

Spring 2022 issue 57

A Dark Fiction

A Horror Zine!

Short Stories, Flash Fiction, Poetry, and Artwork

Featured Artist: Bob Lizarraga

Spotlight Podcast: The Horror Collector Terry M. West

Featured Author: Armand Rosamilia

Featured Book : 'Trapped'

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Sober | Mike Lera

Someone was in his home, hiding.

Watching him.

He could feel it.

The unshaven, messy haired discombobulated man sprang off his den sofa, gazing at the half-opened hallway closet with dread in his baggy, sleep-hungry eyes.

Reeking like mildew from a week of not showering, Sheldon Blake sauntered past take-out food bags, dirty clothes and empty beer bottles, stepping cautiously into the hallway, fixating on the closet.

Where he heard rustling sounds.

Sheldon trembled as he reflected back one week, six days, twelve hours and fifteen minutes ago.

Reflected on how this hellish nightmare began...

"I'd like to bet you two hundred and fifty thousand dollars that you can't go without sex for thirty days," the electronically altered voice proposed. "This includes pornography and masturbation."

Sheldon winced, squirming on his living room couch, his phone plastered to his ear.

"Here's how it'll work," the anonymous caller continued. "Presently, there's cameras in every corner of your home."

Sheldon's eyes widened.

"A USB-size CCTV camera with a built-in tracker will be dropped at your door. Whenever outside your home, you're to plant this camera-tracker on you wherever you're at. If, within this month, you're ever out of the cameras' eyes for more than thirty seconds or if we cannot find your whereabouts, the bet is off. Also know we have everything tapped. Computers, phones—everything. And don't be surprised if you see a 'doorman', a 'garbage collector' or a 'gardener' you normally don't see."

A shriek escaped Sheldon's lips.

"Should you refrain from sex and porn these next thirty days, you will be granted two hundred fifty thousand dollars. You have my word."

Scoffing, Sheldon said, "Listen, I don't need your..."

"Should you give in to sex, porn, strip clubs, and/or masturbation within these next thirty days, you will lose not only this bet, but also a *vital part* of your recreation."

Sheldon gazed down with a twisted grimace.

"Should you refuse our bet, or contact the police, we'll be forced to take this to another level," the voice informed. "Look at your screen."

A live video appeared on Sheldon's phone, showing a seven-year-old girl playing in a front yard, oblivious to the hidden camera person.

"Oh, dear sweet God..." Sheldon uttered, watching the video with bulged eyes, his heart leaping into his throat.

"She won't be harmed," the voice assured. "if you abide by what I just told you: Don't refuse our bet, and no cops."

His lips fluttering, Sheldon asked, "Wh-who...are you people? Why are you...?"

"The bet starts now," the voice said, clicking off.

His numb body covered with sweat, Sheldon took a long, deep breath.

He searched his entire house, finding a number of small cameras in plain view, others completely hidden. His mind whirred at the mere concept of... *intruders*, having been in his home.

He instinctively pressed '9' on his phone.

Then he rechecked his phone's screen.

Again he observed the live video of his one and only *daughter* two thousand miles away whom he hadn't seen for two years, playing happily in the yard of his ex-wife, and he immediately canceled his call.

Who are these people? Sheldon repeatedly screamed in his head. Why are they doing this?

He stood before a 50 by 66 gold framed abstract painting of a couple 'embracing', one of his many sensual collections, aside from his nude statues and photo'd portraits of eroticism.

He pondered over the mystery caller's bet.

No sex, pornography or masturbation for thirty days.

Quitting sex for a month would indubitably be painful, as he was accustomed to three or four times a week, partners ranging from spank buds to 'pay pals'.

Yet, peering down, the better's words echoing in his head, You will lose a vital part of your recreation, he muttered to himself, "You got this."

But... no masturbation?

Be it off porn or fantasy, Sheldon masturbated five to six times a day, and would therefore need to set up *Net Sitter* on his devices. His endless array of mags, DVD's and 'toys' would be locked up. *Pete's Cabaret*, where even the janitors knew his name, would cease.

Sheldon took a hard swallow.

He had never gone a day without solo-sex since he was ten.

Twenty years.

He checked his watch.

Time for a liquor run—something he hadn't done in a decade.

Someone was in his home, hiding.

He could feel it.

Hiding within the hallway closet, watching him.

Without his *vice* now for a week, six days, twelve hours and twenty-two minutes, Sheldon was in pain. Physical, emotional, mental, even spiritual... *pain*. Fatigue, nausea, headaches, congestion, sweats, shakes, chills and diarrhea were just a few effects. The creepiness and the craziness of cameras and people watching him—everywhere, all day, every day—were also setting in. Unfamiliar dog walkers, joggers and bikers. Or 'custodians', 'security officers' and 'window washers' at the office whom he never saw before. Being videoed in the shower or on the toilet was the hardest for him.

But it wasn't paranoid delusions from stress and fatigue—he was certain someone was in that closet.

Every morning and every night since the bet began, Sheldon checked his home for potential 'house callers', but never found anyone.

Until now.

"I-I didn't do anything," Sheldon uttered to the closet's darkness, holding a small two by three framed photo of a woman, eving it with adoration.

He watched as the closet door opened, and gazing down, he immediately and precognitively felt the painful *consequence* set by the unknown better.

"I didn't do anything, I swear to...!"

Then Bill, his cat, exited the closet, yawning.

Sheldon chuckled.

Suddenly, something in the guestroom to his right caught his attention.

He turned, gazed at a large wall mirror in that room, reflecting... a *man*, positioned at the wall separating that room from the den where Sheldon was just in, and it seemed this man was peeking into a hole.

Yet the man was now returning Sheldon's stare through the mirror, beady eyed, a slow lopsided grin forming on his chubby face.

His hair standing on end, Sheldon quick-stepped backward, entering the staircase balcony, and without looking behind him, he crashed through the balcony's wood railing, falling to the living room several feet below.

"Damn!" Douglas Jaffe exclaimed with a crestfallen glare, a muscular forty-something man in a royal blue Brioni suit. "This wasn't s'posed to happen!"

He sat before a laptop displaying multiple live CCTV screens of Sheldon's home, one showing him lying along his living room floor. The chubby man from the guestroom was examining Sheldon's neck. Gazing into the camera, he slowly shook his head to his two employers before retreating.

"Hmm, hmm... our inside guy really spooked 'em," commented Andrew Haigen, a short skinny man in his forties seated beside Douglas.

"A forfeit?" Douglas suggested.

"No," responded Haigen. "Look."

He played back a video on another screen, of Sheldon in his den, moments before he entered the hall. Sheldon sat with one leg crossed tightly over the other, eyes fastened on the woman's photo he held in his hand.

Douglas zoomed the camera in on Sheldon. Examined his posture, studied his *discrete* body movements—carefully.

The *Gentlemen's Position*. A 'trick' he himself used back in the day, during sixth period, or the second hour of grandpa's sermon.

"Explains his paranoia," Haigen remarked. "He was... BUS-ted!"

Douglas refaced the live screen of Sheldon on the floor. He zoomed in on the woman's photo.

Ex-wife, he thought to himself, an empathetic gleam in his eyes, remembering her from his extensive reconnaissance.

Haigen poured two glasses of Scotch.

"Congratulations," he smiled. "You won!"

Douglas gave Haigen a look of contempt, declining the Scotch.

"Now," Haigen said, reclining on a couch. "Tell me again why one of this city's most powerful and feared businessmen bet a pitiful perv two hundred and fifty thou that he couldn't lay off his libido for a month."

Sitting opposite Haigen, Douglas asked, "You ever met my daughter?"

Haigen nodded. "Charming young woman."

"Charming, yes. And indeed young." Douglas leaned forward. "Just the kind of nineteen-year-old virgins that a thirty-year-old sex pot like Sheldon Blake enjoys seducing—before discarding them like toilet paper." He uttered through gritted teeth, "Scarred for life."

Haigen swallowed.

"Had this happened to my baby ten years ago," Douglas continued, eyes moist. "he would've been skinned Viking-style that night she came crying to me.

"But I didn't want to kill him—I wanted to help him."

Haigen's face furrowed.

"Blake was—a sexaholic," Douglas declared.

"Define... sexaholic," Haigen queried.

"When sex is no longer optional," Douglas answered. "When one becomes—dependent on it. When lust kills love."

Haigen sipped his drink.

"And since chronic sexual impulses open the same endorphins in our brain as certain chemical drugs," Douglas furthered. "they can be equal to heroin use. Didja know that? That's why many who quit crack n' booze move to the more... acceptable, legal, *subtle* pleasures, i.e., sex, food, even video games. Simply trading one addiction for another." He gazed into oblivion. "But ohhh, the lives destroyed by this so-called 'harmless' condition called sexaholism." He turned to Haigen. "I know."

Haigen raised a brow.

"Hell, I was far worse than Sheldon. Until SR."

"SR...?"

"Sexaholic's Recovery," Douglas replied. "A radical group with – peculiar methods."

Haigen half grinned. "So... you joined a cult, found religion."

"Not a cult," Douglas corrected, sternly. "And, though religion kept me from drugs, alcohol and cigarettes growing up, SR is anything but false Gods and cathedral candles. No, what SR gave me was something a whooole lot more. As my SR mentor says, 'It's not just about being *sober*, Dougee boy—a sick man must reach *recovery*'. It's therefore our goal to free other sexaholics from their... disease. In the case of our subject, I adapted a few methods of my own—in the form of a bet—to help him find this freedom."

Haigen asked, "If Blake refused the bet, or called the police, would you have harmed his kid?"

Douglas smirked. "No. Just a necessary bluff for doggy to obey."

"Aaand, if he hadn't broken his neck?" Haigen glanced down. "Would he have reeeally lost a... vital part of his recreation?"

Douglas's face was stoic.

Haigen grimaced. "Your methods are a liiittle extreme. Don't recovery programs believe in a *higher power* to conquer inner demons—not tactics?"

"To face an erratic behavior like sexaholism, no doubt one must surrender to a 'spirit', or 'God'," Douglas agreed. "For me, and others in SR, constant surveillance and... consequences are equally—and extremely—important."

He stared at Sheldon's virtual corpse, releasing a heavy sigh. "Was just hoping this one would have pulled through." He shook his head, lips tightened. "Damn—I was so sure he'd make it to thirty days. Especially after shown what he'd lose, and what he'd gain."

Haigen chortled. "If I may restate my case, Doug—this... sexaholism, as you've coined it, stems from nature. Unlike chemical abuse, we're all born with a sexual drive. Strip *any* person of this pleasure for, say, thirty days, and they might as well join a monastery or convent."

"Sex is natural—for the normal," Douglas clarified. "For addicts, it is made *unnatural*. A succumbing to one of the most shrewd—yet undeniably lethal—drugs. All the more reason to use force in combating it."

Haigen lit a cigar. "Yeah, well, I say all the cruel tactics... all that higher power voodoo... all the recovery programs in the world can't help people like Blake—it only makes them crazier."

Blowing smoke at the laptop screen, Haigen stated, "Which was why I had absolutely no problem risking half a mil for my part in this little wager: two-fifty for you—two-fifty for the perv, had he pulled off a thirty-day miracle." He stood up. "Of course, seeing Blake's rather obsessive-compulsive condition, I saw my part as a sure win."

Haigen took out a piece of paper. "On that note, fellow sportsman—my account info."

Douglas snatched the paper with a sneer.

"Insane," Haigen chuckled. "Man bets another man a quarter mil to stay sober, wins the bet, only to hand it over to another."

Douglas's upper lip raised.

"Always the gambler, Doug. Always the..."

Douglas grabbed Haigen's arm with a vice-like grip, causing him to drop his glass and wail.

"Andrew, your father saved my father twice in 'Nam... and you're my lawyer," Douglas snarled. "But no one, not even my wife, talks about my gambling. Kay?"

Haigen gulped at Douglas's piercing stare, which suggested he best be on his merry way with his winnings before the dangerous, well-connected businessman forgot about their history.

Parking his Aston Martin into his garage, Douglas viewed a CCTV on his phone's screen—Sheldon taken by medics—and he frowned.

He glanced at a photo of his nineteen-year-old daughter hanging from his rear view mirror.

Sheldon needed to suffer for her degradation and humiliation, yes. But no one was supposed to die.

"I only wanted to help him," Douglas murmured. Addictions like his need to be dealt with... forcefully! He threw his phone down.

Exhaling a deep breath, he took out the paper with Haigen's account info.

Pondered painfully over having to once again explain his *problem* to his wife.

He pulled out a plane ticket.

Just one weekend, Douglas reasoned. One weekend is all I...

"Agh!"

A piece of thin rope suddenly lassoed his throat from behind.

Choking, Douglas gazed wide eyed into his rear view, at a masked face in the backseat.

His driver and passenger doors opened, two more masked faces at opposite sides of him.

They seized Douglas's wrists, zip tying his hands to the leather steering wheel.

The thin rope was released, Douglas allowed to breathe. Before he could scream "Do you know who I am?!", a handkerchief was wrapped around his mouth.

"Sober for years, Dougee-boy," one of the assailants whispered softly, inches from his ear. "Yet far from recovery."

Douglas recognized the voice.

His chest panged with panic when he realized who his assailants were.

They want to give you a whooole lot more!

The speaker withdrew a small metal instrument resembling a single hole puncher, a mini guillotine at its end.

Douglas's eyes bulged as his right thumb was placed under the guillotine.

The blade sank into his flesh, dug into bone. A crunchy sound made, like chewing hard carrots, blood spurting everywhere.

Pain exploded throughout his body in one gigantic bolt, his face fading white.

A distant voice echoed in Douglas's head, somewhere between his left and right brain, deriving from conscience, or poetic retribution... or insanity.

A bet's a bet, Dougee-boyyy! A bet's a bet! Someone has to 'lose a vital part' under the guillotine! Someone has to! Ha haaa!

His bloodied Vegas plane ticket was tossed out, along with his 'lucky' deck.

Which he will unfortunately be unable to shuffle this weekend.

About the Author:

Classified as 'early Stephen King' by best selling author Bret Easton Ellis, Mike Lera's work has been published in over a dozen anthologies and magazines, and he has recently wrote/co-produced four films based on his published stories. When not scaring people, Lera scavenges Comic Cons for anything to wear, hang, tac, shelf, YouTube and add to his geek shrine.

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The Lady of the Manor | Alyson Faye

Helmsley Manor nestled in a hollow, surrounded by a tribe of trees, snow-shrouded. Malcolm twitched the velvet curtains, and grasping a mug of hot chocolate, eyed the walnut-boxed grandfather clock.

"Come on, hurry up. It's nearly dark."

A few minutes later a car's engine chugged up the drive. Malcolm smoothed back his sparse hair. He could set his plan in motion.

At the sound of the door knocker Malcolm slapped on his host's face and greeted his Christmas house guests. His cousin Jemma and her partner, Alex, beamed at him, all flushed cheeks and good will.

For supper, Malcolm served roast beef. Alex, it transpired, was vegetarian. Jemma waved her iPhone around—no signal.

"This is all very Dickensian, Malc," Alex commented. Malcolm twitched at the abbreviation. "No telly either, no computer. Dunno how you manage."

