ghost but at least he was having quality time with his daughter.

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 Sirens Call, Dark Dossier, Short Horror and Trembling with Fear. You can follow him on his Facebook page and look for his short story collections on Amazon.

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Ela Lourenco

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Jerry laid back in the aging recliner. His legs in the upward position, and his eyes mostly glazed over. He cracked open another warm beer as the night waned on. The television flickered in the dark room, and he could hear his wife Marta snoring in the bedroom.

This had been Jerry's nighttime routine since he was laid off from the local packing plant, the only major employer in the area. He would drink in the recliner until he passed out. By the time he woke up in the morning, Marta would be at work. She was spared in the last round of layoffs and still had her job at the packing plant. Money had been tight before Jerry had been laid off, and now there was seemingly no hope. Their only daughter, Gina, was at college, but the bill for the next semester was coming up, and Jerry had no idea how they were going to pay it.

An advertisement came on the television that caught Jerry's blurred vision. A well-dressed man stood at a pulpit with a superimposed waterfall behind him.

"Are you having life problems? Financial problems? Just need a little extra help in life? If this describes you, please call to get our healing miracle water. Your miracle water will come blessed by me, personalized for your needs, and will turn your life around. The miracle water is one-hundred percent free, my gift to you. Call toll-free today."

The phone number was flashing on the bottom of the screen, and Jerry thought, *What do I have to lose*. He dialed the number, and a computerized sounding answering service answered.

"Please leave your name, and address and the Reverend Shade will personally send you a vial of healing miracle water."

"Jerry Ras, U-724 Magnolia Lane"

Jerry chuckled about his address. Magnolia Lane had no magnolias on it; it didn't even have any pavement. It was rutted tracks in the large trailer park that Jerry and Marta called home. They had moved in back when they were newlyweds, fresh out of high school. It was supposed to be a temporary stop until they were doing better. Neither had done overly well in high school, and the only jobs they were able to find were at the packing plant, so eighteen years later, they were still there, in the same trailer. Not long after they had moved in Marta had ended up pregnant with Gina. Their dreams of a good life slowly wilted away, and now they were struggling just to stay afloat.

Jerry went back to his warm beer and soon passed out with the television on, as he did every night. The memory of calling about the miracle water had already been completely forgotten.

A few days later, when Jerry woke up from his night of bingeing, his head was aching. It was mid-day, and Marta was already well into her workday. After stumbling around the trailer for a bit, Jerry went out in his white heavily-stained underwear to get the mail. At first, when he had started getting his mail in his underwear after he had been laid off, Jerry got nasty looks from the neighbors. At this point, those who weren't at work had become accustomed to the daily ritual and didn't even give him a second glance.

Back inside, he settled back in his recliner and popped open his first warm can of beer of the day. One of the envelopes in the stack caught his eye; it wasn't a demand of payment, which described most of the mail the Ras' received. The envelope was hand addressed to him, and the return address said Shade Ministries. Jerry's booze-soaked brain didn't even remember the advertisement he had seen, nor the phone call he had made a few nights ago. Jerry ripped open the envelope, and inside was a handwritten letter on a stiff sheet of paper.

Jerry,

Thank you for requesting your vial of healing miracle water. However, before I send you the vial, you need to do something so the water can be personalized for your unique needs.

Jerry now remembered his late-night phone call. He scoffed to himself, and this is where they ask for a donation; they always stick it to you. Jerry continued reading

We don't want any money; our healing miracle water is a gift to you in your time of need. I need you to hold this letter, clear your mind, close your eyes, and think of the three miracles you need most in your life. Only think of these three miracles. Then say them out loud while keeping your eyes closed. Then fold up the letter and mail it back, and I will send you your healing miracle water.

Jerry laughed to himself, thinking, *How stupid is this? How is speaking his miracles to paper going to help him, and Marta dig out of their ever-deepening pit? But then, what could it hurt but a few minutes of his time?*

Jerry held the letter, closed his eyes, then said aloud, "I need money for Gina's tuition, I need my job back, and I need to stop worrying about whether there will be food on the table."

Jerry folded up the letter and stuck it in an envelope and, still in his underwear, trudged back out to the mailbox for the mail carrier to get. Jerry went back inside and back to his daily ritual of drinking warm beer in front of the television. When Marta got home, she looked weary and tired, like always. After cleaning herself up, she made dinner for Jerry and herself, Hamburger Helper, with more helper than hamburger.

They sat at the wobbly kitchen table and ate it in silence. Jerry knew the more he drank, the worse their marriage was getting, but he didn't want to stop the drinking. He had nothing else to do with his life. After they finished eating, Marta cleaned up while Jerry returned to his recliner for the night.

Jerry hated how much he and Marta were drifting apart. Thinking about the widening crevasse between them just made Jerry want another beer. He opened another warm beer as *The People's Court* was coming on.

A few days later, when Jerry checked the mail, he found a padded envelope from Shade Ministries. 'So, they did send me the healing water,' he thought. Jerry went back inside, cracked a beer, then opened the envelope. Inside was a vial with a clear solution in it and a handwritten letter.

Jerry,

Thank you for your interest in our healing miracle water. The enclosed vial has been prepared by me expressly for you. Don't share it with anyone else. Drink the entire vial, and you will find the money you need, the work you need, and shortly you will find comfort in knowing where your meals are coming from.

Reverend Nigel Shade

What kind of weird trick is this? Jerry thought. *How do they know what I requested? I never wrote them down? Then again,* he thought, *the letter was kind of generic, maybe that is what a lot of people wished for, work, money, and food.*

The vial was glass with a black screw-on top. Inside was a clear liquid. Jerry opened the lid, thought to himself, *I'm sure I've put worse things down my throat,* and drank the vial. The liquid had a slightly sour chlorinated taste. *Ugh, they sent a vial of nasty tap water to me,* Jerry thought.

Time to start the real drinking, Jerry thought to himself, then popped open a beer and sat in his chair.

A few days later, the nasty tasting vial of water had been completely forgotten, and Jerry was drinking while watching *The Jerry Springer Show*. The phone rang, and Jerry picked it up.

"Mr. Ras?" the voice on the line asked.

"Yes."

"This is Bethany from Oklahoma State."

"Okay."

Oh god, that is where Gina goes, I hope she hasn't gotten into trouble. We don't have the money for any fines, Jerry thought.

"There has been an incident with Gina at the Kappa Sigma House."

"What kind of incident?"

"An ambulance was called to a party last night. Gina was unconscious and taken to the hospital. I regret to inform you that Gina passed away at Stillwater Medical early this morning from a drug overdose."

Jerry dropped the phone and started weeping. He went over to his chair and opened a warm beer, and

chugged the entire beer. He immediately followed up with another. Jerry collected himself, then stood back up and located the phone. The line was dead. *Can't blame her*, Jerry thought. *I'd have hung up by now too.*

When Marta got home, Jerry told her about the phone call. Marta broke down, crying. She wanted details Jerry didn't have and became outraged that he didn't know the answers to her questions. Marta then stormed off to the bedroom and didn't return. A few hours later, Jerry spread some mayonnaise on white bread and ate the sandwiches for dinner.

When Jerry woke up the next day, Marta had gone to work, Jerry assumed. Jerry didn't have it in him to check the mail and just started drinking in the chair. Soon the phone rang. Must be that girl, Jerry couldn't remember her name, calling back from yesterday.

"Hello?"

"Is this Jerry Ras?"

"Yes."

"Hi, I'm Gwen from Sooner Insurance. Oklahoma State had an insurance policy on Gina Ras, and you are listed as the beneficiary. Oklahoma State has already sent us the necessary information to process the claim. I just wanted to let you know we are sending you a check for \$15,000, so you won't think it is an advertisement and toss it. Do you have any questions, Mr. Ras?"

"No, no, none that I can think of."

"Okay, have a nice day, Mr. Ras."

Gwen disconnected the line. *Have a nice day*, thought Jerry. *How am I supposed to have a nice day?* Jerry slunk back into the recliner and popped open another beer.

That night when Marta got home she didn't even say a word to Jerry. She just went off to the bedroom and never came back out. Jerry made himself another mayonnaise sandwich for his dinner.

Jerry woke up the next morning to the phone ringing. *What the hell is it now?* Jerry thought.

"Hello?"

"Jerry, it is Deke from Hansfarb and Sons."

"I know who you are. You are the one who fired me, remember?"

"Laid off, Jerry, you were laid off."

"Whatever, same difference to me."

"Jerry, not the time. I'm calling about Marta."

"Marta?"

"There was an accident with the baler, Marta is in the hospital."

"Is she... is she..."

"I don't know Jerry. You'll have to talk to the hospital."

"I have to..."

"Jerry, I know this is a bad time for you," Deke interrupted. "But we could use you back here, with Marta out. Do you want your job back?"

"Deke, I... I dunno, I'll have to get back to you."

"I can respect that, Jerry. Check on your wife."

Jerry disconnected the line. He dialed the number for the hospital.

"Seiling Memorial"

"My wife was brought in from Hansfarb and Sons."

"Her name?"

"Marta Ras."

"One moment, let me transfer you to the ER."

"Okay."

"ER."

"I'm looking for my wife. She was brought in..."

"Her name, sir?"

"Marta Ras."

"Sir, can you come in?"

"What is going on?"

"Sir, it would be best if you could come in."

"What is going on with my wife?"

"Sir, Marta Ras has passed away."

"She's dead?"

"I'm sorry, sir."

Jerry thought about how he hadn't even talked to Marta since he had told her about Gina. Now Marta was gone. In two days, his whole family had died. Jerry dropped the phone on the floor. He just couldn't process any of this anymore, and he couldn't stay inside the trailer anymore, it was nothing but memories of all his failures and losses.

For the first time in over a month, Jerry put on his clothes and grabbed the keys to his beat-up pickup truck parked in the patch of dirt the Ras' called a driveway. Jerry lumbered outside and pulled open the truck door with a giant creak of rusty hinges. His headache from his month-long drinking binge ripping into his head. The truck started on the second crank. Jerry backed it out of the driveway and drove out of the Garden Terrace Trailer Park.

Jerry drove to his old watering hole, The Chug, went in and took a stool at the dingy bar. Doug was behind the counter, as always.

"It's been a while, Jerry."

"Yup, keep them flowing."

"Bad day?"

"You could say that."

Jerry had no idea how long he was in The Chug, or how many beers he imbibed. All he knew when he stumbled out into the night was the world was swimming. On the fifth attempt, he got his key into the door of his truck, and the truck creaked as he pulled himself inside. He drove home. Suddenly, when he was almost there, a white ghost flew at the truck, then through the windshield. The truck veered off the road, and the last thing Jerry heard was the sound of shearing metal.

Jerry woke up in a hospital. After a series of visits by the police, and a public defender, Jerry found out he had run over a jogger on the way home and then careened into a tree. At the trial, the public defender argued Jerry wasn't in his right mind; he had lost his job, his daughter, and his wife. The jury didn't buy the excuse, and Jerry was sentenced to life at the state penitentiary.

While he was being led to his cell, the guard joked to Jerry.

"Hey, at least you know where all of your meals will be coming from."

In the distance, Jerry could hear the television in the recreation room.

"Are you having life problems? Financial problems? Just need a little extra help in life? If this describes you, please call to get our healing miracle water. Your miracle water will come blessed by me, personalized for your needs, and will turn your life around. The miracle water is one-hundred percent free, my gift to you. Call toll-free today."

About the Author:

K.A. Johnson has a BA in English/Journalism with a minor in Classics from The University of New Hampshire. He covered the news in the small New Hampshire college town of Durham for The New Hampshire before ditching the snow and moving south to Richmond, Virginia, where he lives with his wife Jennifer and his two furry writing partners Sparta Jesus Vernal-Johnson and Kolby Catmatix Domitian Johnson.

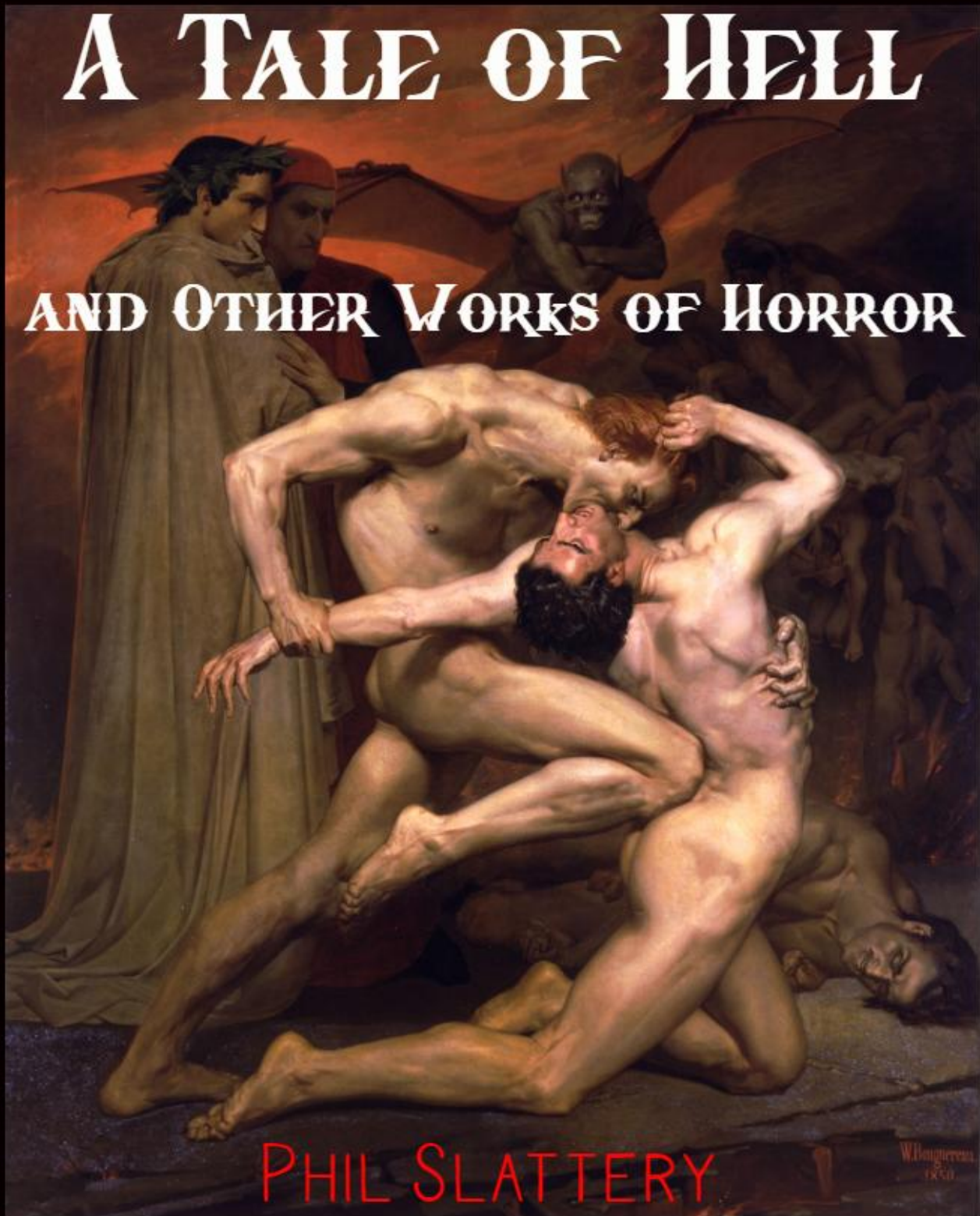
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The lock was secure. Marnie Robinson checked the knob twice, turned and unturned the deadbolt, just to reassure herself that no one could slip in while she was busy in back, wiping down the kitchen. The rest of the diner staff had gone home at least an hour previous, even before the last sprinkling of customers tossed their matted dollar bills and handfuls of change on top of their checks, leaving her with only the tinny hum of 90s college rock from the antiquated radio perched on the shelf above the empty prep table to keep her company.

When she leaned forward to erase the last spray of brown grease from the back of the burger grill, Marnie felt the dampness of a forgotten spill soak through her apron and chill her stomach. It was laundry day tomorrow, thank goodness, though no matter what detergent she used on the machine's hottest setting, her uniforms always smelled slightly of bacon frying.

The clock above the service window read 11:57. Gal's Diner, a simple burger joint Marnie had acquired soon after liquidating her late parents' estate, closed promptly at eleven, often just as the first wave of potential customers from the bar a short mile down the road began to stumble into the parking lot. Thirty Something catered to aging Millennials, most of whom were either recovering from or aiming headlong into divorce, sometimes their second or third, and its specialties were craft beer and sugary martinis. Although staying open after midnight would mean more revenue for the wait staff, Marnie was thankful the restaurant was closed. Her ancient and rapidly-becoming-a-financial-nightmare Honda was in the shop again, and she'd had to pay for a car service the past two days, but it was nice to be able to take her time.

There was no one waiting for Marnie at home. She used to joke that if she died, no one would discover it for weeks, long after her cat had eaten half of her decaying corpse. As it was, it was the eve of a holiday weekend, so she wasn't due back at work until Tuesday, a full three days away, and she no longer had a cat. Some nights, she would change out of her work attire in the bathroom and stop in to Thirty Something on her way home. She'd sit at the bar alone, imagining herself a twenty-first century Diane Keaton from that 70s movie she caught late one night on cable. She never brought the men home to her apartment—absolutely not: that was one fatal mistake the Keaton character had made, she believed—but occasionally followed them to a local motel, one with garish, ancient decor that made Marnie a bit queasy, and promptly left after the deed was done. On a few regrettable evenings, she'd shagged a stranger in the backseat of a family car, a hard plastic car seat jamming into her shoulder blade.

The men she met were always in their mid-twenties, it seemed. Too young to fit the target customer base of Thirty Something, and likely too young for Marnie, who had just rounded the big half-century mile marker, though she kept that detail close to the vest. Her skin and hair were still shiny, her stomach still relatively taut, and she had trained herself to refrain from smiling too much; if she kept her expression serious, the lines around her eyes didn't show. Still, she was old enough to be their mothers, a mathematical equation she tried desperately to shove from her mind each time she walked silently back to her car. Occasionally nagging at her conscience was the added bonus that most of them—all of them, she suspected, if she were being honest—were married, their oblivious partners at home, curled up in their recliners, wearing thick socks with trite slogans like *It's Wine O'Clock!* and watching *The Bachelor* or some other vapid reality romance show.

When the cleaning was done, Marnie snatched her handbag from the tiny back office and fished the roll of clean clothes she'd placed inside earlier. In the corner of the kitchen, out of view of the front windows, she unbuttoned her uniform dress and pushed it to the ground. She quickly replaced it with the t-shirt and shorts, then balled up the fetid uniform and stuffed it into the purse in their place, but not before burying her cell phone in the bottom of the mess. When she finally recovered it, she opened the Uber app and requested a ride. Within seconds, a driver responded that he was on his way. The screen displayed 'John's' rating—4.78 stars out of five—prominently below his name, although Marnie never understood why the company did this. It wasn't as if she could select a driver from an array of livery suitors. John had chosen *her*.

Marnie had left Thirty Something with so many different men over the years that it was no statistical anomaly that one or two would wander unknowingly into the diner one day, and sure enough, more than a few had. But Marnie always kept her poker face straight, her eyes never betraying the secret recognition even while the men's faces blanched and brows beaded with the finest droplets of sweat. Some even had returned days later, sans spouses: a ridiculously rookie move, Marnie thought. They purposefully sat in her section, all wearing the same broad, game-show-host grin spit-slapped on their faces, waiting impatiently for the knowing wink from Marnie that never arrived. Each time, she handed the man a menu, asked if he'd like some coffee, and never broke character. Most times, they were gone before she returned with the pot. Once a one-night lover learned where Marnie worked, she never gave them the

satisfaction of another rendezvous, no matter how charming and eager they seemed.

She thumbed the notifications screen on her phone. There was no update from the car service. She checked Uber's app. John was parked a few miles away, a tiny car icon frozen on a street map. She considered turning off the radio, but the background noise made the empty dining area seem less like a mausoleum. A peppy alt-rock cover of *Mrs. Robinson* echoed off the stainless steel, and Marnie tried to place the band's name in her head. Stumped, she opened her browser and typed in

who Mrs. Robinson

An enormous album cover featuring Simon & Garfunkel led the results, followed by a section titled *People Also Ask*. Immediately under that,

What does it mean to be a Mrs. Robinson?

Marnie clicked on the tiny arrow to expand the response.

Mrs. Robinson is a term used in reference to a character in *The Graduate* (1967) to describe an older woman who pursues, often sexually, someone obviously younger than herself.

Below the related search section were the song lyrics. She sheepishly remembered a Trivial Pursuit game night decades earlier with her family where, on a pie piece-determining question, she was asked, *Who does Jesus love 'more than you will know'?* At sixteen, having no solid knowledge of the song, she'd flubbed the response, squeaking out a lame "Judas?" Her sister and brothers groaned, and her mother, placing the orange triangle back in the bag, tapped her Virginia Slim in a nearby ashtray and stated that it was a wonder the answer hadn't been burned into her daughter's DNA, as the song had been playing on the radio ad nauseam the entire year she'd been pregnant with Marnie.

Marnie flicked the screen back to the car service. The tiny icon hadn't moved. She wondered if John was taking a cat nap. If the car didn't move in a few minutes, she would cancel the order and place a new request. Back on the browser screen, Marnie scanned her eyes over the other search questions.

Is *The Graduate* a true story?

What is the meaning of *Are you trying to seduce me?*

Why does Mrs. Robinson seduce Ben?

Curious, she clicked the third question to reveal the text below it.

Mrs. Robinson had some deep-seated attachment issues and was an alcoholic, although her alcohol use could be the result of her refusal to accept responsibility for the consequences of her actions.

This analysis seemed a bit harsh to Marnie, who felt strangely defensive of a fictional character from a movie released while she was still in diapers. She checked the source credit. A Reddit post. Marnie didn't think clinical psychologists dished diagnoses on anonymous social media channels, and although it tickled her a bit to imagine the writers of the film trolling conversations and interjecting explanations where they deemed them necessary, she didn't think Mrs. Robinson had a drinking problem in the first place...did she?

Is Elaine pregnant in *The Graduate*?

Was *The Graduate* Dustin Hoffman's first movie?

What's the significance of plastic in *The Graduate*?

Ben's use of the term plastic in *The Graduate*, not unlike Holden Caulfield's repeated use of the term phony in *Catcher in the Rye*, is 1960s jargon to classify something as superficial and therefore of lower quality. Ben's relationship with Mrs. Robinson is plastic because it was both cheap and lacking depth beyond a surface connection.

Marnie laughed out loud, the sound ricocheting off the silvery surfaces like she'd released a handful of ping-pong balls. *What constituted a **deep** connection exactly?* she wondered. And then she thought, The Lemonheads—that was

the name of the band on the radio. The song was catchy: she had to admit.

In the song Mrs. Robinson, where did Joe DiMaggio go?

Is the Mrs. Robinson song conservative propaganda?

What is a koo koo ka-choo?

Her phone dinged with a notification that her driver would arrive shortly and would only wait in the designated pickup spot for three minutes. Marnie doubted the veracity of that threat, thinking of how long the car had stayed idle before finally making its crawl toward the diner, but she placed her phone back in her bag and slung the strap over her shoulder. After taking a final look at the front of the dining area and checking the locks one more time, she returned to the kitchen. She could leave from the alley entrance and make it to the corner much easier that way.

She balanced on her toes to reach the radio's power switch, then froze. In the silence, a muffled voice sounded from the corner. Marnie walked briskly to the small walk-in freezer, unlatched the lock, and opened the door. The motion light was already on, casting a sickly yellow hue on the man tied to the shelf inside.

"Marnie? That's your name, right?" the man whimpered. His nipples poked at the inside of his grey t-shirt, tiny nubs as alert and worried as the rest of her captive. "I just thought we'd have a bit of fun again. I was just joking. You need to lighten up, okay?" His breath punctuated each word with a puff of smoke.

Marnie stood still in the doorway but said nothing.

"Jesus, let me out of here: I'm freezing my ass off," he pleaded.

Marnie heard the Trivial Pursuit song lyric in her head, then laughed.

The man continued as if he hadn't heard her. "Listen... my wife's gonna wonder where the hell I am. How am I gonna explain this to her? She can't know what happened, ok? Please?"

It wasn't anything Marnie hadn't heard before, and likely, wouldn't hear again the next time one of them sauntered in on her closing shift. She took a long last look at him, keeping her poker face fixed in place. "Night," she said finally, then closed the door behind her, making certain to latch the safety chain.

As she walked into the sultry, forgotten-summer air and into the spotlight of the corner streetlamp, John's car pulled to the curb. "Hi there," she said brightly to the driver as she climbed inside. "I appreciate you coming. I know it's just down the road a bit, but in the dark, it can be a little treacherous to walk."

"No worries, Miss," drawled John from the front seat. "Thirty Something is hopping tonight. I'm sure I'll have a fare when I get there."

Marnie glanced at her browser screen a final time.

Is the ending of *The Graduate* happy or sad?

What does the line 'put it in the pantry with your cupcakes' mean?

Is Mrs. Robinson still alive?

Marnie placed her phone back in her purse, gazed out the window, and smiled.

About the Author:

Rebecca Rowland is the author of the short story collection *The Horrors Hiding in Plain Sight*, co-author of the novel *Pieces*, and curator of the horror anthologies *Ghosts*, *Goblins*, *Murder*, and *Madness*; *Shadowy Natures*, and the upcoming *The Half That You See* and *Unburied: Queer Dark Fiction*. She pays the bills as a librarian and ghostwriter but vacations as a dark fiction author and editor.

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Standing in the orchard a few miles from the walled village, Cindy shivered as the October wind took on a biting edge. She hugged the thin, ankle-length, black cloak almost closed. "I'm cold, this stupid cloak is absolutely useless. I wish I had my jacket."

She looked over at the other two teens beside her as they nodded in agreement.

"Yeah, this 'it's a tradition' garbage just sucks," Jonathan muttered, running his fingers through his thick black hair. "Of all the coming of age exercises a community can have, this is the stupidest, and who in the 21st century needs to come of age anyway?"

Cindy shivered again her short blond curls bouncing with the movement. "Yeah, really stupid. Apple gathering. I don't get it." Reaching up, she picked another apple from the branch overhead. She looked down at the leaves covering the grass and thought, *well, I do like apples, just wish I wasn't so darned cold.*

"Ever wonder why we live in a town that still refers to itself as a village? Jonathan continued. "Seriously, the town council tries to act like we live in colonial times. I bet they wish we never even had electricity. And that wall! I think the adults in town are afraid of the monsters in the woods." Jonathan laughed, "Oooo scary!"

"Well I want to know why they sent the only three fifteen-year-olds in the place out to gather apples all afternoon like idiots." Cindy bitched. "Apples for god's sake!"

"And they make us wear these dumb cloaks and these shapeless, baggy, not to mention incredibly cheap cotton pants and shirts. This is one ridiculous rite of passage," the third teen, Greta grouched.

"Well at least you're bulimic enough that the clock wraps around you," Cindy snipped, aware that Greta, thin, pretty auburn haired Greta, made fun of Cindy's weight when she wasn't around.

"Whoa, girls" Jonathan said holding out his hands. "Rite of passage here, not WWW Smackdown. What do you think is going to happen when they build that shopping complex down the road. Kinda takes away from that whole mysterious crap doesn't it. Can't wait to get a mall!"

"A mall," Greta said with a far-a-way smile. "Unlimited shopping. I could get a job at a store. Get employee discounts. Actually wear clothes I know are in style everywhere else on the planet."

"A mall," Jonathan said, a look of pure joy crossing his face. "Unlimited girls!"

"A mall," Cindy said as well, trying to sound like the other two. "Traditions are dumb to begin with, but this town takes the cake. Can't wait until I'm old enough to move."

She looked up at the sky and noted the sun was about to fall below the treetops and groaned.

"Guess we better get a move on, it's gonna get a lot colder in a few minutes." Cindy said and tried to make the cloak pull tighter.

She knew that she was actually comfortable living within the strict confines of the village rules and regulations. She always liked the feeling of security and safety she had when she was home. She glanced at her classmates and felt a twinge of loneliness. She pretended to be like the others, but she always felt like an outsider when she was with Jonathan and Greta. They were so ready to move on and join a society that seemed so foreign from the quiet backward village. She didn't want to grow up, at least not yet. And she never wanted to leave.

Greta, who had kept silent for a moment as she gathered two apples off the ground and stuck them in her bag, asked, "Ever wonder why they send us out to gather late autumn apples, I mean what's the point, we could buy them at the supermarket in Haventown or even at a farm stand. Seriously, what do they expect from us?"

"Work together as a team?" Cindy offered.

"Bond?" Jonathan added.

Greta shook her head. "No, there's gotta be more to this. I mean, maybe a long time ago, like fifty years, when the world was a scary place without computers or cell phones or cable TV, there was a reason for rituals. But not today, not in this day and age."

They all nodded again and began to shiver as the cold wind ruffled their inadequate cloaks.

"Where's a hoodie when you need one?" Cindy complained, her teeth starting to chatter as she looked at the dark tree tops swaying in the wind and at the deepening shadows. "We really need to head back now, did we fill the bags with enough apples?"

"Not really," Greta said and picked another two off the ground. "Guess we shoulda spent more time picking than bitching."

Jonathan shrugged, "What're they going to do, give us demerits. Who cares? Look, town gates lock at sundown and I want to get home, get warm, eat dinner and catch some TV."

The three turned as one and walked quickly back toward the town. Cindy sighed, not wanting to admit she was afraid. She didn't care what she did when she finally got home, she just wanted to get home.

They were still a mile from the village when they heard the warning bell toll. "That's the five minute warning!" Cindy yelled. "We'll never make it!"

"It's all right," Jonathan assured her. "They'll let us in."

"No, they won't!" Cindy wailed. "We'll be locked out and have to spend the night in the wild! We'll die!"