"I read, walk, and research my history of the Manor," Malcolm replied. Alex eye rolled. Malcolm felt a visceral urge to pulverise his guest. Instead he said, "You know the manor's haunted?" He pointed to an oil painting. "Lady Henrietta Helmsley. She drowned in the lake in 1886. Pregnant, but not by her husband. That's how our branch of the family inherited the manor. No legitimate heirs left."

"She was gorgeous," Alex slurred, "a real looker."

Time to up the ante. "If you hear noises at night, or see wet footprints on the floors, it's Henrietta returning to take her revenge on any men who live here."

"Well, you've survived," Jemma commented. Alex sniggered. Jemma frowned and shook her head. Malcolm observed this interplay with fermented fury.

He knew what they really thought of him. Jemma had made his childhood a misery with hikes, wild swimming and midnight picnics. He'd felt like an escapee from an Enid Blyton story.

They said their goodnights, but Malcolm stayed awake. He changed into a grey poplin Victorian dress, a long dark wig and tied tubing to his waist, adding a water bottle. Thus armed he began his 'haunting'.

Damn, it's cold.

Over the balcony he spotted snow flurries decorating the hallway, and...prints of bare feet.

What the ...?

He stood at the open front door, staring out towards the misty lake. Behind him a figure, in a rust-stained nightgown, drifted towards him. Unseen, unheard, barely visible. Wispy hands hovered above Malcolm's spine—then he shot forwards with some force, falling face first into the snow.

Clang!

"No! Let me in!" His skirts lifted in the wind. He hammered on the indifferent oak, stumbling around the manor, battling an uncanny sleepiness, sucking at his consciousness.

The next morning, Jemma, up early, tripped over her cousin's body; a crystalline statue, curled in the doorway. Fingers blackened, wig askew, eyes ice-glazed.

At an upper window, a sliver of silver light, in the shape of a woman, observed the scene. Henrietta's frozen heart thawed—finally her manor would be inherited by two women.

Jemma and Alexandra were such a charming couple.

About the Author:

Alyson Faye lives in the UK with her family and rescue animals; she is often out on the moors near where the Brontes lived with Roxy, her Lab. cross. She swims, tutors, edits for an indie press, is an old movie buff. She always wanted to dance with Fred Astaire and catch a train with Cary Grant, whose birthday she shares.

Blog: Black Angel Press





The Edge | Miriam H. Harrison

Ever since her lover had died, Nora kept having the same dream. She was at the edge of a cliff, looking down on a gray vista of mountain peaks. She stood in the breathless silence, her thoughts empty as the landscape.

Then the voice began. It was faint at first, then rising.

"Nora. Nora!"

Even across the distance, she knew that voice.

"Nora! Please!"

It was a voice that she loved most in delicate, furtive whispers, but now it screamed out against the mountain cliffs, coming from everywhere and nowhere.

Then the shapes descended from the sky. The wide wings, circling down in a slow, meditative spiral. Without urgency, but with clearest certainty, the vultures came. Nora watched as they dipped down below her. Leaning over the edge, she saw the rope. And there, hanging from a noose at the rope's end, was an almost familiar face, discolored and distorted by death.

"Daphne!"

"Nora!" Daphne stretched her hand up towards her, far beyond her reach. "Nora, help me!"

Nora tried to grab hold of the rope itself, knowing she could not pull it up, knowing she had to try. She was so far.

The vultures were so close.

Nora screamed as they swooped down towards the dangling body. Daphne screamed too, but it was no use. They could smell her scent of death.

There came a sharp clarity, a sudden familiarity as Nora recognized her dream. This was usually when she woke, those screams still filling her mind. But not tonight. She begged to wake, pulled at her hair, scratched at her arms. She fell to her knees, sobbing. She knew she was dreaming, but that was not enough to stop the screams.

She leaned over the edge once more, the body below lost amid the hungry feathers.

"Daphne!"

There was no answer.

"Daphne," she called again, but softer now. "Daphne. Daphne, please. Why?"

She rolled on to her back, sobbing, staring at the empty sky. It's a dream, she told herself. The dream will pass. But the pain was no less real. The loss. The questions. Those were not imagined, not some horror she could wake from.

There was a beating of wings, and the morbid birds appeared over the cliff. Nora sat up, watching as they landed at her side, one at a time. But they were no longer many. As each landed, it merged with the one before it, coalescing into a greater and greater bird. At last there was only the one bird, larger even than she was. As Nora met its gaze, she felt anger, fear, then at last a cold, hollow ache.

"Why?" she asked it. "Why would she do that?"

The bird did not answer, did not judge. It merely held her gaze. Nora saw all of her pain and confusion reflected in those black eyes.

Suddenly the bird spread its enormous wings and returned to the sky. Nora almost cried out for it, but then stopped.

Where the bird had sat there was now an egg, large and speckled. Nora pressed her hand to it and felt its warmth, its strange texture—not quite rough, not quite smooth. She almost thought she could feel a heartbeat. Then there was a sharper rhythm.

She pulled her hand away just as the sharp point of a beak broke through. She watched in fascination as the tiny hole was pushed wider, cracks spreading out across the egg's surface. Slowly, fragments fell away, then more and more. Nora did not know how long she watched, but at last the egg was gone, leaving instead the downy body of a baby vulture. It watched her with a steady gaze.

"Have you missed me?"

Nora was shocked to hear it speak in Daphne's voice.

"What did you say?"

"Have you missed me?" it asked again, this time stepping closer. "It's alright. We are here now."

Nora had no reply. She held her hands out to the bird. It crawled up into her arms.

"Daphne?" she asked uncertainly.

"Nora," it replied. It rubbed its soft head against the crook of her elbow—the very place Daphne had loved to kiss.

A sob escaped Nora's lips. "Daphne!" she held the small body close. "Oh, Daphne. But how? Why?"

"Why not? Isn't it enough to be here? Together?"

"But are we? You are a bird, and soon, I must wake."

The small black eyes met hers again. "Must you?"

She did not know what to say.

"The dream needn't be a dream. Let it consume you. Let it keep you. Let it keep you here, with me."

"But why here? Why did you leave me?"

"I would never leave you. You know that. But you know we could not be."

"But we could—we were!"

"Until my brother found out."

"Your brother?"

Nora felt a sadness as Daphne's eyes met hers. "Yes, my brother."

"And he...?" She could not ask the question.

"He wanted to be sure I did not shame the family."

A silence lay between them—not separating them, but bringing them closer than they had ever been.

"What must I do?" Nora asked at last.

Daphne told her.

Nora held her safely in her arms as she swung her legs over the cliff's edge, taking hold of the rope. Slowly, slowly, she climbed down, closer to the waiting noose. The vultures returned, but she continued.

"This you must do alone." Daphne said as they nearly reached the rope's end.

"But what will you do?"

Daphne flapped her tiny wings, the down turning to feathers, the wings spreading wide.

"I will help you the only way I can."

Nora nodded. Her lover flew free, joining in with the circling bodies. Nora pulled up the loop, slipped it over her head. She looked at the birds, no longer certain which was Daphne, but she knew that she was there, knew that she was near.

Nora let herself fall, and the vultures descended.

The Long Walk | Miriam H. Harrison

Her shoes walked about at night. She could hear them pace through the house all night, yet by morning they always returned to their place by the door, waiting for her.

One morning she came down to find the shoes dirty. More than dirty—ruined. The once-white sneakers were caked with mud, scratched as if from underbrush. She went through the house and found the back door standing open.

That night she brought the shoes to her bedroom and set them down beside her bed. Closing the bedroom door, she settled in to sleep.

It wasn't long before her shoes began to shuffle about, then pace the room. She rose and opened the door. The shoes hurried out; she followed close behind. Down the hall, the stairs, to the front door. The shoes shuffled about eagerly as she turned the latch, opened the door. They hurried out, but she hesitated at the threshold, her feet bare.

The shoes returned, organized themselves at her feet, waited. She slipped her feet inside. Before she could close the door behind her, the shoes had already carried her into the night.

The door stood open through the night, the morning, into the afternoon. It was only then that a neighbour came by. He poked his head inside, concerned. He pulled his head back, frightened.

There by the door were her shoes. They were ragged from their long walk. Torn, scratched by stones and underbrush, they sat there. Stained through and through with blood, they waited.

About the Author:

Miriam H. Harrison studies full time, works on the side, writes when she should be doing other things, and trains the dust bunnies to fend for themselves. Her poetry and short fiction have appeared in a number of publications, and any updates about her published works can be found on social media or her website.

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Mercy Killing | Patrick J. Porwoll

The watery eye of the leviathan stared through me, its owner battered by sheets of rain as it hung over the deck of the *Santiago*, just outside the porthole of the cozy cabin where I played babysitter to the comatose Dennis Nonswell. The beast was clearly still alive, as weak spurts of water blasted out of the blowholes lining its back, showering its limply swishing beard of tentacles and the crewmen, scampering below in the floodlights, as the squall assaulted our hunting fleet.

I glanced over at my charge, who gave weak, shuddering breaths between choked words. To think, yesterday he was celebrating having harpooned the monster as it swam with its pod, before the freak storm materialized and somehow selected Dennis to lance with a blinding spear of jagged lightning. Lucky for the rest of us it had been only him, as had it struck the monster, who knows if the blubber would have ignited and turned the ship into an inferno. The science behind it all wasn't the sort of thing I understood, (I had been hired for the butchering) but I also didn't want to find out.

For the hundredth time, Dennis dazedly mumbled, a refrain that was becoming unbearable. At this point, I wondered whether it would be acceptable to hold the pillow on his head and convince my superiors to give him the mariner's funeral. It'd be a mercy, so I know it wouldn't be against the faith to kill him.

In the midst of this meditation, the urgent drumming of boots on metal reached my ears. I was greeted by our copilot staggering into the cabin, clutching the portable transponder. Her wide eyes caught mine, and she stumbled into the room, thrusting the receiver to me.

"It just started to play. It's not one of the other ships. What the hell is it?" she shouted, competing with the incessant downpour and the chorus of Dennis' mumbled word.

Baffled, I glanced between her and the radio, because nothing sounded, beyond the static to which a storm would limit communications. Then a pulsating warble burbled out, beginning as a low rumble that steadily crescendoed into an echoing hoot. The noise rang through the cabin with such a force that the metal mug I'd had to keep me company rattled, sloshing what was left of my coffee spilling along the countertop. My teeth chattered against each other and I thought for a moment that my brain might turn to mush and drain from my head. The pain was so intense I wished someone would come and end me. I realized that I was screaming alongside the radio.

Then there was silence again, at least from the radio, as the creaking rock of the ship and the cacophonous machine gun fire of the rain made sure to remind us of the tempest currently tossing the fleet. None of us spoke. Again came the mournful noise, chilling my already bone-cold nerves.

Which led me to nearly jump from my skin when Dennis' clammy hand vised onto my wrist. He wrenched me down to his face, eyes wide and wild.

"Mother.... Mother!" he gasped.

I unsuccessfully tried to yank my arm free, protesting.

"You're at sea, man! It's Herman. Calm the hell down!"

But Dennis' fingers were digging into my arm, nails piercing enough that blood began to trickle out. He gave one taut shake of his head.

"No," he coughed. "We've got the pup. It's hurting. Hanging out of the water, it's like torture. We should have killed it. I hear it in my mind."

He gulped, breathing heavily.

"The storm. The pup has been calling out for help. The storm was sent by the mother."

The ship lurched, tossing Dennis with a yelp to the metal floor. Lashing out to keep from sliding into the wall as well, I clutched the bed-rail and nearly wrenched my shoulder from its socket. The ship continued to tip and I glanced out of the water splattered porthole.

What little illumination shone from the spotlights became eclipsed by a rising shadowed mountain. The ships of the fleet began to roll over, capsizing as the dark shape, tendrils snaking out from it, engulfed my view. My ears rang, as that rolling bellow crashed over the ship.

About the Author:

Patrick J Porwoll (they/them, he/him) is a speculative fiction writer and fan. When they aren't finding new ways to inject the fantastic or horrific into their own stories, Patrick is designing narratives and worlds in tabletop games, designing character-accurate card game decks, or appreciating the exploration of others' stories in books and video games. When they return to reality, Patrick is an educator.

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The Secret Garden | Maria Bertolone

Well away from the prying eyes of local children and over inquisitive folk in her neighbourhood lies a secret oasis, a place where she is at peace in the knowledge that this is her space and no one can enter. Situated right at the bottom of the back garden and hidden under a tall canopy of Green Giant trees is a world of carnivorous plants she has cultivated and built up over the many years but to name a few, such as Dionaea Muscipula, better known as the Venus Fly Trap which ensnares its victims by luring them and counting the number of times its hairs are triggered by an unwary insect before snapping shut and releasing digestive juices to dissolve their victim. Plus numerous other carnivores such as the Nepenthes, known as the tropical Pitcher Plant, which has brightly coloured cups that in addition to their bright colours lure their victims with the irresistible temptation of nectar. Once inside the insect is doomed to slip down the pitcher tube and into the corrosive digestive juices. Then there's her Sundew, Latin name Drosera which adorns itself with sticky tentacles that lie in wait for its next potential meal, once the unfortunate insects come into contact with the sticky globules on the end of the spiked tentacles they roll up and ensnare the creature. Lilith was fascinated by how her plants cruelly caught their prey, and spent many hours in her sanctuary in close observation. She loved watching a fly or spider landed on Venus's many traps totally unaware of the danger it was in and confidently walking all over the trap, only to have the trigger hairs on the end close the trap within half a second tightly. After watching with sadistic delight each plant capturing their prey, and the futile attempts at escape their most unfortunate victims made Lilith grew tired and became bored leaving the hapless invertebrates to their fate.

Lilith's ambition was to train her assortment of weird and wonderful plants to accept human flesh and blood in addition to their normal every day diet. She was sure the daily cocktail of insects must be rather boring for them by now, and that they would eagerly welcome the refreshing taste of blood as a change to their mundane diet, she would first start her experiment on Venus. This was to be her most important and ambitious project yet, as she'd never attempted anything like this before, not with any of her carnivores anyway.

"Well, my precious I have a little treat in store for you this evening, something different you will agree. It will certainly awaken your taste buds Venus," she lovingly purred whilst cradling the fly trap before setting it down on the wooden ledge well apart from the others. She hastily made her way out of the greenhouse, the cool breezy night air causing a shiver down her spine as she made her way back to the house.

Opening the backdoor she quickly made her way through into the kitchen and opened the fridge which housed dozens of large jars containing a variety of pickled and well preserved body parts of many a nosy trespasser, and a few of the locals that had mysteriously gone missing over the years. Some were stuffed to the rim with eyeballs, while others contained fingers, and toes some of which were complete with their painted nails still attached. Further down were the larger plastic containers especially chosen to accommodate the larger organs, these were neatly stacked on top of each other and contained many human hearts so well preserved that they appeared to be still beating. Whole human heads some of them shrunken, others were of normal size, many of them gazing through their glass prisons with expressions of deep hatred and malice toward others with the pain and sorrow that they had been put through. Various sizes of human hands and brains, kidneys and livers, also an assortment of ears occupied the vegetable drawer. Lilith reached in and snatched a large jar full of human intestines, slamming the fridge door shut she excitedly grabbed her flashlight and swept out into the dark night. Carefully aiming it ahead she fought her way through the overgrown shrubs back to the greenhouse where Venus eagerly awaited. Quickly unscrewing the lid and pulling a large chunk of the slimy dribbling entrails out with a long pair of tweezers she set the bloody mass down on a wooden platter and divided it by hand. Picking the tweezers up again with her fingers now oozing and dripping blood all over, she fed the tiny pieces of meat to a few of Venus's traps which eagerly snapped shut on contact with the juicy morsels. However, she wondered how Venus would react to being given something completely different from its normal diet as she had read when she'd obtained her first fly trap that they shouldn't be given anything other than insects.

The next morning after washing down her favourite breakfast of fried viscera with the usual goblet of human blood, now feeling fully energized by the iron and vitamins that she'd just consumed everything seemed right with her world she was very eager, although a little apprehensive to see how Venus had reacted to its new diet. Making her way to the favourite part of her garden and slipping under the canopy of Green Giant trees Lilith stopped abruptly, her heart skipping a few beats. "Where is the greenhouse?" She exclaimed looking round. However, upon casting a quick glance down in the overgrown grass she discovered the remains of the shattered greenhouse, shards of glass crunched under

foot as she took a few tentative steps forward. From somewhere within the darkest recesses of the garden where very little light penetrated came a loud and terrifying series of grunts, growls and belches. What the heck was that? It isn't like any animal I've heard around these parts. What the hell's going on? Her instinct told her to run as fast as she could and get out of there quick and back to the house. However, raw fear had turned Lilith's legs to jelly causing her to become rooted to the spot. Her heart beat was so loud that she thought both her eardrums would burst as she slowly turned her head, dreading having to face whatever creature was making those terrible animalistic noises. A wave of nausea hit her so badly that she couldn't keep her freshly digested breakfast down. In the far corner she could see something slowly moving in the shadows, she couldn't make out what it was at first until it came into full view, yawning before her whilst slowly bobbing up and down was one of the many traps belonging to Venus. She stood staring wild eyed with the dribbling remains of digestive juices from her puked up breakfast dripping from both corners of her mouth into the path of the trap which had grown to gargantuan proportions overnight like the rest of the plant.

In an instant she was snatched up into the giant trap as it enveloped her, slamming shut within a half second of the long bristling hairs being triggered upon contact with her helpless body. Inside the darkness descended as she struggled in vain punching and kicking the inner walls.

"It's no use," she murmured. "There's no way I'm getting out of here alive."

Closing her eyes tightly as she lay there weakened by the effort of trying to break free Lilith gave up and resigned herself to her downfall. A terrible burning sensation took over every inch of her body as the plant's corrosive digestive enzymes set to work washing over it and began to quickly dissolve the outer layer of skin, inch by inch. The pain was excruciating as it gradually burnt away the second and third layers eventually eating deep into the nerves, tendons, muscles, then finally the major internal organs. Now she knew what those poor unwary insects must have suffered when she took such gory pleasure in watching them die within Venus's traps. Also not forgetting the many human victims of her own that she had more than willingly butchered, dissected and pickled placing them in numerous jars and containers whilst draining their blood to drink. Some body parts she kept to satisfy her own twisted and morbidly depraved curiosity, others for a never ending supply of food. Venus the fly trap now stood six foot in height and had developed many more traps all capable of killing and digesting a human. The taste of human remains had given the plant a new lease of life that it had never experienced before, rather than killing it. The tables were turned and justice was finally served as Lilith had now suffered the same fate as many of her victims, like them she too was no more. It had also developed a brain and was able to see hear and think, just like any human, with this came intelligence which spawned a new freedom that included emotions such as happiness, anger and a hatred of its owner who had, in its own opinion held it captive for years leading to an intense desire to kill and eat her which also extended to the entire human race.

A sudden burst of laughter came from the far end of the garden immediately putting Venus on high alert, following the direction the sound was coming from Venus could clearly see the three children, two girls and a boy who had mischievously sneaked in.

"My mom and dad have told me a weird lady lives here and that she's an evil witch, if she catches you in here, you won't ever be seen again," Daisy remarked nervously.

"I've heard tales too, about a crazy woman called Lilith living here and weird noises coming from the house and all sorts of comings and goings in the middle of the night," Luke replied.

"Go on I dare either of you to go and knock on the door!" Cried Ellie in excitement.

"Count me out, I just want to go home, I don't like it here. Mommy told me to keep away," Daisy protested.

"Count me out too it was a stupid idea us coming here in the first place," Luke retorted.

"Okay bad idea, but I can't help wondering what's in that house Ellie sighed resignedly pointing towards Lilith's dilapidated house.

All three made the unanimous decision to leave, as quickly as they came. Making their way down the overgrown path towards the back gate they had to pass the house, even in the day it had a forbidding and eerie appearance.

"It feels creepy here as though we're being watched, I'm frightened," Daisy whispered throwing a furtive glance at the house. As the sky darkened ominously Daisy's anxiety only intensified, breaking into a run and putting some distance between her two friends she suddenly tripped landing in a pile of broken glass and splintered wood which had once been the greenhouse. As she lay crying and bleeding in the overgrown vegetation Luke and Ellie rushed to her side. Helping her get up they guided her to a large rock and sat her down. However, it began to rain heavily so they decided to

shelter under the thick overhanging vines of creeper and Green Giant Trees, totally unaware of the danger they were in. Venus sprawled silently up against the crumbling wall watching them intensely, the sight and smell of human blood excited the traps so much their digestive juices pulsated through the whole plant swelling it to twice its enormous size. It moved stealthily towards them, just as it was about to pounce a sudden loud rumble of thunder frightened the children causing them to bolt out of the back gate. Venus's disappointment at being deprived of three good sized meals was intense, however there was always tomorrow.

About the Author:

Maria Bertolone a Landscape Artist by profession was inspired to write by her late friend, a writer who encouraged her to take part in the Blackpool 100 programme in 2011 resulting in the Anthology; The Walls Have Voices which she is published in. Her other achievements: Fylde Arts Association 2015 Anthology two poems. Sally Parrington Award Anthology. When not writing her passion is collecting dolls.

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Streets in Sepia | Sonora Taylor

The streets were in sepia now. Claire only saw them in her memories, cobblestone and starlight, clean and immaculate.

Everyone takes liberties with their memories. Claire could leave the blood off the streets if she wished. She only saw them in sepia. Burnt photographs of what she'd done lingering and fading in her mind like photographs in pages with torn binding. Unprotected from the sun, covered in dust and smelling of mold. Claire breathed in and took in the scent of mildew and dust, engrained so deeply into her mattress that she wondered if the bed was older than the prison itself.

Everything had been in color then. Everyone had roamed the streets laughing and piercing her ears with their shrieks. Claire had longed for the city she'd seen in a photograph. It was in sepia, empty and waiting to be filled. The street should've been more careful about what it wished for.

Still, Claire could help. The ringing in her ears began to whisper. The street told her that the best way to erase the filth was to send it running down the streets, to wash out the color by letting it seep through each nook and cranny until the sepia photograph could reappear in her eyes.

The blade in her purse served to touch up the photograph. The streets ran red and the ringing turned to screams. Claire watched the color drain from the street as she was dragged away.

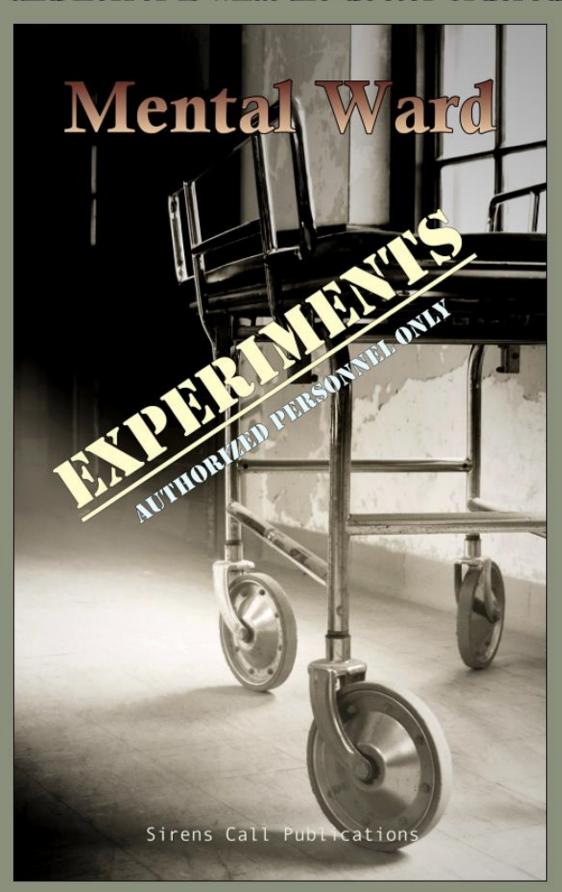
She smiled as she touched the stone wall of her cell. The street was forever in sepia. She'd made it that way.

About the Author:

Sonora Taylor is the award-winning author of several novels and short story collections, including *Little Paranoias: Stories, Without Condition*, and *Seeing Things*. Her work has been published by Sirens Call Publications, Cemetery Gates Media, Tales to Terrify, and Camden Park Press. When she's not writing, she loves to cook. She lives in Arlington, Virginia, with her husband and rescue dog.



Step into a world where sanity is left behind, and horror is what the doctor ordered!



<u>AVAILABLE ON AMAZON</u>

Black Stones | L.S. Engler

He was building the bridge stone by stone. George stopped and straightened, stretching his aching back and brushing the damp hair out of his eyes. The island, as well as the sentinel of the castle perched upon it, seemed close enough that he could almost reach out and touch it, open his hands and close his fingers around it, bringing it in, close to his heart. But he could only look across the channel that separated him from the island wistfully. He sighed, reaching into the wheelbarrow for another rock and dropping it lazily at his feet. It clattered against the others, rolled into the water without as much as a splash.

"That's the last of them," he announced, brushing his hands against each other, then against the salty stiffness of his pants. His eyes fell, despondent, into the empty barrow, across the rocks they had dropped so far, and to the wide gap left between where the stones ended and the island began. It pained him to say these next words. "We'll have to call it a day."

"This is ridiculous," said his friend, surly and sour with his stooped shoulders and scowling face. "We're never going to make it across this way, not until we're old men, bent and crippled. And, by then, your princess won't even want you, George, and you may not want your princess, either!"

Despite the harsh words, George gave his friend a small, faint smile. "I will always want my princess, and she will always want me. This must be done, Roderick. Black stones will lead the way, and, once I am across, the great waters will take the stones with them, while she and I remain safe in our stronghold until the very end of time."

Roderick shook his head, turning away, ready to be finished with the work and his friend's lunatic ravings. Everyone knew that the castle was empty, had been for centuries, and yet, as Roderick drifted away and the sun turned red with the bleeding of the setting sun, George lingered, staring at the highest pulpit of the tower. It was shrouded in shadows, but George liked to think that, if he looked closely, he could see a flash of a white handkerchief. The princess waving to him, surrendering to her hope that, one day, the bridge of black stones would be complete, and they would be together.

Feeling the swell of his heart in his chest, George lifted his hand in acknowledgment to his mysterious princess, and he stayed for a good long moment, as if expecting the exchanging to continue. The castle stood, cold and black, and the warmth of the day was quickly descending into a chill as the sun disappeared. He turned and followed after Roderick, steeling himself to not look back. He did, though, just before disappearing through the forest path, one last glance so the princess would know his silent vow to return again every day, until the bridge was built.

The next day, he went to the field to collect the stones in the trusted wheelbarrow without Roderick. The process was much slower. With the two of them, the barrow could be filled of the black stones within an hour. This would take closer to two, and he might upset the others with his tardiness. If he loaded the barrow now and returned to the tasks expected of him, then he would have a chance to unload the stones by afternoon, return to reload, and do twice as much work in the entire day. So, at the break of dawn, while traces of night still hung in the lavender sky, he slipped out of the quiet house and down the field to start gathering his stones.

He must have lost track of the time, though, because George looked up from dropping another stone into the barrow to see two figures not far away at the fence bordering the field. His sister was sitting there, perched up on the fence with their younger brother at her feet. The wind whipped Catherine's long curtain of red hair across her face, and she patiently tucked it behind her ear again, so as not to interrupt the steady, unwavering look locked onto George. Young Peter extracted the thumb out of his mouth and lifted his hand in a lazy little wave.

He considered saying something to them, but shook his head and went back to work, wondering how long they had been there. Eventually, Catherine spoke, just as he expected she would. "Mother wants you to come home, George," she stated, her voice lifting slightly to carry across the distance between them. "She says if we do not fetch you now, then you will spend all day at this ridiculous nonsense."

George realized he could have explained that it was not nonsense at all and that he had no intention of ceasing, but he decided to let his actions speak for him instead. Speaking would only waste energy, potentially sparking an argument, and he would allow no argument on this. There was just too much work to do.

Catherine didn't say anything more, either. She just sat there, watching, until George felt a nervousness creep up his spine. Noticing that the wheelbarrow was still not nearly as full as he had hoped, he dropped a black stone into it, released a sigh from exertion with his hands on his hips, and glowered at the scrawny girl. "I don't suppose you could lend a helping hand," he stated pointedly.

"I will have no hand in supporting your insanity," remarked Catherine with just as much aplomb. "Mother says come home now, George."

"The sooner I load this barrow, Catherine," he responded, "the sooner I will come home. Help me, and I shall finish sooner."

Catherine slid off the fence and reached her hand down to take Peter's. "This is not good, George," she said. "it was a strange fancy at first, but now, this chasing of a tale told to children is going to wreak dangerous consequences. Come, Peter." With a small tug, she pulled the little one into movement, but those wide, deep eyes lingered on George for a while longer.

Though there was more work to be done, George waited until they had disappeared down the path through the trees before continuing, and he continued on until well after the midday hour.

He did return home after that, to help with the chores, to have his mother look at him with her eyes wide and haunted and confused. Knowing what his response would be, she asked what he intended on doing when he was finished, and he wilted under the disapproval that surfaced when he told her, not wanting to lie. He knew it hurt his mother to see him so possessed with this task, but surely she must understand its importance. He thought he saw Catherine narrow her eyes, glowering at him from across the room. He ignored it, turning his mind to ways to speed up the bridge building while his hands worked mindlessly at other tasks, which seemed so useless and insignificant by comparison.

It was late when he finally shuffled back to his bed, under what little starlight remained. And dawn had only just started to emerge when he was back in the field again, finding more rocks. Collecting and building, building and collecting. It felt as though he was getting closer and closer across that dark, treacherous water between him and the castle when he left, but when he arrived again for more work, he seemed farther away than ever before.

Things continued that way for several days, and, every so often, Roderick would join him, or Catherine would sit on the fence and watch. Sometimes, she had Peter with her, but she never helped. She just stared, occasionally throwing out the usual warnings and reprimands on how he should stop. Then came the day when the wind was so strong, it not only blew her hair into her face, but it almost threatened to sweep her off her feet entirely. She didn't sit on the fence that day, but clung to it with both hands, lifting her voice in a shout to be carried to his ears on the stiff gales.