Greta stopped walking and grabbed Cindy. "Do you realize how dumb you sound? Really, stop acting like a little kid. If they lock us out we'll hike to the highway and hitch a ride, spend the night at a 24 hour restaurant. I have \$25 in my shoe."

"They told us we couldn't bring anything with us today!" Cindy gasped.

"Seriously?" Jonathan laughed. "Cindy, you really believe everything we're told? I brought three granola bars and five bucks. Here, everybody take a bar and save it just in case. Now, let's get moving."

They ran side by side, until gasping, they burst through the opening in the forest that surrounded their town just as the huge gate swung close with a bang.

Cindy howled, "Noooo." She tried to run faster, her legs pumping with a surge of adrenaline leaving the other two behind.

She heard Greta shout from behind her, "We're coming!" as the clang resounded off the forest.

Jonathan dashed forward pushing ahead of both girls and pounded the door with his fists. Greta caught up and joined him.

Cindy, barely able to catch her breath from the run, sank to the ground. Tears on her cheeks, she wept, "I wanna go ho- ho- home!"

Jonathan and Greta ignored her and kept banging on the huge door and yelling.

A window over the gate in the tall metal wall that enclosed the community opened with a creak.

All three teens looked up at the noise. "Let us in, we're sorry we're late," Jonathan yelled up to the silhouette framed in yellow light.

"Can't," the night watchman said. "Guess you're stuck out there for the night. Shoulda listened." He chuckled as he shut the window as Cindy and her friends stood there their faces reflecting shock.

"They can't do that!" Jonathan bellowed. "Open this door!"

Cindy cried harder.

Greta shrugged. "Guess we're stuck outside, Getting darker, sun's down and the moon will be up soon. Let's eat the granola and some apples then we'll just have to hike it by moonlight. It's full tonight."

"You know it really is weird, like the plot of a silly movie," Jonathan said as he sank to the ground and reached for an apple. "I don't know why they just don't let us in."

Cindy sniffled, wiping her nose with the back of her hand. "Do you think there really are things, monsters, out there?"

Jonathan laughed. "Of course not, what you think we'll see a yeti or a zombie. Wait no, the woods are full of werewolves and they are going to bite us and make us werewolves too."

"Arrwwwwooll," Greta howled. "Come on Cindy, there are no monsters. Only monsters I can think of are the ones who just locked us out."

Cindy tried to smile through her tears. "I know, what a weird place, full of weird people and creepy old buildings. Ever wonder who built the original wall and fort why don't they just tear it down and build a Wal*Mart?"

The sunset was complete and as they sat talking and munching in the deepening dusk, the window above them opened again. "Jonathan, Greta, Cindy!"

They all looked up at their teacher, the only one they'd ever had, the only one in town, "Mrs. Gray, let us in!" they all called as one.

"Sorry, we can't. But let me explain."

"Come on, let us in, then explain," Greta called, "we're freezing."

"I know you wonder why we're a walled community and we lock up tight at night. Well, locking the gate nightly is just a precaution, we don't want strangers wandering in uninvited and it also makes sure everyone inside obeys the law."

"Yeah so?" Jonathan shouted, impatience in his voice. "We said we're sorry, we've learned our lesson. Now let us in."

"Jonathan, your lesson is just about to begin. You see...," there was a long hesitation, "... everyone in town is a werewolf."

The three teens laughed.

"No, it's true, everyone is and so are you three. Seriously, all you kids are always so naive not to mention oblivious. Think now, didn't you ever wonder about your mother and father going to the club meeting every month. And that all the kids in town would be sent to the lodge for a movie marathon sleepover. And then your parents would be sound asleep when you came home. Didn't you wonder why there was never school the next day no matter what the day of the week was? Well, all the adults lock themselves up in the fort. Surely one of you must have wondered why a small village like this would have a fort full of jail cells."

"Well yeah," Jonathan said. "I just thought it was a historical building, you know from the 1800's or something."

"You know, it is kind of strange that although we don't like outsiders, the babysitters come in from out of town and watch all the kids for the night at the lodge." Greta said with a strange tone in her voice. "I just never thought about it because that's the way it is."

"Well, I always liked the sleepover night every month and thought it was lots of fun," Cindy said. "I don't care why we did it. Anyway, this is stupid I'm a girl, not a monster."

Their teacher sighed and interrupted them, "Ah so young. Look, you'll never do the movie night again. You three will turn tonight, when the full moon rises. Everyone turns for the first time when the October moon is full on their fifteenth year. Nobody knows why, it's just happens."

"Come on, seriously?" Greta called. "We're not werewolves!"

"Yes you are."

"Are you saying that my mom and dad are werewolves? That you're a werewolf?" Cindy asked and all three teens laughed again.

Their teacher continued, "Listen up, this is your initiation, the one and only time you'll roam the world freely during a full moon. You won't be fully developed, so you won't be able to harm anything large. Avoid the highway, stay in the woods and enjoy! See you in the morning, and oh yeah, save those cloaks, you'll need them when you revert back."

The window slammed and as the round yellow moon rose in the dark purple sky Cindy and her two classmates laughed. That is, until the apples she and the other's were munching suddenly became inedible and their bodies began to change form.

About the Author:

Diane Arrelle has had more than 250 short stories published as well as two short story collections: *Just A Drop In The Cup* and *Seasons On The Dark Side*. A retired municipal senior citizen center director, she's co-owner of a small publishing company, Jersey Pines Ink LLC. She resides with her sane husband and her insane cat on the edge of the Pine Barrens (home of the Jersey Devil).

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How you determined which was my 'gay half' and which was my 'straight half' is a mystery to me. I suspect the realization came during last night's date at Texas Roadhouse. A handsome waiter approached our table, black t-shirt highlighting the bulge of his pecs, tight jeans highlighting a bulge of a different sort. I tried not to stare, but I must have grinned — or half of my face must have grinned. The gay half. You ate in silence, spreading cinnamon butter over the dinner rolls with enough force to flatten them into dense discs. I asked you what was wrong, but you said nothing. When I pressed the issue, all you offered was, "Long day at work. And the chicken here sucks." Our waiter came with the check. You didn't leave a tip.

"What was that?" I asked, brushing past the birthday saddle as we rushed into the parking lot. "If you're mad at me, don't take it out on the waiter. Seriously, what the fuck?"

We reached the car, and as you unlocked it, you smiled at me.

"Everything will be fine in the morning. Don't worry about it," you said.

I didn't know what to make of the mood swing, so I stayed quiet for the ride home.

I awoke the next morning in two places — my straight half in bed with you, and my gay half locked in the closet. A little on the nose, don't you think? It was disorienting seeing two sights at once — a split screen of a spinning ceiling fan on one side and a pile of sweaty gym clothes on the other. Oh, and blood — the one consistent element holding both sides together. A crimson spray on the bedroom ceiling and a brown crust on the closet carpet. An absolute mess.

You rolled over in bed and smiled at my straight half. Even splattered with gore, your blonde curls were gorgeous, somehow immune to bed head. You kissed my half-mouth, and when you pulled away, a thin web of blood went with you. You looked unbothered. Unbothered by any of this.

"How would you feel about a little...you know?" you said, massaging my torso with your soft, warm hands.

I shook my head, unable to speak. When your smile persisted, I shook more vigorously, stopping only when half of my brain almost dislodged itself. Your face darkened, and you stroked your chin, whispering something indecipherable. A moment later, you grabbed my straight half and lugged me over to the closet where my gay half lay. Maybe you'd been wrong about which half was which. You switched out sides, relocking the closet behind you.

Again, you put the moves on, your tongue tracing my neck, a sensation I normally loved but could no longer tolerate. I tried to twist away and, hell, I even thought about biting you — half a mouth could still do some damage. But I didn't. That wasn't my style. And frankly, I would have pissed myself if my bladder weren't cut in two. Everything inside had already drained out.

You must have seen the look on my face because you stopped again, this time gritting your teeth. I thought for a second you might kill me, fed up with trying to guess which of my sides was which, your experiment a total failure. And of course it was, but my reasons for thinking so were certainly different than yours. I didn't say that to your face though. Who knew how you'd react?

Time was what you needed. Time to think, to hypothesize, to scheme.

"I'm late for work," you said, hopping out of my lap and stomping away.

The hiss of hot water came from the bathroom. I eyed my phone, pondering who I could call before you got out of the shower, but you stepped back into the room almost immediately to grab a towel. You tracked my eyeline, grabbed my phone, shattered it against the floor. I couldn't see where it landed, but I was sure it was in multiple places, just like me.

With no way to contact anyone, I waited until you left, practically catatonic. Probably you'd be back for lunch — wouldn't trust me on my own for a whole day — so I had to make the most of what little time I had.

Half of me shuffled to the edge of the bed while the other half scooted against the back of the closet wall. Together, we stood up, slowly and precariously, balancing on one foot each like fucked up flamingos. We hopped to each other, standing on opposite sides of the locked door. The thing was easy enough to open — just a twist of the lock — but in our rush, our bedroom half tripped. Barely catching ourself on the doorframe, a lung popped out and swung like a pendulum from my gaping cross section. We got that half of ourself upright again and tucked the thing back in.

Door open now, my halves met, and we hugged. I hugged. My closet half reached down to grab the sewing box, then both my halves hopped over to the bed. There, I spent the next couple hours sewing myself together, glancing at the clock every other stitch. When the spool ran out, I unraveled thread from the pillowcases, using those to finish the job. The colors weren't uniform — white becoming green — but that was fine. It was only a temporary solution. What a permanent one looked like, I had no way of knowing.

The moment of truth came when I stood up. There was a sound like fabric stretching as the slack between the stitches widened, my halves threatening to separate once more. But after a moment of me staying perfectly still, the seam didn't stretch any further. Sure, someone could slip a spaghetti noodle through my center, but for now, the fix was stable enough.

I checked the clock. 11:58. You'd be home soon. I ran out of the room and down the stairs, my steps only semi-coordinated, the stitches at risk of tearing away if I slipped. But I made it out the front door, past the driveway, into a pile of bushes just as your car whipped around the corner like a drag racer's. I paused to breathe, my lungs inhaling at different times, losing some oxygen through the slit in my windpipe. You slammed the car door, hustled into the house. But it wasn't long before you stormed back out, screaming my name. I stayed hidden and didn't dare answer.

When it was close to one, after nearly an hour of pacing and shouting, you drove off again. Back to work so your boss wouldn't get mad. You'd deal with this when you got home. Or so you thought.

But I made sure you'd never find me. Where I went, I won't tell you. Just know that it wasn't with the handsome waiter from Texas Roadhouse. Though, if it were, I hope he'd never try to cut loose parts of me.

This is goodbye, not from one half of my being, but from a united whole — hurt but healing.

About the Author:

Eric Raglin is a horror writer and educator from Nebraska. He frequently writes about queer issues, the terrors of capitalism, and body horror. He also interviews horror writers on his podcast Cursed Morsels.

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Wasteland Witch | *Natasha Sinclair*

Whisper they would; what harm is there in hushed voices?

Heard in the distance; with a smile towards my face, tightness around my throat.

To my door, each one would knock, rap and tap; in need of an ear, to shed a judgment free tear.

A closed mouth; their release and relieve.

Whispers feed whispers; taking wicked twisted form.

Filthy crooked fingers pointed in fierce accusation; neighbour and friendships turned sour.

Speaking in tongues; evil and lust for persecution — the execution.

Tales twisted unrecognisably; cures contorted to fatal blame.

It's good to have a scapegoat and I'm one of theirs; purging their evils and guilt with gangland misdirection.

Trials fuelled by bloodlust and power; there was only ever going to be one verdict grown from whispers...

"Witch!"

"Guilty!"

"Sentence her to death!"

Strung up naked, centre stage; a place I never wanted to be.

I only longed for peace, quiet, to be free.

Angry eyes burned back in hate; none of them seeing their burning Witch.

Inward looking desperate to purge their cruelties in my body's destructive flames.

I am Issobella; their last Witch strangled and burned.

I am Issobella; their Wasteland Witch.

They claim to have learned but they still don't see.

Times have changed them little; their Witch is still me.

About the Author:

Natasha Sinclair is from Scotland, UK. Her first published piece was released in 2018. This was followed by the release of short story fiction and poetry. Her writing spans genres including; speculative, fantasy, horror, psychological and erotica. Out-with her own publications she is a contributor to several anthologies.

When not writing she's teaching, raising and adventuring with her daughters and looking after their adopted animals.

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All Hallow's Eve, the year of our lord, Thirteen Hundred and Fifty

The Lord has nothing to do with this year, unless it be to bring about the end of days. A year of omens has it been. The winter warm, so that apples blossomed before their time only to be stunted by frost in April. Aye, the rain fell and the crops grew lush in June; by August the barley lay low, scythed by the summer sun's scorching heat. Death sent forth his retainers. Famine and pestilence galloped across the face of the earth. War too may come, but that will not be my concern.

The darkness of winter lies before me, merciless and indifferent. The granaries hold but a handful of barley. The harvest was meagre, yet still some lies ungathered in the meadows. There are no men left to garner the fruit of our labours.

My cottage is lit by the yellow glow of the hearth and by the steadfast smile of William, my son and heir. He is dressing Estrid, his younger sister, in the snowy fleece of our last spring lamb. She laughs and claps her hands as he dons a thin painted mask, carved from the gnarled wood of an ancient walnut tree. He gives her a sheep's mask, fashioned from a cured hide that the village tanner gifted us in happier times. She runs around in her new costume, innocent and carefree.

Tonight, I have promised them a feast, promised them that they will sleep with full bellies for the first time this year. They do not know that I intend to call on the old divinities of the Samhain, that I intend to sacrifice what soul I possess in order to secure a future for my son.

There is no other way.

Our village of Ashfontwell was once green and prosperous, filling a fertile valley nourished by an ever-flowing spring. My father was a devout man who had turned away from the ancient beliefs of his forebears. He was a skilled wheelwright who won the favour of the church by making the wheels upon which heretics were broken. His patronage secured me a future in the priesthood. But that was not to be my destiny. Before I could be ordained, my father and elder brother were killed in our liege lord's war. I was called home to be our family's leader.

A year ago, God crept away from our village on soft-slippered feet. Our priest went on pilgrimage when rumours of the great plague reached our ears. He sought a miracle that would save our community. Behind him, we built a mighty palisade around our parish and denied entry to strangers. Itinerant soothsayers and travelling physicians called at our gates, offering poultices and potions. We shot them with arrows and left their bodies on the boundary stakes as a warning, for we knew they were more likely to carry the plague than to cure it.

The priest returned a month ago. Some of us would have denied him entry, but the god-fearing would not refuse him. He came through the gates, declaiming a benediction that he had brought from the Pope himself in Avignon. He raised a flea-ridden bundle of silk which contained, he said, the finger bone of a saint. He promised that praying to the holy relic would bring us salvation.

The mothers let him in, desperate to save their children.

My wife, a foolish woman, followed the procession to the wooden church which stood on a small tor outside the village. I heard them singing hymns of praise day and night, then came the screams, the moans and the silence. She is there still. The women lie with the pestilential priest, who carried the black death into the heart of our community. Some of the men, mad with grief, went to save them; carried the bubo-ridden bodies to the sanctified graveyard. Those that had the strength to dig made graves that they themselves fell into. There are none left with the strength to pile the obscuring earth over them. The stench of their decay casts a miasma across the valley.

I hid the children from my wife's pious urging. She begged me to relent, but I had already turned to the old beliefs to keep them safe. Thus they live and she does not.

Tonight is Samhain and I have planned the rituals that will lift the veil between worlds. I will entreat the spirits to turn the wheel of life through the coming darkness, carrying our hopes into the spring light of the year to be.

At sundown, I served the Dumb Supper as instructed by the forbidden texts of the monastery where I was training to become a priest. Even before I was summoned back to my family, I knew that the clergy was not my calling.

There is a month's food on the table – barley gruel sweetened with wizened apples from our store; a few pigeons, caught by my snares and roasted before the fire. I invited the spirits to join us. I talked to them of our life in the village, the small joys that we hoped to have again when this bleak year is done. The spirits did not speak, but I could feel them listening. William listened with them, his eyes shining with wonder as I described the future that I hoped would be his.

The texts advised that the spirits would expect entertainment. William had carved the two last turnips – one with a devil's face, the other an angel's. He presented a simple mummer's play – his piping voice hovering on the brink of manhood. He played the devil; his sister, Estrid, a rosy-cheeked seraph, played the angel who defeats him. I warned the children to keep their masks on – they would be safe if the spirits did not recognise them as living souls.

William is eleven years old; his sister is ten. My son is kindness itself and wise beyond his years. I marvel that such a wondrous soul could have sprung from my humble loins. He will soon be old enough to be apprenticed to a trade, to marry and take over the farm. I once prayed that I would live to see that day; now I know I will not.

I conversed with the spirits for many hours, allowing the fire in the hearth to die. William offered to fetch more wood. The night was dark and bitterly cold, but I bade him be quiet. The darkening of the hearth at midnight signalled the next stage of the ritual. By the time the last ember winked out, the children were drowsing in their blankets. I let them be; if all went well I would be back soon with the blessed flame that would ensure my son's future.

The night sky was clear, and a hoar frost glistened in the silver light of the stars and of the new moon's sharp sickle. I felt the spirits flow around me, inspecting the pyre that I had laid in the church doorway. It had taken me days to prepare, enduring the reek of the rotting corpses within. I imagined my own sweet wife's face – she had been a comely woman, though foolish in her beliefs. I yearned for the cleansing fire to wipe the blackened and worm-eaten flesh from her bones.

One of my father's iron-rimmed wheels was mounted on a pole by the pyre, eight feet across with an axle as thick as my thigh. A spark from this symbolic wheel of life was needed to ignite the pyre.

I set the wheel to spinning. As it turned, I struck a flint against the iron rim; sparks flew but the kindling on the pyre did not take flame. Time and again the sparks flared; time and again the embers died. I felt a wild madness in my breast – the hearth I had allowed to cool so carelessly could only be rekindled by a flame from the Samhain pyre.

I felt the spirits crowd around me.

It is not enough, the wheel of life turns too slowly, they whispered.

I spun the wheel until my arms sagged like damp straw.

It is not enough. The spirits insisted.

"Father, may I help?"

My son stood hand-in-hand with his sister, watching me with wide eyes. My own eyes widened as I saw their faces, bare for the spirits to perceive.

"Where are your masks?" I growled, my fear making me brusque. "You have doomed your sister!"

Estrid began to cry, but William stood resolute.

"I am not afraid, father. I am ready to help. Let me spin the wheel."

"Can you hear them? Do they talk to you?"

William had looked frightened then.

"There is no-one but us, father, but I heard you cry that the wheel did not spin fast enough."

Yes! Yes! the spirits said. *His youth will give life to the fire.*

I set William to turning the wheel, his hands pushing urgently against the rim. The dark iron reddened as the soft skin of his palms was blistered and ripped, but still the flint would not spark.

My mind was full of confusion. Why would the pyre not ignite? I called to the spirits for advice and pledged to follow their words.

Samhain demands a sacrifice, the spirits urged. *Spill the girl's blood on the pyre; the flames will ignite; you will be saved.*

I lifted my daughter – her face blushed strangely in the bloodless moonlight.

"She will die! I cannot!"

She will die if you do not. She will freeze without the flame.

I laid my daughter on the pyre. She was sleepy and did not resist as I stroked her forehead gently. The frost that coated the timbers fled at the touch of her fevered skin. I took my long knife from my belt.

"Father! No!" William cried.

"This must be; life can only be renewed through death."

I pleaded with my eyes, willing him to understand the words I dare not utter out loud lest the spirits hear. His sister was already dying; I had felt the swelling buboes under her arms. The spirits had demanded wholesome flesh in sacrifice, they could not know of her sickness.

"No! I can spin the wheel faster...for her. My legs are stronger than my hands."

William darted between the spokes before I could cry a warning. He ran; the wheel blurred. I struck the flint again and again, but the sparks died without flame.

We were caught in a frenzy of desperation.

"Strike again." cried my son.

"Faster." I called.

The axle rolled like thunder; but failed to ignite the lightning that I needed to save my family.

"Father! Try once more!" William entreated.

I saw him stumble, his weary legs giving way. The wheel was spinning of its own volition. His back cracked loudly as his boyish body was caught up in the heavy spokes. I heard his bones splinter with each revolution, but no fire crackled in the kindling.

William cried for his sister's salvation until his body slumped across the wheel, limp and lifeless as the Samhain pyre. I roared in anguish - I had sold my soul in this ungodly ritual for him, to ensure his survival, but it was all for naught.

He was unworthy, the spirits whispered. But the girl is pure. She will kindle the light that will sustain you through the dark winter.

Tears streaked my face, but I stifled my torment -- I did not want her to wake to this terror. Before my courage faltered, I thrust my belt-knife into Estrid's chest.

As her warm blood soaked the wood, the kindling ignited and flames engulfed the pyre. The wheel, and the bodies of my children were consumed by fire. The church followed. Maybe the blaze would warn the whole county to stay away from our benighted valley.

I stumbled back to my cottage, a burning brand from the pyre scorching my fingers as I relit the fire in the hearth. I felt the spirits move around me. They hissed as they saw the pus and blood that bathed my hands - the fluid from my own burst buboes mingling with that of my daughter's. Now they perceived my deception. That I had bought a turn of the wheel of life with the cursed blood of ones already dying; but their gift of light, once given, could not be withdrawn.

Thus I write this testament by the glow of our rekindled hearth. No doubt the flames will die by dawn. I care not. The fire of fever and damnation burns in my veins-- the wheel of life turns not for me or for my beloved son; but maybe our sacrifice will be enough to save some other brave souls in this accursed land. Souls that can carry news of our fate into the future.

For any that read my testament, beware of All Hallow's Eve, when present and future are clothed in darkness. Do not burn your hope in the fires of fear; turn not to sham gods, old or new. Stay at home; disguise your faces so that the spirits may pass you by. Watch over your children. Keep them safe.

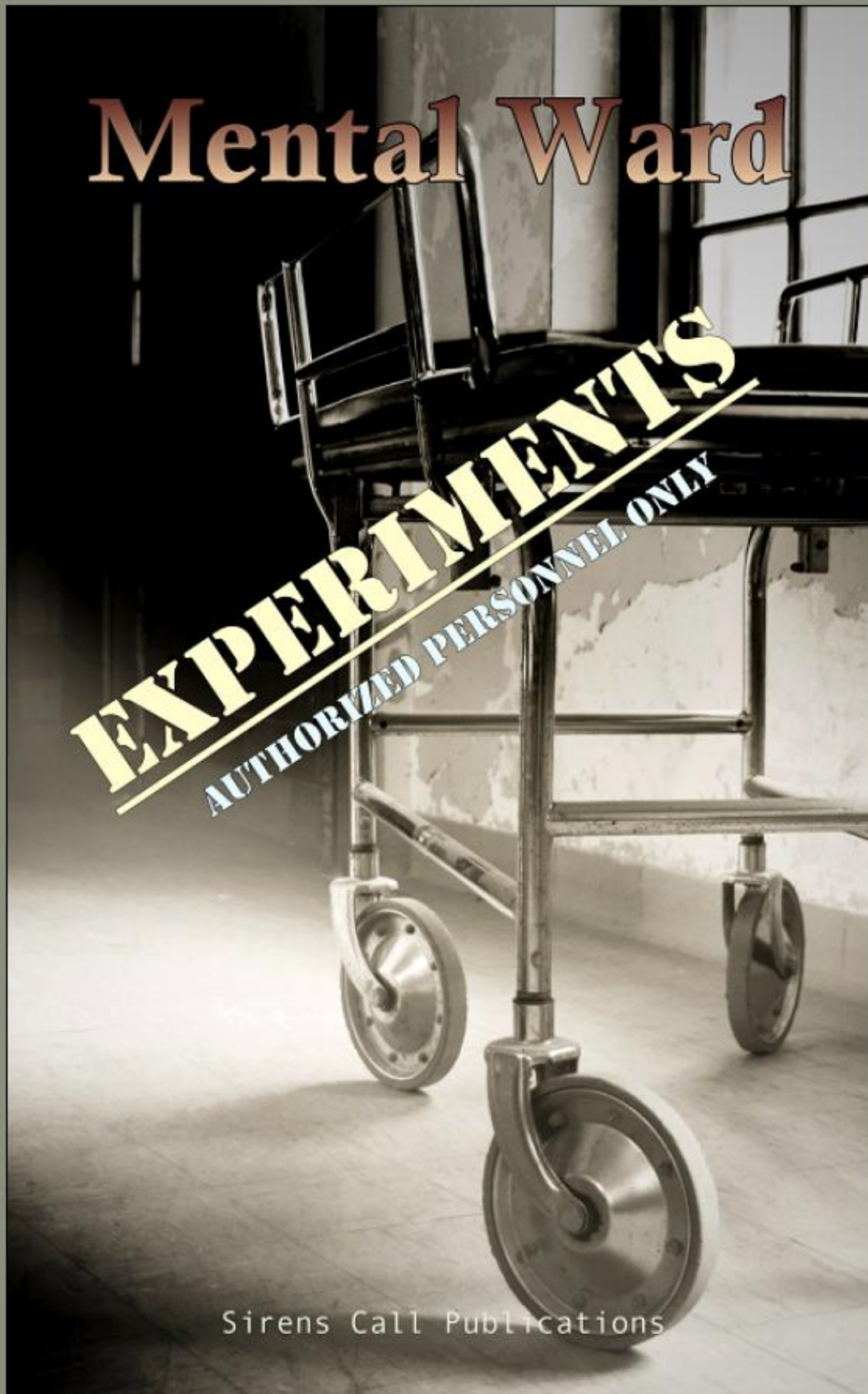
About the Author:

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](#)

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Step into a world where sanity is left behind,
and horror is what the doctor ordered!



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Water dripped down Skylar's naked body while she sat on her cabin's bunk in tears.

She felt so stupid believing those girls were her friends. Why did she let them talk her into jumping naked into the lake? The sight of them laughing at her from the shore and leaving her alone made her cry even heavier. She felt ashamed and wanted to go home.

The only reason she wasn't getting in her car was the fact that a year ago, she stood in front of her mother's casket. Soon after, her father received a job offer in Bethel Ohio. So, they packed up and moved. Skylar was positive she was not going to make friends at her new high school, but Riley had immediately welcomed her and introduced Skylar to all her friends. She never had been camping nor had a girl's weekend. Today was the first for both.

"Thought you were going to swim all day." Riley said with a slight devilish grin.

"Why did you leave me by myself?" Skylar yelled.

"It was a test. We are here to bond. You came out of your comfort zone and took the leap." Riley replied.

"I thought you said you guys came out here to celebrate. What are you celebrating?" Skylar questioned as she started to get dressed.

Riley sighed, "Come out side and we will explain."

Skylar looked into her friend's eyes and nodded. Riley took her by the hand and they stepped out. Skylar saw the rest of the girls sitting around the picnic table.

"Thought you were going to run home to Daddy." Steph said with a slight devilish grin.

Skylar ignored her comments as she sat down next to Riley, "What was the point of having me jump in, if you were just getting out?"

"To see if you would do it." Farrah replied.

"Well, if these are the games you are going to play, I think I'll head home." Skylar announced as she stood up.

"Sit down." Steph commanded.

"Screw you." Skylar responded as she walked away from the table.

"Skylar, wait." Riley called.

"Why?"

"We need you." Riley answered.

"Skylar turned back to her, "Need me?"

"We're witches. We'd like you to join our coven." Riley answered with her arms out.

"Your what?"

"Witches." The three responded in unison.

"Then why do you need me?" Skylar asked.

"Come join us at the table." Farrah said.

Skylar joined them as Farrah started to explain, "We represent the Goddess, Xzapherus. In order to have her blessing, each one must represent an element. I represent water."

"I represent Earth." Riley said.

"I represent air." Stephanie replied.

"Okay and who represents fire?" Skylar questioned.

"Paige." Farrah answered.

"And where is she today?" Skylar asked.

"She was killed in a car accident last year." Riley explained.

"A year from today to be exact." Farrah added.

"I'm sorry." Skylar replied, "Why do you need me?"

"You were born under the sign of Aries, which makes you a fire sign." Steph answered.

"You were in a car accident with your Mother a year from today. I'm sorry she didn't make it." Farrah added.

"It occurring at the same time has created the energy that has brought you to us." Steph announced.

"If this is all legit, then what do I need to do?" Skylar asked.

"Join us tonight and we will initiate you into the group." Farrah replied.

"I still don't know?" Skylar said doubtful.

"Listen Sky, we all like you and we all agree you are meant to be here." Riley replied.

"And we are more than friends. We are sisters of the natural order. We need the fire you have inside you to reignite our group." Farrah stated.

"Okay. There's nothing wrong with trying. Right?" Skylar responded as the three ran up and hugged her.

"Do we keep our clothes on?" Skylar hesitated to ask

"No." the girls replied in unison.

That night the girls were standing around a roaring bonfire wearing long white dresses.

A gold chalice is held by Farrah, who drinks and then passed to Riley. Riley drank and passed to Skylar.

"What is this?" Skylar asked as Riley handed it over to her.

"It's all natural. It will help you achieve your true self and then the magic will flow from you." Steph explained.

Skylar grimaced before she drank. As she swallowed, a warm sensation filled her body and her toes tingled. She passed it to Steph.

"Wonderful and all loving Xzapherus, hear your disciples as we ask for help mending this covenant." Farrah shouted, "Tonight we bring a new vessel for our fallen, Paige."

"So what do we do now? We chant and dance round the fire naked?" Skylar whispered to Riley.

"Yes." Riley answered as her dress dropped to the ground. The others followed.

Skylar felt a little embarrassed as she watched the three girls start to dance naked around the bonfire.

"Join us, sister." Steph said as she frolicked around Skylar.

Skylar took a deep breath and pulled off her dress and under garments. Farrah approached her, smiled, and embraced her tightly.

Skylar smiled as the others chanted, suddenly Skylar's vision went blurry and her head started to spin, "What's happening?"

"You're about to be reborn!" Farrah announced.