"George!" she called. "You have to come back home! There's a storm in the air; they say it already hit down in Monarch's Glen. Please, George! Come home! This is madness!"

Roderick was with her, though George hadn't noticed him there until he had his hand on Catherine's arm and tried to pull her away. "Come," he said. "Leave him to his insanity. We should get you somewhere safe."

George considered doing as he always had, not even bothering to grace them with a response, but he thought of the castle, the tall dark shape looming over the now rushing waters, the bridge of black stones almost complete, and the flash of a waving white handkerchief in the darkened windows. He shook his head. "I can't," he said. "I'm so close, Catherine! I can't give up now. Go with Roderick. I must do this!"

Even with the howling wind, the heartbreak in Catherine's words could be heard, her face disappearing in a cloud of red hair one moment, then illuminated as lighting ripped through the sky. "George," she all but whimpered, "please."

"This is madness, George!" Roderick chimed in, much louder, turning worried eyes toward the sky as the storm undeniably had arrived over them.

Knowing there was nothing any of them could say to move the other, George just continued working, turning his back on his sister and his friend. He continued to lift the rocks from the field, into the wheelbarrow; they were becoming harder and harder to find in the long grass. It had taken him all day to fill it, but this was the night, this was the day he would finally complete the bridge to the castle. He would just keep looking a little longer, fill it up a little more. Eventually, Catherine had given up, or perhaps merely given in to Roderick's will and goading, and they drifted away like ghosts. The rain started to fall on his cheeks in fat, wet drops, the sky darkening quickly with the cover of menacing clouds and the unforgiving nighttime.

The wind whipped at his back as he trudged forward, his hands cold as they gripped the slick handles of the wheelbarrow, pushing forward through the storm, though the forest path, down to the straight and the island with the castle looming like an immovable mountain in the darkness. He put his head down and hurried forward, fighting against the great gusts that pushed the water up over the bridge he had been building. A flash of light streaked across the sky, sending everything into a sharp contrast before descending back into black again with a low rumble. His feet slid on the rocks as he angled his barrow toward them, and the gushing wind was strong enough to nearly push him over. He kept moving, though, until he reached the end of the bridge, the water drenching his boots, his trousers, his hair clinging to his face and practically blinding him.

But he didn't need to see to know what he was to do. He could lift the stones and drop them blindly, and he did, working despite the fact that the rain and wind were now becoming whips, and he could feel every wet lash through his muscles. Still, he worked, straining against the pain, ignoring the figures that appeared at the shore, at the start of the bridge, clocks and hair whipping about them as they shouted out to him. The wind howled, taking their words with it, so that he couldn't hear them begging for him to come back. Roderick, and his sister, shouting about the storm, shouting about his safety and his sanity. His fingers wrapped around another black stone, lifting it up, setting it down. And then picked up another, lifted it, set it down. Another and another, until all he knew was his fatigue and his fingers scraping into the bottom of the barrow, filled with rain water, and there were no more black stones.

In the morning, after the storm, there was also no George. The only sign that he had been there was the overturned wheelbarrow set a few paces from the shore; even the long line of black stones had been completely washed away with the wind and the rain and the storm. All that remained between the island and the shore was the dark, turbulent water. No one would give a voice to their thoughts, averting their eyes and shuffling by with uncomfortable acceptance. No one dared to speak of what the storm had likely done to the poor madman.

Catherine slipped away that morning, with Peter trailing behind her, always trailing, and they went to the shore where the castle loomed, black and still and immovable on the other side of the straight. Tightening her fist, Catherine quietly cursed it, cursed the rain, cursed the black stones that had washed away. Beside her, quietly looking up, Peter thought he saw the faint glimmer of something in the tower's highest window. A flash of candlelight, or perhaps a white handkerchief. He shyly lifted his hand and waved, and he could swear he saw someone waving back.

About the Author:

L.S. Engler works from outside of Chicago, though she grew up chasing dragons in the woods of Michigan. Her work has appeared in many anthologies and journals, including Pulp Modern, Phantaxis, and the Saturday Evening Post.

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A Flock of Angels | Brian Rosenberger

During the bank robbery, I was shot in the leg. Bad luck. It could be worse. I could be James.

I met James at a brothel. Together, we had raised Hell ever since. His brain exploded on our getaway.

Goddamn that Marshall. He had great aim, drunk or not. I had the money bags and rode towards freedom, damn sorry about James but more concerned with my own fate.

James wasn't the only one to catch lead. My horse, Betsy, died a few miles out of town.

The bullet in my thigh was a problem. Reluctantly, I dropped the money bags. Too much of a burden to carry but I still had some of the loot stuffed in my boots.

Burning sun. Empty canteen. Poor James. Poor Betsy. I wish there was a bartender around to pour me a stiff one or two.

Angels circle. A flock of them. They look like feathered morticians. Black and friendly but greedy.

Not Angels after all.

Vultures.

Scars | Brian Rosenberger

Bloom Memorial is not without controversy, having its share of malpractice suits, wrongful deaths, insurance scandals, and the occasion gross abuse of a corpse accusation. It's the stores that miss the headlines, told in whispers and shadowed corners, which tell the true history.

Demonic visitations, floating heads, screams in the night, bodies that move minus a pulse.

Bloom was built on the grounds of a slaughterhouse, torched by surviving relatives of victims who died from eating tainted meat. Fact.

Critics say they traded one slaughterhouse for another. Others, less vocal, say Bloom serves as a mouth to Hell itself.

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.*

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Weaker Vessels | Robert Staub

As I pulled the rust brown Opel Manta off the road into the state park's oversized parking lot, I noticed only two vehicles. A brightly colored green and yellow jeep, and an empty silver town car. I nosed my car into a spot on the other side of the luxury car. Engine switched off, I looked through the front windshield at the park in front. Beautiful hills stretched away for miles.

I tugged off my tie, and stepped out into the parking lot. To the front was a long flat field that ended in a series of hills. I walked forward into the park.

The field ahead triggered memories of taking off, flying and landing the Ultra-Light Aircraft, of the engine malfunction that had almost killed me. Cave diving in Mexico, two extended expeditions deep into the Amazon. Thrill seeking, I'd always thought. As I grew older, there came recognition of an inner weakness, a persistent death wish.

I climbed several hills on a well-worn path. As I started to climb the fourth hill, the woods grew thicker, more dense. The trail began to narrow. Rare stands of birch trees gave way to a sheer hill face close to a hundred feet high. My first thought was to go the long way around. I moved closer and spied what looked like 8 by 4 inch cornerstones almost fully buried into the sheer hillside every few feet. The stones were partly covered by dirt and moss. They stuck out of the hill just enough to barely provide a hand or foothold. If I climbed the shortcut straight up using the stones, it would save time and aggravation. I could descend it later, or find an easier path back.

As I breathed in, the smell of decayed autumn leaves filled my nose. I started to climb. The stones were just far enough apart to require an awkward stretch and push to climb up from one to the next. After the first ten stones, I started to feel the strain in my legs. At the halfway mark the hill's face was almost vertical. I looked down and felt a rush of dizziness. The stones were damp, dirty and cold, my fingers were scratched, knuckles scraped. Forty feet from the top, my legs started to quake violently with the effort, each stone harder to climb then the last. It was either climb the rest of the way up or carefully go back down. Something deep inside said to climb, just suck it up and go. Without another downward look, I pushed higher, one stone at a time. The last stone was five feet from the top. I would have to jump and pull myself over the edge. launched straight up, pushed arms then shoulders over the lip of the hill. A surge of adrenaline hauled the rest of my body over the top and onto flat, weed choked ground. I lay there for a while to get strained lungs filled with air.

At the top of the hill I sensed a change in the air. It felt chilly and bleak. The sky was darker. I walked up further into the hills another half mile, the parking lot and the road well out of view. An eerie feeling crept over me. Close scrutiny of the trees up this high yielded an unusual observation, the leaves seemed to lose their autumn colors. All appeared faded to an unearthly yellow. At first I attributed the change to the altitude, or that the cooler air had affected their coloration. Face to a large tree, I saw that its leaves were all the same uniform shade of unnatural, almost fluorescent yellow. To my shock and consternation, I realized that every tree in sight had exactly the same affliction. This included oaks, maples, even the evergreens. Dazed like a stunned fighter, I now recognized that something was very wrong. I shook my head from side to side, squeezed eyes shut then slowly opened, took measured deep breaths. The steel grey skies darkened more quickly. There was no background noise, no bird sounds, the breezes had stopped.

Instinct warned me to perk up my ears, to listen intently in the hope of discerning just what in God's name was going on. In the distance, at the extreme limits of my hearing, I detected the clear ring of horseshoes across a solid surface. What a damnably peculiar sound to hear deep in the New England foothills. Perhaps it was the aural equivalent of a mirage, a hallucination. Less than a minute passed and the sound returned, louder, clearer.

An unbidden remembrance of an obscure poem fragment sprung to mind. 'With hooves of steel I race on the rocks, through Solstice stubborn to Equinox, and I reave, and I rape, and I rip, and I rend, in the might of Pan'. A poem about the giant, horse trunked, man bodied, Demi-God Pan. An emissary of Satan. The human

mind is a bizarre, complicated instrument. A little strange weather, buttressed by a horse somewhere in the distance, started my mind conjuring up arcane poems and images of terrifying beasts out of the darkest myth.

Discordant sounds began to echo, softly at first, then louder. Pealing sounds like giant wind chimes forged to propel sour, unnatural notes into the air. Something truly bizarre was happening. The burst of confident strength I had gained from climbing the hill face leached out of me like water from a broken bottle. I fell painfully to the ground bottom first, and felt the first stages of genuine panic set in. The clatter of hooves was closer now and much louder. It reverberated with a powerful rumble of small earth tremors.

Darkness settled in what felt like seconds. The sky was almost black, the luminescent leaves a muted neutral hue. The grass directly to my front, the outline of the hills and trees now barely discernible. The onslaught of ringing noise, hoof crack rumblings and darkness combined to reduce me to a fear frozen statue. A burnt, coppery bile pushed up from the back of my throat. Terror like this should be for small children, not grown men.

Yet another memory came in, a fragment from an old Lovecraft story. That Satan or his emissaries choose to enter the earthly plain through one of humankind's weaker vessels. What had triggered these thoughts...and why in God's name had they forced themselves into my head?

Seated, hunched over on the cold ground, blubbering like a child, a hundred yards from a hilltop escarpment, I sensed something ominous rapidly approaching. My whole being teetered on the edge of a fear induced collapse. Eyes on the nearest hilltop, I knew that whatever approached would emerge there.

The ground shook violently. The air pierced by an unearthly deafening wail that barely eclipsed the din of thundering hooves. A brutally painful maelstrom of sound stripped away the last remnants of my self-control. On bruised knees, hands pressed tightly to my ears, I screamed and cried for all I was worth. A heavily muscled ram the height of a two-story building attained the hilltop in a sinewy charge of grace and fury. Crystalline, pure horrific fear released my bowels. Clods of earth the size of oil drums flew away from its massive cloven hooves. It stopped at the apex of the hill, one massive hoof scraped rock, sending a shower of molten sparks arching away into the night. This being that towered above me, was the antithesis of all I had come to know as real. Its giant, corded, blackened ram's body, topped by hugely rounded shoulders and head commanded awe. Enormous horns rolled outward from its head as typhoon waves sculpted from immutable stone. Eyes, dark cobalt blue eyes larger than my fist stared right through me. All sound had ceased. The air was perfectly still.

Fixated on me for mere seconds, the great being turned and ran directly toward me, then over the lip of the hill and into the forest, smashed through trees snapped effortlessly into shards of kindling. Discordant notes again filled the air, the Demi-God's roaring wail mightily attaining the distance.

In my meaningless insignificance, I looked down dispassionately at the trunk of my body, severed in two by one of the ram's massive, razor-sharp hooves. A liquid stream trailed what little was left of my life's essence into the ground.

In these last fragments of time, I was perversely grateful to him for taking away the pain, the loneliness, the emptiness of my life. Perhaps, in the end, it was an honor to serve as one of his weaker vessels. To help bring about his return. To serve as a chosen human sacrifice to the ancient, the eternal, the Great God Pan.

About the Author:

Robert Staub has loved creative writing since he was a teenager. He began writing speculative fiction six years ago, favoring the genres of horror, pulp adventure and dark noir. A Bronx born amateur historian, Staub is writing a novel based on Dutch Schultz, a Bronx mobster of the '20s and '30s who made his fortune in crime, including bootlegging and the numbers racket.



The Bag Lady | David F. Shultz

Time oozed like molasses while I cowered in the closet, peering through a slender crack of eerie light. The vacant penthouse had a hallucinatory quality, dimly lit in greenish-blue. Through tall glass windows that spanned the walls were many distant pinpricks of white, the lights of the city. It gave the impression of a cold fish tank, with twilight blue through the long windows, and the bag lady floating, suspended in unseen currents.

The bag lady changed form, not just undulations of hair and clothing, but a subtle morphing. The robes were fish scales, briefly, before again becoming cloth. Bedraggled hair was seaweed, then tentacles, each topped with an eyeball, only they weren't, except for a moment. The head was a monstrous mouth of some deep-sea horror, ringed with row on row of teeth, too impossibly large to fit in the room, and yet there it all was, until it wasn't.

Altering its form, like camouflage. Playing with images and thoughts all culled from its victims. There it floated. And then it turned to face the crack of the closet.

Run or die. The doors gave way from my stumbling push, and there was the long expanse of the room. Footsteps echoed on wood. The spinal-shiver of pursuit by a nightmare. A cold gaze grasping at my back. Limbs slowed with each straining step. And then—stuck. I accepted my fate, hoped it would be over quickly.

A blink, and there it was, clutching my shoulders with spider-like fingers. Black, eyeless sockets led straight into its mind. A cold, dark tunnel, and at the bottom a mirage. Those teeth, that cavernous, circular maw, closing down like a spiked coffin. The vision vanished, and an alternative to death was offered.

It wouldn't eat me, at least for now. It needed help with its camouflage. A human mind to wear. Like a shell for a hermit crab. I agreed to help the bag lady with its disguise.

What choice did I have?

I thought to the bag lady that it will do no good for its disguise to float, since human beings don't float, except in the water, and that its disguise would be less unsettling if it had eyes, and were less of a corpse. But the entity did not understand the concepts of water or air, floating or standing, living or dead. These things were all alien to it, and meaningless.

Its present form was an approximation of its first victim, a homeless lady named Bethany. Bethany had lived a life of addiction, survived on a steadily dwindling income from prostitution as age, drugs, and street-life took their toll on her market value, until she ended up in the clutches of the entity in the empty penthouse lair. And the entity had devoured her and taken her form, with a horrifying loss of fidelity. The disguise was decomposed. Not decomposing flesh, but decomposing reality. A twisted amalgam of fears and haunting memories, a corporeal phantasm of nightmares, frayed at the edges. The bag lady.