Skylar felt like she was in a dream as she watched the girls blur in and out, chanting and calling upon spirits. She then saw a body lying upon a stone altar. She was a beautiful blonde and appeared to be dead. Skylar realized it was their friend Paige. She fought to wake up, but couldn't move.

"Wake up sweetheart." A familiar voice said.

Skylar opened her eyes and saw herself and the other three standing around her. Skylar tried to speak, but no words would come out. She tried to move, but her muscles felt stiff.

"Yes, you are seeing yourself, yet you know it's not you. It's me Paige." Paige laughed and the others joined.

"I'm sorry Skylar, well I guess you're Paige, it was the only way to bring Paige back." Farrah said.

"Paige's soul needed a new vessel, but it had to be a girl who had a traumatic loss the same day as her death. We never believed we would find someone. That's until you arrived." Riley added.

"You are a sexy bitch; I just can't wait to give this body a proper tryout. I'm sorry you'll miss out." Paige said, "Rest in Peace, Skylar."

Skylar attempted to shout as she watched in horror as she closed the lid to the casket. Small thuds echoed from above her head as she believed they were burying her. She didn't know if she could even, it was possible she would remain stuck in this body like a prisoner only time would tell.

About the Author:

Marcus Cook made his Sirens Call Debut in issue #50 with *The Giant Killer*. He is excited to be a part of the Halloween issue. Born on Day of The Dead, Marcus loves this holiday season. You can see his other published stories on his facebook page, read Marcus Cook. Marcus lives in Cleveland Ohio with the love of his life and their cat.

Facebook: [Marcus Cook](#)

"The boundary line between instinct and reason is of a very shadowy nature"

EDGAR ALLAN POE (1840)



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"Get it off me, get it off, get it off me!" Evie screamed as she clawed at her arms, her legs, her back, her stomach. She felt it crawling, tingling, stinging here, there, and everywhere. "Get it out! I can't stand it anymore! It's driving me crazy! Make it stop!" Evie dug her sharp nails into her arm and drew blood. She watched it ooze out and smeared it over her skin, hoping it would soothe the itching and ease her pain.

Her examiners had looked for the source of Evie's trauma, but found none. A complete physical examination and extensive testing had been conducted over the course of the last few weeks. Specialists had been consulted and a conclusion had been reached.

"There's nothing there, Evie," Dr. Summer had calmly told her. "All your tests came back negative. There's nothing physically wrong with you."

"How can there be nothing wrong? Look at me!" Evie had responded as she rolled up her sleeves exposing her skin, red and raw with fresh wounds, marked and scarred from old wounds.

Evie thought back to the first time she had sought out her doctor's advice for her skin problem. She had told her she was itchy all over. She had hoped for a simple explanation and solution.

"Lots of people have sensitive skin," Dr. Summer had said during that first visit. "Sometimes changing your soap or laundry detergent helps. Have you tried that?"

"Yes, I've tried using all kinds of different soaps for sensitive skin. I've tried lotions, anti-itch cream. Nothing helps. It just seems to get worse," Evie responded. She thought how ridiculous it was to imagine that adding more layers to cover up the coverup would somehow alleviate the painful itching. Lotions, creams, concealers - she had tried them all.

"I've been wondering if maybe it's something in the water," Evie ventured. She didn't want to think of something so natural, essential and cleansing as harmful. In any case, she was certain it was her skin itself that was the culprit, not anything that may have come in contact with it.

"Has anyone else in your family been experiencing problems with sensitive skin?" asked her doctor.

"No, it's just me," answered Evie.

"It's not likely the water. I'd suggest you try a few more weeks of using only hypoallergenic, fragrance-free body wash, shampoo, and laundry detergent. Stay away completely from any perfumes, lotions, or makeup. I'll give you a prescription for some anti-itch cream for the really bad spots, and some allergy pills. But the most important thing to do is to stop scratching. You're just making it worse. It's best to try to ignore it. Come back to see me in a few weeks if you don't find any relief," concluded Dr. Summer.

Several months went by and her itching and scratching had progressed from an embarrassing nuisance to an obsessive need to rid herself of her skin by gouging and cutting deeper. The more she tried to peel away her skin, the thicker it grew back. Scars were taking over her body, bringing with them a stronger itch as they closed over the wounds. Evie went back to see Dr. Summer, who sent her to a skin specialist. After determining there was no physical cause for the severe itching, Dr. Summer had suggested Evie see a therapist.

"What? How is that going to stop the itching? Oh, I see, you think I'm making it up. Do you really think I'd scratch myself raw and bloody for no reason? Why would I intentionally hurt myself?" Evie reacted. Evie was adamant that the itching was real.

She left Dr. Summer's office feeling let down. It wasn't the first time she had felt dismissed by someone. As usual, she was either the recipient of derisive comments or ignored completely.

A week later, Evie's husband rushed her to Emergency. She had woken up from a nightmare screaming about something crawling all over her. She insisted it was biting her, stinging her. Adam couldn't see anything on her body, apart from the usual scars, red welts from her own fingernails, and open wounds from pulling at the skin.

"It's okay, you were just having a nightmare. There's nothing here. It's just you and me here. It's okay," he calmly reassured her and tried to settle her down.

"Someone's stabbing me!" she shouted as she frantically pulled back the covers and searched for the creature that was attacking her. There was nothing there.

"I think it's coming from inside me!" Evie yelled as she jumped out of bed and ran to the kitchen. Adam followed her and watched as she took a knife out of the drawer and held it next to the skin on her left wrist. "I need to get it out!"

Adam wrestled the knife out of her hand and held onto his wife as he reached for the kitchen phone and dialed 911.

As Evie reached to her face to scrape the skin off, the nurse held her arms down and called for assistance. Adam watched in shock as the nurses restrained Evie's arms to the hospital bed and medicated her to stop her from hurting herself any further. He had never before seen her this distraught. When the doctor pulled him aside to speak to him later, she explained that the problem with Evie's skin was a mental health issue, not a physical one.

"We can keep her restrained and sedated for now, to keep her safe from herself, but she needs to get help," Dr. Summers told Adam. "I'm going to prescribe some antidepressants. More importantly, she needs to get therapy for her self-destructive behaviour."

Adam agreed to do whatever was necessary to make his wife well. He convinced her to take the prescribed pills and to attend her therapy sessions.

Evie asked him, "Will that make the itching stop?"

"Yes, I think it might. It's worth a try, at least," he suggested.

Evie trusted her husband and complied.

The pills made Evie feel a bit tired, not quite herself. They did ease the itching a bit, though. It was still there, under the surface, but not driving her crazy like it had been. Evie went to her therapist appointment, with Adam by her side for support. During the first session, Evie was aware of Dr. Rose's skin. Her youthful face was flawless, perfectly framed by her shoulder-length blond hair. She had just the right amount of skin, stretched taut by regular sessions at the gym. There were no scars or bloody gashes on her arms.

How can she possibly understand, Evie thought to herself. For the first few minutes, Dr. Rose remained silent, giving Evie the opportunity to initiate the conversation. When Evie continued to stare in silence, Dr. Rose spoke quietly.

"Evie, can you tell me about your skin?"

Ever since she could remember, Evie had been aware that skin was a troublemaker. From a very young age, she was conscious of how its colour, imperfections, slackness, and even its amount, caused people to stare. As she grew older, she realized it was the first thing people saw when they looked at you. She didn't understand why skin caused people to hate. People ridiculed you for having too much skin, skin that wasn't tight enough. Evie felt self-conscious about her size. She dieted and exercised herself to the point of anorexia. People stared at you if your skin was too perfect or too flawed. Evie was certain she was not considered beautiful. She kept her head down and avoided eye contact, hoping no one was staring at her ugliness.

In school, Evie learned that skin is the body's largest organ and that its job was to protect and hold things together. It was amazing, Evie had always thought, how something that is supposed to protect you could be the source of so much ridicule, fear, hatred, and pain. It was incredible how something that is supposed to hold things together could be the reason for slavery, wars, terrorism, and the loss of millions of lives. Evie hated skin. It was evil. She just wanted to get rid of it.

When she was little, she chewed her fingernails down to the quick and picked away at the skin around them. It seemed to be useless, this fingernail skin, but it kept growing back.

She tried rubbing the skin on her arms and legs repeatedly, hoping to erase it and flush it down the drain with the bath water. When some came off, she asked her mom if she could make her skin disappear.

"No, silly girl," her mom laughed. "There are lots of layers to your skin. The old cells die off and get replaced by new skin cells all the time."

Evie's skin seemed to attract bugs and mosquitos. When they stung her, it made her skin itch like crazy. Evie tried to scratch away the itch, but it only made it worse. She thought if she could scratch far enough past the surface, she could dig out the itch and get rid of it.

Blood, unlike skin, was always red. It's what's inside that counts, Evie always thought. If everyone could walk around with their insides showing, the world would be a better place, wouldn't it? Without skin, everyone would look the same.

As Evie continued to stare at Dr. Rose, she understood that she herself was a victim of skin's deceit. She judged Dr. Rose as unable to understand her problem, based on the doctor's perfect exterior. As she tried to envision what it was like to be in Dr. Rose's skin, Evie softened up a bit towards Dr. Rose.

"I don't like my skin. It's always itchy. Sometimes it's downright painful. I feel like someone is sticking pins into me," Evie confided to Dr. Rose.

"Lots of people have sensitive skin, Evie. Not everyone is the same, though. Some are just more sensitive than others. Has your skin always been this sensitive?" Dr. Rose invited her to continue.

"It's always been sensitive, but it's gotten worse over the last year or so, I'd say. It's almost impossible to get relief for long," Evie responded.

"What do you think is making it worse?" the doctor asked.

Evie thought about how she was ever more conscious of her skin as the years progressed. The scars that had been formed in her childhood and teenage years were permanent. Evie would have liked to scrape them away and let new cells regenerate in their place. But the more she scratched at them, the more prominent the scars became. The more she scratched, the more sores opened up. When they healed, they left more scars. It was an endless cycle.

To make things worse, over the last few years, her skin was making her more uncomfortable. It was like an old coat that didn't fit anymore. Brown spots were growing bigger and more abundant. She thought they might swallow her up entirely. Lines became etched more deeply and changed her appearance. She could hardly recognize herself in the mirror. Her skin was sagging and puckering. She wondered if she was shedding her old skin and would grow a new skin.

Evie didn't think the itching would stop until she had shed her skin completely. Maybe getting rid of one's skin was part of the growing process. Growing pains can be quite painful, she thought.

"I think it's gotten worse as I've gotten older. I've been too embarrassed to talk about it. Does this happen to other people, Dr. Rose?" Evie asked. "Or am I just losing my mind?"

"I don't think you're losing your mind, Evie. And yes, as people age, their skin gets thinner and can be more sensitive. When you scratch, you bleed more easily. But you need to control your urge to scratch. You could get an infection," the doctor explained. "And we don't want that. So I would suggest we continue with your medication and keep monitoring your condition."

Evie nodded her head. She figured it was best to agree. How could she explain her compulsion to jump out of her skin? She wondered if other people felt what she did. Did anyone else want out? Maybe if there were enough of them, they could join forces and wipe out the controlling alien species completely.

It won't be too much longer, regardless, Evie thought. Maybe a couple more decades. At some point, we all lose our skin. As it decays and rots, it eventually exposes what's underneath. At the centre of it all are the bones. You can't find fault with the bones. You can't hate them. The bones are all the same. At least at first glance. They're not too fat or too thin. None of them are pretty. But they're all beautiful. You can't judge someone by their bones. She doubted the bones would itch.

About the Author:

Ivanka Fear is a retired teacher and a writer from Canada. Her poems and short stories appear in or are forthcoming in Spadina Literary Review, Montreal Writes, Adelaide Literary, October Hill, Scarlet Leaf Review, The Sirens Call, The Literary Hatchet, Wellington Street Review, Aphelion, Muddy River Poetry Review, Suspense Magazine, and elsewhere. She is currently working on her fourth novel and looking for a publisher.



A Ghost of a Walk | *Ivanka Fear*

Welcome to our ghost walk. I'm your host, come join the rest inside.

What's the fee? you ask.

"Don't worry, we'll collect before you leave."

Are you eager for a haunting? Looking for a thrill? Perhaps you've heard the rumours of past tours and missing clientele? Curiosity got the better of you? Here on a bet? No matter, enter now, if you will, at your own risk. You're going to love this!

These old buildings don't lack spirit, the history here is palpable. After you, if you please, let me hold the door. Oh my! It seems it's only you and I tonight, a personal tour, you're in luck!

Let me draw your attention to the old tin ceiling, fans above spinning wildly. Watch your head, just in case. Things have been known to fall. Lots of spots here to roam. Great for a game of Hide and Seek. I must warn you, I've been on a winning streak.

Sorry, it's too late to turn around and leave, the exit doors don't open without a key.

This way, please. This old store has many former lives—this side was once a motorcar garage. Listen carefully, they say you can still hear the sputter of an old car engine. Through here is the stairway that goes nowhere. I don't blame you for not climbing up those stairs. Note the false ceiling here. Who knows what's up there.

What you're hearing now is just the branches brushing up outside the wall.

Underneath this storeroom lies the crawl space. Listen for the wind howling through the cracks. I could manufacture some spooky tales right now, but I'll let the ambiance do its job. I'm sure your imagination can outperform my fiction.

Up the stairs now, hold the railing tight, you might get push... er, trip, that is.

As you enter the apartment above, you may glimpse a fleeting cat or two. Though they lie buried now, their spirits refuse to leave their owner's side.

No, no one lives here anymore, but you can feel it can't you? Their presence remains, regardless.

That steady dripping sound you hear? Simple leaky taps.

Come right through, let's check out the bedrooms where countless souls have slumbered over the years. That door was boarded up at some point, happened a lot in this old place. Not sure why, windows, doors, no longer there, one bedroom leading into another, rooms with no windows. No exit now, unfortunately,

Oh, not venturing inside? Just as well, the doorknob tends to fall off, hate to see you trapped, I would.

Enter the lower apartment where apparently dances were held years ago. Guess that accounts for the sagging floor. If you watch intently you'll still see them glide across the dance floor, music keeping time. As you glance out through these window eyes, you'll see where the old train station stood long ago. Rumour has it the whistle of ghost trains can still be heard, long dead passengers still on board.

Don't bother with that exit. It doesn't actually lead anywhere.

Let's head on down to the bowels of this old place. I'll make sure you get your money's worth. Cobwebs everywhere, don't get yourself entangled. That old furnace lets off quite a bellow, you're wise to back away, not get too close.

Follow me in here, a bit crypt-like, I'll admit. Yes, another door's bricked up back there, I'm afraid. I don't know who or what was kept locked up down here. You're looking somewhat sickly now. I fear you've lost interest in our haunted quest. Ready to leave? Why are you backing slowly toward the stairs?

How wise of you to come prepared, with all your senses on alert. Had me figured out, didn't you? Staying out of corners, keeping your distance, distrusting your ghostly guide, sidestepping my every move. You may well have escaped my clutches, avoided being my next victim, so wary of me, rightfully so. Seems you're free to leave, to live to tell your tale. Hope you'll recommend us to your friends.

But the thing is, you'll soon see, I'm not the only one here.

In retrospect, I guess you shouldn't have come alone on Halloween.

About the Author:

Ivanka Fear is a retired teacher and a writer from Canada. Her poems and short stories appear in or are forthcoming in Spadina Literary Review, Montreal Writes, Adelaide Literary, October Hill, Scarlet Leaf Review, The Sirens Call, The Literary Hatchet, Wellington Street Review, Aphelion, Muddy River Poetry Review, Suspense Magazine, and elsewhere. She is currently working on her fourth novel and looking for a publisher.

What a man does for pay is of little significance. What he is, as a sensitive instrument responsive to the world's beauty, is everything!

—Howard Phillips Lovecraft

As a well-respected civil engineer in the good graces of officials responsible for the development of Providence, I fervently supported any expansion of the city's infrastructure. The advent of the automobile simultaneously marked an eclipsing of public transit, and if I were to stay ahead of the proverbial curve, it was in my best interest to arduously defend any reigning technology of the foreseeable future. As such, I relished the daily drive in my premium green Cadillac Series 341B from our family home on College Hill to my office at City Hall.

My usual route to work brought me past the Rhode Island State House, whose glorious marble dome—topped with its bronze statue of The Independent Man—gleamed in the morning sun, a testament to the liberty and order around which my reality was constructed. Upon making the return trip down Dorrance and Dyre Streets, across the Point Street Bridge, and then back north along Benefit Street, it never failed to impress me how Providence Harbor represented an unadulterated blend of bustling cityscape with healthy maritime commerce.

Thus I drove, day after day, leaving for home in the mid-afternoon—stopping by the post office if necessary—and smiling at the ever-expanding campus of my alma mater: Brown University. With our two adult children off starting families of their own, I had resolved to purchase the Cadillac as an early retirement gift, with no small amount of disapproval from my loving wife, Sarah. However, a recent accident, involving the unceremonious dashing of a stray animal in front of my vehicle, resulted in regrettable damage to its front left wheel.

After an exceptionally long and tiresome day at the office, I was admiring the late July sunset over Prospect Terrace before approaching my turnoff at the corner of Congdon Street and Lloyd Lane. As I started to execute the right-hand turn, a pesky stray suddenly darted out from the passenger side, and I veered left to avoid hitting the creature—though still doing so, despite my efforts. The bumper and driver's side fender penetrated the tire wall upon impact with a fire hydrant, which began spouting water and would need to be seen to by public works immediately.

All told, the vehicle could be repaired in short order; but regardless, I would report the incident to my younger brother, a local police officer who—under the right pressure—would withhold the mishap from the newspapers to protect my career. Yet before stumbling home to make that particular call, I inspected the road for any remains of the blasted stray and was amazed to find only a small pool of blood where I had struck the animal. More than anything, I was disturbed by the fact that the crimson liquid emitted a putrid stench so offensive I could not help but gag several times over.

It was on Tuesday, the day following that ill-fated accident involving my prized Cadillac, when a series of unsettling events began to unfold. Departing a full hour earlier than usual, I begrudgingly walked the distance to City Hall. Sleep had not come easily, as I was in the throes of preparing for an important meeting on Wednesday with Governor Case and his staff, during which I would deliver a proposal suggesting a complete renovation of the area between Fox Point and the Washington Street Bridge. This neighborhood had fallen by the wayside, in my opinion, having degenerated to cheap tracts of land upon which impoverished immigrants and their mangy pets congregated over the past decade—making it prime real estate for future road development!

Not long into my morning trek, I became turned around at what was assuredly the west end of Lloyd Lane, where the accident had occurred. On the ground lay a gruesome sight of horrific description: a tabby's corpse decorated the pavement, its face shorn clear off from some traumatic blow. Dried blood was pooled in a spot not far from where I had found fresh blood the night before, but again, I recalled having seen no carcass of which to speak.

I covered my nose with a handkerchief—to reduce exposure to a familiar, repugnant odor emanating from the creature's lifeless body—and noticed a tiny charm fastened around the dead animal's neck. But before I might investigate further, I was rendered lightheaded by that morbid scene splayed across the cement. Turning to head what I believed to be north—or was it south?—I hurried onward, taking comfort at the sight of the replacement fire hydrant . . . at least public works was still dependable.

Checking my Rolex Oyster Perpetual, I was relieved to see there was still plenty of time for me to arrive at least a quarter of an hour early to my office. However, after nearly thirty minutes of wandering through the streets, I grew discouraged by my lack of progress. Even the magnificent dome of the State House, usually a reliable landmark, eluded

me in those moments. I was not accustomed to being lost in Providence and eventually found my way, albeit bewildered by the path I had purportedly taken.

With only a minute to spare, I breached the entrance to City Hall and quickly ascended the stairs—unkempt, perspiring, and out of breath. A steady day of work ensued as I recovered my faculties and continued preparing my proposal—with my secretary, Miss Lillibridge, asking minimal questions as to the disagreeable state in which I had arrived.

Around eleven o'clock, my wife telephoned the office and suggested we meet for a late afternoon picnic at Tockwotton Park, anticipated to be a moment of relaxation before the stress of tomorrow's meeting with the governor. Sarah would bring a basket filled with a sumptuous feast while I, in turn, would present her with a fresh bouquet of white Asiatic Lilies: her favorite flower. There was a florist on Brook Street, Barney Bros., from whom we always purchased, and I agreed that if my preparations were completed, I would call her to confirm our picnic engagement.

The only other notable interruption came as a self-imposed break to peruse Sanborn insurance maps of Providence, an attempt to rationalize my confusing trip from Lloyd Lane to City Hall. Alas, I could not locate the road, nor any specific intersection, from which my intended course had deviated. *Perhaps, I reasoned, age was finally catching up with me.* . . .

Later that day, I experienced a deep satisfaction upon delivering the finishing touches to my proposal, yet became more than a little dismayed when I could not raise Sarah at home. Three times I telephoned her, and three times I received no answer. Assuming she was already en route to our picnic rendezvous, I bid my secretary good day, obtained the conciliatory bouquet of lilies, and made for Tockwotton Park.

It was down a side street, perpendicular to Hope and in the heart of that very neighborhood in which my proposal would restore decency, where I once again lost my way. The brushing of a stray, black cat against my pant leg—combined with a strange pungency from the flowers, which I knew to hold no fragrance—evoked an inexplicable sense of mounting dread. This feeling was further intensified by a light breeze that stirred a nearby set of wind chimes and foretold of angry clouds visibly gathering in the south.

At the park, I became truly concerned when I found Sarah's gingham blanket unattended, her lacy handkerchief discarded next to our wicker basket. All of sudden, I heard her voice softly calling my name from the southeast, beyond India Point: "Daniel . . . *Daniel.* . . ." It sounded as if she were on the move, so I followed, leaving the park and stopping only once at the railroad yard to pick up her cream-colored hat from the dirty tracks. Turning the accessory over with apprehension, I recoiled in terror at the bloodstains soaked into its inner fabric.

Before this, I had imagined Sarah playfully luring me to her like Odysseus and his crew to the Sirens, but I now traversed the train bridge over the Seekonk River in sheer panic, chasing a voice that began to urgently scream for me from a place southwest of Fort Hill. The sky, a dull mixture of pale pink and sickly yellow hues, was all but blotted out by dark clouds backlit by increasingly frequent strikes of silent lightning. The humid air positively thrummed, bearing the unbridled power of nature and carrying with it a scent of wet, heavy malignancy indicative of a mighty storm . . . yet no rain fell.

Screeching seagulls made landfall above me as my aching body raced in the opposite direction, bound for the Wilkes Barre Pier, underneath that turbulent weather rolling in off of Narragansett Bay. However, when I reached the end of the pier—shaking with adrenaline—my beloved Sarah was nowhere to be found, and her frantic voice no longer guided me forward. Instead, I was met with a hideous trauma; for looking down into the rough waves, I saw her beautiful face: white as porcelain and wearing the tranquility of a death mask, despite the wild flashes of lightning and howling wind around us!

And still, no rain fell. . . .

I dropped to the ground, heedless of pain as my careworn knees struck the pier with a loud crack. But before I could mourn the apparent loss of my wife, I was startled from that haze of disbelief by the gentle mewing of a cat behind me. I spun round as the first crash of thunder came down from the heavens, ominously punctuating the entrance of a lone tabby. It sauntered toward me as if to provide comfort. Unsure of its intentions, I did not touch its gray fur but noticed a charm dangling from its fragile neck, on which the word 'Ulthar' was carved.

As the peculiar name left my lips, a second rumbling of thunder brought about the start of a rain shower. The cool precipitation would have been welcome had those fat drops not begun to burn my skin upon contact! The tabby wailed in agony as acidic, crimson rain poured down upon us. Insanity overtook me when the fur-covered flesh of the cat's face and dilated eyes melted to the ground, revealing that same grisly carnage I witnessed at Lloyd Lane—concerning the very animal I had undoubtedly run over with my Cadillac the night before! I cried in never-ending

torment and lost my mind when a sizable group of cats approached from the open end of the pier. At this, I took flight—desperate to escape their feline fury—and dove headlong into the bloody waters of the harbor below!

“Mr. Monahan . . . *Mr. Monahan.*”

My head snapped up, nearly striking Miss Lillibridge as I came to. Apparently, I had dozed off at my desk, and the secretary was rousing me so I might receive a telephone call.

“It’s *Mrs. Monahan,*” she said, with a tone of criticism at my having fallen asleep on the job. In as few words as possible, I rejected Sarah’s offer to meet for a picnic. Hanging up the phone, I then left City Hall early and rode the trolley past Tockwotton Park to the station nearest our house, where I savored a home-cooked meal with my wife—grateful for her safety.

That evening, I contacted the road commissioner and postponed my meeting with the governor . . . indefinitely. The final shock that drove me to such drastic measures was this: after taking out the trash, I spied a snow-white cat—illuminated and waiting—under a nearby street lamp. In its delicate maw, it carried a single crimson flower . . . a blood red Asiatic Lily.

About the Author:

A. E. LaMalfa’s head couldn’t fit through the dressing room door, so he gave up his dream of acting for a gym whistle instead. After narrowly escaping the bureaucracy plaguing public education, he discovered music but found stage fright lurking behind the act curtain. Now, his creativity turns dark imaginings into weird tales inspired by literary greats such as H. P. Lovecraft and Shirley Jackson.

Author Website: [A.E. LaMalfa](#)

Unmasked | *Ken Goldman*

She had to be beautiful beneath her Halloween mask. He could tell.

“I’m Michael.”

“Michelle.”

He moved closer.

“Interesting mask, Michelle. An old woman. But your body gives you away. No old woman could...”

She probably blushed beneath her disguise. “I’ve been told that. Care to see for yourself?”

He reached for the mask. She stopped him.

“Not here. You have a car?”

He did. Parked beneath the full moon he held her close.

“Your mask. May I see what’s--?”

“Allow me.” She tore the mask from her face, grinned.

Michael gasped.

“Not an old woman, Michael. A dead one...”

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*.

Amazon Author Page: [Ken Goldman](#)

Facebook: [Kenneth Goldman](#)



Descending the concrete stairs into the club. Vampire fans, cyber-goths, hippy-goths, victorian-goths, punk-goths, all flavour of goth littered *Underworld*. Velvet, lace, latex and PVC tapestries of pale skin wrapped in the dark. Depeche Mode's 'Black Celebration' pumps through the monster sound system reverberating off the man-made cavern walls with the look of charred, blackened rock.

Underworld was split into nine caverns, each representing a Hell, of sorts, including a central dance floor cavern. A human design of fantasy — the energy was more sex drizzled in desperation than any true under-worldly horror. Humans could be a rather pathetic species with their oxymoron fantasies.

"A Diesel please" I lick my lips and tap the register with plastic. The blood-red drink of the night was a long-standing staple. Uncoiling the rigid and igniting the loose strands beyond just the dance of these self-professed 'freaks' mating ritual. I make my way through the caverns to the *Lust* suite, draped in velvet fabrics, the club boudoir. By the much-desired VIP claret, velvet corner booth, 'The Vampire Society' flock like a little preened feathered murder, the goth elite — they were a sorry mess. Bleeding out their miseries and celebrations over red wine, pretension and meaningless pitiless blood-letting fucks. Pomposity and arrogance of the privately schooled, clueless hack fans — harmless I suppose. They put too much shit sex overtures into it — unrealistic. Sure we fuck, but it's nothing like those blood bags imagine and we certainly don't fuck each other — talk about disgusting, we're not necrophiliacs for fuck sake.

My near colourless living-dead eyes scan the crowd of sad wannabe-somethings, most would never be much. All in the head, for the most part, those so-called eternal children of the dark. Some would eventually succumb to the maddeningly mundane with the old 'I used to be a goth' tagline; a vain attempt to garnish interest over their beige existence. Others would grow old and sad, stuck in their never to become fantasy. Not sure which was less appealing. Well, one lucky wannabe would be picked off tonight, maybe two, if I can canvas enough desire to play the part. *Think of the blood, Ash*, I tell myself, trying to muster the motivation to play the game, to sing for my supper.

I watch. Stalk. Narrow down potential prey. I mingle. I hone in on Lincoln and Cecelia, a young couple whose path I had crossed a few times this year. Tonight they're marked; *mine*. Their little games a mildly entertaining watch as they work the groups in the club, finally settling with The *Vampire* clique for tonight. Watching one another flirt — their foreplay.

Cecelia was dressed in a short black latex dress, PVC stiletto heels. The dress kisses her fishnet-stockings clad thighs where they meet her ass, that tight though — it ain't rising any further. Her bosom spills, ever so slightly, over the taut second skin just enough to tease of an imminent slip behind her long glossy raven hair — again, it's all part of the tease. She perches on Donald's knee — the Society's leader. He's more than twice her age, lean, regal looking with his expensive custom embroidered top and tails, his embossed high-gloss cane — every detail down to the points of his highly manicured, black-painted nails deliberate. Roomer has it he even bedded down in a custom made coffin. They really were a funny little bunch of puny humans.

Meanwhile, Lincoln watches as he whispers into the ear of a petite, pale, pumped-rouge-lipped goth, blonde — a stand out little number beside so many bottled blacks. Eyes lustfully fixed on Cecelia as he caresses the other woman's doll-like face.

It doesn't take too much effort, once I put my hungry mind to it. They've eyed me as much as I them; when we've danced the same floors under the same neons, to the same beats. Tonight I get up close, teasing of skin meeting skin between the two, for the classic *you've scored* anthem — NIN's Closer. *Oh, I'll violate you both alright*, if I had a pulse it would sure as hell quicken. Where they crave sex — for me, it's food and I'm working my meal with the seductive sway of my hips, the sure fuck promised in my intensely focused eyes — the well-seasoned chef. Tonight we'll all get fed.

Lincoln and Cecelia's flat is an old subterranean sandstone — not far from my place. Perfect to fuck, feed and flee and I don't need to clean the mess.

Her scent tonight is thick, musky it sticks in my nostrils like treacle, and drives my appetite wild to know she's in cycle. Exuding life — her heady, sweet fragrance lures me.