Without the capacity to understand human perception, the entity was blind to the weakness of its present disguise. But it had other uses for me. Spidery fingers wrenched open my jaw, fingers with far too many segments, segments which traced all along the sides of my face and into my mouth, stretching it wide. The bag lady gaped its bile-stained mouth over my own and regurgitated a worm-like thing, no thicker than its fingers, but longer. Involuntary gags, reflexive struggling, as the worm wriggled around my tongue and throat, coated them with mucous, probed. The worm didn't go down, but up, up into my nasal cavity, and then up further, until it was crawling inside my brain, squeezing in with the grey matter. Panic, panic. And, gradually, as the worm settled, panic made way for dread.

The worm nestled inside my skull, inside the warm bed of my brain.

The bag lady drifted back to the center of the room, and floated there. I was free to go, along with the worm. To observe for the bag lady. To do its bidding. It would eat me if I refused, perhaps starting with my brain, though it hadn't yet decided, and was curious about starting with feet. So I left, and observed for the bag lady as I went, and relayed my thoughts through the worm.

A new life with the bag lady's worm inside my brain. Small talk with servers at restaurants. Not this one, the worm had to be told, incessantly. Not these ones, the worm had to be told, as people strolled past on the sidewalk. Not this one, the worm had to be told, when talking with coworkers in asset management.

I looked into the eyes of the people I spoke with, and they looked into mine, and the worm looked at us both, increasingly impatient. And maybe the people sensed it, sensed something was wrong, just behind my eyes, but they did not comprehend the true horror. The bag lady was getting hungry.

"Spare some change?" A homeless old man said. He wore torn clothes, held a cardboard sign in hand, and smelled of urine. The worm prodded. And the worm did not hear the usual refrain of not this one. What's special about this one? The answer was nothing, which may have been precisely the point.

"How about something to eat?" I said. Or the worm said. Or somehow both of us said it, together.

A jingle of coins, a handful of change to buy him a coffee, and a conversation. A talk about his life, and to find that his name was George. George had lost his job, and his family, and couldn't work because of pinched nerves, or so he said. Perhaps his story was embellished for panhandling. But the worm didn't care. And the worm insisted that the bag lady was waiting, waiting for me to demonstrate my usefulness, or else be eaten tonight. So George found out that there was a great place he could sleep. Better than the street, or the shelters. A building with a vacant penthouse. George wanted to know if I was the owner, so I said yes, which was true in a way.

And we went to the top floor of that building. To the empty penthouse lair. To the room bathed in blue light, with the glass walls like a fish tank, where the city sleeps below, unaware of what lurks over them, where the floating entity waits inside for those who keep finding their way, like a deep-sea fish dangling its lure.

The bag lady appeared, and changed form, and the scream lasted just a moment, maybe a fraction of a second, before George was gone. Then the bag lady floated there, silent and sated, while I watched from the crack of the closet.

I always watch from inside the closet.

About the Author:

David F. Shultz writes from Toronto, Canada, where he is Lead Editor at *Speculative North* magazine. His 80+ published works are featured through publishers such as Augur and Diabolical Plots.

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Them | Christina Mirzoi

All children know them. They lurk in the shadows of the young mind. They watch every naughty move, take notice of every bad word, while waiting patiently for the cries of a displeased parent. Once summoned, one cannot elude their wrath.

As the child plays near the fireplace, shimmering embers mirror into his eyes. He reaches out with his small hand and his mother suddenly cries out. The child ignores his mother and takes a small coal between his pink fingers. He shrieks, drops the coal, and discovers a malevolent being inside the embers; it's out to get him. Next time, he won't be reaching out.

Later that day, he tries to go under his bed, only to be warned by his mother of the perils brought by this. He disobeys and peeks into the lingering blackness and timeless dust. He hastily backs out; frightened he would not see daylight if he does otherwise.

At dusk he sneakily seeks to leave outside, but his nearby mother instructs him to run back inside and shut the door.

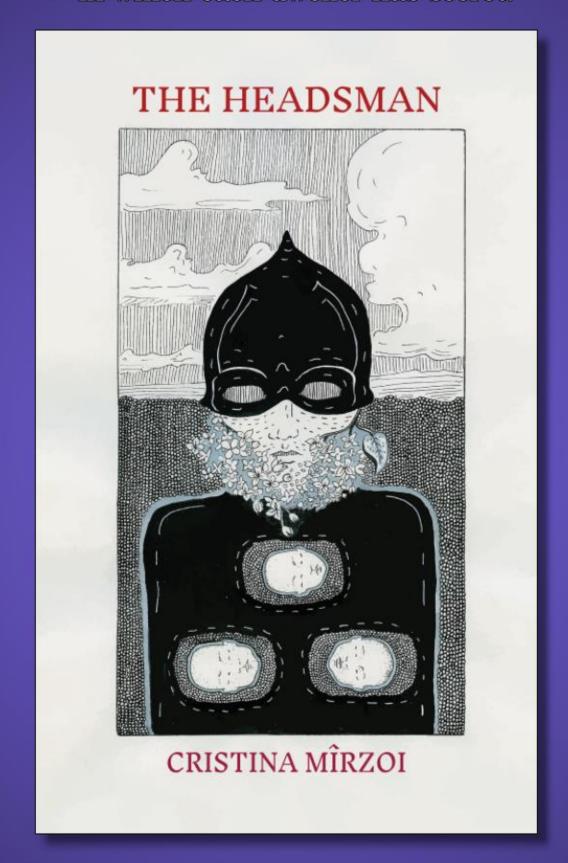
At night, mother is not around, and the child is unsettled. His eyes won't open, and his voice is gone, so darkness comes to claim him. They gather around his bed, the lady of embers, the bed monster and the night spook, each grin greedier than the other. And so, they take him...

About the Author:

Cristina Mirzoi has a Bachelor's Degree in Communication&PR and an MA in Religious Studies, with a dissertation in Roman Divination. Speaks English, French, Spanish and a bit of Koine Greek. Her favorite author is Ray Bradbury, and she is obsessed with Terry Pratchett's Discworld. Wes Anderson binge watcher. Animal lover. Has a children's fantasy novel soon to be published and also a dark short story collection.

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A gripping story about moral decay, set in a gloomy village in which each dweller has secret.



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

On the 221 | Corinne Pollard

She was in my intended seat. That was how she grabbed my attention.

You see, I often catch the 221 to reach the market. On most Saturday shopping sprees, it would be often filled until the last passenger was squished against the front windows. Surprisingly this warm January morning, there were more empty seats than I could ever remember.

I lingered down the long aisle, ignoring the steep stairs to the upper floor and spying that my usual seat was not vacant. This was of course not a problem and I found another with a window view.

However, what was frustrating was that the woman who had chosen my seat had done so for the crowd of carrier bags to swarm over the entire wheelchair space.

I mean, why couldn't she use the baggage holder like everyone else? You understand what I mean, right? She even knew that she was in the wrong; her petite blonde head was slightly bent down to avoid eye contact and one of her knees jigged on the spot with rattling nerves.

I tried to focus on the blurring landscape beyond the glass scratches and foggy fumes.

Yet my eyes kept zoning in on her traitorous frame with her soft pink woolly jumper, tight purple jeans and curling locks of fake yellow. At that time, she was facing forwards with one hand holding onto what appeared to be the heaviest bag out of the bunch. Her face was splattered with a shimmering lip gloss, an orange plastic tan and dark eye shadow; the doll that every little girl desired from my era.

Eventually I sensed I had stared at her for far too long to be considered even polite. I tried to distract myself by peering into the passing terraced houses.

About halfway through it's route, the 221 swung over to drop off a sullen teenager, wearing neon headphones and guyliner, who plummeted down the staircase rather than use them like a normal human being.

As the robotic doors shut, something crossed the aisle, reflecting the January sun.

It was a stream of some unknown murky liquid slathering the already sticky laminate flooring like a tongue. Of course, I was the only one to notice.

I coughed and projected my voice to be heard over the roaring engine.

I remember uttering; 'Excuse me, love. Your bag seems to be leaking.'

The doll raised her head to stare before my words finally clicked somewhere in her brain. Then she giggled.

'It's mostly water. It will be fine.'

Her high-pitched response startled me. I expected her to panic at least.

'Water?'

'Yeah, the ice is melting. I have a buyer who's looking for a certain type of meat and I don't have a car, so on the bus I go.' She giggled again.

'Ah, interesting. Good luck with your buyer.'

My hope to end the conversation right there was not granted. The doll let go of her bag and hopped over to sit next to me. I could see that the lip gloss was fading fast to show chapped skin while her eye shadow was smudged from frequent rubs. Alcohol breathed on me and mixed into her strong citrus perfume. Her hoop earrings jingled as she leaned into me.

'I was very lucky to find a buyer. He calls himself The Butcher. Funny, huh?' She grinned and I slightly nodded, holding my breath.

'What's your name?'

'Harvey.' I replied. After all, I am a gentleman.

She must've thought this was a welcome sign because she then babbled about her home life; how fat her mother had gotten, how spoiled her sister was and how her husband or her lover didn't want sex anymore. I admit that I barely listened. I was pleading with repetitive glances to the two macaw ladies on the back seat, who were far more engrossed in gossip.

Are you going to talk to them as well?

I see. Yes, sorry. Where was I?

Thankfully I was saved from a growing cough, tickling at the back of my throat, by the doll bouncing up, declaring it was her stop and scooping up all of her belongings. However it was also my stop.

I raised myself, dinged the bell and held on to the metal bar, waiting patiently for the doll to hurry up. She was weighed down by the bags and when we finally screeched to a stop, she scuttled forwards.

The heaviest bag snapped. It ripped a hole at the bottom, spilling out its contents.

A large round messy ball-like object fell and then rolled down the aisle to rest before the bottom tip of my cane.

Of course, that's when the shocked eyes, deathly blue skin and dripping neck veins registered it's identity. It dampened the aisle with it's juices. The decaying flesh attracted a nearby fly and suspended in disbelief, I observed as it landed on one of the bloodshot eyes. The victim's eyes had faded to an opaque liquid, as if one poke would pop the eyeballs instantly.

The rotting meat drifted over to pinch my stomach. I gagged and restrained myself from whacking it with my cane.

The doll freaked out and abandoned the rest of her suspicious carrier bags. She fled the bus and headed down a backstreet. The macaw ladies finally shut their beaks in a stunned silence. The driver called you guys as soon as he reanimated himself.

Paralyzed, I dared not move. My limbs grew numb as I awaited your arrival.

That's all, Officer. I hope I was useful in your investigation.

A Loving Son | Corinne Pollard

Caleb filled the bathtub with his mother's soap. Lavender and chamomile. The herbal scent lingered up Caleb's nostrils again. He wrinkled his nose. A forever time-looping sneeze.

Carrying his mother's delicate frame, Caleb settled her down into the porcelain. His mother seemed pleased with the soothing bubbles. Caleb cleansed her slippery curves tenderly. Meanwhile, the lavender and chamomile soap seeped into spongy pores.

Caleb lifted his mother out, and as he dried her, Caleb reminisced. Back then, it had been difficult to bathe her. His mother's fleshy largeness got in the way. It was much easier with just her bones.

Testing Love | *Corinne Pollard*

My sticky palm curled around the freezing metal bulge. This was stupid, but still I held on as the lights flickered. My sparkling date grinned; glad she had got her way. I automatically smiled back.

Her seguin dress shimmered as her long legs swayed to the arcade's melody. I salivated.

Then, the bulbs flashed their announcement. Mild. Harmless.

She gently rubbed my neck to soothe me. She declared it didn't matter, but the embarrassment was too much for her to bear.

The rub was replaced by a clawing grab and with one thrust, my head smashed through the lover's machine.

An Irish Amadan | Corinne Polland

I snatched a litre bottle and legged it through the churchyard. The whiskey was smooth enough to tingle my throat. I tried to swish it around my cheeks like mouthwash, but it was still disgustingly American. I willed it to fog my mind and dull my senses.

One step upon air and I blacked out. Then soil splattered my eyelids.

Eight feet deep. The earthly walls closed in. Dirt scattered from the cloudy sky to land upon my hungover limbs and the cheap wooden body-length surface underneath me.

I spat, coughed and croaked for help.

The shovels never heard me.

About the Author:

Corinne Pollard is a disabled horror writer from West Yorkshire, UK with published works in The Sirens Call and Trembling with Fear. With a degree in English Lit and Creative Writing, Corinne has always enjoyed the world of dark fantasy. Aside from writing, Corinne enjoys metal music, visits to graveyards and shopping for books to read.

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Creepy Window | Cat Voleur

You know how when you live with someone, you develop these sort of household jokes? The kind of stuff that isn't funny when you try to explain it to an outsider, because they weren't there, and the premise doesn't seem to hold up through description? Growing up, 'creepy window' was the inside joke that my father and I shared.

My childhood home was a bit odd in design. It wasn't very big, but there were two stories and a basement—plenty enough room for just the two of us. The top story was normal; two bedrooms, a couple linen closets, and a bathroom. The floor plan downstairs however, was incredibly open. This meant that unless you were in the little half-bath, or we had the library closed off (something we only ever did in the winter) you could essentially see into any room from any other room. More importantly, you could see the dining room windows on the north-facing wall from virtually anywhere on the first floor.

There were three windows on that wall. They were wide, to let natural light into the home, but high up enough to avoid sacrificing privacy, something I'm sure was intentional in the design. The windows were all identical, which I guess is what made the situation so funny.

We were sitting on the couch in the living room, getting a movie set up, when my dad said "Hey, look out creepy window." We had never discussed the window before, but when he said that I knew right where to look; the dining room window to the far left.

It wasn't that the window itself was inherently creepy; it looked just like the other two, after all. I had never personally associated that word to that window until Dad brought it up, but on a subconscious level I had realized something about it was off. It caught the light in a different way than the others. This was especially noticeable around sunrise and sunset, when the sky would appear a radically different color there than in the two windows beside it.

That day, for example, the sky was a shade of blue when viewed from anywhere in the home, but almost lilac from that window. We had been staying in the house almost a year at that point in time, and it wasn't the first instance I'd seen of something like that. I was only twelve, and I guess I just hadn't thought about why this one spot in the new home felt strange until someone else gave voice to the feeling.

What my dad found amusing, more than the pink tint in that one area, was that I immediately identified what he was talking about. It was somewhat funny that we'd both, at separate times, noticed the bizarre, almost unnatural quality of the lighting over there. He had intentionally used the phrase 'creepy window' to puzzle me, but I had instantly understood. Thus the joke of 'creepy window' was born.

When we were done laughing about it, he did the parent thing, and took the teaching opportunity to explain to me about how the angle of light can affect our perception of color. I eagerly accepted the explanation for something that had lightly been nagging at me for a while. My curiosity was, for the time being, sated, and life went on as normal.

From that point on, we would often crack jokes about the window, pointing out when we noticed a substantial color difference, and making up crazy alternative explanations for what was happening. These theories ranged from alien technology to residual radiation from government experiments, to supernatural entities, and covered just about everything in between. When we had guests over, sometimes one of us would casually drop the phrase 'creepy window' leaving the other to explain as best we could. One thing that other people seemed to have in common was the way that they found it to be more creepy than funny when we tried to include them in the bit. I guess in the time we had spent living there, we had just gotten used to it, to the point where it no longer seemed abnormal.

Gradually, over the years, I began to suspect that there might actually be something wrong, dare I say creepy, about the window. I started noticing that it wasn't just the light that didn't quite line up with reality.