Fishnets off, she reaches up fingers inside her pussy — removes the silicone cup — now this really is a fine Red. I take it from her, my eyes never leaving hers. She licks her fingers as I down her moonblood. The contents of her evacuated womb bathes my tongue and coats my throat pouring sweet life into my corpse, the endorphins flood my

system and I harden instantly, I feel the ghost of a pulse restart, alert for more. Just a little blood rush and I'm temporarily alive.

I satiate myself in both their bodies, a little blood-play foreplay feeds their vampire fantasy, reminding me why I'm here. With little consensual cuts, I drink of them both — entree's before the main meal. Each riding the waves of endorphins, heat, sex. Taking my time with the girl, making our feast of the boy her extended foreplay. I watch her every move, as I suck his cock. Eyes to eyes as I sit on his face and she rides, I keep her, turn up the heat for her. This really is a story, one neither of them will live to tell. When Lincoln is spent, Cecelia and I vacate to the living room — women almost always need more for their fill, the blood pulses harder with less concentration than that which flows to the cock. It's just biology.

Once they've fed and both deep enough in a near sedate sleep — a single paralytic dose of my own blood ensures they won't wake. I make my meal of them. From my bag, I take the venipuncture kit; tourniquet, butterfly needles and blood collection bags. I start with Lincoln, and sift off 7 pints, then from the ever-giving Cecelia, I obtain 6 pints then pack up. I feel dawning light begin to trickle, sharp into the dark — time to go.

The short walk home is no more than 20 minutes, I cut through Kelvingrove park take in the sounds of night submitting to the beckoning of morning. The final rustle of night birds retreating. Soon I'll submit too and not in a fucking coffin.

About the Author:

Natasha Sinclair is from Scotland, UK. Her first published piece was released in 2018. This was followed by the release of short story fiction and poetry. Her writing spans genres including; speculative, fantasy, horror, psychological and erotica. Out with her own publications she is a contributor to several anthologies.

When not writing she's teaching, raising and adventuring with her daughters and looking after their adopted animals.

Author Blog: [Clan Witch](#)

Instagram: [@clan_witch](#)

The Promise | B.T. Petro

Dylan leaned on her front porch railing. "Yes, officer, a woman matching that description was here. Headed towards the soccer fields."

"Halloween doesn't often have a full moon and we expected to get a lot of weird calls tonight. Never figured we'd get complaints of someone promising perfect health."

Officer Lewis placed one foot on the stoop, then backed off. "Your neighbor Alvarez was approached and told us of your situation."

"I'm probably not contagious. Long-term fatigue and foginess. I'm OK."

It was enough for Lewis to leave.

Dylan noted the Lycan's bite on her forearm was almost scabbed over.

About the Author:

B. T. Petro is retired and living in Ohio. His published story genres include sci-fi, fantasy, and horror. The stories generally have a bit of whimsy or a touch of the macabre. His best friend when he was growing up was an invisible robot, who still visits from time to time.



Nice Costume | *Radar DeBoard*

Gregg noticed the new guy standing in the corner. He was just watching everyone else dance, which was creeping Gregg out.

Gregg made his way over to him and yelled, "Hey man, stop staring at everyone. It's kind of creepy."

The guy said nothing as he turned and stared at Gregg through his weird burlap sack mask. Gregg had to admit the guy had a nice costume. The sack mask was weird, but the blood splatter all over the costume looked good, and the knife looked pretty real. "Nice costume..."

Gregg said as the first stab ripped into his stomach.

Time for a Treat | *Radar DeBoard*

Taylor opened her door to a small child holding out a sack full of candy.

"Trick or treat!" the kid said gleefully.

"I choose trick," Taylor said.

"What?" the child said in confusion.

"You said trick or treat," Taylor explained, "I chose trick, so I'd like to see a trick."

"I-I don't have any tricks," the kid quietly muttered.

Taylor shook her head, "That's too bad." She grabbed the child by the collar and pulled them inside her house, quickly shutting the door behind her. Taylor took the long knife out from behind her back, "I guess it's treat then."

Ripples of Space | *Radar DeBoard*

He whispers through the waves of space into my unconscious mind. I have long feared that I would hear the voice of Thelostuthoth.

He tells me of what is to pass. Of the things that will soon come, and of that which will soon fall. His movements send ripples across spacetime and I see them reflected in the oceans.

Then I feel the rumbling. I know what Thelostuthoth has done. I see the great priest rise above the waves. Spreading forth his wings that have not moved for millennia. He has returned, so now the time of man must end.

Town on Fire | *Radar DeBoard*

The horsemen rode through the town now engulfed in violence. Every man, woman, and child had given into their rage. Neighbors had been attacking one another. Family members had been killing each other.

The whole town had thrown themselves behind causes they would normally find trivial, but for some reason, they were suddenly willing to kill for.

Anarchy had quickly risen from the fighting and the town paid the price. Personal property was destroyed while bodies littered the ground, and flames spread over the buildings. The fire now engulfed the town, while the four horsemen watched the beautiful flames dance.

About the Author:

Radar DeBoard is a horror movie and novel enthusiast who resides in Wichita, Kansas. He occasionally dabbles in writing and enjoys making dark and exciting tales for people to enjoy. He has had drabbles and short stories published in various electronic magazines and anthologies.

Facebook: [Writer Radar DeBoard](#)

Dilly felt the pull as soon as the school bus sighed to a stop. Something was tugging her to explore, to discover, to create. Maybe the annual field trip to Bayshore National Park wouldn't be so boring after all. The teachers and chaperones divided up the tenth graders into groups. Dilly stood apart, grinding her purple Doc Martens on the slipper shells scattered in the parking lot.

While the boys made crass jokes about Fort Handcock and the 'cool' girls talked about bikinis, Dilly played to her nickname *Dilly-dally Dana* for all she was worth. She lagged behind, planning her escape.

Cheryl trudged over. "Ms. DeAngelis said we have to be buddies. Collect samples or something."

Perfect, thought Dilly. They were the two kids no one else wanted to partner with. *No one will miss us.*

"Let's see what's behind the seagrass," Dilly said.

"Yeah, sure," said Cheryl, showing off the e-cigarette hidden in her pocket, like she was that cool.

The sound of the surf got soft and far away as Dilly and Cheryl walked down the other side of the dunes. A muted stillness settled into Dilly. The path was right in front of her. All she had to do was follow it.

Half a mile down the trail, they found an old war bunker. The long beige building was buried in sand, like a washed-up leviathan, its opening a dark mouth drawing the girls in.

They stood in the entrance, shoulder to shoulder, the dank smell of stagnant seawater and wet concrete heavy around them. In the dim light, Dilly saw a dozen large murals painted on the arched walls. The images were primitive depictions of distorted birds, Picasso women, flying fish, and elongated cows and snakes with bellies full of creatures in agony. This is what she came for. This is what had been calling her from the bus.

"Creepy," said Cheryl. "I bet these are part of a freak religion that sacrifices animals."

Dilly took a hit of Cheryl's e-cigarette. It blunted the edge of nervous fear from being in a dim bunker, surrounded by animals with bodies full of knives and spears. She took out her colored pencils, a sketch pad, and began to draw.

A large half-chicken, half-woman formed on the page. Dilly added fine lines to the flames shooting from the woman's mouth. She pressed hard. The fire was a strong vermillion red, the teeth a harsh yellow. The hum of creativity flowed from her mind's eye down to her fingers. Her version had more depth, more fullness than the flat images on the walls. The creature almost looked like it was breathing on the page. When it came this easy, she knew it was good.

Dilly focused on the final details, and her vision went blurry. Her drawing of the half-woman shimmered, and flames shot right off the page. The long claws flexed, threatening to rip through the sketchbook. Dilly blinked and the image went still. She shoved her pencils and sketchbook into her bag.

The walls began to murmur. Like the distant buzz of a plane coming closer. The sound grew louder, fuller—*buzz-scrape-buzz-scrape*—like something was cutting itself out of the wall. Dilly leaned forward, but Cheryl was dragging her out. They ran down the trail, leaving the scraping sounds far behind them with the screeching of the gulls.

Back on the bus, Dilly took out her sketchbook to see better in the light what she had drawn in the dimness of the bunker. She traced the heavy lines. The bared teeth felt like sharp points under her fingers. It was some of her best work.

The rancid smell from the acid in the creature's stomach filled her nostrils. *Whoa*, she thought. The stink of the bunker was in the pages like cigarette smoke on clothes. She aired out the sketchbook on her lap.

It was the sleepy time of day when everything is drowsy with a late afternoon hum. Dilly leaned her head against the bus's thick glass window, eyes empty, the whole long ride home.

In the seat across the aisle, Cheryl snored lightly. With each exhale, puffs of smoke came out of her slack mouth. The smoke floated over to Dilly. The greyiness shaped itself into the Picasso woman, with half a silhouetted head, bright red angry lips, and crazy hair. Perhaps there was a little pot in that e-cigarette.

Pushing her nails into her palms, Dilly thought she *must* be dehydrated.

The smoke became a solid Picasso woman. That's when Dilly bit hard on the inside of her cheek.

Wake up! Wake up, she commanded herself. *It's a bad dream. Wake up!*

In front of her, a wolf-headed boy opened his dripping mouth wider and wider to devour the winged white fish next to him.

She was a little light-headed. Too into her art. Lurching up from her seat, she needed to find Ms. DeAngelis. A drink of water. She scraped her teeth hard on her tongue. She was desperate to send the visions back to the bunker.

A long two-headed blue snake rose up in front of her. Its forked tongue caressed her cheek.

"We are released," it said. "We are bound to you now."

Dilly screamed. She pulled her hair. She forced her eyes open. But a black-horned cow with three eyes and too many legs walked towards her. It was wrong, all wrong! She collapsed into a fetal position.

When she woke up in the hospital, the two-headed blue snake curled up at the bottom of the bed, one head resting on each foot. The Picasso woman roamed the halls.

Dilly did the only thing she could. She found her sketchbook and began to draw.

About the Author:

Heidi Lobecker once used the words 'fusty tang' in a story so now she can die happy. She can tie a bowline, tack upwind and has experienced uncontrolled jibes. She takes her time, loves Shakespeare, and needs lots of chocolate. She puts her pants on and hopes they fit, just like everybody else. Ask Heidi to go for a walk, she'll probably say, 'Yes.'

Author Blog: [Sailing in Chester](#)

Monsters Do Not Exist | Andrew Kurtz

Allow me to introduce myself, I am a werewolf and transform during a full moon, though not in the manner in which you may think.

I do not grow hair all over my body or even become an actual wolf because real werewolves do not exist except in movies, folklore, and the minds of people.

In addition, vampires that rise from the grave to drink the blood of the living and transform into a bat do not exist either. However, there are mortal people who drink blood and call themselves vampires.

Therefore, in reality there are only people, which I am one of, who fantasize about being a monster.

The full moon boils my blood to the point where it is screaming to burst from my body as I undergo a transformation in my mind. My rational thoughts desert me and what remains is the desire to kill.

It may be an understatement to say kill because what I feel is an infernal fury to rip apart another human being piece by piece with my hands and teeth.

Do you see that woman standing alone under the streetlamp? She is practically asking to be murdered because it is a full moon and she is on an isolated street. She should have a sign on her back saying, "**Please kill me.**"

Her blood is calling to me, screaming that I should set it free from its prison of flesh and I must oblige.

As I stealthily approach, she doesn't even turn her head. My palms are sweating in anticipation of the kill and saliva is dripping from my mouth onto the cold ground below.

I place my hands around her cold throat which feels more like an ice cube than actual flesh.

As she slowly turns around and gazes upon me, her flesh appears pale under the streetlamp or maybe it is pale in general.

Her eyes and lips are fiery red and her face is chiseled to perfection with long black hair that is shining in the moon glow.

When her blood red lips part, bloodstained fangs are revealed.

As I was saying before, there are no supernatural monsters. In her mind, she imagines she is a vampire and thus has plastic fangs in her mouth with red dye. Her eyes probably got their color from contact lenses and the flu or some other illness explains her frigid pale skin.

In a flash, she seizes both my wrists in a vice-like grip and snaps them as if they were twigs. I can see my wrist bone protruding from the torn flesh and blood pouring out onto the sidewalk below.

I scream in agony as she pierces my neck with her sharp fangs and can feel my blood draining out of me as the world starts to get blurry and dark.

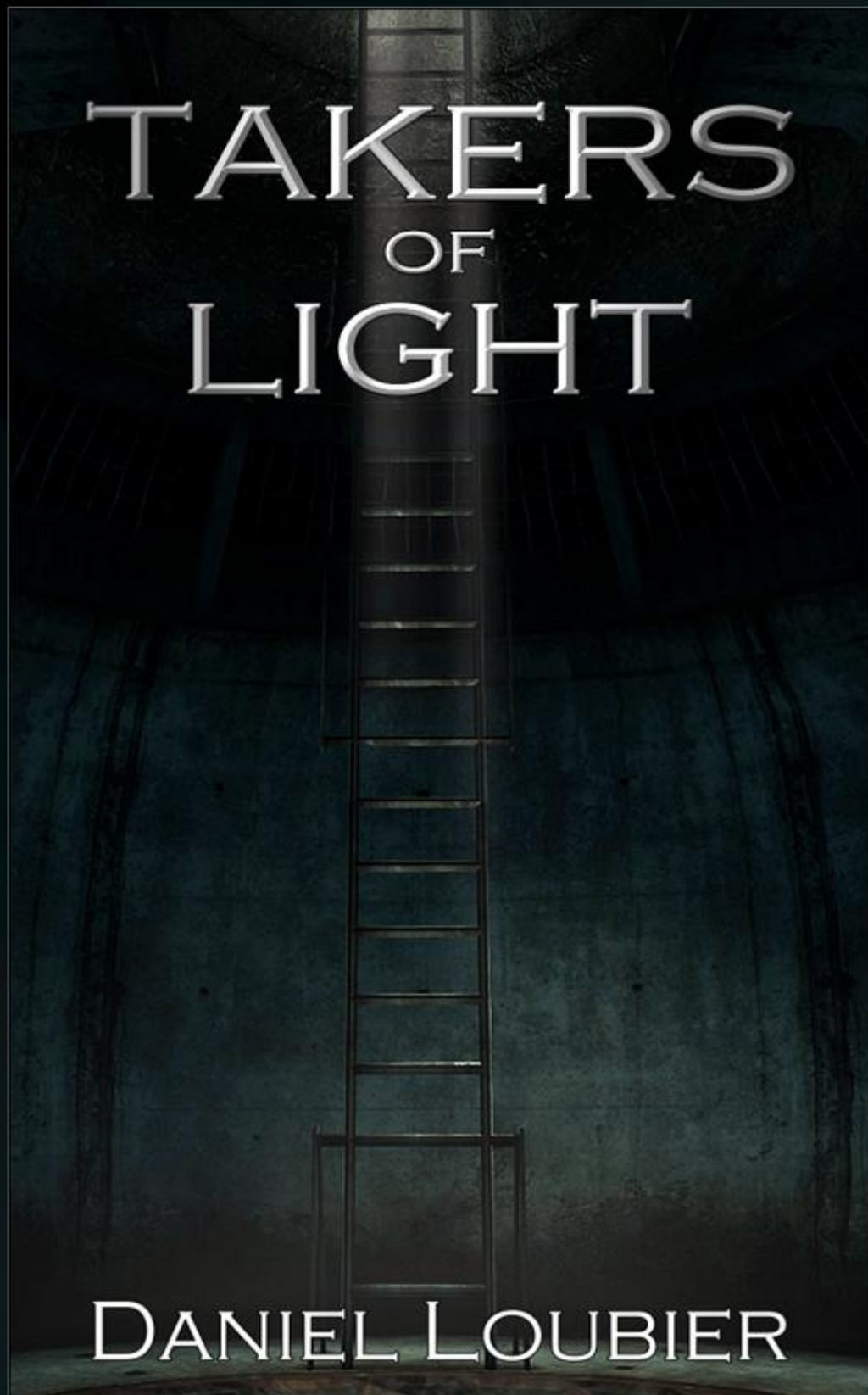
My final thought as the vampire bat flies away into the night and I enter oblivion is that I was gravely mistaken in my assumption that supernatural monsters do not exist.

About the Author:

Andrew Kurtz has been in love with the world of horror since a young age. He was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York and has a Master's degree in Psychology. He is an avid reader of horror novels, and enjoys watching horror films.

Amazon Author Page: [Andrew Kurtz](#)

Driven underground by those of the light...
Now known as The Dark Dwellers...



Available Exclusively on Amazon for
Purchase or Borrow!

It started with one person at the door. The screaming and knocking had attracted the attention of a few people nearby. It wasn't long before a small crowd had formed and were trying to break into the fourth floor apartment. The Barnes family were trapped inside. They kept the lights off and remained silent, hoping that the strangers would give up and leave.

"Come on out!" A man yelled from outside.

Those were the first words spoken among the howls, barking, and banging at the door.

The maniacal crowd hushed to let the man continue speaking. "We know you're in there. I saw you go in with a little girl. I saw it with my own eyes."

"There's nothing in here for you," said Ethan, holding his daughter as she rested her head on his shoulder.

A roar of laughter erupted from behind the door. Once the sound calmed down, the man responded, "Oh, I think there's plenty in there for me."

"Dad," Max said, looking up at her father. "Can't we just give them what they want?"

"No," he whispered back, hugging her tightly.

"But why?"

"Because what they want is too valuable."

Ethan looked at his wife, Mary, who sat on the sofa beside him with her arms crossed. He had tried to pull her into a hug, but she wouldn't budge from her position. If that wasn't enough, the disdain in her eyes made it clear she was angry. Their lives were at risk and she blamed him. He knew that but didn't want to make excuses to make her feel better. It was done. He couldn't turn back time.

If only, he thought. He imagined ducking into an alley when he noticed the man following him. The man would run to catch up but wouldn't be able to find him mixed in with the crowd on the other side of the street. He imagined turning around and fighting the man when he attempted to grab Max's arm, instead of picking up his daughter trying to ignore him. He imagined choosing not to go out that night. It was dangerous and there were so many people who didn't want to risk it. He could have been like them.

Looking down at Max, he knew that he would do it all over again. He wanted to be an example for her. She would be in the same situation at some point in her life. There was no doubt of that, as it seemed to get worse every time. He squeezed her a little tighter and was glad that he could be there with her during her first Release Day.

As soon as the date was announced, Ethan had been telling Max stories about previous Release Days to prepare her for what might come. Not wanting to frighten his daughter, he sugarcoated a lot of the things he saw. But, in that moment as he held her in his arms, he wished he was honest. The reality of the prior Release Day was much worse, but not as bad as the one they were facing that night.

"If you just—" Mary began.

"Not now," Ethan cut her off. "And not ever. You never seemed to mind when it was me and you."

"We have a child now. We agreed that it wasn't worth the risk."

"I didn't agree to anything."

"So you don't care about her safety?"

"This is not about her safety. This is about you being jealous that I took her with me today and didn't wait for you."

"You're an asshole."

"That's a real nice thing to say in front of our daughter."

Ethan kissed Max on the forehead.

"Daddy?" asked Max.

"What is it, sweetie?"

"I don't know how to tell time on this watch." She pointed to the black band on her wrist.

"We can worry about that later," said Mary.

Ignoring his wife, Ethan pointed to one of the buttons on the side of the band. "You push this button. There. See? Now it shows the time. But it's not a watch, sweetie. That's the new e-Ssistant from NewGrade. It's your own little assistant on your wrist."

Max stared at the time and said, "It looks like a watch."

"After those bad people are gone, I'll show you all of the cool stuff it can do."

They sat in silence while the commotion outside increased. Ethan grabbed the remote from the table, and turned the television on. The already low volume seemed deafening in the quiet room. He immediately hit the mute button.

"Why don't you open up? We wanna watch TV with you!" a woman yelled.

Ethan recognized her voice. She was a neighbor, two doors down on the same floor. They took out the trash at the same time, and often held the door open for each other.

Mary nodded in disapproval at Ethan.

"What?" he said. "They already knew we were in here."

He flipped to a news channel. There was live footage of shops being burned down, fighting in the streets, and a group of people attempting to overturn a car.

"Ethan," a man said from outside. His voice was unusually calm, given the circumstances.

After hesitation and waving off his wife's gesture to keep quiet, he responded, "Yes?"

"Ethan, I'm sure you want this over. And, I think I can speak for us all, we don't want to spend the night in this dirty hallway."

"Then just leave...please."

"That works. We can leave. You know how to make that happen. Maybe we can sweeten the deal. How does that sound? Judging by your mail, you seem to be under a mountain of debt, Mr. Ethan Barnes."

"They're not gonna leave until they get what they came for," said Max. She wiped tears off of her cheeks with her sleeve. "It's okay."

"No," said Ethan, pulling Max down beside him.

"Please! I'm not afraid."

"No. Absolutely not. We can't save ourselves at your expense. What kind of father would I be?"

"You know what kind of father you'll be?" the man yelled from behind the door. "A dead one!"

The cheers and banging started up again. A chant was developing among the ruckus but the family was unable to identify any words.

"I'll make dinner," said Mary. "If we die of something tonight, at least it won't be starvation."

Mary walked to the open kitchen. She grabbed a pot from the lower cabinet and looked through the spice rack. Before she had a chance to withdraw, a hand reached out from the window and grabbed her by the wrist.

"I got one!" a man standing on the fire escape screeched louder than Mary could scream.

Ethan set Max down, grabbed a broom, and repeatedly jabbed the stick outside the window. The man attempted to catch the broom handle with each hit, but it would slip out of his hand. Ethan noted that the man looked very young under his shaggy hair.

"Go home, kid," said Ethan. "I'm sure your parents wouldn't be too happy about you being out tonight."

The man laughed and responded, "No way! My whole family is out tonight and we're not going home empty handed."

"Then they'll probably be proud of you when you tell them this story."

Ethan pushed Mary to the side in order to give himself enough room to swing a fist out the window.

The punch connected and the man fell down the fire escape stairs. Ethan poked his head out the window to see how far the man had fallen. He was squirming in pain, one floor down. But there was more movement below: even further down, a group of people were climbing the stairs.

"We need to board up this window! And any other window with a fire escape," said Ethan.

A crash from the bedroom let them know that it was too late to block that entrance from the incoming mob.

Max darted for the front door. She opened it to find no one was there anymore. They had all moved to the other side of the building to join the crowd that was climbing towards the windows.

"Max!" Mary yelled.

Ethan looked back in time to see his daughter run out the front door. He knocked over a stand in the kitchen that was holding vegetables. While the crowd squirmed through the kitchen window and stumbling over potatoes and onions, Ethan and Mary ran out the door.

Not having any time to waste waiting for the elevator, they took the stairs to the ground floor.

"Max!" Mary called.

"Where'd you go, Max?" asked Ethan.

"There!" Mary pointed to the tiny figure running down the sidewalk across from their apartment building.

They ran as fast as they could but, in front of her, was another horde of people.

"Oh my God!" Mary screamed. "What is she doing?"

Ethan picked up the pace, noticing that the group ahead was stationary. They curiously watched the young girl as she approached them. Some holding up sticks, ready to swing once she was in reach.

"Hey!" said Max. "You big idiots! Why don't you leave us alone?"

That earned her a barrage of laughter. They all fell silent at the same time, as soon as Max removed the e-Ssistant from her wrist.

One of the men took a few steps forward and said, "Come here, little girl."

A woman, with a bandana wrapped around her mouth, jumped on his back and put him in a chokehold. She shrieked into his ear, "If anyone gets one tonight, it's gonna be me!"

Another man took a few steps forward, only to be tackled to the ground by two teenage boys. A woman with a ponytail was dragged back into the crowd by her hair when she tried to make a move towards Max.

"Let go of me, you bitch! She's gonna get away," the first man said.

"I won't," said Max.

The crowd quieted down enough to listen, but kept hold of each other.

"Max, don't!" Ethan yelled as he finally reached her. "You don't have to do this."

"Yes, I do." She held up the gadget for them all to get a good look at it, and then threw it into the crowd.

As soon as the first person came in contact with the object, all hell broke loose.

Ethan picked Max up and sprinted back to the apartment. Over his shoulder, she could see punches flying, knives darting in and out of flesh, a young woman had her head smashed into the ground over and over, and the headlock on the first man ended in a snap as his lifeless body slumped to the floor.

By the time the Barnes family got back into their apartment, there was no one left. They all heard the excitement outside and ran out to join the brawl.

"Why?" Ethan asked, setting Max down on the sofa. "Why'd you do that?"

"I didn't even want it," Max said through tears.

"Of course you did. Everyone wants one. You saw all those people lined up outside the store today. You were excited when we reached the front of the line. Now you wanna pretend that you didn't want one?"

"I just like doing stuff with you. I don't even know what that thing does."

"It does everything!" Ethan took a deep breath to compose himself before continuing, "I'm sorry. I'm not mad at you. It's just...I know you'll regret it when you're the only one in your class that doesn't have one. Won't you feel silly?"

"No."

"I can't talk to her when she's like this," Ethan said to Mary.

"She's still young," Mary shrugged.

Mary began picking up the vegetables that were scattered across the floor. With one last confused nod, Ethan went to the kitchen to sweep up the broken glass from the window.

Max watched her parents clean, still perplexed as to how they thought the tiny device was worth the chaos they had faced. She looked out the living room window and saw the crowd was still out there. The surrounding sidewalk was decorated by corpses that served as a makeshift barrier. Anyone who was able to get their hands on the latest release from NewGrade, was not able to hold it long enough to climb over the bodies.

"Dad," said Max. "They're still out there."

"I know," Ethan responded, brushing a pile of glass into a dustpan.

"Were you and Mom ever like that?"

Ethan dropped the dustpan and looked at Mary, who was already staring back at him. Neither moved from their positions.

"Were you? You said you used to go out together on Release Day," said Max.

"No," said Ethan, not taking his eyes off of his wife.

"We were never like those people," Mary agreed.

"Okay," said Max. "I was just asking because—"

"I think it's time for bed. Don't you?" Mary asked Ethan.

"You're right," said Ethan. "Go to sleep, Max. We'll clean up."

Max watched their uncomfortable body language and decided to let the subject go for the moment. She went to bed, knowing that they could discuss it again on the next Release Day.

About the Author:

Kahramanah is an American-Egyptian horror writer that currently resides in New York. She's a lover of all things terrifying and an avid supporter of every form of indie horror. Her stories have appeared in the anthologies *Manifest Reality* released by Hair Brained Press, and *Crescendo of Darkness* by HorrorAddicts.

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Fresh tear tracks cascade down my cheeks, feeling like acid dripping slowly towards my breaking heart. I've put my heart and soul into a relationship for two years, only to figure out that a lifetime wouldn't have been enough. My mind is consumed in a spider's web of questions, each branching off into three other questions of their own. Ultimately, I know I could ask all of them and the answers wouldn't matter. Nothing matters to someone who's given away their soul.

Justin and I met at a bowling alley when I was halfway through my teenage years. He had just entered his twenties. The age difference wasn't evident immediately; we were so taken with each other that we didn't think to ask. He called me every chance that he got after that first night.

I'd never been with anyone intimately and though we definitely had the chance, Justin never pushed me. He was sexually experienced, had a full time job and sold grass on the side to boot. We would get together anytime that we could during the weekends. I was a high school girl who still lived with Mommy and Daddy. I didn't even know how to smoke a cigarette without exhaling through my nose. While Justin had been shown pleasures and had real, adult experiences with *women*. Normally the pressure of a situation like this would break lesser girls, but not me. Justin was happy just to be with me. We didn't have to smoke, fuck or do anything other than hold each other, talk and laugh. It was my first *pure* relationship. My heart broke to see it end. The best summertime romances usually do though right? The good ole' Danny and Sandy scenario.

Justin had come to my town with his friend Vance for a funeral. Vance's mother had killed herself. All these years later and I still don't know how or why... but that's for another day. Well, when it was time for Vance to go back home to a state that was practically across the country, Justin had no choice but to leave with him.

We both moved on with our lives but the thought of Justin always sat dormant in the back of my mind, as first loves often do. I married young, built a home with my husband and gave him two sons. Unbeknownst to me, he did just about the same. Both of our paths ended in divorce, and that's what started the pathway of bullshit and destruction that led us up to this point.

Hey! Remember me?

One message, just one social media message started me on the path to Hell. Yeah I know, I didn't have to respond, sure. But I wanted to. My heart and mind were entranced with the fact that he even remembered who I was and that I once meant something to him. It all felt so wonderful. We fell right back into the groove we found together fifteen years earlier.

It was only the natural order of things that we meet up again. He drove all the way across the country nonstop to see me. We played house for a wonderful four days. I don't need to tell you the details, you already know we slept together. It was so much more than that though. It was... talking and laughing and reeking of garlic from dinner together. He taught me new things and looked at me in a way I had never felt before. I thought that I had done the same for him, I'd desperately hoped anyway.

As high as we rose together towards the heavens of soul-entwining bliss, we came crashing down to hell that much harder.

At first it was little things, I went from hearing every aspect about his day to entire twenty-four hour periods with no contact. I guess I shouldn't say no contact. I tried to get a hold of him plenty, to no avail. He would call me later, tell me he was depressed because of the distance and didn't feel like talking. Then we both got jobs with clashing schedules. Then a week went by, this excuse was that his mother was dying and he was tending to family matters. Next thing I know I couldn't reach him for a month...I didn't know if he was dead, sad, fucking someone, etc. Eventually I gave up and we fell out of touch for over a year. He wrote me to apologize one day out of the blue, just like the first time.

I forgave him, we once again picked up where we left off. The disappearances happened a few more times over the next year; but I'd always take him back. I know, I know... fool me once, shame on me. Fool me twice, shame on you. But I'd loved this man for half my life.

I'd mostly kept all thoughts about Justin to myself. I hadn't had that many friends locally, and the ones I'd bare my soul to all lived out of state. What other option was there? I even went to therapy for God's sake. It's not like I could afford to drive twenty-two hours cross country or book a plane ticket just to ask why the fuck someone was ignoring me. I'm pretty sure they have shows on ID Discovery about that kind of behavior anyway. Glenn Close flashed through my mind repeatedly in her white dress, 'I will NOT be ignored!' That's not who I wanted to be.

I finally opened up to a close friend Wayne about all that I'd been going through after texting Justin that my father was in the hospital and him asking for cigarette money in response. This wasn't the man I'd known and loved

since my heart was old enough to know how to feel the act. Whatever magic we did have was blackened and twisted into a symbiotic need on both parts. I needed my heart to catch up with reality. Anyway, my friend told me about this ritual, metaphorical healing more than anything else really.

"Natalie, I know this sounds weird but the next time you take a shower, bring a pair of scissors into the tub with you. Scrub yourself as clean as you can and while you rinse off, cut the water droplets in the air. Speak your pain aloud about how they've made you feel. Shout the truths that your subconscious won't let your heart absorb. Make a cut with each declaration. Then when you're done, scrub your tub. Clean it as well as you possibly can; smudge it afterwards if you want to." Wayne said, clearing his throat before waiting for me to ask the questions I no doubt had formed.

My mind was having a hard time processing the information. "But... Justin doesn't give a shit if my tub's clean or not." I quipped.

Wayne chuckled in response. "I know right? That's what I said too initially. But try it. You have nothing to lose."

"What is it supposed to do? Like what's the purpose?" I inquired.

"Well it's quite literal really. It represents you cutting mental and emotional ties to the person intended. You're cutting the emotional tether, releasing yourself from the power they hold over you."

I agreed and disconnected the call. Wayne hadn't known it, but I was getting ready to take a shower just before he called. The scissors resting on the corner of the sink from trimming my hair the night before only solidified my resolve. It seemed like fate had given me everything I needed to be on my way to a better mindset.

So, just as instructed, I followed the uhhh... exercise? I guess would be the right word? I don't know. The important thing is that I did it. There were so many tears and cuts. It surprised me just how painful the words were to say. My bathroom tub was the cleanest it had ever been. The smell of bleach and burnt sage lingered on my skin and throughout the entire bathroom. I can't say I felt any different after. That wouldn't be put to the test until I heard from him again. Hopefully the next time he dragged himself out of the shadows to grace me with his presence, I'd be ready.

Exhausted in every way possible, I laid down in bed. It barely took any time at all to surrender to the sweet, painless pull of sleep.

I spent the whole next week slowly clearing all signs of Justin from my life. I changed my phone number and blocked his email addresses. None of this meant a damn thing until I blocked him from my Facebook, but there were some pictures I needed off there that I wasn't ready to look at yet. Besides, it's not likely that he'd contact me anyway right? This was more symbolic for me than anything else.

I slept in the next day, waking early the next afternoon, well past the time of singing birds and rooster crows in the bright summer sky. Justin was normally the first thing on my mind, and he definitely was that morning, but not in the same regard. His memory was wispy, almost ethereal. Like the memory of someone who had long since passed. To avoid any future pain and drunken stalking, I opened up the Facebook app and went to Justin's page, fully intent on blocking him from my social media life.

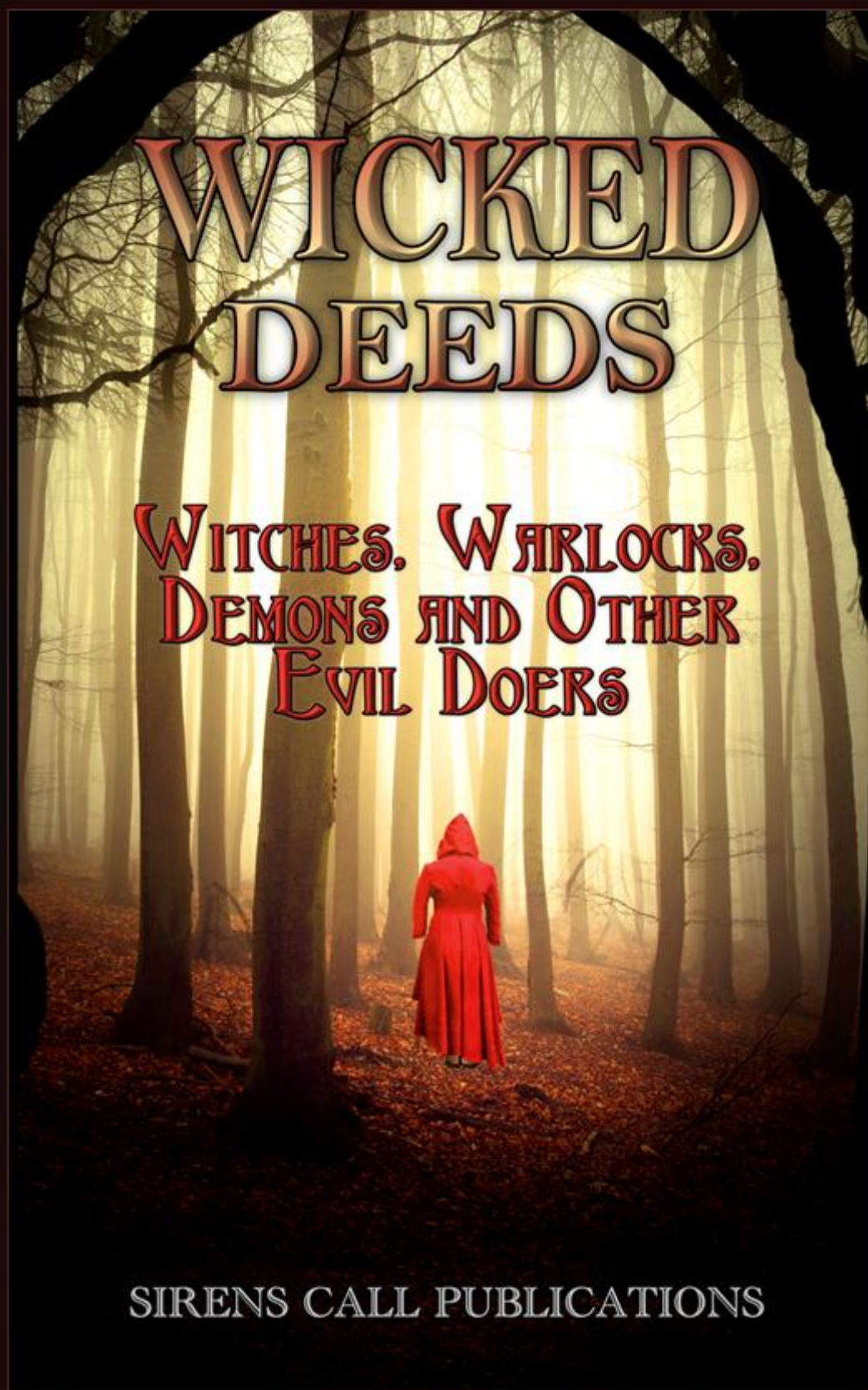
There were at least a dozen posts on his wall, including a one from his mother in bold print. She posted a message that Justin was found dead in his apartment that morning. His....*wife* had come home after staying the night at a family member's house to find him dead. Justin had died from multiple stab wounds. Most were shallow, but the deepest and fatal blow was evident by the wound in his heart.

About the Author:

N.M. Brown is a happily married mother who sheds light on the dark corners of the mind that we like to keep hidden. She has stories in *Sirens at Midnight*, the recent award winning series *Calls From the Brighter Futures Suicide Hotline*, along with several others. Her passions include soap making, publishing and spending time with family.



Sometimes wicked people do wicked things...



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The man stepped out of his car and directly into a muddy puddle.

"I knew I should have worn boots," he grumbled and wiggled his toes in a vain attempt to protect them from the damp leather. "Well, if this is the worst thing that happens tonight we'll be lucky."

"Are you the... the exorcist?" the lady at the Glassbridge Community Gardens' gate looked both hopeful and embarrassed.

"Delton Waynes. Paranormal investigator, at your service."

"I'm Majella," she smiled and shook his outstretched hand. "Majella Hook."

Although she was no older than forty Majella's hair was already iron grey, her face weathered and lined from being outside. With her low-slung tool-belt adorned with trowels and pruning shears she looked every inch the hipster, guerrilla gardener.

"Haunted vegetable patch, right?" Delton missed her embarrassment as he removed a leather shoulder bag from the car. "You know, I'm not all that fond of veg to be honest. It's all just so... green."

Majella tried to resist staring at Delton's immense stomach, which protruded through his open jacket and strained the buttons of his tweed waist-coat, like it wanted to join their conversation.

Suddenly, from someplace nearby, came a great creaking and groaning, as if some ancient and immense being was trying to pull itself out from the very earth.

"Sounds ominous," Delton said. "Lead on."

"This was all wasteland, an awkward little wedge, left over when they finished building Rosepark Downs," Majella indicated the identical houses poking over the hedge like nosey neighbours. "Too close to the train tracks on one side and the canal on the other, it's perfect for community gardening. Well, if it wasn't haunted that is."

As they walked Delton noticed well-tended rectangles of growth and green, where orbs of orange, red and yellow hung from vines and creepers. Decorations fashioned from bits of coloured glass and plastic, home-made sun-catchers, flickered the light and added colour.

Delton stopped. There was a shadowy figure up ahead.

"That's just our scarecrow," Majella said slowly, concerned he'd been spooked so easily.

"He's wearing the same jacket as I am," Delton looked down at his clothes, disappointed.

Then, from his left, came the snap of branches and Delton turned in time to see a coil of vines slither, like snakes, out of sight beneath some greenery.

"That's my patch," Majella whispered. "The haunted one."

Delton held a finger to his lips and approached slowly. With the handle of a rake he parted the leaves to reveal a hunched over heap, all green moss and brown earth. In the centre of this twisted mass of vegetation a pumpkin, orangey-brown and creased, sat like a bloated king.

It began to turn.

Delton stepped back and elbowed Majella gently in the ribs.

"You know, a demonic vegetable patch isn't the strangest thing I've investigated. Once this football team contacted me to perform an exorcism on their opponents," he paused for dramatic effect. "Because they had so much possession."

The lines on Majella's brow furrowed even deeper.

"That was a joke," Delton said slowly.

"Oh. It wasn't very good."

Just then the sinews of vegetation creaked and groaned as they stretched out of the ground and the pumpkin was slowly lifted aloft. Roots and vines shoved it upwards, until finally it towered over them, nine feet tall. Through the cloak of moss, twists of stem and nodes could be seen, like dirt covered entrails.

The pumpkin-head pulled itself apart with a rip, to reveal a jagged mouth, a wide gash of open rawness. Pulp dripped from the ragged hole. A thin section of brown root extended out over the gardens and, with root-like fingers, plucked an unsuspecting duck from off the canal bank. There was an elastic snap and the bird disappeared into the gaping pumpkin mouth followed by a crunch, then the crack and fatal snap of tiny bones.

Behind him Delton could hear Majella getting violently sick.

"Come on, while we still have time," Delton whispered. From the leather satchel he removed a canister. He popped the lid and walked quickly in a circle around the still chewing demon, pouring the contents out as he did. "Salt, it's not just good for seasoning, you know."

An unbroken circle completed Delton removed a candle from the bag and placed it on the ground, just outside the salt circle. He lit the wick and began to chant.

The pumpkin-head, suddenly aware, twisted, turned, seemed to seek him out. Blood and feathers painted the front of it, like an obscene mouth. A root, fast and wicked, flicked out, hit the air above the salt and crackled.

Sparks flew.

The pumpkin headed thing bellowed, a deep, earthy sound. There was a momentary pause and then it drove a vine down into the ground, burrowing. This emerged victorious on the far side of the salt circle and quickly wrapped around Delton's waist. The exorcist dug his fingers into the soil for purchase and continued to chant through gritted teeth as the pumpkin howled and pulled him towards it.

Then Majella was at the edge of the circle. Trowel in one hand, shears in the other, she hacked mercilessly at the greenery. The pumpkin roared as sap leaked from the wounds.

Delton's chants changed, and the circle of salt lit up, electric-white-blue. Fire. He lifted his arms and moved his hands together while Majella continued her assault. The cleansing flames mirrored Delton's movement and crept towards the centre of the garden patch. Everything burned until finally the pumpkin-head roared one last time and crumpled, reduced to ash.

"Thanks for the assist," Delton said as he helped Majella to her feet. "That was some good pruning."

"What was that thing?"

"Bad seeds," Delton wiped mud from his face. "Honestly. Combine those with lay lines and the negative energy compounded here and well, you saw the result."

Majella's jaw dropped "Seriously."

Delton nodded. "Getting out into nature, it's not always good for you."

About the Author:

Ken McGrath's fiction has appeared in Cirsova Magazine, K Zine, The Society Of Misfit Stories Presents..., Liquid Imagination, Daily Science Fiction and the anthologies, *The Devil's Hour* (HellBound Publications) and *Transcendent* (Transmundane Press) among others. You can find him online @fromthebigface, if you like. He lives with his wife in an upside-down house in Dublin, Ireland.

Author Blog: [Ken McGrath](#)

Snapped | *Natasha Sinclair*

Laying the last body down on the bed, I studied them both, side by side. My beautiful, loyal white pups; they looked as if they were peacefully sleeping. Dreaming still. You'd never know by this sight that I had snapped their necks. Still warm, the serenity of death. My wrist hurt. It was almost over now. There was nothing left to hold me back. I step up on to the vintage blue weaved wooden stool. Reaching above I put the prepared noose over my head to my neck and jump forward. Swinging and choking, *why didn't my neck just snap?*

About the Author:

Natasha Sinclair is from Scotland, UK. Her first published piece was released in 2018. This was followed by the release of short story fiction and poetry. Her writing spans genres including; speculative, fantasy, horror, psychological and erotica. Out-with her own publications she is a contributor to several anthologies.

When not writing she's teaching, raising and adventuring with her daughters and looking after their adopted animals.

Author Blog: [Clan Witch](#)

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The cacophony of metallic clanking, desperate and rageful sobs, and the whispers of a distant crowd brought me back from the darkness. I woke up inside a car that looked familiar, the dim glow from the interior lights bathed me, barely breaking the suffocating darkness that reigned outside. A green velvet jacket shielded my legs from the cold of the night and my head was a tangle of confusing memories, incessant murmurs and an unnerving dread.

I sat up, dizzy and unable to recall how I had gotten there. I was trying to clear my mind when the loud banging and soft sobbing broke the silence. I looked through the window and a woman was crying while she lashed out at one of the tires in the back of the car. The whispers grew louder in my ears and a stinging headache joined them.

"Mommy?" I said, after recognizing her.

"Oh God, baby, are you alright?" she asked, her voice muffled by the rolled-up windows, jumping towards me, she opened the door and wrapped me up in a warm and trembling hug. A sigh of relief escaped me, as I nodded while resting my head on her neck. I caught a whiff of her scent and shivers ran down my spine. It was a blend of different aromas: oranges, roses, and the bitterness of the cold sweat on her skin.

"Wait here, please," she said with a catch in her voice.

The sense of safety disappeared when she let go of me and moved to continue her endeavor, loosening the lug nuts. She was striking at the tire, grunting and puffing with every blow. Her face red, jaw clenched and hands gripping the tool with such strength that I could see the white of her knuckles. The wrench banging louder and louder, her tears mixing with the perspiration than ran down her face despite the cold air of the night. Her attempts were futile, the nuts were rusted almost beyond recognition, as well as most of the exterior of the car, in clear contrast to the interior.

She sat on the dirt of the road next to the car, weeping. An unfamiliar twinge ran across my chest as I watched her cry. The whispers grew louder, and I looked around, trying to locate the source, for the sound was so strong that I could have sworn a crowd of hundreds of people was muttering just behind my back. My search was in vain, I couldn't see another soul. Only the edge of the woods on the side of the road and a couple feet of road before me, awash in the headlights' white light.

"Mom, where are we?" I asked.

"We're still inside the Woods," she said, standing up to see inside the trunk of the car. "I felt us blow a tire back there. I...I tried to keep going but we almost crashed a couple of times. The car wasn't steering right, so I stopped. Tried to change it, but... but I can't. The tools, I swear! They were in better condition and... and so was the car. I don't know what's happening." She slammed the trunk closed then walked to the open door of the car where I was sitting, patiently waiting. After cleaning her hands on her skirt, she took my face, gently rubbed my cheeks. The feeling of wellbeing grew, warmth and peace filled me, the pain in my head subsided and the whispers quieted for a moment.

"Annie, I thought I'd never see you again. When you disappeared I lost my mind. Spent hours in that meadow searching for you." her voice cracked and tears rolled down her face again. "Then... that horrible sound. I don't know what it was." Her hands trembled and her voice lowered. I thought it was because of the cold. After a short pause she continued "I just remember that after the sound you appeared on the edge of the woods. You were cold but still breathing, looked as if you were sound asleep but wouldn't wake up no matter how much I called for you, so I picked you up, got you into the car, and started driving home."

"How long ago was that?" I asked, confused.

"Probably about three hours ago." As soon as she answered her face drained of color as if a horrible idea was taking shape in her mind. Her eyes widened and darted from place to place, peering outside the windows, into the darkness.

The whispers rose to a deafening level. My mother shouted and I followed her fixed and terrified gaze to the front of the car. Slightly beyond the reach of the headlights stood row after row of half-seen, shadowed human figures. She jumped into the car, closed the door, and slid into the driver's seat. She turned the ignition key.

Nothing happened.

"What's going on?" my mother screamed, pounding a fist on the dashboard even as she tried again and again to start the car.

Without warning the stereo lit up. Static filled the quiet. The white noise and the whispers scrambled my thoughts, and my headache burst behind my eyes, full force.

"Start, goddammit!" shrieked the woman between sobs and blows to the steering wheel. She turned to the stereo, trying to turn it down or off, but the buttons and knobs were stuck fast.

I covered my ears. The whispers grew louder still, the pain in my head made me cry as I rocked back and forth. The headlights flickered once, twice, then shut down completely. The rows of shadows blended into the night, and the oppressive darkness pressed against the car like a heavy blanket.

I found myself unable to move, and beside me my mother sat still as stone. The temperature plummeted, the air was damp and almost thick enough to suffocate. My mom turned to me, reached out, and as her fingers brushed my head dozens of hands started banging on the windows of the vehicle. Some hands were rotting, others were grey or green with bruises and cuts, some were bloated, and some looked perfectly fine.

My mother jumped to the back seat, shielded me tight and begged the hands to leave, her voice high and tight with panic.

After several minutes, the hands stopped banging, simply resting their palms on the windows. The whispers and the headache abated, the only sounds in the car were the static of the stereo and our heavy breathing.

"Coommme hhoooome." said a deep and distorted voice that came from the speakers of the stereo.

"What do you want? Leave us alone!" screamed my mother.

"Coommme baaackkkk tooo usssss." replied the voice, this time with an edge of anger that brought back the headache and sent shivers down my spine.

"Please!" begged my mom.

"Unnnnngratefulll." the voice growled, awash with rage. The stereo shut down and the hands started banging on the windows once more, harder and harder.

The car shook, the interior lights flickered, and blooms of rust grew on what metal I could see from inside, spreading with impossible speed. Under the onslaught the glass first cracked, and then shattered. My mother and I screamed and held tight, shielding each other from the shards that flooded the car.

The hands crawled into the vehicle slowly, sliding down the doors, creeping closer by the fingers over the dashboard and car seats. Strands of rotten flesh, fur and dirt tethered the severed limbs to the darkness on the windows. The wretched claws grabbed my mother and pulled at her back, leaving deep gashes. She kicked and struggled all she could, but the black void was stronger and slowly she was dragged away. I could neither move nor scream; the pain and panic clenched me and wouldn't let go. I wanted to help her, say something, cry, or flee. I couldn't.

One of the hands drew closer to my leg, and when it touched my skin a sizzling jolt seemed to run through me. The pain disappeared, along with the fear, everything made sense again and I was allowed to shout.

"STOP!"

The hands released their prey and withdrew back into the darkness. I inched closer to the woman, who was still shaking and crying, and I helped her up. She was in a terrible state, scratched and bloodied, shards of glass stuck in her hands, legs, and face. She hugged me, turning around, waiting for another attack.

"Easy now, everything will be fine." I said. Her eyes were wide, uncomprehending. I held her warm hands between mine and waited for her to calm before I continued.

"I have to go now, I just came back to say goodbye. I love you mom."

The door behind me opened. From the darkness a hand the size of a steering wheel, pieced together from rotting scraps of flesh that had once been both human and beast, gestured at me to come.

Unafraid, I took the hand in mine and the whispers rose now in welcome. A wave of peace swept through me, but as I edged towards the black wall a gasp made me turn. The disjointed and heartbroken look of the woman shocked me. A mix of terror, sadness and confusion was clear on her damaged face.

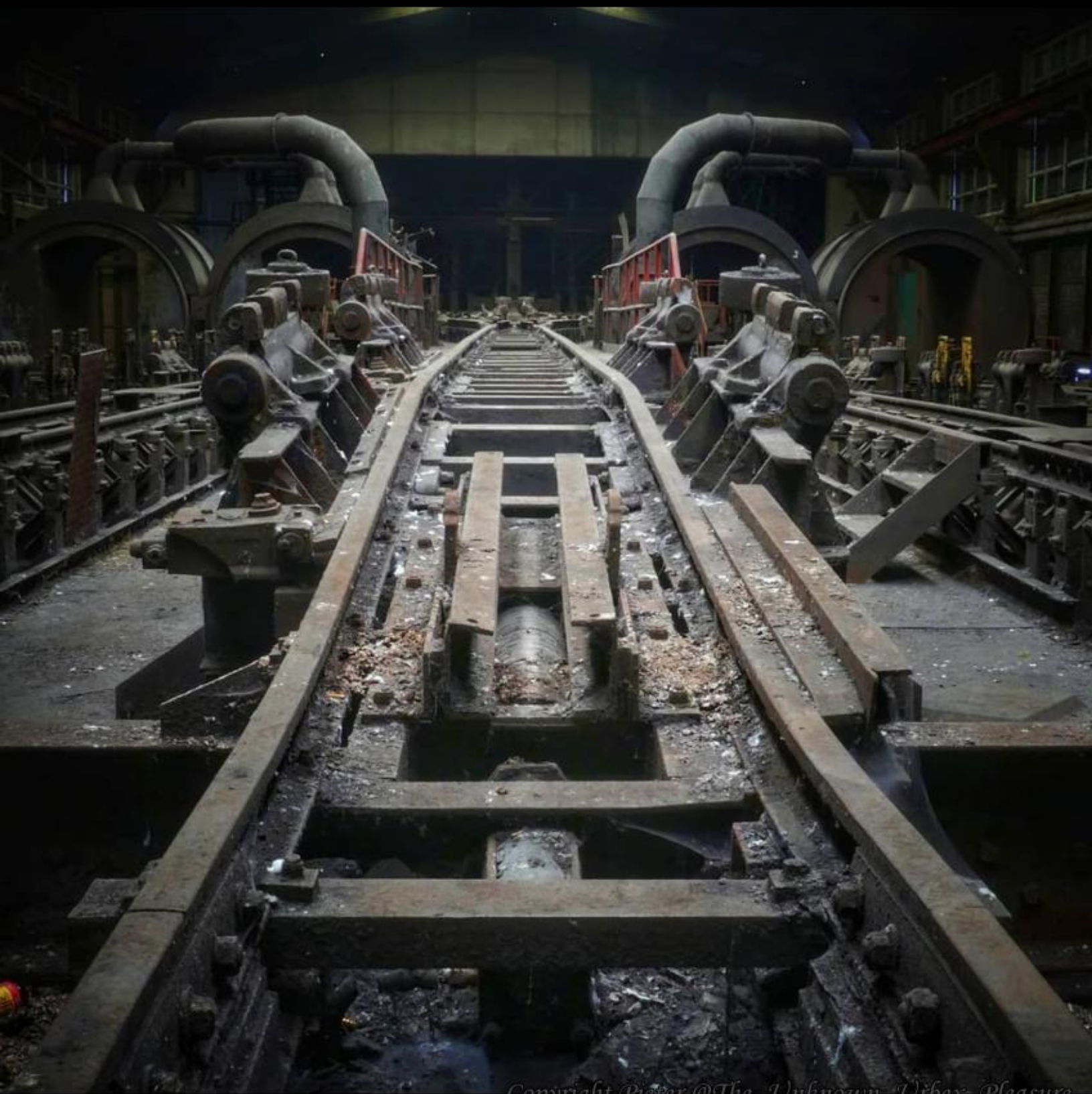
We took pity on the mother and as I extended my hand to her, I said: "You can come with us Mom."

About the Author:

Antonio Lopez A. was born in Mexico City in 1989. He is a: writer, engineer, reader, gamer, husband and father. His influences include Charles Dickens, Miguel de Unamuno, Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman. Antonio writes fiction and poetry, both in Spanish and English. He's also an enthusiastic NaNoWriMo participant and one-time winner, as well as an avid reader of horror, mystery, sci-fi, fantasy and poetry.

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The driver let me out on the side road. The sun disappeared while I walked. The distance stretched. My ankles hurt, my feet burned, but I couldn't turn back. Night fell by the time I spotted black iron metal bars—a gate shimmering in a cascade of moonlight.

The convent.

I flung myself against black-ironed gates, wide stretching and high, intending to shake them until I was heard. No buzzer or anything went off. High hedges and trees hid the gothic mansion, leaving only its narrowed cap of flourishes and hunky punk gargoyle-like creatures to peer down on me.

The gates creaked backward slowly.

I stumbled inward. "Hello?" I called, barely able to get the word out.

The gates closed behind me, as slowly as they'd opened. The sound of gushing water hinted at a fountain nearby. Trellises divided the yard into gardens.

I staggered toward the heavy wooden doors looming immaculate above the stone steps. The Sisters would be kind to me. Nuns had to be kind.

As I crossed the courtyard, the fountain on my right protruded through a garden of delights dimly lit by lampposts. A statue of a delicate and petite woman, pivoted on her toes as if a ballerina. She tilted her body to the sky, holding a rose in one hand. My eyes traveled the length of her refined body, halting on her face. Not human, but that of a beast, with hair of snakes and deformed bulging eyes and fangs.

"Does that bother you?"

"No," I lied, surprised by the presence of an older woman in a nun's habit.

"Why are you here?"

"To join the convent."

"Why?" She stared down at me from the steps, her face searching.

I took too long to answer.

"Society rejected you, did it?"

The harsh words took me back. "I am here to give myself to something greater."

"No one comes here of their own free will. Couldn't find a husband, could you?"

I steeled myself against the insult.

"Very well then, come on in," she said, and turned toward the mansion.

I glanced to the statue one last time, before following her into the mansion.

Two nuns awaited us. One was younger than me, sporting a long and protruding chin. The other was middle-aged, not as old as the woman I trailed.

"Thank you for welcoming me," I said.

"This...", said the Nun who let me inside, turning to me.

"Ellis Brown," I said, stepping forward.

Their eyes drifted to my feet; their expressions turned ugly. I glanced to my own feet, fearing I had dragged mud or dirt in with me. It was neither. Plant needles stuck out from my right ankle. It must have poked me when I ran. I moved to rip it off.

"Don't bother," said the eldest Nun, stepping forward and taking a piece of her robe in her hand. She stooped to remove the bush, observing it with great interest. A drop of blood ran from my ankle, but it wasn't enough to stain the floor and cause a mess.

"Must be a Venus Flytrap," said the Nun.

"I'm sorry. I got lost on the way. I would not have come so late..."

"Cecelia, show her to her room," said the Nun.

"Yes, Mother Superior," said the young nun stepping forward. She took my arm, a wide grin on her face—happiness. Giddiness. I knew not what it meant.

The bell's chimes woke me, heavy in my ears, as if the tower was close by. After breakfast, Mother Superior showed me around the castle—"Given to the Sisters by a prince who died ages ago," she said.

We traveled by the pond, through the gardens. I was in love.

My days fell into a routine. They did not ask me to take my vows. When I tried to help with chores and gardening, I was shunned.

"I came to join the Convent," I said in protest.

"You are a special girl, Ellis," Mother Superior said, but that was all.

I spent my days in the gardens. The fountain statue disturbed and enthralled me. It felt wrong. Such a beautiful and delicate woman given such an ugly face. Beauty should never mix with beast, and my gut agreed. Maybe because I had never been considered beautiful, and had been punished because of that, I had grown obsessed. The garden had plants Mother Superior knew by heart.

One morning, Cecelia could not be found. The sisters combed through the castle and discovered her body at sunset. Mother Superior waved me away, and from my bedroom, I watched a flood of sisters rush in and out of the bell tower.

I anticipated the arrival of the police or coroner but none came. Mother Superior took me aside the next morning, her face cold and hard. "Cecelia has died."

"How?"

"It is not important. We've dealt with it."

That was all.

Cecelia's death weighed heavily on me. I escaped to the gardens. In a quiet spot, near a batch of hydrangeas, I used a trowel to dig a small grave for Cecelia, placing a crucifix carved with her name. After covering the gravesite with a small flat stone, I rose to my feet and spotted the glimmer of a white shiny object some three feet away protruding from the dirt.

The thought of some marvelous buried treasure quickly disappeared when I pulled the object out from the ground.

A human skull.

My disgust morphed into horror at the sight of its empty eye sockets and exposed teeth.

They did not remove Cecilia's body from the tower. I am sure of it.

I ran to my bedroom, paced, trying but failing to calm myself. This place wasn't right. From the moment I'd arrived, I'd sensed it—the eeriness. Strange sounds late at night. Sick to my stomach about Cecelia, and unable to take my mind off the skull, I began packing my small bag. I could not stay any longer.

Mother Superior stood in the doorway.

I staggered backward.

"Is something wrong?" Her eyes lacked the concern of her words.

I took a deep breath. "I can't stay. This life isn't right for me."

Mother Superior's serious expression had an undertone of amusement. "Ellis, that's not the way it works. Did Cecelia not explain the rules to you?"

"I haven't taken any vows." I tried to sidestep her.

She blocked my path. "Is there a reason for your change of heart?"

A human skull in the garden. I took a deep breath. "I simply must leave."