The first thing was that I never saw animals outside of creepy window. I first noticed this one day while looking for the cat. He had snuck out through the fence to sunbathe on my neighbor's back porch, something he did often. That was one of the first places I checked, only I hadn't seen him there when I had looked from inside. It was only when I was standing outside, in my own backyard, that I saw him, right where I thought he'd be. An easy explanation; he'd only just gotten there. But after I'd wrangled him back into the house, something nagged at me. As far as I could remember, I had never seen him through that window, or any other pets. No birds, no squirrels, nothing. Since cats, birds, and squirrels are not known for being where you want them to be, I had no way to validate the notion. But as time wore on, I continued not to see animals through the window.

With my interest in the situation renewed, I began to actively check the view out creepy window on a regular basis. It wasn't exactly an obsession, but it was a habit I incorporated into my daily routine. A few months passed without my witnessing anything exceptional, and I had begun to relax some. Then it rained.

It was late fall in Ohio, so while it wasn't exactly the rainy season, such weather was not unheard of. I was in the dining room doing my homework when I happened to glance up. There was no sign of precipitation outside from that window. I stood up instantly and walked around, trying to find an angle that would give me better visibility. It was gray, and overcast, but there was no sign of the big drops that were landing everywhere else. I spent the better part of an hour that night fixated on the situation, but could find no logic in it.

Of course, that was the same night where my dad got stuck working late. By the time I saw him the next morning at breakfast, the rain had stopped, and there was nothing to show him. I held my tongue, but waited anxiously for another storm.

A few weeks later, the skies were cloudy and overcast, Sure enough, when it began to sprinkle, there was still no sign of water outside creepy window. I pointed it out, trying to sound casual.

Dad just laughed it off. "That's creepy window for you," was all he said.

The situation had already become too much of a joke to concern him, I realized. So I did my best to let it go. I thought that if my father wasn't worried about the totally random views from that one window, I didn't need to be worried about them either. If I had learned anything from my years living in the house, it was that it doesn't take a lot for our perception of something to become wildly skewed.

I actually ended up doing a science project on the whole thing for school one year. I omitted the term 'creepy window' to get it approved by my teacher and keep my classmates from mocking me. I can vaguely recall titling the paper something obnoxiously long and pretentious so it would be deemed as 'sophisticated' and not 'paranoid'.

I don't remember the report very well, but I remember the 'Light Refraction Log' that I kept for that whole month, to document the way that light can affect color. I got a few disposable cameras, and every day for two weeks I would wait until sunset and take three pictures of my dining room windows. One showed the light from the normal, middle window, one from creepy window, and the third would display all three windows to prove they were taken at the same time. The last thing I wanted was to fail because my teacher thought I was pulling an elaborate prank.

I didn't include it in my paper, but I began to notice a pattern in the photos. It made me believe the views might not be as random as I thought. The sky color from the pictures taken through creepy window one day would almost perfectly match the sky color from the pictures taken through the normal windows the day after. It was almost as if there was a 24 hour window into the next day. If my teacher noticed, she didn't say anything, and I felt no pressing need to point it out.

The idea that the window was somehow showing me the future seemed absolutely ridiculous to me, even with as young as I was and the amount of evidence I had collected that pointed to that conclusion. I went back and forth with what to do with the information. Part of me desperately wanted to tell my dad in the hopes he'd have another rational explanation for what I was seeing — like he had the night when we'd first discussed the window. I was afraid though, that he might not take my concerns, or me, seriously.

What scared me even more than that was the idea he *would* take it seriously, and I'd find out something really was wrong.

I started keeping a closer eye on that view, though. There were days when I'd see moisture on the glass, and my body would go cold. The next day, it would never fail to rain. This always left me with a sense of dread. It was times like that, when I could accurately predict the weather, that I almost broke my silence on the subject. But I never did. Creepy window was just some dumb, inside joke. I felt it would be safer if it stayed that way.

You'd never believe just how easy it is for adults to forget things that seemed important to them as children. Creepy window was something that alternated between the coolest thing ever and utterly terrifying to me, but it was always so prevalent in my childhood. It seemed life-changing, like something I'd never be free from.

Then I grew up. I moved out. I went to college. I got a job, and an apartment, and just like that, creepy window had ceased to matter. On the rare occasions I did think of it, it was just a fading memory of an inside joke. My dad and I had other things to talk about when he called, and soon I didn't think of it at all.

Then, I came to visit.

Dad put some coffee on and I took my bags upstairs to my old room to settle in. It was just like I'd left it, and the warm memories of the old house with its strange downstairs architecture flooded my brain. Coming back downstairs to reminisce with my dad, I caught a glimpse out creepy window, and it all came back. It was all I could do not to scream as I looked out into the red, fiery oblivion just beyond the glass.

About the Author:

Cat Voleur is a writer of dark, speculative fiction and co-host of the Slasher Radio podcast. Her day job consists of script writing for ever-growing YouTube channels focused on media breakdowns. She currently resides in a house with her army of rescue felines. In addition to her writing, she can often be found reading, gaming, or pursuing her passion of fictional languages.

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Hemlock's Secrets | Miracle Austin

I bet no one has ever told you about **shadow twisters**, right?

They're eccentric trees that grow best in deep, fertilized soil, where rotten bodies sleep.

You can find plenty of them in the Hemlock Cemetery.

Most people don't know the differences between regular trees or *shadow twisters*.

They think they're just trees and harmless, but that's where they're wrong—especially when one is removed from Hemlock without proper precautions being taken.

I tried to tell my careless brother not to steal anything else, most certainly not a twister. He laughed at me.

He owned a home in the country. His closest neighbor lived several miles away from him.

About a month ago, near midnight, he drove to Hemlock in his 1986 rusty Ford truck and dug up one to plant in his backyard for extra shade.

Butterflies, birds, squirrels, bees, grass, and flowers disappeared from his yard almost overnight.

The leaves stayed *stock-still* in that tree, even when breezes came through.

After only three days, the dirt around the transplanted tree became wet, coffee grounds that bubbled up during the daytime. Zig-zag markings decorated its trunk.

On the seventh night, all the tree's wooden limbs broke off. The waiting quicksand devoured them.

By the time I went up to visit him, his yard smelled as if hundreds of dead rats—doused with the cheapest perfume you've ever encountered—had baked for hours under a blazing, Texan sun.

Wiggly and twisted, thorned-hairy, burgundy tentacles sprouted out a hole in its trunk that resembled a mouth around it.

My brother walked up barefoot and leaned in to touch one.

"Travis, stop!" I begged as I exited the glass, sliding door, holding his bottled beer in my hand.

"Why don't you mind your own business and sit the beer down next to my chair?" he snapped.

I honored his wish.

"Fine, you think you know what you're doing? You know *nothing*, but you will soon enough!" I said, sitting down a few feet from his chair and crossing my arms. I looked away from him.

"Ouch!" he yelled out.

I turned my head back towards him.

Two tentacles were wrapped around his wrists and a third one extended up towards his throbbing veins in his quivering neck.

He jerked his arms away and the tentacles retracted back to their original positions. They swayed in the wind for the very first time.

"Did you see that? That damn tree just bit me!" he shouted out, panting at the same time. Sweat streamed down his temples and saturated his beard. He massaged his wrists with his hands for a minute.

Wiping some draining blood off his neck with a rag he dug out of his back pocket, he returned back to his lawn chair and sat down, sipping on his beer. He stared at the tree up and down.

Within a few minutes, his glass bottle crashed onto the patio.

He stood straight up from his chair and vomited out the most piercing scream I've ever heard. The broken glass trembled on the ground.

My eyes were fixed on him.

His entire body transformed into a crispy, charcoal statue. First, his toes curled back—then each one crumbled away. His legs, arms, torso, and head all did the same.

I already knew I couldn't help or touch Travis.

It was too late.

After all, he'd invited the *curse*.

He became a pile of gathered dust, which floated up in the air and encircled the tree.

Then, one of the arms unzipped itself and his gritty remains slithered down the tree's throat. It took in a deep gulp and swallowed.

I contemplated calling the police, but dismissed that crazy idea. Who would actually believe my creepy story about a **shadow twister** consuming my brother? I figured Travis's disappearance would be reason enough to celebrate for most who knew him. So, I never called.

When I woke up the next morning, the tree and its stench had vanished.

After local law enforcement officers questioned me about my missing brother, I drove up a few days later to Hemlock and found the same tree that Travis had stolen.

The twisted tentacles were gone.

It looked normal, but fuller, and completely satisfied.

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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Death | Patrick J. Wynn

Bob knew the end was near. His chest rose and fell in hitching jerks and the room swam around him. There was no family around to share or comfort his ending, just the nurses who came and went as they checked the machines or emptied his piss bag. He wasn't surprised, he would have been astonished if his three children, his four ex-wives or any of his siblings had shown up. He wasn't sure if they even knew where he was, he hadn't seen any of them in years. As his chest jerked, he gave a short burst of laughter as he thought about his past. He hadn't been a good man, his wives left him after one-to-many beat downs, his children left never to look back for the same reasons. His job had taken him to places around the world most only dreamed of, but his travels were not for pleasure or vacations. They were usually to pay a visit to people; the visits were short and ended abruptly. He giggled a little at the thought of pleasure it brought him. His last breath shocked him, and he tried in vain to make his chest rise once more to draw in that sweet breath, but it was not to be and the room around him slowly faded. When the reality of life disappeared, Bob was shocked by the utter lack of anything. There was no light, no sound and the blackness that surrounded him seemed filled with deep emptiness. He didn't float or move, he just was. Cold began to seep in and the pain was agony, he wanted to scream but... nothing. His mind snapped into insanity but just as quickly as rational thought left it roared back causing the pain to rise again driving his mind to unthinkable images. Suddenly a deep warm voice called to him.

"Robert Hawkins" The voice calmly called.

It took Bob an eternity to grasp the difference between insanity and the softness of the deep soothing voice.

"ROBERT."

"Yes," Bob whispered.

"I have need of you." The voice said.

"Please don't leave me. Oh, please, please. I'll do anything" Bob pleaded.

"Good. I have need of your talents. Come forth and be" The voice spoke from a growing light.

Bob felt, he actually felt himself. He was one and whole, but the coldness remained.

"I'm so cold," Bob whined.

"You must feed on his children to push back that cold. When you feed on God's children their warm blood will flow into you giving the memory of life"

Bob stood and rose as evil itself stood over him. He could feel the long sharp teeth that now filled his mouth and he clicked his razor sharp nails together in anticipation of tearing the flesh from bone.

"Go, my son. Go into the world and feed."

Bob felt a long pull and suddenly he was once again in the world of man. Running his long black tongue across his pointed teeth he was ready to do his bidding, he was ready to push back the cold. With a groan of want he stepped out from the shadows and pulled in a young thing who gave a shriek of pain as he bit down. Stopping in mid swallow he remembered to give thanks and praise to the dark one who set him on his true course.

About the Author:

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



Old Route 6 | Byran C. Laesch

Having ridden motorcycles my entire life, I'm no stranger to danger. I've wrecked more times than I care to mention, but my scars clearly tell the stories I won't. But there is one I would like to tell myself—the time I rode Old Route 6, also known as the Devil's Trail.

They say it's claimed more than 66 lives, but no bodies have ever been found—only wrecked vehicles in the woods nearby. Add to that, people who have ridden it and escaped have said they've seen some strange and terrible things along that road: monsters, demons, some even claim to see Hell itself. So, for someone like me, what else could I do, but pick up the challenge?

It took me weeks to track down Old Route 6. Rumors claimed a satanic cult met in the woods nearby and opened a portal to Hell, hence its nickname. And the locals, it seems, knew its fearsome reputation rather well. As a result, they don't speak of it, which makes it difficult to find it to begin with. But what makes it nearly impossible is that it's not mentioned on any paper map or even the Internet. In the end, I cross-referenced my resources to see if I couldn't find anything about the satanic cult. I had some luck there as I found an old newspaper clipping in the local library about a devil-worshiping cult that had a few of its members arrested. Apparently, some of the cultists had been raiding local farmers' livestock for blood sacrifices, but authorities weren't able to track them down until a young girl went missing. Finger prints had been left on her window sill by someone with a record a mile long and wide. They arrested him shortly after, but the girl wasn't found at his residence. According to the article, the suspect gave up the location of the cult's meeting place and even mentioned a dark ritual they would be conducting soon. The police found the location, but not the girl or any of the other cultists. All they did find was blood spilled on a stone altar. Some of its DNA matched the girl's parents' DNA enough for the police to conclude that it was the girl's blood. They presumed her dead.

The police searched for a body, but never found one. According to reports, their search came to a sudden halt with no reason given, although some of the officers connected to the search said they had heard and seen things in those woods no one should ever see or hear.

Anyway, the newspaper didn't name the woods exactly, but did mention it was somewhere in the Shady Hollow, a forested region in the Appalachian Mountains just off Route 7. I tracked Shady Hollow all along the route, but still had no luck finding Old Route 6. Finally, fed up, I decided to ride the area by myself and see if I couldn't find it the old fashioned way. I rode my bike in both directions, but still couldn't find it. It was the weirdest thing.

But one day it occurred to me to try riding at different times of day. I don't know why, but one night at around 3 AM, something caught my eye. I was riding around a corner I had probably gone around at least a dozen times before when suddenly I saw what looked like a little girl standing in the woods. I screeched to a halt and lifted a flashlight. I saw no girl, but did see a sign saying 'Route 6' that I could've sworn wasn't there the day before.

I knew I wasn't ready to make that run as I didn't know the road, but the excitement of having finally found Old Route 6, along with some lingering apprehension that I may never be able to find it again, got the better of me and I backed my bike up and turned around. I decided I was going to put those monster sightings to the test.

I must confess I was nervous to ride that mountain road that late at night but the Devil's Trail was a kind road to begin with. The first mile and a half was composed of long straights and long, lazy turns one way or the other. Not very challenging, not even for a new rider, but the gradual elevation changes up and down helped add to the excitement.

About mile two I finally got a whiff of what I was in for as I hit a long increasing radius left followed by a decreasing radius right. I scrubbed some speed for the left, but managed to build it back up before braking hard for the right. I added some maintenance throttle after the initial slow down and stayed there into the apex. Past it, I twisted my wrist and opened the throttle way open. The next few turns were similar and certainly within my skill level.

I slowly became more and more confident. Despite being an old route, the road surface was in great condition, and despite some of the blind corners around the mountain's bends, Devil's Trail was actually a very easy road to ride. I found myself going faster and faster, even coming close to dragging a knee and drifting around a few corners. There was just something so intoxicating about that road that brought out the daredevil in me. I even started cracking my throttle as loudly as I could on the straights so I could hear my engine break the still of the night.

Eventually, Old Route 6 came to an end—a very unexpected end. You'd think it would join back up with another route; 5, 7, or maybe 4, but that wasn't the case. Instead, Devil's Trail ended in a dead end with construction barriers, stopping you from running into the forest. I was disappointed to see that, but I was honestly grateful for the break. My heart was thumping like a jackhammer. It had honestly been one of the most exciting and enjoyable rides of my life. But as I came to a stop, something stepped out from behind a tree that nearly made my heart stop.