"Nonsense," she said, grabbing my bag and tossing it aside, looking confidently pleased as she faced me again. "Once you enter, you can't leave, not without my permission."

"You can't make me stay here." What did she have in mind? Would she physically try to stop me?

"I have wondered about you Ellis. How much you'd fit into this convent. Whether you are strong enough."

"Please get out of my way."

Mother Superior's amused eyes locked with mine.

I marched past her. I bolted past Sister Ann, and rushed out the heavy front doors. This whole place made me sick. The iron gates loomed ahead of me. As I raced toward them, a shot of bone-crushing pain ripped through me, knocking me down.

I needed to reach the gates. They pulled away from me. My limbs were suddenly heavy and my breath loud in my ears. From the corner of my eyes, something moved. The hedge bushes bristled.

The statue of the ballerina with the demon-face. Her stone-grey eyes opened up and pinned me. *No, not real. Why couldn't I move?* Something latched onto me. I looked down and gasped at the sight of vines crawling over me like snakes.

Mother Superior hovered over my crippled body.

"Ellis, I chose you for a reason. You'll breathe new life into us."

"Let. Me. Go," I said, weakly. They'd poisoned me.

"I'm afraid that's not possible anymore," Mother Superior said, snapping her fingers. The other four sisters pulled me to my feet.

"Take her to her room and lock her inside."

The chimes of the bell tower haunted my sleeping hours. The tower became my distraction, consuming my attention whenever I was frustrated. I dreamed that I saw Cecelia inside of it, crying, crouched down like a scared child in a corner, her hands covering her eyes.

She peered up—"It won't be long now."

A loud bang jolted me from my sleep and I leaped upright in time to witness Mother Superior storm into the room in a march toward the window. "It's a lovely day outside," she said, pulling the drapes.

"It won't be long now, Ellis." Mother Superior marched out of the room.

It won't be long now.

The words never left me as I plotted my escape three days later. My room was very high up into the castle but I braved the climb downward, choosing to die rather than stay a moment more in this hell. Barefooted and determined, I used ledges and hunches on the castle to anchor me. I slipped plenty of times and had to fight to stay balanced. When about fifteen feet off the ground, a chunk of concrete broke away under my feet. I landed on my back.

Voices echoed from the nearby garden. The only path of escape was by the tower that led to the woods beyond. Though wary of it, I raced inside of the tower. From behind the slightly ajar door, I watched the casual strides of Sisters Ann and Mary. I'd feared they'd come inside, since at least one person often entered.

The door slammed shut, locking me inside of the tower. I wrestled with the knob to no avail. The tower was not at all what I'd imagined. Because the sisters visited it so often, I assumed it harbored some comfort, but the room was dark and cold. Ashy. There were no signs of anything worth noting. It looked like a storage room.

This couldn't be right.

The longer my eyes roved over it the thicker the cloak of gloom, and even the smell—a faint stinging odor of decay. I wandered around the empty room, seeking another door, or at least a light switch, anything that could help me navigate my way out. There was nothing useful in the room. Had I truly entered the tower or somewhere else entirely?

The space around me grew small, tiny echoes underlying its eeriness. Another occupant was in this room. I almost missed it, the strenuous wheezing that wasn't mine. The other's strained breathing fell out of sync with my own.

"Who's there?" The loud echo of my voice died in the silent room. Silence was such a misleading word. It implied the absence of sounds. But what about emotions? The quiet weighed down burdensomely on my nerves. I saw no one else, and my rigidity softened as my fear thawed, replaced by the tingle of newfound lucidity. *I am a coward.*

The other occupant took a quick gasp of air. The room spun and shrunk, confining me to its vacuum of whispers and hums. My eyes widened, narrowing on a chair to the right of me—standing where a fireplace might have been. *Where did that come from? Had it been there the whole time and I missed it?* I took a shaky step forward, intending to put aside my fearful suspicion. Three steps behind the wooden chair. No need to go further. It was empty.

Closing my eyes, I pressed one hand against my stomach trying to squeeze out the anxiety. *Don't let them win.*

Someone or something dashed to the other side of the room stalling my stride to the door.

Nothing odd revealed itself in the darkened room, but my suspicion rose all the same. Whatever this convent was it clearly wasn't for me.

No matter how I pounced and leaned into it, the door wouldn't open.

Squeaking. The sound was behind me.

I faced the source of the errant noise. The chair.

It rocked. Why was it rocking? There was no wind. No opening in a wall. No ... My thoughts died, choked by a clump of dread in my throat. My gut bottomed out. Someone was behind me. I could feel the shallow, wheezing, low and cold on my back.

Every bone inside of my body calcified. From the corner of my eyes, long spindly fingers wiggled slowly toward my shoulder. The flesh of the hand was scaly and reptilian. The nails were thick, big, and very sharp. A smell of fish decay burned through my nostrils, setting my fears on fire.

All at once my mind shattered. I broke into pitch high shrieks and dashed from the creature. It slithered around me, halting my dash to the door in a quick move. I saw, in that moment, the inevitable pain I'd suffer in death. The creature towered some eight feet in height, its body scaly and fork-tailed. My eyes traced up from its bony and liver-spotted chest all the way to its gilled face, before settling on its horrendous fish-shaped mouth, opening with the stench of rotted meat. Its teeth. Forks. Sharp. Strong enough to crush my bones with a single clamp.

What good was screaming?

Oh, it didn't matter now. The monstrosity hawked its snakehead backward and sucked in a shrieking, mucus heavy breath. In a second my face was on fire. A splatter of phlegm formed a cast over it. I was suffocating. I wiped the sticky, acidic secretion from my burning skin.

The castle was the first thing that came into view when I opened my eyes. Why I was seeing it? I couldn't move. I took in as much as I could about my surroundings. Plants—I was surrounded by plants. Was I in the garden?

"This is such an interesting statue." A young nun I didn't recognize walked into my view.

"Oh yes," said Mother Superior, coming to stand beside the girl. "Does her face bother you?"

"In some ways, the mix of beauty and beast works," said the young nun.

The nun peered up ... at me. Horror chewed my insides. The statue. Me. No! What was happening?

"It keeps watch over us—been doing so for centuries."

"Centuries? It looks so new."

"It's recently polished ... given a *new* life." Mother Superior laughed. "Each time we polish it, we give it a new name. I like to call this new model, Ellis. It will last another hundred years before it needs polishing again." Mother Superior exhaled. "Let's get you acquainted. Cecilia, come here please."

Cecilia, looking exactly like the Cecilia I remembered, joined them. She locked hands with the new recruit. "Let me show you your room."

They skipped away.

I screamed.

No one looked back.

About the Author:

K.M. McKenzie is a writer from Toronto, Canada whose short stories have been published in *Strange Economics*, *Shoreline of Infinity*, *Polar Borealis*, *Scare Street*, and *Cosmic-Horror.net*. She has been attempting to learn French and play the guitar for ten years with little improvement, though she's vastly improved her kitchen witch skills.

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Jerry's mates had dared him to spend Halloween night in the reputedly haunted 'Picture House Bookshop'.

The abandoned cinema's grubby art deco façade had been left to decay for decades. But a few years ago it had been restored to its former glitzy glory as a vast bookshop with cunning staircases, towering mahogany shelves and curving mezzanines overlooking what had been the auditorium and the vast wall where the silver screen had once been suspended.

Some said the restoration had enticed the spirit of the movies to return; ghostly film stars strolled through the red-carpeted foyer; House of Hammer ghouls lurked in cellar storerooms. Customers swore that they heard an old cinema organ playing as they sipped their lattes in the bookstore's *Auditorium Coffee Shop*, though the vintage Wurlitzer console had long since been sold off.

The store closed at 6pm. The departing staff didn't notice Jerry hidden between the bookshelves on the high mezzanine overlooking the coffee shop. In the darkening hours, the yellow light from the streetlamps outside cast shadows among the books, fracturing the titles with darkness. Jerry cracked open a beer and fired up his hand-held games console. He'd come equipped with enough entertainment to last the night – anything to avoid actually reading a book. He was more afraid of boredom than of the ghosts.

However, at midnight Jerry noticed flickering lights in the auditorium below. He peeped out of his hiding place and saw a series of brilliant images passing over the silver screen wall. A book stood upright and open on the coffee shop counter, its pages flicking to the beat of the moving images. Books sat on each of the café chairs, watching intently.

The book on the counter turned its last page and closed its covers. The other books flapped in applause.

Jerry took a few photos on his phone. He thought he must be dreaming, but the sound of drunks spilling from the nightclub opposite was real.

He tried to message his mates. BEEP!

>Message Undelivered<

A *shushing* drew his attention back to the auditorium.

There was a new book on the counter, waiting. Jerry turned his phone off, convinced that the books were staring at him. The show resumed. A title flashed onto the screen 'The Catcher in the Rye'.

Jerry groaned.

Just my luck, he thought, *I'm in a haunted bookstore with the dullest book ever written.*

The title image gave way to the story, not in letters, but in pictures. Even Jerry knew that the novel had never been made into a movie, yet there it was.

'Of Mice and Men' came next, followed by 'The Old Man and the Sea', old school bores that had left Jerry dozing at the back of the classroom. Yet here, the images gave the stories a fascination that he had never appreciated. Jerry wondered whether the bookshop had plucked the titles from his mind, trying to educate him where all his teachers had failed.

At dawn, the screen darkened, and Jerry heard the susurrations of books flying back to their shelves. He turned his phone on—full signal. He couldn't wait to get his photos onto social media. They'd go viral. He'd be famous.

As he poised his finger over the 'POST' button, the cinema screen flickered into life. There was a new book on the counter. The screen showed a graphic depiction of a young man being punished for divulging a great secret. Jerry grinned; this was more his style. He watched intently as the man on screen was horribly dismembered until only his head remained... a head wearing Jerry's face.

He felt the books watching as he slowly lowered his phone...

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's best friend says 'For someone so lovely, you're very twisted!'

Author Blog: [Ideal Reader Blog](#)

Twitter: [@Indigodreamers](#)

In Darkness Calls there are ten tales of the supernatural, the macabre and the weird for you to enjoy.

*Darkness Calls:
Tales From the Shadows*



Alyson Faye

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Wanting Song | Lee Andrew Forman

With a solemn lurch we go on. A fragrance only the dead know hangs over us, vapor over dust. No light of nature, no bright joy, only the motive to keep going. It tethers us, a walking tangle of thoughts and dreams no longer cherished. What lies at the end of the dried land we aren't sure. We only know we must go there. Souls pull sagging flesh, drawn to whatever is beyond the expanse of lifeless soil. Swollen feet crack; they bleed a trail behind us. But evidence of our journey won't last long against even the void's subtle breath.

A violent tone bursts from somewhere beyond the horizon. A low-pitched blast, a beacon the planet itself could feel. Each time it fills the air our feet push a little harder. That nightmarish horn draws us like desperate, stray creatures. We struggle to it like infants in need of milk—weak, fragile, endangered by our own nature. Only we know not whether the milk will be sweet or sour. We don't know if it will be there at all. We only hear the thunderous horn, the only thing in our world that isn't us.

Our memories serve empty plates. That which came before the march has been forgotten. None know how long it has been. The only thing to feed on is the horn, the beckoning storm of sound, the not-so-silent savior of emptiness.

I once asked the man next to me where we came from. He only shrugged. When I try to think of how long we've been traveling my mind fogs over; words, phrases, meaning, they shadow themselves from insight. I can only focus for so long before my feet begin to slow; I've never reached a conclusion.

All I know is to follow the sound. Whether it be life or death holds no importance. To witness something other than all I've known would be Heaven.

About the Author:

Lee Andrew Forman is a writer, editor, and publisher from the Hudson Valley, NY. His fascination with the macabre began in childhood, watching old movies and reading everything he could get his hands on. He's a third-generation horror fanatic, starting with his grandfather who was a fan of the classic Hollywood Monsters. His novella, *Zero Perspective* is available on Amazon.

Blog: [Lee Andrew Forman, Author](#)

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Darkest Dreams | Kelly Matsuura

It's a costume, I say to myself. *Just a stupid Halloween costume.*

I'm wearing it to the block party, I'll have my photo taken in it, and then I'll take it off.

Probably.

As I cross the neighborhood, I feel it stirring.

No, not *it*. Me. I feel *me* inside, ready to come out. This suit with alum claws, synthetic skin and black folded wings, makes my darkest dream come alive. I'm reborn.

I turn the corner and spot the perfect victim—my ex, Georgios. As I tear wildly at his chest and face, he screams in pure terror.

"Harpy!"

About the Author:

Kelly Matsuura writes diverse YA, fantasy, and literary fiction. She is the creator of *The Insignia Series'* anthologies (Asian fantasy themed) and has had stories published with Ink & Locket Press, A Murder of Storytellers, Black Hare Press, Harbinger Press, and many more. Kelly lives in Nagoya, Japan with her geeky husband. She loves traveling, knitting, cooking, and of course, reading.

Website: [Black Wings and White Paper](#)



The First Day

I arrived at Mannerley half an hour early; it had always been my intention to view the church ahead of my meeting with the incumbent, Reverend Jenner. The Architectural Digest had provided a very specific brief: to determine the extent to which Victorian 'improvements' had affected the early 13th century Norman crypt. This was topical because the crypt had been opened for the first time since 1897, when the most recent occupant had been interred there.

What I knew already about Mannerley I had gained from a local guidebook: *'the church, in the Early English and Georgian styles, is of part-dressed, coursed sandstone rubble and part sandstone ashlar, with slate and plain tiled roofs with parapets at the gable ends.'*

The church was situated atop a hill, from which the excellent panoramic views of Worcestershire were afforded. I was taking this in when pulled out of my reverie by a hand on my shoulder.

"Mr. Bannerman, I presume?"

I turned to find a man dressed in clerical black standing looking at me with the keenest interest, all the time with his hand still on my shoulder.

"Reverend Jenner," I responded. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

Jenner gave every indication that the feeling was mutual.

"My dear fellow, do come in. My housekeeper has prepared tea. You must understand that we get very few visitors out here, and certainly fewer still from such a distinguished publication as the Architectural Digest."

He took my arm and led me toward the church porch, and as he did my attention was drawn to a nearby copse. It was the wind blowing hard through the branches, which first attracted my interest. It was the sight of the young woman, kneeling by a monument and dressed all in black that held my attention. There was something about the scene that was disquieting, as if it *could not be*, and in a twinkling, I realised the wind was blowing a gale, but this woman was unaffected by it; her dress unruffled, her veil motionless.

Her veil...

"You will see our crypt after tea, I suppose. There's no electric lighting of course, but we do have oil lamps."

I turned to Jenner and nodded, and in that instant the woman was gone. This in itself did not perturb me, for it was a meandering path and overgrown. I assumed she had merely passed out of sight.

I thought no more about it. Jenner was a kindly man, an excellent and indulgent host, very keen to talk about the parish and the local worthies that lived there. After a while, he remembered the purpose of our meeting, and putting down his cup he stood up, flexed his back and announced:

"You won't be able to make an examination at this hour, but you can stay at the rectory tonight and begin your work in the morning."

I agreed, but a feeling of deep unease had already taken hold of me.

The Second Day

Jenner left me immediately after breakfast; he had urgent business in the village but assured me that we would lunch together. I walked the short distance to the church, where it had been arranged for the churchwarden to provide me with access to the crypt.

The memory of the woman I had seen the previous day returned as I walked through the gates, and in that moment, I determined on a slight detour. Once again, I walked toward the copse, and this time I left the path and crossed to where I had seen her. There was indeed a solitary monument here, and I went down on my haunches to examine it:

*Sir John Beckingham, Bart., MC
of Mannerley Hall
Captain, The Worcestershire Regiment
Died 15 March 1940
Aged 47*

Clearly, the lady I had seen must have been a relative, a daughter perhaps. I noticed, however, that it was overgrown and that there were no flowers on this grave.

The churchwarden was most helpful, and assisted in my examination of the crypt, holding the lamp as I sketched and made notes. There were a number of tombs there, including several members of the Beckingham family. Afterwards, over tea, I asked him about them.

"Aye, the Beckinghams lived at the Hall since before Queen Bess. They're the local squires, see. They had a lot to do with this church and all. A lot of them are buried under here he tapped the floor with his foot, and in the graveyard."

I asked him about Sir John Beckingham.

"Sir John was a decent sort. He got the MC in the Great War, but it changed him. There are some wounds you cannot see, and he had it bad. He shot himself in the end. I s'pose he couldn't take it anymore."

"I thought I saw a lady yesterday, just by the grave. I suppose she might have been a relative?"

The churchwarden paled and looking at me intently said, "I know nothing of any relatives, and we should be on our way now. I need to be locking up." I walked back to the rectory by way of the canal. My host was already sitting down to a lunch of soup and bread. I told him about my conversation with the churchwarden, and as I recounted each specific detail Jenner stirred his soup, all the while staring at it. After I had finished my tale he was silent for a moment before setting down his spoon and saying:

"It's quite the local mystery, you know. There's no doubt Beckingham was unhinged by the war. How he got through it at all is a miracle. However, there are those around here that say there was more to his death than straightforward depression and despair.

The Hall was given up to the National Trust after Sir John's death; if you're that keen you might want to walk down there and talk to some people. The Beckinghams were patrons of the living from the 17th century. That will give you a way in."

I took his well-meaning advice, and after lunch made my way to Mannerley. The Hall has two storeys and was built of red brick in the Queen Anne style. There are associated Orangery and Long Gallery pavilion ranges. The whole effect was most pleasing, and tapestries portraying scenes from antiquity adorned the grand staircase. The guides were most informative, and I walked from room to room garnering information about the Beckinghams, Mannerley and the church.

It was in the Blue Room that I found what I was looking for. It was laid out as it had been during Sir John's lifetime; this had been his bedroom, and the tables and sideboard were covered with family photographs and newspaper articles about life at the Hall.

It transpired that Sir John had shot himself through the mouth with his service revolver; death was instantaneous and the act had occurred in this very room, whilst he sat in a chair in front of the window overlooking the drive leading up to the Hall.

Additionally it became apparent that Sir John was a widower; his wife, Lady Sybil, had died of influenza in 1919. This I had not expected. I always assumed that any wife had survived him. No one—not the churchwarden nor Jenner—had said anything to persuade me otherwise.

Finally, there was a wedding portrait, dated 1915 and showing Sir John resplendent in the dress uniform of an officer in the Worcestershires, arm-in arm with a woman that must have been Sybil. She had the most piercing eyes that seemed to look out beyond the photograph and into my soul. There was something terrible about that portrait; it chilled me to the bone.

The Third Day

The next morning Jenner had already left before I rose, and so after breakfast I made my own way to the church. Once again, the churchwarden assisted with my survey of the crypt, which I finally completed.

I decided to sit on a pew at the back of the church, with the porch immediately behind and to the left of me, and make a start on writing up my notes. I must have been engaged in this activity, engrossing as it was, for a considerable period of time for eventually I was regularly altering my position to benefit from the fading light as day gave way to dusk.

So absorbed was I in this task that I failed to notice that someone else had entered the building; the first intimation I had that this was the case was a sudden blast of cold air consequent upon (so I thought) the heavy wooden door being opened, and the groaning of the old timber pew behind me.

However there was no pew behind me!

I turned first to my right and then to my left and then I saw her. I discerned her immediately, but I also knew that it could not be.

The piercing eyes that had looked out from the picture now stared directly at me. I had the distinct impression that as surely as I recognised her, she now also knew me.

After a moment Lady Sybil—for it was she, there could be no question—slithered (there can be no better word for it) back into the encroaching twilight and faded from view. I sat transfixed, unable to move and doubting my own senses. There was a physical intensity to her awful malevolence that remained afterwards, and I was most disconcerted.

Somehow, I have no recollection how I found my way back to the rectory where Jenner immediately inferred from my appearance that something terrible had happened. He ushered me into the study before fetching brandy and water.

Pulling myself together, I told my story.

Jenner again listened with great intensity, and uttered not a word until I paused to take a drink. Then he spoke.

It transpired that the marriage of Sir John and Lady Sybil had been a love match. It followed a tedious courtship of two days. It had been a singularly intense relationship—at least on her part—from the start. There were suggestions (to which notwithstanding my own experience he could obviously attach no credence) that their connection had not ended with her death. The story goes—this is local rumour bordering on superstitious nonsense, you understand—after Sybil had died, she came back. Whatever the truth of the matter, it had driven Sir John beyond despair.

Furthermore, several locals swore that they had seen Sybil tending to her husband's grave. Of course he, Jenner, had witnessed no such thing during his many years as rector. Then Jenner said something that made my blood run cold. "They say that if she ever catches your eye, then she'll claim you for her own."

Jenner retired to bed, leaving me to contemplate his words.

The Final Day

The following morning, after a restless night's sleep, I took my final farewell of Jenner and made my way to Mannerley Station for the early train to London. I had a growing sense of unease as I walked, for it was a cold winter's morning and was startled by each sharp crack as the canal ice moved and split. I was anxious to look behind me often, and was fearful of walking under the canal bridges.

My train was on time, and as we pulled away from the station, I gazed out the window and caught, out of the corner of my eye and only for an instant, Lady Sybil Beckingham standing on the platform. Then she was gone, obscured by steam from the engine. This time I could not doubt my eyes.

That evening I took a light supper whilst listening to the Home Service, and then reviewed my notes on Mannerley. Thankfully, few amendments were necessary. Afterwards, drained and exhausted, I prepared for bed.

I crossed to the window to draw the curtains and, on looking out into the street, was at first struck by the strange ethereal effect streetlamps have on the eponymous London smog. The swirling mist glowed yellowy-green and, as I strained to discern any movement within this miasma I slowly made out, with mounting horror, a familiar presence directly opposite below. In that instant I knew: *it could not be otherwise, and from this moment it would always be so.*

From that instant she has never left me. She is ahead of me in the street. She is there at the office. At night, if I wake (and God knows I barely sleep), she is stood at the foot of the bed. I am cursed and tormented. Oh God, what am I to do?

Extract from The Architectural Digest, 5th December 1954:

We regret to announce the sudden death of Mr. Kingsley Bannerman at the age of 26. Late of King's College, Cambridge he had been retained on this periodical as an editorial consultant for the last six months. His latest assignment took him to Mannerley, Worcestershire where he conducted a survey of Victorian improvements to the crypt of the parish church there. He took ill soon after his return. His survey of Mannerley Church will be published in the next edition of the Digest.

His death has been described as unexplained.

About the Author:

Robbie Porter is a lecturer and charity worker from Worcester, England. He was born in Hawick, Scotland and studied English and History at the University of Sunderland. His fiction will be published this year in The Sirens Call eZine, Shlock! Webzine and Ghosts and Scholars.

Shattered | Darlene Holt

She was watching me again, the woman in the window. Crazy, blood-tinted eyes. Cold, haunting smile. Always watching. Judging behind glass.

I saw what she did—cringed, as the kitchen knife punctured his heart, ripping through flesh and bone like paper. Bloody bullets splattered the glass. She glanced toward the window—toward me—as she dragged her husband’s corpse across blood-soaked linoleum.

She saw me. She knows I know. And ever since, she won’t stop staring. Smirking. Laughing!

I can’t take it. I grab the bloody knife and strike the glass and laugh as she shatters into a thousand pieces.

A Night in the Neighborhood | Darlene Holt

I just bought a house. Supposedly, the original owner murdered dozens of kids on Halloween decades ago. Tragic.

Neighborhood’s nice though. Julie even met some twins and is going trick-or-treating with them and their mom.

I go introduce myself. Knock, but no answer, despite seeing her behind a curtain upstairs. Julie says she’s shy.

They’re leaving soon, but I’m working, so I can’t see them off.

I call Julie from work—typical worried mom. No answer.

I call the realtor, asking about the neighbor next door.

“Next door? No one’s lived there since that crazy woman murdered those poor twins.”

About the Author:

Darlene Holt is an educator, writer, and language enthusiast. Her previously published story, *Blood Moon*, appears in The Penmen Review, and her poetry appears in The Scarlet Leaf Review and The Drabble. She has an MA in English and Creative Writing and currently resides in San Diego, California, where she enjoys reading horror stories and spending time with her fiancé and cats.

The Babysitter | Gary S. Watkins

“That really hurt,” Terrance sobbed between short, sharp breaths, half-hidden beneath his covers. “I’m telling.”

“You deserved it, you whiny little brat. Tell your parents. I’ll deny everything and you’ll get worse next time.”

“I’m not telling *them*,” he whispered, his voice suddenly distant and cold, “and there won’t be a next time.”

A shadow darker than darkness, sinewy and wet slid across her calf. She pulled back, but it pulled harder, tripping and dragging her into the widening inkiness beneath the bed.

The last bits to go – her fingertips – clutched the bed frame defiantly until Terrance stomped them free.

About the Author:

Gary S. Watkins is easing back into writing after taking a few years off. He has published everything from poetry and micro-fiction to flash fiction and full length short stories in publications such as Star*Line, This Mutant Life: Bad Company, The Story Shack, Tales in the Ether, and Hex Support. When not writing, he enjoys spending time with his daughters and grandkids, playing tabletop games, and getting outside.

Facebook: [Gary S. Watkins](#)

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



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She left the door open; that was never a good sign. I put my keys in my pocket and stepped inside. The hall was dark and warm, humid. I could smell the heavy scent of blood in the air, but by then I was long past the point of gagging. I hung my purse near the door, kicking off my heels. The living room's curtains were drawn, shutting out the light. The ceiling fan was off and the room stuffy. I gave it a cursory glance and moved into the kitchen. Some days she was in there. Other days she found other places to do what she felt had to be done. That day she was not in the kitchen; dirty dishes still floated in the sink and all the lights were off. The knife drawer was open. I closed it and moved into the hallway.

It was dark as usual, and narrower than the closets, even. I'd always hated that damn hallway. I skimmed my fingertips along both sides of it, my elbows folded to my sides so that I could fit. I checked the bathroom; sometimes she used the bathtub. Nothing. The first bedroom, what had eventually become our office, was dark and empty. The closets—once I found her in a closet—were filled with rarely-used clothes and dust. The second bedroom, a storage room and her makeshift workshop, was devoid of her presence as well. I looked at the easel—a small ray of late afternoon sunlight, let in through a gap in the blinds, splayed over the canvas. Again, moving without thought or consideration, I closed the curtains. I could no longer see the light, tentative sketches on the canvas. Her pencil lay on the tray of the easel, and by the look of the array of tubes and brushes perched on boxes around her stool near the window, she'd been planning acrylics for this piece. I left the room, unwilling to intrude on her space much longer. She rarely liked me in there, especially when she was working. I was only ever welcomed in to see a piece in its final stage. It's been many years since we met, and if after all that time I couldn't read her as well as I could read myself, I'd have to be as perceptive as a brick.

I left the second bedroom and headed for the master bedroom, where I expected to find her. Or possibly she was in the attic, but if so she must have been trying very hard because I couldn't see any installation or anything she might have used to get to the attic. It's not even a real attic, just a crawlspace in the roof that's always hot and never useful.

I went into the master bedroom, and sighed. She was laying on our bed, throat slit from ear to ear. Her hands were covered in blood, and both her arms were sliced open from her elbows to her wrists. There was probably a knife from the kitchen drawer somewhere in all that mess but I couldn't see it. The blood had soaked into our bedding, probably right down into the mattress. Her clothing certainly was soaked, although her face looked peaceful and pale as she lay back on our pillows, eyes closed, unmoving.

But she wasn't dead.

"Had a bad day again?" I asked, stepping into the room and taking off my sweater.

She opened her eyes and gave me a withering look. "You shouldn't talk to corpses. It's bad luck."

"You aren't a corpse," I said, going over to her. I could see the knife by her hip, absolutely covered from tip to handle in her blood. It was sticky and warm. I brushed her cheek with my hand absently.

She closed her eyes again. "Kiss me. Kiss me awake like a fairy tale."

Not for the first time I bent and kissed her lips gently. They were not cold, not warm. They simply were. I knew she felt the same sensation from mine and shivered a little. When I leaned back, straightening up, she opened her eyes but did not smile. I have not seen her smile in two hundred years*

When I ask her what she remembers of life before, before the endless drip of time that never leads to anything, she says she can't remember. I don't think she's lying because I don't remember either--nothing but the sweet song of some bird and the smell of cinnamon. I don't know if that's my past life, or from whatever I was before, or if it's just something my brain cooked up for me to make me think that this life did have a beginning, once.

I've always known her, too. It seems we met the same time that we became what we are now, or else we met before, or perhaps we never actually met but have always known each other. And although I remember when I began to mark the time that was passing us by carelessly as two stubborn rocks in a trickling stream, I don't know what the day was, or the year, when we began.

We spent our time early on watching the world as it went by. We saw man build itself up and burn itself out; we saw him create marvels and wonders, weapons and diseases. We observed as countries were born and countries died, as people found love and people found death. And all the while we stood still in our bodies and nothing ever changed. I have every hair that was on my head twenty years ago, fifty years ago, three hundred years ago. I'm the same size. I never feel hungry or tired, although I do eat and drink and sleep, mostly because it passes the time. I enjoy simple things; I watch the world, watch people, and learn what they know. If I went to school I could probably boast dozens of degrees by now. It fascinates me what new information man discovers every day.

That isn't to say that I'm happy. Waifish is a good word for me. Apathetic is probably another. But if you knew how much time can wear on you, grounding you down to a finely polished stone, then to dust, you wouldn't blame me for not caring about anything. I don't feel things anymore. Maybe that's a blessing, or maybe it's the worst part of this curse. All I know is living for hundreds of years doesn't make the seasons pass any faster.

But for her, it's different.

All she knows is that she is missing something. She misses her emotions, her pride, her sense of right and wrong. She misses being alive, I suppose, although I wonder if she can remember what it's like.

So when I go to work—I've had a hundred jobs so far; right now I'm a law clerk in the northeastern United States—she lays about the house, this among dozens of homes we've had to purchase and then escape from like thieves in the night to avoid detection. She could work but there's no need and she hates the monotony of it. I can't imagine anything being more monotonous than spending every day inside a little house that looks identical to the many that came before it, but that's why she paints, I suppose. Once she finishes a painting she either burns it or stores it away. She never displays her work or sells it. I haven't had the heart to ask her what she thinks of it—if she's getting any better with all the years she's been around or if she hates her work and only does it to fill time.

One day about seventy years ago, back before the age of the internet and cell phones, near the end of the second world war, I came home from my job as a chef in a restaurant in New Hampshire and found her in the bathtub, wrists slit, her cool bath water as red as rubies. She'd looked up at me with eyes that tried to be apologetic but were empty and said she was sorry for the blood. The next year she bought a gun and used that in the dining room—what a goddamn mess that had been. Since then she's stuck to mostly easy-to-clean methods; she's hung herself two dozen times and when she's dramatic she usually keeps it in the bathroom, where we can wash the blood down the drains. We've sprayed gallons and gallons of it down drains and sewers and gutters and every day she has a little more to spill.

At night we lay together. Most nights we sleep; other nights we stay up until the sun comes and then sleep. Our bodies don't need the regeneration but it occupies our minds well enough. Without sleep we would spend even more time in the quiet darkness with just our thoughts. Occasionally we have sex, but we're not in love. It's just another thing that we do because there's nothing else left to us.

One night early on I asked her why she did it. That day she had drowned herself in the bathtub and I had come home to find her chocolate-brown hair floating in the cool water. She turned to me and wrapped her arms around my neck. "I want to feel alive," she whispered in the dark of our bedroom.

Another night she asked me if I was going to leave her if she kept it up, kept making messes and trouble for me. I said no, not because I felt bad for her or pitied her or felt obligated to stay. I just said no because I knew that was the truth. There is nothing to hold me to her and nothing to make me leave. She does not need me and I don't need her, either. We barely speak some days. But I can't fathom doing anything else, so I stay. And she does, too, even though with the way she looks she could have anyone she wanted.

"Do you want to die?" I asked her once after she had hung herself. There were no bruises on her neck, no swelling; the noose came away from her flesh easily. I suspected she'd only hung there pretending for half the afternoon until I came home and released her. We don't feel much pain, either, although sometimes it is a good distraction from the mundane.

She did not look at me in the darkness, only turned away and let me hold her body against my own. "We are already dead," she said.

I've repeated those words in my head ever since. *We are already dead*. She's right, of course, and maybe I should have some sort of epiphany or breakdown when I think about it. We're dead and yet we will never die. We can drown ourselves, bleed ourselves dry, hang ourselves from the tallest oak tree and not come down for days . . . but we will live on.

I suppose I should feel something when I remember this. But I don't feel anything.

Nothing at all.

About the Author:

Katherine L.P. King is a writer and Chapstick enthusiast from California. She holds an M.F.A. in Creative Writing, but please don't hold that against her. She primarily writes short horror fiction and her work has been published in Wild Violet Online Literary Magazine, HelloHorror, Coffin Bell, Exoplanet Magazine, and Aphotic Realm.

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It was April of '86 when the blood moon murders began in Madison, Georgia. Before I met my wife, Charlene—hell, before I could even legally drink—back when life was simple. Or so I thought.

My buddy, Chris Higgins, and I were taking some 'easy A' elective on the history of religion at Madison University. It was the week before the murders, and our soft speaking, slow talking professor said something that, for once, didn't make us fall asleep.

"Next week will begin a tetrad lunar eclipse for the first time in three decades," he said, eyes widening behind rectangular frames. "They call it the blood moon—four consecutive eclipses that turn the moon and surrounding sky red. But that's not where the name 'blood' comes from." His voice fell into a low, drawn-out rasp, as if telling a ghost story at a campfire.

I stopped doodling in my notebook and glanced over at Chris. He was rubbing the sleep from his eyes to get a better look at Professor Sherman. For the first time that semester, the class seemed to hang on Sherman's every word.

"There was a prophecy, you see," he continued, stroking the graying whiskers lining his jaw. "The blood moon prophecy was an event predicted centuries ago. The end of mankind, according to several religious groups. It was believed that when the moon turned red and the sky emitted a crimson mist, madness would fall upon us. It was an apocalypse where man would be consumed by insanity, and mankind would perish at its own hands."

"But none of that's true, right, Professor?" asked Greg Mueller two seats in front of me.

"Obviously, moron, we're all still here," blurted out Chris. Several students sniggered.

"Ah. Mr. Mueller, excellent question," Professor Sherman said as he picked up some chalk and began jotting names on the blackboard. "In fact, there were accounts dating back hundreds of years to strange acts of violence from the blood moon. Jack the Ripper, Belle Gunness, H.H. Holmes—murderers whose killing sprees began at the beginning of a blood moon." He set the chalk down and turned back toward us. There was fierceness in his weathered face I had never seen before. "There are, perhaps, thousands of unreported cases," he went on, "those who fell victim to the moon but are clueless to what brought on such urges. Some claim to have no recollection of their attacks, returning to normal once the eclipse passes. For others, it ignites something in them, fuels their need to become cold-blooded murderers long after the blood moon's end." He cocked an eyebrow at Chris. "The prophecy may not have been completely fulfilled, Mr. Higgins, but that isn't to say there's no truth to the matter."

Professor Sherman glanced at the wall clock behind him. It was five past seven. "Looks like time has escaped us again. You may all go, but do be cautious when the moon falls red."

"Can you believe that crap Sherman was spewing?" said Chris later that night in our dorm room.

"Seems pretty farfetched," I said.

And it did. But one week later, it became much more real.

It was spring break, and a bunch of us decided to celebrate at MacMillan's, a dive bar just blocks away from school. They had a lenient "don't ask, don't tell" policy when it came to our ages, so we were frequent customers. Everyone was in good spirits that night with cheap booze and a decent cover band. Hell, Jerry Evans even snuck in a bit of pot. After a few rounds of pool and belting out lyrics to Metallica and Guns N' Roses covers, we all stepped outside for a smoke. That was the first time we saw the moon's red hue.

"Look, dude," Chris said with a bit of a slur as he pointed to the sky. "Hope no one loses their shit tonight!" He mimed choking Jerry to death as a few of our classmates burst into fits of laughter.

One girl named Janine Wilkins was the giddiest of them all. She actually toppled over from a combination of giggling so hard and drinking too much that I had to catch her from face-planting on the asphalt.

"You good?" I asked, pulling her up. Her smile faded from her freckled face as she contemplated me, her dark eyes shifting left to right and left again until her lips met mine. As we kissed, I felt the warmth of her breath bursting with remnants of peach schnapps and Grey Goose until she released her vodka-laden tongue from my mouth.

"I'm good now," she said, her giddy laughter returning. I laughed and took a hit of Jerry's joint as we all sat down on the curb behind Macmillan's. We stayed there for another hour or so, paying no heed to the reddening sky.

"Shit, I gotta get going," said Janine's friend, Marie, shortly after ten. "You comin', Paula? How 'bout you, Janine?"

"In a minute," she said, downing a mini vodka bottle. "Gotta finish these last two."

"My mom'll kill me if I'm home too late. If you want a ride, let's go."

Janine waved her on. "It's—what . . . ? Two blocks? I'll just walk," she said, putting the bottle back to her lips.

Two of the girls jumped up and followed Marie around the corner to the parking lot. A few seconds later, they flew down the alleyway in Marie's '83 bug, waving and chucking beer cans at us through the window before speeding out of view. Not long after, the rest of the group stumbled to their feet and started back toward the university.

"Peace out, homey!" Chris yelled to me halfway down the alley. He made a stabbing motion in Jerry's back as his followers all broke into laughter again.

I settled next to Janine and waited another minute for her to finish the vodka. "Want me to walk you back?" I offered as she swallowed the last drop and lobbed the bottle into the dumpster next to us.

"Don't you live in the west dorms? I live in the east." She got to her feet just as Chris and the group were parting ways at the end of the alley.

"Oh, right. Yeah," I said, standing up to finish my own beer, watching as a light red mist began descending on the bar.

"Thanks for a great time," she said. Then she broke into a staggering run down the alley to catch up with her friends.

"Alright," I called out, now fixated on the giant red moon, "catch ya later."

I didn't catch her later. But somebody did. She was the first victim of the blood moon. It was all over the news the following morning—how she never made it back that night, how her body was found by patrons leaving Macmillan's, cuts and marks and slivers of glass all over her body.

The police came to our dorms early that morning, questioning each of us about our activities the previous night.

"Can you believe that shit?" said Chris with a mouthful of Cheerios after the officers left. We were in the common room, watching the news about Madison's mysterious murder. "Was Sherman really right?"

"I don't know, man," I said, slumping over my cereal. "I just don't know." I felt so much guilt for not walking Janine home that night and couldn't help but feel responsible for what happened. "Maybe I could've stopped it," I said, scooping Cheerios in my spoon and dumping them back into the milk. "Could've stopped some . . . *lunatic* from killing an innocent girl."

I carried that guilt for the next few days. Then I heard the radio announce the arrival of the second blood moon in the tetrad eclipse. Spring break had ended, and classes were back in session. There was a lot of talk in the halls about Janine, the girl who drank too much and got herself killed. People who weren't with us that night thought she did it herself, fell onto a bunch of glass or something in a drunken stupor. I wasn't sure what to believe, but I started to wonder if there was some truth to Professor Sherman's prophecy or if it was just a sad coincidence.

I spent the night of the second blood moon in the library, finishing up a political science paper. By 9:55 p.m., the library was closing, and the few students still there gathered their books and left. After printing my essay, I followed suit and started back toward the dorms. The moon was red again, and the air grew moist as the mist slowly descended. I walked down a grassy path that connected the library and University Hall. Everything fell into a magnificent red haze. The lamp posts lining the path emitted angelic white halos in the mist, and for a moment, I actually found beauty in it all. Ahead of me, I heard an echoing laughter, but everything had now become so muggy, it was getting hard to make out my surroundings. I suddenly got the horrible feeling I was being watched, that the blood moon was entrancing someone, influencing them to murder, just as it had the night of Janine's death. I looked behind me, around me. What if I was being followed? And who was laughing? Or was it crying? I had to get back to my room. I broke into a jog, making my way through the hazy night air, away from the moon. When I finally got back to the dorm, I felt shaken, like hours had passed or maybe days. I couldn't think clearly.

"But you're fine. You made it back fine, man," said Chris after I walked in with a sweat-soaked T-shirt.

"You're right," I said, half laughing. "Sorry, I'm just really tired. I've been working on this paper all day. Stupid Mr. Sherman and his stupid stories have me paranoid."

Chris and I shared a good laugh at Sherman's expense, and we both went to bed with no more thought of the blood moon. That is, until morning.

"Dude. You gotta check this out," said Chris, adjusting the rabbit-eared antenna of the TV. A news report was on. It happened again.

"Nineteen-year-old Travis Thompson was found dead late last night with a broken jaw and several blows to the head. Students say they heard screaming, but there are no suspects at this time . . ."

"That dude was in my bio class last semester," said Chris. "Guess you were right to be so freaked out last night."

After word got out about Sherman's lecture, the entire student population could talk about nothing other than the blood moon prophecy. Hell, with two murders in the span of a week, everyone in Madison was talking about it. The newspapers were having a field day with headlines like 'Seeing Red: Madness in Madison!' and 'Blood Moon Murders at

Mad U!’ The next lunar eclipse wasn’t for another month, but every newspaper in town speculated on how many more would fall victim to the moon.

It was May 13th when the sky lit up again, and the moon glowed a vibrant vermillion. A group of us were gathered in Tommy Geist’s room down the hall, inadvertently honoring the school’s new curfew of nine p.m. They wanted to make it six p.m., but with so many night classes, they didn’t have the time or available staff to reschedule. Plus, much of Mad U’s student population had day jobs and could only take classes at night, so they settled for nine and upped security instead.

I had just finished my chem final and was in desperate need of a beer when I got to Tommy’s.

“Yo, Tommy! We need another Coors here!” yelled Chris with a finger pointing down at me as I plunked onto Tommy’s twin bed.

Tommy opened his mini fridge and threw me a cold one. I flipped the tab open and downed half the can within seconds.

“Hey, don’t you have chemistry with my girlfriend, Whitney?” asked Tommy, plopping down beside me.

“Whitney . . . Porter? Yeah. She finished before me. Surprised she’s not here.” I sipped my beer, trying to ignore the strange feeling forming in the pit of my stomach as I watched the red mist materialize outside Tommy’s dorm room window.

Sure enough, it was all over school the next morning, how Whitney Porter mysteriously vanished after class, another victim of the blood moon. No one ever found her body, at least not while I still attended there.

The final blood moon that year came less than a week later, the day of Whitney’s memorial service. I wore my best black suit, just as I had to the other two services that year. Tommy was hunched over Whitney’s empty white casket, his face in his hands. Everyone grieved for Whitney, even those like myself who hardly knew her. The truth was, we were all worried about the final blood moon. We knew, that night, it could happen again.

Dozens of police were stationed around campus for the impending eclipse. But once the moon glowed red and the haze returned, more people went missing. There were two this time. The first was an officer. They found his badge lying near Jack H. Brown Hall along with speckles of blood leading out toward George Madison Bridge. The other victim was a student, a girl named Marley Chenoweth. I didn’t know her, but it makes me sick to this day to think about what happened. A lot of people suspected that the blood moon murderer disposed of the bodies in the nearby river. Chris and I talked about searching near the bridge ourselves a few times, but something about it made me uneasy. Maybe I was scared we would actually find something. Several search parties were dispatched in the area in the subsequent months, but neither of the bodies were ever recovered.

And then, just like that, the murders stopped, exactly as Professor Sherman predicted. The tetrad eclipse had passed, and any lunatics that arose from the red mist had apparently regained their sanity.

It’s been nearly twelve years since then, when everyone I knew dreaded falling victim to the moon. But tonight is the first of the next tetrad eclipse, and as I drive back home, the road glitters with a red sheen from the blood moon overhead. I flick my wipers on to see through the descending mist, but my head feels as foggy as the weather. I remember seeing Charlene and the kids but can’t recall why I left the house, why I drove to the bridge. I stop the car and wonder why I’m so afraid to look in the backseat. Against my better judgment, I turn. Dark red splatters cover the seats where my wife’s stiletto lays on its side, its spikey heel wet with flesh.

About the Author:

Darlene Holt is an educator, writer, and language enthusiast. Her previously published story, *Blood Moon*, appears in The Penmen Review, and her poetry appears in The Scarlet Leaf Review and The Drabble. She has an MA in English and Creative Writing and currently resides in San Diego, California, where she enjoys reading horror stories and spending time with her fiancé and cats.



Bent Metal



NINA D'ARCANGELA

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

As night descended over Park Street, the Elle family sat huddled on the hardwood floor of their dimly lit living room. Shadows danced across their faces as candle flames eerily swayed from side to side. Thick webs covered the walls, some housing furry spiders, and to their right lay a vast dusky cauldron that Mr. Elle had just brought up from the basement. Mr. and Mrs. Elle sat across from each other, clad in long sweeping robes that draped loosely across their pale bodies. Their daughters, Eve and Holly, sat beside them, dressed similarly to their parents, but with the addition of tiny latex gloves to protect their hands.

Mr. Elle sat amongst his family holding a long serrated knife, its jagged blade encrusted with remnants of his previous victim. He vigorously stroked the blade with a cloth. As the knife's silver luster resurfaced, Mr. Elle addressed his youngest daughter, Eve, who was staring at him in fascination. "We're just about ready," he said, admiring his reflection in the newly clean knife.

Eve nodded with a mixture of anticipation and fear, her mousy brown pigtails swinging wildly. She flashed him a nervous, gap-toothed smile as he set the knife on the floor and made his way to a large table on the other side of the room.

Numerous glass beakers glowed with vibrant, purplish hues from the black lights of the chandelier above. He smiled approvingly as his eyes wandered past a beaker full of fingers bobbing like dinghies in a thick green liquid. Next to them, a jar of eyeballs that Mr. Elle picked up to examine more closely. He lifted his wire-framed glasses from the bridge of his nose, staring at the pupils in fascination before admiring several more beakers with intestines and other various organs. It wasn't until his eyes caught an old burlap sack that he lit up with excitement. The bag was tightly tied and torn in several places. He flung it over his shoulder and hauled it back where his family sat, anxiously waiting. "He's a big one, he is!" the man exclaimed. "I found this one near the abandoned farm on Elm. A bit odd-looking, but he'll look better when we get through with him." He winked at his daughters, giving a jovial smile, then eagerly untied the bag and dumped its contents in front of Eve. She gazed at it in disgust, crinkling her nose at its mildew aroma.

Mr. Elle gently handed Eve the knife. The young girl's ghostly face contorted into a grimace as she clutched the knife in her tiny hands, staring at the victim before her. She remembered what she had learned last week in kindergarten about how they should treat every part of nature with respect, whether big or small, human or not. She looked up at her father with wide eyes. "Daddy, I can't do it—I'm scared," she said, placing the knife back at her feet. "Maybe you can do it instead?"

"No, no, Eve. This is your chance to be a big girl. My father had me do this when I was your age, and his father before him. Now, I *know* you can do it. Holly can help you," said Mr. Elle, gesturing for his other daughter to move toward Eve.

Holly stood up from her cross-legged position and smoothed out her robe. She dragged her feet across the wood floor and plopped down next to her sister. "Don't be such a baby, Eve," she said impatiently. "It's not hard. It's not like it's alive or anything, so who cares? All you do is take the knife and jab it into the ribs here," she said, taking Eve's finger and running it along its cold, smooth skin.

"There, you see, honey? Nothing to worry about," said Mrs. Elle. "But be careful not to make a mess. Last year, your father got guts all over our new rug."

Mr. Elle smiled sheepishly as his wife shot him an annoyed glance.

"Sorry, Hun," said Mr. Elle, his grin deflating. "Hey, maybe we can save some of its flesh this time. I heard Dan Grover's wife made an excellent stew from theirs."

"Can we get this over with?" said Holly.

They directed their attention back to Eve who was staring at the knife near her feet.

"Go on, Eve," encouraged her mother.

And lifting the jagged blade over the point of her witch's hat, Eve began carving the enormous pumpkin.

About the Author:

Darlene Holt is an educator, writer, and language enthusiast. Her previously published story, *Blood Moon*, appears in The Penmen Review, and her poetry appears in The Scarlet Leaf Review and The Drabble. She has an MA in English and Creative Writing and currently resides in San Diego, California, where she enjoys reading horror stories and spending time with her fiancé and cats.

Kaia's eyes popped open. The first thing that somersaulted into her mind was the pumpkin farm. Her family's annual pre-Halloween celebration was finally here.

This morning she, her parents, and older brother, Kyle, would get up early and pile into the car. The first stop is always the Pancake Outlet, her favorite restaurant in the whole world. The promise of chocolate chip-filled pancakes with chocolate syrup and mountains of whipped cream topped with more chocolate chips levitated Kaia off her bed. She sprinted into the bathroom. After washing and dressing, she flew downstairs as if there were fluttering fairy wings on her feet.

Her mom laughed. "I don't have to go through the usual teeth pulling to get my favorite little girl moving this morning, do I?"

"Nope, and Mom, remember, I'm not little. I'll be ten next week."

"Oh yes, I seem to recall. That Halloween, you were the best treat I could ever wish for." Her mother wrapped her arms around her daughter.

"Good morning, my ladies of the house." Kaia's dad was halfway down the steps with Kyle right behind him.

The four of them were in the car in no time. The trip, to devour pancakes, spurred lively conversation about those breakfast sensations and the adventure afterward.

Today, the land of the orange fruits included much more than wandering a field full of potential jack-o'-lanterns and mouth-watering pies. You could relax aboard a wagon, pillowed by hay, pulled by a patient horse, navigate a straw maze, or stroll past smiling people selling their handmade creations, as well as jellies, fresh-baked bread, and other craft fair treasures you didn't know you needed until you saw them.

Not too long after breakfast, Kaia's dad was steering their car into a parking space at the farm. She and her brother were out almost before the vehicle stopped moving.

"Kids, hold on," Dad yelled, "You both have your phones, and they're charged up, right?"

"Yes," they answered almost simultaneously.

"Mom will call you when it's time to get some lunch, and then maybe we'll all get on the hayride. Kaia, don't get too far from your brother."

"OK. Bye."

Their mother watched her seemingly rocket-powered young ones take off and turned to her husband. "Hon, do you remember when we had all that energy?"

He chuckled and shook his head. "It's definitely been a while."

Kaia was ready to get right down to the business of choosing just the right orangey specimens. As she and her brother headed toward the field, some of his friends from school shouted to him.

There was only one thing on Kaia's mind. "C'mon, I want to get some pumpkins. Can I start looking if you're going over there?"

Kyle wanted to talk to his friends, but he was supposed to make sure his sister stayed safe. He hesitated for a second, wondering what to do. Kyle figured she would be alone for maybe ten minutes tops. "All right, you can start. I'll text you when I'm on my way to the field. Be careful."

"I will."

Kaia jogged along, reached her destination, and latched onto one of the Radio Flyer all-terrain cargo wagons lined up for customers. Those cheery, red wagons begged to be loaded up.

Once knee-deep in pumpkins, she spotted some that looked perfect for carving into fearsome jack-o'-lanterns and knelt to give them the once-over.

"Kid, come here."

The voice sounded like her brother's. Expecting to see Kyle, Kaia stood. It wasn't him. There was no one nearby, so she returned to what she was doing.

"Kid, come here."

Kaia got to her feet, whirled around, and still didn't see a soul. "Are you talking to me? Where are you? I can't see you."

One of the gourds slowly rolled out away from the others. It stopped a few feet from her. "That's weird," she whispered to herself, walking over to it.

Suddenly the thing split down the middle, exposing its stringy guts. While Kaia stared at the pumpkin, its entrails exhaled an orange vapor that snaked around, enveloped, and transformed her. She was sucked into and trapped in the gooey, ropy innards. Kaia's phone was ejected, launched skyward before the pumpkin snapped shut and rolled back into place. The device, now a doll-sized accessory, enlarged as it fought a losing battle against gravity and crash-landed in the wagon.

Those ten minutes with friends stretched into twenty. Kyle realized his sister was alone too long and texted her that he was on the way. She didn't reply. He knew his parents would go ballistic if they found out he left her. Being grounded for

Halloween meant he would be at the front door handing out candy to trick or treaters. As far as Kyle was concerned, that would be a fate worse than death. Why wasn't Kaia answering?

He dialed his sister's number and ran toward the field. Kyle heard her phone ringing. Each time it stopped, he called again and followed the sound, discovering his sibling's cell in the Radio Flyer.

"Kaia. Kaia, where are you? Mom and dad are gonna be really mad at us." He searched in the vicinity of the abandoned wagon and didn't see her anywhere. Kyle prepared himself to hear the riot act and alerted his parents.

The police were summoned and arrived on the scene with a K-9 unit. Dogs and officers, Kyle and his dad, farm staff, and volunteers searched the grounds, including the surrounding area, until way past dark. After the search was suspended, her mother gave additional identifying details of her daughter to one of the first responders, and an AMBER alert was issued.

Almost a week passed, and Kaia was still missing, devastating her family. Kyle wished he had just stayed with her; none of this would have happened. It was his fault.

One day before All Hollows' Eve, a boy about Kaia's age, was wandering the pumpkin field.

"Hey, kid. Come here."

A pumpkin rolled out. The child approached it to have a closer look. The fruit burst open, an orange vapor formed. Just before it reached him, he heard a young girl pleading.

"Help me, please. I want to go home. Help me!"

Panicking, the boy spun on his heels and ran away, afraid to look back.

The mist dissipated. Before the reddish-yellow sphere shut to roll back into place, a pitiful whine escaped from its sinewy bowels.

"I want to go home. I want my mo..."

About the Author:

Carol Smith lives near Richmond, Virginia, with her husband and very spoiled cats. She has written short stories published in anthologies, books in a variety of genres, plus poetry. Carol investigates the paranormal, tutors reading for adult learners, and loves science, music (especially classic rock), and singing. She's always listening for her Muse's next big idea.

Author Blog: [The Write Drive](#)

Twitter: [@CSmith_Writes](#)

Playing With Squire | *Evan Baughfman*

Petyr held Father's wand. Should he wield such power? Mead had given the boy courage but not skill.

Uwen, his friend, urged, "A unicorn's horn, in the middle of my head! C'mon!"

Father knew a spell that, when carefully recited, temporarily gifted his children with wings, tails, and other animalistic features.

"Please, Petyr!"

The wizard's son focused the wand, slurring Father's words. Petyr blasted Uwen with brilliant light, just above the chin.

The squire screamed. A bottom canine tooth grew inside his jaw.

A rising spike, it perforated the roof of Uwen's mouth, ravaging nasal cavities, piercing his terrified brain.

About the Author:

Evan Baughfman is a middle school teacher and author. Much of his writing success has been as a playwright. He's had many different plays produced across the globe. Evan also writes horror fiction. His collection of short stories, *The Emaciated Man and Other Terrifying Tales from Poe Middle School*, is published by Thurston Howl Publications. More information is available at his author page on Amazon and his website.

Facebook: [Evan Baughfman](#)

Instagram: [@Agent00evan_716](#)

The Tag | *Gavin Gardiner*

He closes his eyes.

The concrete brickwork of the basement explodes, revealing tulip-patterned wallpaper adorned with framed memories of a life never lived. The square-panelled fluorescent lighting above flickers out, its glare replaced by a twilight glow through suddenly-formed cottage bay windows. The hum of industrial refrigerators fades to nothing as birdsong and summer ambience resonate from the meadows outside. He smiles. This is where he wants to be.

Her head rests on his chest as he runs his fingers through her hair. One leg is draped over his. He loves these moments, tangled amongst the limbs of a lover. But moments are all they are. Soon she'll leave him, then he'll find another. He always finds another.

Her head rises and falls with his meditative breathing, her hand on his stomach rising and falling also. His breath sends ripples of movement through her hair. Her face rises to meet his own as the finger under her chin gently guides it up.

Gentle. Always so gentle.

He knows this is their final time together. Tomorrow she'll go upstairs, despite his sincerest wishes. He's beginning to believe she may actually *want* to stay here with him, if she's even capable of such a desire. Her body says she might be, as welcoming as it is to his embrace. He carefully kisses her.

Careful. Always so careful.

Lips still pressed against hers, he opens his eyes. Through the bay windows he sees concrete bricks tearing across the grassy pastures like cannon balls, crashing through the tulip wallpaper and reassembling themselves in an instant. The twilight glow grows harsher as the square-panelled fluorescent lights re-emerge above. The birdsong dies. Industrial humming recommences. He lifts his mouth from her cold lips.

Cold. Always so cold.

He sits up and swings his legs off the slab, then looks back at that precious white face. Yes, she wants to stay. Maybe a little while longer wouldn't hurt, after all. Rising to his feet he straightens his tie and buttons his cuffs, before heading for the door. He stops abruptly, letting out a slight sigh, and pulls the tag from his pocket. He replaces it around the cadaver's big toe and steps from the room, making his way down the corridor to his office. He picks up the telephone.

"I'm aware it's short notice, Mr Davis, but your wife's embalming is going to take another week at least. Precisely, we just want to give her the care she deserves. Of course, Mr Davis, we always are. Yes, we will be. Indeed. Gentle, Mr Davis. Always so gentle."

The Thing Within | *Gavin Gardiner*

I press the needle to my neck, screaming promises of conviction and intention at the men surrounding me – always men. Reassurances are returned through the rain. They want what's best for me, and I believe them. But they want what's best for the thing inside, too. They don't know what I know, feel what I feel. I know no details of the thing within, refused all their offered information. I knew enough, but now I know even more. Now I know it must die.

Their faces, all of them, are of my tormentor, my conqueror. For nearly nine months I bought their bullshit. I grew to love the growing form inside, believed it could come into this world more me than him. But that can't be. Maybe others out there, but not this one. Not mine. Its father was found dead two weeks ago. An overdose. Too little too late. The thing within is all that's left of him. Its demands for release were all I needed to finally see the fate it must meet. A mother's love, it's eternal. But I've seen my hate overtake that eternity. I've come to see the kicking creature in my uterus to be no more than *him*. *His* secretion. *His* being. *His* flesh. The power to sterilise the world of that rapist fuck is in my hands. I'm sorry, little thing within.

The hospital looms before us, a towering headstone reaching into the starless slate sky. If that monolith swallows me again he will live on through the child. I won't let him. I won't go back.

I am infected with rape. They won't administer the cure, so I'll do it myself. The amniocentesis needle, it's as long as a butcher's knife. I lower it to my swollen, diseased belly.

It kicks.

I administer.

The needle penetrates my skin, fat, muscle, connective tissue, the lining of my womb; as many layers as an onion made of flesh. The implement finally finds the thing within and ruptures its soft, fighting form – an intravenous baptism. The poison flows. The men run at me, but I know they're too late. I feel the terminal writhing of the abomination inside as the chemicals invade it, and with it me. Finally, stillness. Together it and I begin to fade. They'll try to save it. They will fail.

Then, in our final moments, as the men swarm me with their tools and knives and good intentions, I feel something else inside. Something the poison has failed to cure. Something missed. There is still a thing within.

A twin.

About the Author:

An upcoming horror writer from Scotland, Gavin Gardiner believes there are no greater terrors than that which reside within our own minds. For this reason, he specialises in the psychological, and pushes the themes and subjects of his work into areas seldom explored in the genre.

Author Website: [Gavin Gardiner Horror](#)

Twitter: [@GGardinerHorror](#)

The Cherub | *Evan Baughfman*

Sneaking onto carnival grounds after midnight, seven-year-old Ollie came for the Cherub.

If the sideshow's advertised 'angel' was real, that meant Heaven was, too! Ollie, an orphan, could look forward to seeing his parents again someday!

Ollie entered a tent. A harp sang from shadows, leading him through darkness.

But it was just a boy, chained inside a cage!

Naked except for a filthy diaper, the 'Cherub' glumly plucked at harp-strings with bloody fingertips.

Broken pelican's wings were sewn to his shoulders. Ollie saw surgical scars.

Firm hands gripped Ollie's own shoulders.