It was a young girl, and not just any girl, but the girl from the newspaper article. She had a red, bloody spot on her chest where her heart was supposed to be, but in my headlight, it looked like an empty, gaping hole. She screamed an ear-splitting scream—like a death wail—and a vision pierced my mind. I saw a large group of people dressed in black cloaks gathering around a stone altar somewhere in the woods. I returned to the moment and watched on in horror as the girl transformed into a large, muscular demon with a cow skull for a head. Its eyes burned and two black shadows emerged from its shoulder blades before finally extending into two black wings.

Things went from bad to worse as the darkness of the night was illuminated by a red glow. I couldn't see where it originated, but it seemed to be coming from both the ground and the horizon. I whipped my head from side to side taking in my new surroundings and that was when I saw them—more 'creatures', like the demon standing before me, as they emerged from behind the trees.

Seeing that I was now in Hell, I grabbed a fistful of throttle and spun my bike around as fast as I could. The 180 degree turn saw me go almost off the road where I noticed that instead of the road being connected to the forest floor, there was instead a sheer drop to a burning pit of fire below. The nearest creature snatched at me and made a horrible moan, but it missed and I was soon twisting my wrist for all it was worth.

What caution and respect I once had for those turns and corners was thrown to the wind as fear enveloped me. Around every corner, I saw more and more horrifying creatures and devils step out from behind the trees. The red glow around the forest intensified and though the wind rushing past my helmet already threatened to deafen me, I could hear a moan, rising over the wind, coming from below.

Things became all the worse as I suddenly heard the loud beating of wings. I looked in my mirrors and saw the cow skull demon giving chase. It reached out for me and let out another scream as I leaned around a corner. I nearly lost my balance and lowsided the bike as another vision pierced my mind. I saw the same cultists as before, gathering around a stone altar and chanting. But now, one of them was laying the naked form of a young girl—the same girl who had disappeared—upon the altar. I shook my head and returned to the chase. I managed to keep the bike upright, but then I received a nasty shock as the road I now rode was not the one I had ridden. This one had more corners and hairpins. The surface was rougher and filled with divots, holes, and small unseen changes in elevation. The bike threatened to buck me off for how hard I was pushing it. And all the while, more and more demons appeared as the one with the wings stayed glued to my tail.

Distracted by my changing environment and mental duress, I let up on the throttle some and the demon tore at my back, ripping up my jacket. The sharp, searing pain of its talons made me refocus, but not before I saw another flash of the vision where a cultist produced a knife and the girl screamed. The pitch of her voice reached such a piercing crescendo that I got a mind-splitting headache. My concentration slipped and I nearly drove off the road, plunging into the depths of Hell. I threw my entire body weight to the inside of the corner and forced my bike to lean over as much as possible. As a result, I impacted the left foot peg into the ground and was nearly taken down. Thankfully, the bike actually bounced off the peg and I was able to counter weight accordingly, keeping the bike up. I sped out of that corner as fast as I could.

My luck finally changed at last as I was now on the first mile and a half full of long straights and long, lazy turns. Thankfully, this part of the road was the same as what I rode not more than ten minutes ago. I hoped to make up some time and leave the monsters and demon behind, but the creatures kept coming and the cow skull demon also benefited from those straights and lazy corners. Not only did it keep pace with me, but it managed to gain on me. It got so close that it threw several ferocious strikes at me, tearing up my jacket, scratching my helmet, and ruining my bike's paint. It left deep gashes in my arms, shoulders, and back, all of which were bleeding. Each hit was hard and fast and pummeled me in such a way that they threatened to throw me off the bike. I was woozy, but I couldn't tell if it was from blood loss or from all the impacts to my head. There were very few things I could keep straight, but I tried to focus on staying on the bike and keeping my wrist as twisted as possible. I could still feel the bike beneath me which boosted my morale some, but my arms and legs strained to hold onto it.

As the road straightened and I saw Route 7, I took one final blow to the helmet from the demon as the last of the vision shot through my head. I saw the cultist plunge the knife into the girl's breast. I saw him cut open her chest and rip out her still beating heart. The girl screamed and cried as a bolt of lightning flashed, setting her heart on fire, and that's when the true horror of the scene was revealed. I saw the cultists transform into the devils around me, I saw the red glow of the hellscape suddenly appear, and I saw the girl transform into the cow skull demon, her death wail becoming its own ear-piercing scream.

I returned to reality, hyperventilating, as the cow skull demon screamed the girl's scream, and I immediately became nauseous. I puked inside my helmet and lost all visibility as hot vomit splashed off my visor and into my eyes.

The stench was unbelievable and my mind threatened to tear itself apart. I desperately held onto my sanity as I kept my hand on the throttle, my wrist twisted. But at that moment, I wasn't so much riding a motorcycle as I was squeezing my own mind, trying to hold it together, twisting it in the opposite direction of the way it wanted to unravel.

I don't know what happened next as I was still blinded, but I was mildly aware of the red glow disappearing and I could no longer hear the beating of those terrible wings. But before any of this could register, I felt a sudden impact from the front that launched me over my handle bars, and I collided into something hard and large. Immense pain shot through my entire body and I couldn't do anything to stop myself from losing consciousness.

When I woke up, I was in a hospital and two weeks had passed. The nurses explained to me that a local had found me lying in a heap just off Route 7. My bike had hit a tree. The bike's twisted frame and pieces were flung 50 feet into the woods, and 100 feet down the road.

The sheriff reckoned I was doing nearly a hundred when I hit it. I meanwhile had been covered in vomit, dozens of bloody cuts, and I reeked of sulfur. I had broken bones all throughout my body and my many cuts eventually became infected. They all thought I was a goner, but through a long, painful, and expensive recovery, I actually managed to pull through.

They all of course wanted to know what happened, and a couple of times I almost told them, but then I would remember the cow skull demon and the vision of that little girl getting her heart ripped out, and I would vomit again, no matter where I was. Not like it matters anyway—they wouldn't have believed me. And I'm sure some of you don't either. But, if you ever find yourself in the Appalachian Mountains late at night and you think you see a little girl standing in the forest, do your best to ignore it. Believe me, better to let the woods take another innocent than for you to drive into Hell.

About the Author:

Bryan C. Laesch calls himself the Omni-Genre Writer, despite some evidence to the contrary. He writes in every genre and has written in every style...that he likes. His main interest lies in Gothic horror as it allows for a unique combination of genres, including romance, fantasy, sci-fi, mystery, erotica, action, and Christian. He also blogs about MBTI and owns the t-shirt business Transcendent Tees.

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The Incantation of the Crimson Star | Jeff Fields McCormack

With a strained grimace and a quivering grasp, I slid the jagged shard of glass across my exposed palm. The soft flesh depressed as the glass sliced through my hand. Pain poured from the wound. My once-ironclad grip loosened. The fragment glimmered in the flickering candlelight as it shattered against the floor below.

The pain was not unwelcome, however. It was exhilarating.

I placed my bloodied palm against the floor and traced a crimson star. After muttering the words of some long-forgotten language, I grew silent.

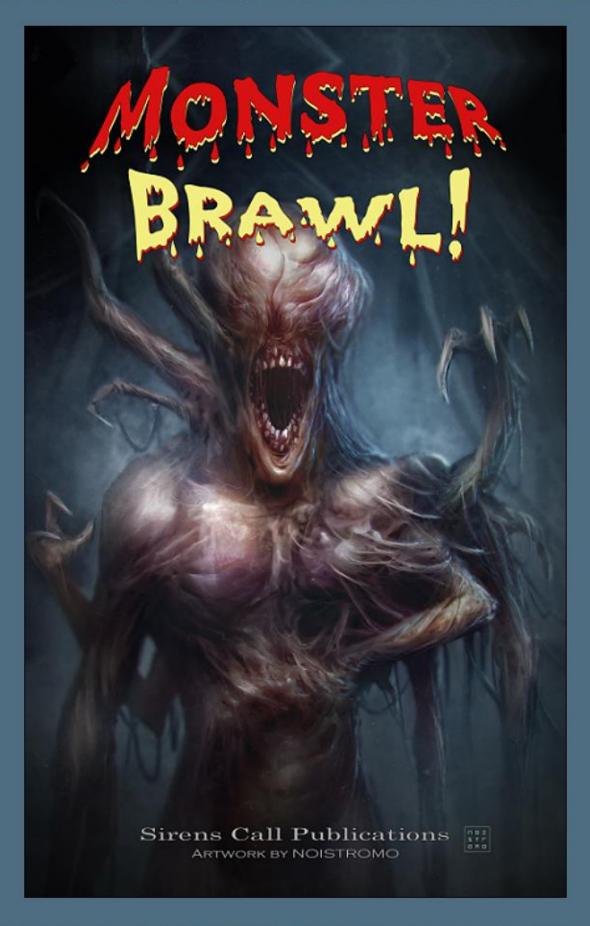
A raspy voice emanated from the darkness, confirming that the incantation had been successful.

About the Author:

Jeff Fields McCormack recently received his Master of Arts in English from Texas A&M University in Commerce. He is the founder and Editor-In-Chief of Midnight Manuscripts Quarterly. Jeff's stories have been published in several magazines, literary journals, and anthologies, including Sanitarium Magazine and Black Ink Fiction's Halloween Frights.



It's time to let the monsters out!



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

The Man in the Store | RJ Meldrum

The elderly man behind the scruffy counter of the scruffy store was pale, with dark circles round his eyes. I paid for my cigarettes with exact change and thanked him. He stared past me, not responding. I exited, feeling uneasy. An old lady on the sidewalk leered at me.

"You must be new to the street."

She was right, I was. I'd just moved into a shared student house to attend the nearby university. The street and town were foreign to me; I looked and sounded out of place.

"Yes, I just moved in last week."

She cackled.

"I knew it! Only outsiders visit old Ben's store."

I hesitated, a variety of possible reasons flitted through my mind. Too expensive? Unsanitary? Dirty old man? She leered again.

"He's dead, you see. A ghost."

She stared at me, anticipating my response. Clearly, I wasn't the first person she'd told.

"Oh, how interesting."

I tried to keep cool. She was obviously as crazy as a bedbug and I didn't want to encourage her. She stared a moment longer, cackled then walked away.

"Just ask around dearie, you'll find out!"

I asked my housemates, but they were all new to the area and hadn't heard the story. They concluded the same as I did; the old dear was crazy or, at the very least, trying to get a rise out of a stranger. In an effort to be thorough, I checked the obituaries on the local newspaper's website. Imagine my surprise when I saw the man in the store, staring at me. Benjamin Peabody. He'd died the previous year. And yet, he'd taken money from me, just two days ago. Could it really be his ghost? Was that even possible? I had to investigate further. The first point of call was the old woman. I caught up to her the next day, just past the store. She took one look at my face.

"So, you checked. Now you know."

"I don't understand. How can it be?"

"You think I know? It just is."

"He can't be a ghost."

"Ask him, he'll tell you himself."

I couldn't face that prospect. Imagine asking someone if they're a ghost.

"But why is he there, in the store?"

"It's all because of Mimi."

"Who?"

"His wife. Widow now, I guess. Flighty sort. She wasn't interested in helping him with the store when he was alive. She'd left all the work to him. After he died, she told everyone she was going to run it herself, rather than selling it. She was finally going to make improvements, she said. Hire some staff, make it modern. She said it couldn't be that hard. But it wasn't to be. He clearly wasn't happy with her ideas. Day after he was buried, he reappeared in the store, kicked Mimi out from behind the counter and took over."

"Really?"

She continued.

"At first, we all went in to get a peek. It was a bit of a novelty. After a while it got too creepy. Too morbid. Who wants to stare into the face of a dead man? Now, the only ones who visit the store are folk who don't know."

"Surely he isn't planning to stay there forever?"

"He told old Mr. Grayson he couldn't tolerate making a mess of his legacy. Said it'd be bankrupt within the year if she was in charge. Said he was staying until Mimi either sold the store or died. Then he'd leave. He gave his word on that."

"Is Mimi going to sell?"

"No, she's just as stubborn as he is. She was royally ticked off when he returned. She refused to sell, mainly just to annoy him. And he can't sell it himself, what with being dead and all. She's the legal owner."

"Where's Mimi now?"

"In the apartment above, but she isn't doing too well. Poorly. Mrs. Johnson says she won't last much longer."

"I wonder what will happen when she dies."

"That's what we're all wondering. He gave his word about leaving."

Despite myself, I was intrigued. I wasn't sure if I really believed the tale, but the evidence was right in front of me. A man who looked exactly like Benjamin Peabody stood behind the counter of the store. And his wife, the one who'd necessitated his return from the grave, was dying.

I busied myself with my studies, while my new-found friend Mrs. Hill kept me up-to-date on the news. On Saturday, it was reported by those in the know that Mimi was close to death. The tension amongst the inhabitants of the street was palpable. Whatever was going to happen was going to be soon.

It was Tuesday when I saw the hearse outside the store. Mrs. Hill and a bunch of her cronies were gathered nearby. Two men carrying a small coffin emerged from the building and loaded it into the vehicle. I noticed a pale face staring out from the store. Benjamin was taking a keen interest. He was smiling broadly, but I could see he wasn't quite as...substantial, as he had been before. We all noticed it, he was fading away. It was all over in a few seconds. Benjamin was gone. It was clear he was a man of his word.

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, the Horror Zine and Drabblez Magazine. His novella *The Plague* was published by Demain Press.

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The Colony | Johnathan Worlde

Tanya's wedding was a first for the year-old colony. This wonderfully benign planet hosted verdant forests, sparkling rivers teaming with fish, was free of known dangerous predators and viral diseases.

Herbert, the team's biologist, was in an overgrown neighboring field, studying a group of aging earthen mounds. Digging into the structures, he felt heat—a frightening anomaly—and heard an ominous rumbling from below. Upon unearthing huge exoskeletal remains, Herbert rushed to warn the party-goers.

The reception was in full swing, accordion playing, when giant rapacious arthropods burst from the mounds, attacking and greedily feeding upon the tasty wedding guests.

About the Author:

Jonathan Worlde is the fiction byline of Paul Grussendorf, who is an attorney representing refugees and a consultant to the UN Refugee Agency. Paul Grussendorf's legal memoir is *My Trials: Inside America's Deportation Factories*. (Available on Amazon). Jonathan Worlde's neo-noir mystery novel *Latex Monkey with Banana* was winner of the Hollywood Discovery Award.

Facebook: Paul Grussendorf



Featured Artist | Bob Lizarraga

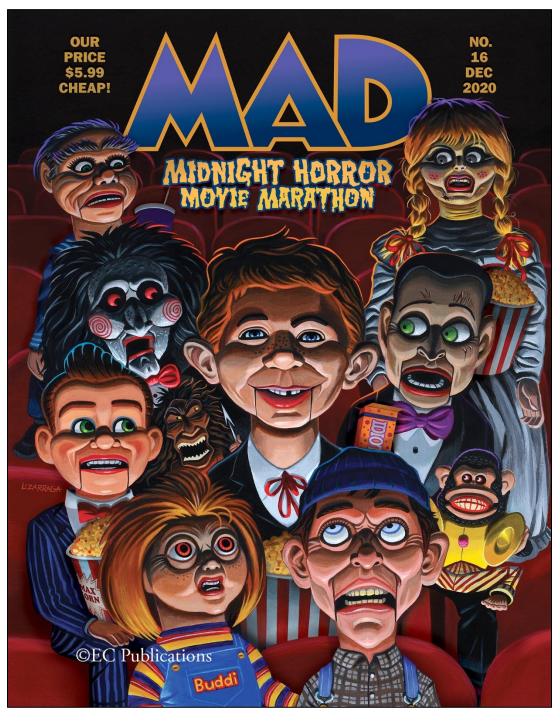
Bob Lizarraga has developed and designed characters for a variety of animation projects, including Clifford the Big Red Dog, Chalkzone, Butt Ugly Martians, and Disney TV's "The 7D".