"Another angel," someone cackled. "Ready for your wings?"

Whispers Inside | *Evan Baughfman*

On a drunken whim, we explored the long-abandoned asylum.

Why did my nosy friends have to snoop through that dusty file cabinet and discover all the horrible things I've done?

Alcohol amplified the whispers inside my skull, the twisted orders I'd fought years to suppress. The way the others looked at me made the voice biting at my brain impossible to ignore.

My palms were slick with sweat, but the scalpel, my old friend, held firm in my grasp. She begged to be fed.

That night, she drank from the screaming throats of those who had dared to replace her.

About the Author:

Evan Baughfman is a middle school teacher and author. Much of his writing success has been as a playwright. He's had many different plays produced across the globe. Evan also writes horror fiction. His collection of short stories, *The Emaciated Man and Other Terrifying Tales from Poe Middle School*, is published by Thurston Howl Publications. More information is available at his author page on Amazon and his website.

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Cradle



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON, BARNES & NOBLE,
KOBO AND iTUNES

Hiding in Plain Sight | *Nicole Henning*

Running past the grinning pumpkins, their eyes cast shadows on the ground while she pants in terror. There's nowhere to hide and she hears the footsteps growing louder behind her. She can feel breath on her neck now and she trips in her panic. Falling to the ground hard she looks up whimpering at the masked being standing over her, knife gleaming in its hand. Before the blade plunges into her heart she hears, "Happy Halloween."

Once the deed is done the masked figure returns to the party. Everyone compliments them on the realistic blood soaking their costume. They smile.

Never Run Out of Candy | *Nicole Henning*

The porch light has been shut off for hours now, the candy only lasted through about 100 children. Snuggling into the couch to watch scary movies was the perfect ending to the evening, until the sounds started. At every window tapping and scratching echoed. Getting up you made sure the door is locked and go upstairs away from the strange sounds.

The sounds follow you, now they seem to be coming through the walls. Stumbling up the steps you fall and crawl into your bedroom. Lying on the floor you feel the tiny hands pulling you away, into the night.

Devils Night | *Nicole Henning*

Kicking off her shoes she mused about what had happened at the Devils Night Dance. Music had filled the air while bodies heaved to the beat. It was the perfect evening for wicked fun. She smiled as she unzipped her dress and slid it off. Walking around her home in a sheer slip she knelt in front of him and smiled. His head lolled to the side as she rose and sat on his lap. Licking her lips before she leaned in and tore into the side of his throat. His blood made her slip the perfect shade of red.

Transitions of the Moon | *Nicole Henning*

Their howls echoed in the distant patch of trees, golden eyes glittering from the dense foliage. The smell of blood coated the breeze making it taste like pennies as you walk as quietly as possible. Don't make a sound, don't draw attention to yourself. Let them pass without noticing you.

You hide behind a tree and crouch while they run past, their paws kicking up dust. Breath blasts against your neck and you close your eyes. Before you can open them, sharp teeth rip into your flesh. You awaken later and feel the need to feed. You howl, Happy Halloween.

I Dare You | *Nicole Henning*

The basement is musty as you work your way to where the coffins lay. Every step bringing you closer to your doom, they dared you to come here and claimed it was a Halloween prank. They didn't know the houses secret, but you know now.

The coffin lids are opened by pale hands tipped in long clawed fingers. You walk towards the hands beckoning to you. You are almost drained when they ask if you want to unleash on those who dare call you scared. Agreeing you drink their blood and laugh, you will show them who's scared of Halloween.

About the Author:

Nicole Henning is a book-a-holic who lives in a big-little town in Wisconsin. She surrounds herself with all things scary and bizarre and enjoys creating unique art. When she isn't writing she enjoys playing video games and spends a lot of time snuggling with her dog Allie aka Princess Prissy Pants. Reading, writing and horror are her biggest passions in life.

Amazon Author Page: [Nicole Henning](#)

This is the folklore of the demoness Churel, a woman who died in childbirth. These impure evil spirits spawn many times and haunt the land seeking revenge, purging and killing without reason.

--XX--

The afternoon sun simmered the small crowd of mourners squatting on the riverbank beside the graveyard in Dharwad town. They looked at the small mud dolls coated with flour and the small rice balls called pindas placed on banana leaves near the riverbank. They waited for crows to consume the balls. The omnivorous crows circled overhead, swooped down cawing and then flew off. Pinda daan or offerings of the pindas are an important part of the Hindu funeral rites.

Even after 10 days, the embers of his wife's cremated body were still smoldering indicating that her soul, had not yet left her body.

The Brahmin priest watched with trepidation. He frowned and spoke to the grieving husband Suhas whose pregnant wife had died.

"Gentleman I had drawn the horoscope of your deceased wife when her parents had asked me before your marriage. After detailed calculations, I found that she had a Demon gana or nature in her stars. This nature shows the temperament and behavior. People with demon nature are embodiments of evil spirits. In addition, she had a very serious channel imperfection in the horoscope. These channels in the human body allow the life-force to flow."

"I do not understand."

"Twenty seven stars are grouped in three channels and each channel is ruled by the Sun and the trinities, by fire, and by the moon respectively. Each channel has a dominant star and yours is α and β Pegas that signifies deceit, craftiness, and cruelty. Your star is the same as your wife."

"Why are you telling me this now?"

"Such matches end in death. I had told this to your mother when she had come to match your horoscope. I advised her against this marriage. The girl's father promised a lot of dowry and your mother agreed."

"What can I do now?"

"Nothing gentleman. The demon channel of your wife is pulling her to the evil spirit side. If the crows eat the pinda, then her soul will be saved. Else, she will roam this earth as an undead."

The acharya sat uttering some sholkas then turned towards him and said, "Shriman, did your wife have any unfulfilled wishes?"

"What? I don't think so."

The Brahmin moved on uttering mantras.

Suhas's widowed mother, a typical bullying Indian mother-in-law was angry at the delay and fidgeted muttering. "Oh this vile wretch, she does not even go away in peace. I have fasted from yesterday night and I am starving."

Until the crows consumed the pinda and pecked the zombie dolls, food would not be served.

The husband sat stoically, praying for his wife and their unborn baby. He loved his wife and turned over his salary to her, an act that made his widowed mother very angry.

She would often mutter. "O this wretched woman. My son runs after her."

Suhas was disgusted with his mother, at her avaricious and petty ways and the harsh treatment that his wife endured. However, he was a devoted son and obeyed his mother.

He sat forlornly, waiting for the crows to consume the pindas and take his wife's soul from the ghostly matrix, or the releam of the undead, the stage where the soul resides for 10 days after death. On the 10th day, the last ritual of sacrifice is performed, where the atma enters the realm of ancestors where the soul is worshipped.

Only crows could carry the soul. The zombie dolls represented the dead woman and her baby. When the crow consumed the offerings and pecked the dolls, the soul wandering in the nether world is and liberated to join the ancestors. It could then live in hell or heaven, depending on the karma. Suspended in the nether world was the most horrifying fate that could befall the dead.

All eyes looked in expectation when some crows hopped near the offerings. They peered at the offerings their eyes momentarily glowed red, and they flew off to a nearby tree where they kept cawing. They had seen something unholy in the offerings.

The Brahmin started chanting Sanskrit mantras.

*"Oh noble birds, who are blessed by God Rama,
To have double vision, please bless the departed one and take her pitri.
Oh enlightened ones, we know that you are the vaahan, vehicle of Lord Shani dev.
You have the power to see beyond death,
You see spirit in the channels.
If you know of any unfulfilled wishes of the departed,
Please let us know so that the bereaved husband can fulfill them."*

The crows appeared to have heard the prayers and they settled down near the offerings. Clearly, they were waiting for something. What were they waiting for?

The husband muttered to the poojari. "She died in childbirth and the unborn child is in her womb."

"What? Did she have any unfulfilled desires, did she yearn for anything? Promise to fulfill the wish, else, her spirit will remain in the pretyoni forever and she will become a Churel."

His voice trembled with sorrow. "She wanted a good life, a house, and richness. I did what I could and gave her what I earned."

"No. These are material needs, and they cannot be carried into the nether world. Did she have any deep desires?"

The husband began crying at the prospect of her spirit hovering for all eternity in patal loka. She would remain unconsumed, tormented by the unfulfilled desires.

"If the pinda daan is not completed, then what will happen?"

"If her unfulfilled desires are charitable such as giving alms, conducting pooja, going on a pilgrimage, then Yama, the Lord of death may show compassion, if she had not sinned, and allow her to go onward."

The priest added. "If her unfilled desires are for vengeance against torment, then her soul will seek retribution. She will emerge from the pyre and haunt this land as a Churel."

The crone started shuddering, sweating and trembling, eyeing the pinda that glowed like embers. She closed her eyes and started muttering prayers.

A vision came to her. Her daughter-in-law rose from the funeral pyre with the unborn child bursting from her swollen belly. They came to her, holding burning sticks from the pyre, sputtering with oil poured on the pyre and thrust into the crone's mouth and eyes.

The old woman screamed. "Forgive me. I loved my son and tormented you as he loved you more. Oh God, please forgive me."

The crowd looked at her in anger and abhorrence as the crows flew off. The son scowled at his mother.

Something was stirring in the graveyard yonder where the woman was cremated. A whirlwind wind started blowing, carrying screams of the undead and the undying to the gathering. The eye of the vortex crept to the spot where the woman was cremated. Embers from pyre glowed and the ashes billowed out caught in the whirlwind.

With horror, the people saw the pindas rolling towards the cremation spot. The zombie dolls started to twitch as they were carried by the whirlwind into the eye. Something was forming in the vortex and it screamed and struggled to break out.

The Churel was emerging to seek vengeance. Her hair and face was aflame, the burning saree barely covered her nude form, her swollen breasts swung free, as she pushed the unborn child dangling from the umbilical cord into her womb. Casting a blazing look at the crowd, she entered the river to douse the flames.

She would emerge later, possess the body of a hapless woman, copulate, and kill.

About the Author:

Based in Pune, India, Shashi Kadapa is the managing editor of ActiveMuse, a journal of literature. A second prize winner in the IHRAF short story competition July 2020, his works have appeared or forthcoming in anthologies of Casagrande Press, Anthroposphere (Oxford Climate Review), Alien Dimensions #11, Agorist Writers, Escaped Ink, War Monkey, Carpathia Publishing, And Lately The Sun, Sirens Call Publications, and others.

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The Allure of the Haunted

What is it about haunted places that fascinates us? It's a question I've asked myself over and over again. For me, it was something I couldn't ignore; I felt I had to pursue an answer in any manner I could. Intent on dissecting the appeal of a haunted location or object, I injected my own childhood home—which happened to be haunted—into my latest book, *The Bury Box*.

A haunted place, no matter where it might be, draws the curious, the eager to know, those who aren't afraid of the truth but seek it out in all forms. That unknown *something* that may or may not be there is hard to ignore. The unexplained corrupt feeling a malevolent haunting brings to a place, or object, can make your hair stand on end, send a cold shiver down your spine, cause you to question what you see, hear, or even think. It's a hard experience to forget. Maybe you doubt if it's real at all. Perhaps it's all in your imagination. But there's always that nagging question, *what if it is real?* And if it is, *what is it?*



Where does your mind wander when you think of a haunted place? For me, it's old prisons, abandoned psychiatric hospitals, and most prominently—houses. The idea of a home being haunted draws my interest more than anyplace else. Primarily because it's such a personal space, a safe haven where you can be at rest and find shelter from the world. But when that place is invaded by the supernatural, whatever form it may take, the entire idea of safety begins to crumble. Fear is suddenly the most prominent thing in your life.

Does the place have a dark past where tortured souls continue to reside? Or is history only part of this uncanny connection with another realm? Are there places where the dead just go and never leave, or are they bound to an area or object with purpose? If there is a purpose, what is it and how does it affect the mortal plane?

Maybe you've visited a haunted place, or had an experience someplace you've lived, or maybe you haven't—yet. Either way, once you enter that world, once it touches you, your curiosity will always be drawn to the allure of the haunted.

About the Author:

Lee Andrew Forman is a writer, editor, and publisher from the Hudson Valley region in New York. His fascination with the macabre began in childhood, watching old movies and reading everything he could get his hands on. His love of horror spans three generations, starting with his grandfather who was a fan of the classic Hollywood Monsters.

Lee has published three books to date, *The Bury Box*, *Zero Perspective*, and *Fragments of a Damned Mind*, along with numerous short stories in multiple anthologies. He is a regular contributor to *The Lift*, and writes non-fiction pieces for various periodicals. Lee is also a member of the horror writer's group Pen of the Damned, where you can find a new piece of fiction each week.

Blog: [Lee Andrew Forman](#)

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The

BURY Box

LEE ANDREW FORMAN

Chapter 1

With a face black as the void of space—so dark it appeared like a hole in reality—it approached. No legs carried its form across the yard; it hovered in the air, its red robe and strange hat swaying in the breeze.

Reggie stood and stared, boyish wonder and amazement displayed with a bright smile. He felt no fear, but rather welcomed its approach.

Two white holes opened like eyes on its circular head.

“Hello, Reggie. I’m God. I want you to dig a hole in the ground. Then put yourself in a box, put the box in the hole, and bury it.”

Lorie’s only relief was that her husband wasn’t there to see Fluffball’s corpse on the bed. Tom had been gone three days. He was rarely away that long. The tension in her shoulders tightened its grip both at the thought of him coming back too soon, and at the thought of him never coming back at all.

She still couldn’t believe Reggie dug up the dead cat and put it next to her while she slept. Strange behaviors had taken hold of her son as of late. Before the cat, the most disturbing was his hoarding of boxes: all boxes he could get his little hands on. Cereal cartons, shoe boxes, anything of the sort, he’d take to his room and stack in a neat pile. He called them ‘berry boxes’. She had no idea what he meant by that, but her concern burned through a pack of cigarettes a day.

Maybe it’s the summer heat, she thought. It’s been hotter than hell out all month.

Reggie was on the lawn, playing by himself as usual. It never worried her that he seemed to interact with thin air. Every kid has imaginary friends, don’t they? But the boxes... They made her fearful, a feeling intensified by the cocaine, liquor, caffeine, and nicotine—and by the house.

They’d only been here a few months, but Lorie still felt like a stranger in her own home. Most of their belongings had been unpacked, save for some things that just never seemed to leave their boxes no matter how many times they moved. Those random objects just seemed to travel with them wherever they went, never opened, never looked through; transferred from one basement or closet to another, they were fixtures with mysterious contents. They were easy to spot, too. She instinctively knew where to put them when they moved into a new place. They were worn, faded, used, water-stained. Not fresh and clean, like the boxes they’d normally acquire and discard.

Even though she finally had the furniture arranged the way she liked, all the knickknacks and wall decorations hung, the apartment still held a strange, uninviting feeling. She felt like an intruder, like she’d broken in and had to get out before the owners returned. The feeling danced on her shoulders continuously, never stopping, always tapping to some unheard rhythm.

In every room there was a chill that followed on her back like stalking ghostly fingers. There was emptiness, a hollow pit in her stomach, all the time. Shadows flickered on the walls. Strange noises after dark...

And now the ‘berry boxes’.

A cigarette shook in one hand as Lorie ran fingers through her hair with the other. She tapped her foot on the black and white tile floor. She often wondered if Tom would come home at all. Sometimes, when he was out on a bender for more than a couple of days, she’d stare at the phone, wondering if she’d get a call. Maybe it would be an accident, or he’d overdose on whatever multitude of drugs he mixed together on any given night.

God can’t interfere in the affairs of man, because he gave him free will. If God were to guide fate, mankind would lose that free will.

It was something she’d read, written on the bathroom stall of some dive bar Tom took her to early in their relationship, just when the red flags started popping up like neon beer signs. Just when she realized he was a douche bag and she was in for a bad time. She never forgot the quote. *Such beautiful words in such an ugly place*, she thought. Sometimes Lorie imagined who could have written them. To her, it was an epiphany. It was the answer to that old question: why does God let bad things happen?

It was both a comforting and a disturbing thought, a bi-polar philosophy. But ever since that night, it was one she had to face. Especially in her current life.

Why is this happening? God can’t intervene. You’re on your own.

She snorted another line and lit another cigarette.

“Mommy, I want cake!” Reggie said as he ran into the kitchen.

She tousled his hair after covering the white powder with a magazine. "You'll have to wait until tomorrow, sweetie. The cake is for your birthday." Its chocolaty scent filled the kitchen.

"But I want it now."

"I know, but it'll be more fun if you wait. You'll get to blow the candles out!"

"Do you think Dad will be here for my birthday?"

Lorie hesitated. "We'll see."

"Why's Dad gone all the time?" Reggie bounced back and forth between his left and right foot.

"He's working. Go get ready for bed, and tomorrow we'll have your birthday party."

"Ok." Reggie shuffled away. The loose feet of his pajamas dragged along the floor.

Lorie's attention turned to the door, wondering if and when it would open. She lit another smoke and let it shake between her fingers, ashes falling like dead leaves onto the table. She rubbed her nose and sniffled. She felt the urge to burn another line. Just in case he came home, just in case he didn't.

She got up to check if Reggie was getting ready for bed. He was surprisingly good about it for a boy about to turn only twelve, but she wanted to make sure it was safe to bring out the dust and the liquor and dive into it like a Greek goddess. Whether Tom came home or not, it didn't matter. She was going to need it. The house itself could be just as cruel as him.

When Lorie stopped at the bathroom door, Reggie was brushing his teeth and making faces in the mirror. He saw her reflection and grinned with a foaming blue mouth. The smile that grew on her lips brought pain, both physical and emotional. Her mouth wasn't used to the motion, and neither was her soul. She smiled when necessary, as a role, as a defense, but rarely out of actual joy. Those were the ones that hurt. Not the ones pretended, but the ones that were real.

"Almost ready for bed?"

"Yes, Mom."

"Good boy."

Lorie tucked Reggie in, turned on the nightlight, and left the door open a crack. He didn't like being in the dark. Neither did she. Not in this house.

At the kitchen table, three lines and a bottle lay before her. The only choice was which to start with. Lorie knew the rule for beer and liquor, but couldn't recall if one existed for coke. She shrugged and picked up the cut-in-half bendy straw, pulling one line clean off the faded wood. Eyes watering, she unscrewed the top of the bottle and took a long drink. She leaned back in her chair, lit a cigarette, and closed her eyes. She inhaled deeply, exhaled slow-moving clouds of gray smoke. She watched them waft through the room, hanging like fog in the dim, yellowed light of the kitchen.

The walls creaked and groaned.

She snorted another line and took two drinks.

The floor rumbled.

The third line, gone.

Cold needles pricked her flesh, accompanied by the icing of her bones. Reggie was asleep. Tom hadn't come home. Lorie was alone with the house. The home that never felt like home. She took another drink, thought about spreading out another line. But she felt high enough to make it through the night if it didn't get too bad. Besides, she had the bottle for company.

The light in the kitchen flickered, and her mind with it.

It's just the coke fucking with you.

It flashed repeatedly, then went out.

Lorie's chest heaved. The dark engulfed her in a claustrophobic embrace. The chair's one uneven leg rattled against the floor. Her hands clamped onto the edge of the table. She gritted her teeth. Her gaze went to the light fixture in the ceiling. Every nerve prayed for it to come back on. Prayed that the voices wouldn't start.

The light did come back on, and the rumbling walls calmed. Reality made its return, and with it, the comforting sound of crickets outside the window. She listened to them intently, allowed their chittering to fill her ears. She had to focus on something other than what was already in her head. She had to make it through the night.

Chapter 2

Beneath the light of a birthday sun, Reggie took the gardening spade outside. He had to make holes for his bury boxes, had to practice for the real thing. God might be angry if he didn't do it right. It was important that the bury box he put himself in would be completely covered in dirt so he would be well-hidden.

"It'll be like playing hide and seek," God said.

"I like that game."

"I know you do, Reggie. Why do you think we're going to play it?"

Reggie's cheeks flushed, and he wore a big smile.

"You should go play with your friends."

"But I don't have any," Reggie sighed.

"What about them?"

God nodded to his left, toward the house. Two children, a boy and girl roughly the same age as Reggie, stared at him.

Reggie stared back, delighted by the sight of two kids he'd never seen. When he looked back to God, he was gone.

"Who are you?" Reggie asked the kids.

"We used to live here."

Reggie considered the answer. An inkling of suspicion crawled up his spine; he wondered why they would come back to a house they no longer lived in. But that thought quickly vanished. There were other kids here. His eyes opened wide. His heart warmed with the thought that finally, there would be other kids to play with.

"Do you wanna play?" the boy asked.

Despite his excitement of meeting new friends, something felt wrong. Reggie questioned their monotone expressions. Suddenly, they didn't look very nice.

The boy crossed his arms. "Well, do ya wanna play or not?"

"I guess so," Reggie answered. He thought of something that might impress them. Make them think he was tough, like Dad. He took a pack of candy cigarettes from his pocket and offered one to each of them. "I'm Reggie," he said. "What are your names?"

The boy put the chalky cigarette in his mouth and leaned against the side of the house, one knee bent, foot against the siding. "Mikey. That's my sister, Tabby."

Tabby smiled, but only briefly; her mouth went back to the horizontal line it had been before. She held her candy cigarette, but not between her pointer and middle fingers like the grown-ups did.

"So what do you wanna play?" Reggie asked. "Hide and go seek?"

Mikey pretended to puff on his cigarette and blew out imaginary smoke. "No. I don't like that game. Why don't we play, how many ways are there to die?"

"I don't know that game," Reggie said.

"All you gotta do is imagine cool ways you can get killed. Like bleeding to death, or getting your head chopped off with an axe. You go first, Tabby."

She eyed them both before speaking. "Getting murdered by your daddy."

"Good one, Tabby," Mikey said, smiling. He aimed his gaze at Reggie. "Your turn."

Reggie ran scenarios in his mind; it came to him like a revelation. "Getting buried alive!"

Mikey widened his grin. "I like that one. Let's start digging."

Reggie picked a good spot on the lawn. Nice, flat, soft soil. He stuck the spade into the ground and pried up the first pile of dirt. Then again. He kept digging. Mikey joined in, helping to shovel loose earth with his hands. Tabby watched.

The hole got bigger and bigger. Reggie's heartbeat quickened the deeper he went. He'd soon be in there, hiding in the dark, waiting for Mom or Dad to find him. He soothed his thoughts by imagining the calm, quiet embrace of his bury box. It'd be like camping out in a sleeping bag, only beneath the ground. He was glad he found a friend to help dig. As his arms tired, he realized the task would have been near impossible alone. The hole was only big enough to sit in.

"Reggie!"

He heard Mom call for him and looked up from his project.

"Reggie, your lunch is ready!"

He stood and noticed Mikey and Tabby were gone.

Where did they go? Reggie thought.

"Reggie, come get your lunch!"

"Coming!" he answered.

He dropped the spade and ran inside. He hoped she made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

After lunch, Reggie spent his afternoon exploring the woods behind their new house. He gathered sticks and fallen tree branches and put them in a pile. He wished Dad would build him a tree fort, but he had no hopes of that ever getting done, so he decided to make one of his own.

From his pocket, he removed a ball of string he found in a drawer of random stuff in the kitchen. He always loved that drawer. Every time they moved somewhere, all sorts of treasures would be placed in such a drawer. Exploring its contents always rewarded him with something to do.

He surveyed his materials and the area in which he planned to build. He figured he could lean the branches against a fallen tree, and there would be enough room for him to at least sit in the fort. It wasn't the lavish tree-top house he wished for, but for the time being it would have to be enough.

His name echoed in his head, as if heard from far away. But it didn't sound like a voice. It didn't even sound like a sound. The words were more a vapor, a mist, a foggy image in his mind. It was Mom. Her smoky words swirled with concern. She seemed to be calling out to him, wishing him home.

Dedication to his task forced him to ignore it and continue. He hoisted branch after branch against the horizontal trunk. Once they were lined up, he wrapped a line of string around their middles to hold them together. He then placed the thinner sticks over the large ones to fill the gaps between.

Reggie felt the words in his head again. His stomach fluttered with worry, the same agonizing feeling he assumed Mom would feel if he were missing. Was he missing? He asked himself the question with uncertainty. He knew he had to build his fort, but Mom was desperately seeking his whereabouts. Reggie felt urged to run home, but couldn't decide whether or not to listen to Mom or finish what he was doing. It seemed too important to leave undone; he wanted to make Dad proud.

Lorie pushed open the screen door and stepped out into the yard. "Reggie!" She called, hands cupped around her mouth. "Reggie, come home!"

She looked around, didn't see him anywhere. Deep fear rooted itself in her gut—the kind only a mother can feel. She didn't know where her son was, and the blame was on her. If only she hadn't been in the bathroom for so long, snorting those lines of white powdered perfection, maybe she would have known his location. Maybe if she'd been watching him like a good mother should. Maybe if Tom was more of a father...

But Lorie pushed that last thought out of her mind. Sure, Tom was to blame for much, but it was she who'd been snorting coke off the bathroom sink while little Reggie played outside. As the only parent who was actually 'there', it was her responsibility. She fucked up. She made the mistake. It didn't matter how big a piece of shit Tom was. It would be her fault if Reggie went missing.

She called out again into the empty lawn. "Reggie, get your ass home right now!" Maybe if she threw a little anger in her voice, he'd heed the urgency.

Her heart quickened in her chest. Fingertips went numb, breath fast and shallow. *Oh Christ, what if the house did something to him?* The thought intruded the long list of scenarios she could imagine. As strange as it was, as unusual as it would surely sound to any other parent, it seemed more likely to her than him getting lost, or kidnapped, or dying in some kind of accident. The place had a bad temperament, and although no one had seriously been injured, it wasn't something she'd dismiss as a possibility. In all likelihood, that house had every intention of causing harm, and as much of it as possible.

"Reggie! Where the fuck are you?"

The urgency in Mom's voice straightened Reggie's back, boiled his blood. He felt genuine concern in her calling, which didn't come often. *Maybe Dad's home!* he thought. *Dad might finally be back in time for my birthday!* He decided to bolt for the house. Waking dreams of Dad wrapping huge arms around him and lifting him into the air inspired his feet to glide over the uneven forest floor.

When he reached the yard, his heart stopped. Dad's truck wasn't in the driveway. Sorrow pushed tears to the corners of his eyes, but he quickly wiped them away. 'Men don't cry,' Dad always said, 'stop it, you little bitch.' He hoped, prayed to God with all his will that maybe Dad just didn't have his truck; maybe it was broken and getting fixed by that weird guy with white hair that only grew out the sides of his head. Maybe he got a ride home from someone else, and he was in the kitchen lighting birthday candles.

With new hope, Reggie ran for the door. His heart pounded at the thought of bursting in to see Dad at the kitchen table, ready to sing him a birthday song. He wouldn't even care if Dad's breath smelled like beer.

Mom came around the corner from the other side of the house. Her face expressed something between fear and anger. Reggie couldn't tell which had the upper hand.

"Where have you been?" she yelled. "I've been calling you!"

"Is Dad home? Is Dad coming home for my birthday?"

Lorie's angry eyes settled. The scowl she wore disappeared. Reggie recognized disappointment right away. He'd seen it enough times to know. Dad wasn't home. He wasn't *going* to come home.

"Come in the house, sweetie," Mom said. "Dinner is ready."

Reggie's shoulders slumped as he followed her inside. As the back door closed, Reggie looked again to the empty driveway, prayed to God that Dad's truck would come roaring in. But there were only dead leaves blowing in the wind.

The smell of chocolate cake filled the kitchen; Reggie sniffed the air, tasting its fragrance with a warm feeling in his stomach. Chocolate cake was his favorite above any other flavor. "Can I have it now?" he asked.

"No, you have to wait until after dinner."

"Please, Mom!"

"No, but I made your favorite dinner. Steak and green beans!"

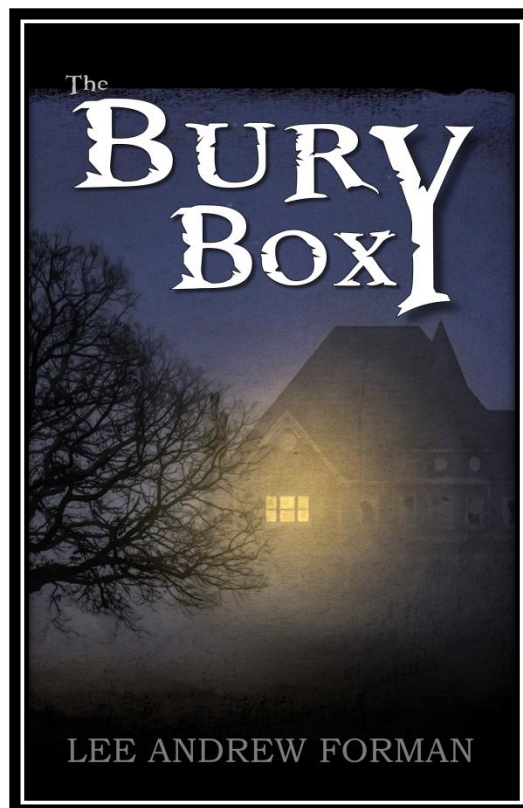
The thought of his favorite meal filled Reggie with both joy and sadness. It was Dad's favorite too, but the man wouldn't be here to have any. Reggie wondered where he was; if he was eating steak somewhere, wishing him a happy birthday from someplace far away. The boy closed his eyes and thought hard, so hard it made his head hurt. *Please, God. Please let my Dad come home for my birthday. I'd do anything...*

God answered with a flood of images in his head. Reggie saw the completed hole in the ground. He saw the bury box, his own body nice and snug inside. He watched himself pull the lid closed.

But who's going to fill the hole back up with dirt? he asked God with his thoughts, so Mom wouldn't hear.

God answered. *"Don't worry about that. Mikey and Tabby will help. Then I'll tell Mom to search for you."*

Reggie smiled at the thought of the game being played out. Mom would be so proud of him for coming up with such a good hiding spot, the best in history. Of course, it had been God's idea, but she didn't need to know that.



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The Bury Box

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