Clients include Warner Bros., Famous Monsters of Filmland Magazine, Universal Cartoon Studio, Comedy Central and Nickelodeon.

Bob illustrated and co-wrote the SPAGHETTI & MEATBALL comic for MAD Magazine, and received a Society of Illustrators Gold Award for his MAD Halloween cover illustration in 2020.

In addition to his animation design, Bob creates unusual works combining caricature and dark fantasy, and has exhibited in a number of Los Angeles galleries...

Etsy Store: <u>Bob Lizarraga</u>
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Moonlit Horror | DJ Tyrer

"You shouldn't leave your tools out at night. Always put them away before nightfall, or evil shall befall you."

Chuck snorted, but picked up his hammer and saw and tossed them into his toolbox. Petru was an old ninny, always spouting silly old-world superstition that should have been left behind in a mouldy-old caravan.

Dumping his toolbox in the shed, he said, "I'm surprised you don't drop dead from the stress of always worrying about evil."

It was Petru's turn to snort. "I make sure not to court it—that way, I don't get stressed."

Chuck shook his head and strode off to his pickup. The sooner he got home, the sooner he could do the yard work Shania was always whining about and, then, kick off his boots and relax.

Their plot wasn't too big, so it didn't take him long to drag the old mower across it a few times. Then, he set about hoeing the flowerbeds, trying to uproot the weeds that his wife hated to see in them.

"Phew!" He dragged his sleeve across his brow and tossed the hoe down next to the porch. He looked at it for a moment, hearing Petru's voice in his head, then laughed. He still needed to sweep the uprooted weeds into the trash and it wasn't as if rain was forecast; he could afford to leave putting the hoe away till tomorrow; it wasn't as if it was going to rust...

"Yeah, Petru," he muttered as he went in, "I'm real worried about it."

"You say something, honey?" called Shania.

"Just that I'm done doing the yard and could do with a lovely cool beer before you fetch my supper."

"Sure thing, honey."

He settled in front of the TV, forgetting about the hoe and about Petru.

Outside, a full moon rose in the sky, its rays falling upon the hoe which seemed to quiver slightly in the silvery light.

Chuck didn't even think of the hoe the next morning as he set off for work, nor the next day. But, then Shania pointed out it was still laying beside the porch 'cluttering the place up' and that she wanted it gone before she went to visit her mother.

"Yeah, sure, I'll shift it later," he said as he climbed into his pickup.

Arriving home, he made a beeline for it and grabbed it up and tossed it into the small shed in the corner of their yard before heading inside to help his wife with her bags.

Had he paused to glance at the tool, he might have wondered at the small red drop of liquid that quivered upon its blade, but his mind was elsewhere and he was in a hurry to see Shania off so he could get back to watch his game.

"I'll be home in a week," she told him, pausing to kiss his cheek, before climbing out of the pickup and heading for the Greyhound bus, Chuck dragging her cases after her.

"Have a good time," he said, sliding her bags into the storage bay of the bus and not really caring whether she did or not. He was more interested in the outcome of the game—he had money riding on his team.

"Oh, and be sure to give those flowerbeds another going over, would you, honey? I swear those weeds pop up the moment you turn your back."

"Yes, dear ... "

Back home, he settled down with few cans of beer and a microwave meal and watched his team crash ignobly out. Muttering curses to himself, he headed up for bed.

As he drew the curtains, he was certain he could hear the sound of the shed door rattling, but when he looked out he could see nothing amiss.

"Just the damn wind," he told himself, and he climbed into bed and fell asleep.

The next day was a Saturday and, as much as he wanted to laze, he knew he'd better attend to the weeds. With any luck, Shania was exaggerating and he could get the job done in half-an-hour and settle down to enjoy a few beers in the sun.

He grabbed the hoe out of the shed and set to work.

"Ah, dammit and hellfire!" he cried as the hoe somehow contrived to slip in his grip and strike his shin.

He sucked in a breath as a sickening wave of pain ran through him and looked down at where the denim of his jeans was darkening. Damn thing had gashed his leg good and proper.

He chucked it onto the lawn with a cry of disgust and hobbled inside to wash and bandage his leg.

Some break from the wife this was turning out to be! First, his team made a mess of things and, now, he'd given himself a bloody cut in the leg. Well, he didn't care if Shania was dissatisfied or not, there was no way he was going back to work on those weeds until his leg had heeled.

He slumped in front of the TV and downed beer after beer.

Then, once it was dark, he staggered on unsteady legs up the stairs and flopped down on the bed, still dressed, his leg throbbing.

Outside, the hoe quivered as if alive and the blood that was smeared across its blade vanished as if it were being absorbed into the metal. Though it might have seemed no different to Chuck's uninterested gaze, a terrible spark had been awakened within it, along with a fierce hunger—a hunger given a taste of what it needed.

The quiver became a shudder and the hoe bounced and flipped over, landing a little closer to the door of the house. It jumped again, then began to vibrate its way across the lawn before tossing itself awkwardly up the front steps.

Chuck never bothered to lock the house up—he always told Shania they had nothing worth stealing—and it was only a slight difficulty for the hoe to open the door and flop inside and move like a petrified snake across the floor of the front room.

With some difficulty, it thumped its way up the stairs.

On the bed, partially illuminated by moonlight through the window, Chuck stirred, uneasily, but his beer-fogged mind couldn't quite make its way up from the drowsy depths of sleep and he remained in a doze as the hoe finally reached the landing and made its awkward way through to the bedroom.

He woke with a start as something thumped onto the bed and with blurry vision saw something tall and thin looming over him.

"What the hell?"

The hoe fell forwards with a force greater than that impelled by gravity and its blade slammed into his body, gouging a deep wound into his flesh.

Chuck shrieked wordlessly in pain and horror as he felt a peculiar sucking sensation.

Before he could do more than flap his arms uselessly, he felt his strength leaving his body, draining away with his blood as the cursed tool fed its vampiric hunger.

It was impossible. It was ridiculous.

His last thought was that Petru had been right all along.

Then, he died and the hoe slipped off the bed to hide and wait for Shania to come home...

Night of the Living Shed | DJ Tyrer

It wasn't Hallowe'en, but it should've been. Hallowe'en is the sort of night such weirdness should occur, not a warm summer's evening. Equally, had it been a gazebo, I would have found it more believable; I've always felt that word should be the name of a monstrosity. But, it wasn't. It was a shed and it was a balmy summer's evening and I was terrified out of my mind.

It all began innocuously enough. I'd offered to help my girlfriend's father out for the same reasons young men have made such offers since time immemorial. He'd bought a rundown house he planned to rent out for an income and the garden needed dealing with. You doubtless have seen such overgrown plots filled with chest-high grass and brambles, with the odd shopping trolley concealed amongst the growth. In the hopes of increasing the chance of physical pleasures, I was busy hacking away at it all with a strimmer and had been for some time. I'd uncovered the aforementioned shopping trolley and the shed and had stumbled into a weed-choked fishpond. The garden still looked awful.

As I worked, the full moon rose in the sky and a pallid glow washed over the garden.

I was startled by a sudden wrenching sound and was startled to see the shed tearing itself free from its foundation to stand on a pair of spindly legs that looked like garden hoes. The door flapped open like a misplaced jaw to reveal teeth made of shears. To either side of it, two small windows stared balefully at me.

It began to chase me.

Have you ever been chased by a shed? Of course not. You probably haven't even been chased by a tiger and that, at least, would be a mundane occurrence. Well, let me tell you, being chased by a shed is a terrifying, confusing experience. And, when it chases you down a street and people stare at you in surprise, rather embarrassing, too. After all, nobody should be scared of a shed.

But, believe me, it was scary.

Now, I'd abandoned the strimmer and so was quite unarmed. I called the police as I ran, but the moment I shouted that a shed was trying to eat me, they hung up.

What was I to do? What would you do?

Not one of the gawking onlookers moved to assist me.

I was on my own and I was screwed and not in the manner I'd hoped the gardening would lead to.

A bonfire might have done, but you don't see too many of those these days.

The shed's door-jaw snapped open and nearly bowled me over; it was right on my heels.

Then, a thought struck me and I ran towards the highway, the shed snapping at me as I went.

I dodged out amongst the traffic. Thank goodness folk drive out to clubs and pubs in the evening! Horns blared and brakes screeched as I leapt around cars. Then, came an almighty, splintering crash as an SUV ploughed into the shed. I felt fragments of wood strike me.

I let out a cry of delight and began to dance for joy: I was safe!

That was when a Ford Fiesta clipped me, putting me here in hospital. But, still, I was safe.

Only... every now and then, I'm certain I hear the click-clack sound of hoe-blade feet on the passage floor outside the ward...

No; it must be my imagination.

Rug The Assassin | DJ Tyrer

My rug attempted to assassinate me today. No, seriously; I swear it was deliberate. I was just crossing the room when it seemed to wrap itself about my foot. No, not seemed: it *did* wrap itself about my foot and sent me flying across the room into the wall. I only narrowly avoided being hit by a falling portrait of a wildebeest. I think that painting was in league with the rug.

I staggered over to the chair, which seemed further away than I remembered, as if it had moved, and slumped down. My knee and ankle felt as if they had been wrenched out of alignment; my right arm and shoulder were in agony; blood trickled down from my scalp where I'd struck my head. I felt a wreck.

Looking around the room, I couldn't pinpoint the rug responsible for my fall: there were two rugs in the room, both looking totally innocent right now, and neither was near where I had been walking. It was at that moment I realized my trip had been a deliberate act by the rug, rather than an accident. Not that I could imagine what I had done to upset it so. Unless, and this was an even worse thought, the rug had made the attempt on my life on behalf of some other object: was it a hitrug?

I looked around the room again, wondering which object might have hired it. The standard lamp in the corner certainly seemed askance, but I could think of no offence I might have committed against it. Perhaps, the fan? I had definitely been overworking it in the hot, muggy weather; maybe it wanted a rest? But, was it exhausted enough to want me dead?

I gave up. For all I knew, the television could have been behind the conspiracy! I couldn't trust anything.

The next attempt on my life happened just a short while ago: the bookcase fell on me. I was nowhere near it at the time, yet it crashed into me, knocking me to the floor beneath an avalanche of paperbacks. Only the fact I was wary of such a follow-up attack allowed me to avoid the worst of it.

I have come to the conclusion that the entire contents of my house are conspiring against me. Even as I was typing this record, I noticed the coffee table edging closer towards me, doubtless planning an assault on my shins. Then, my laptop snapped shut on my hands; a couple of my fingers are surely broken.

Well, I'm not going to take it anymore. They're not going to get me. I've made up my mind. I know just what I am going to do. I'm going to fetch the axe from the shed and chop all the furniture up into teeny, tiny, little pieces and build a bonfire of them in the garden. We'll see who gets whom in the end...

I'm pretty certain I can trust the axe.

About the Author:

DJ Tyrer studied history at the University of Wales at Aberystwyth, edits Atlantean Publishing, and has been published in various anthologies and magazines, such as Chilling Horror Short Stories (Flame Tree), What Dwells Below (Sirens Call Publications), and issues of The Horrorzine, and Tigershark, as well as having a novella available in paperback and on the Kindle, The Yellow House (Dunhams Manor).

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Blue Tip Down | *Ian Sputnik*

He awoke early, too early, yet had no idea why, but would soon find out. His head was itchy. Not just itchy, it was on fire. He dug his fingernails in deep and scratched. God it felt good, although it did nothing but offer temporary relief.

Dave Driver felt like he was in a living hell. Even as he sat down in front of the TV with his morning cup of coffee, his attention was fixated on his head. It felt like a thousand ants were crawling around in his scalp.

Being his day off, he decided to numb the pain with a rather large glass of whiskey, and then another. Eventually the discomfort seemed to ebb away.

He woke several hours later but felt much worse. The itch on his head had spread to his eyes. He rubbed them until they were as red as stop signs, and still they stung and burned.

Dave made his way to his bathroom to splash cool water onto his face. The relief was only temporary and the discomfort quickly returned. Only this time the tingling, itching, fire-laden feeling had spread to his nose and ears as well. He could hear a scraping-crawling sound. The volume was excruciating, but no matter how hard he held his hands to his ears, it only increased. Staring bleary-eyed into the mirror, he stepped away from the sink and immediately passed out.

He couldn't tell if it had been minutes, hours or days since he had fallen, but one thing was evident to him—he was completely blind. He gingerly touched his eyes. The sockets were encased in clumps of matted hair. As Dave screamed in repulsion, he realized the sound was muffled. Had he hit his head when he fell? He reached for his ears only to feel long, thick hairs protruding from his auditory canals. Still on his knees, there was a wretched gagging sensation crawling down his throat. His body convulsed, tried to vomit up the intrusion, but the bile and contents of his stomach were stuck fast behind an impenetrable wall of hair that was working its way down his throat.

After what seemed like an eternity of writhing and spasming in pure agony, he died.

Dr. Sadler didn't hear the door open as the two police officers entered the room followed by two other doctors from the facility. As they shook him awake, they were repelled by the stench of alcohol that enveloped him. He stared at them with upside-down eyes, then proceeded to vomit all over the lead investigator's shoes.

Sometime later, after he had sobered up enough to sit upright, the interview began.

The detectives laid out the facts of Mr. Driver's sad demise. They then inquired about the procedure Dr. Sadler had performed the day before wanting to know every minute detail of the patient's hair transplant.

Dr. Sadler cleared his throat and then confidently informed them that he had inserted each of the genetically modified hairs with the utmost precision, and applied the growth agent at the required dosage of 1ml per square inch of scalp. He proudly announced that he had managed to give Mr. Driver double the number of hairs per square inch than most of his co-workers had the skill to deliver.

This new genetically modified hair was even better than the older version, his arrogance proclaimed with a belch.

"Blue tip down, white tip up," he boasted. "And then the patient will never be blue, or down again." Drunken laughter punctuated his statement.

Dr. Marigold, one of Sadler's co-workers who had sat in on the interview, put his hands to his mouth and gasped. "It's blue tip up on the new hair, and 0.1ml of solution. Please tell me you didn't..."

Dr. Sadler's shoulders slumped and his body fell forward, his head made an audible thump as it hit the table; he'd fallen into a drunken stupor, again.

Mrs. Driver put down the flowers that she has brought along to adorn her husband's grave. She gently laid them on the thick thatch of dark hair that continued to push its way up through the oak coffin and six feet of earth. She had heard the churchyard gardeners mumble and groan as she passed them. Apparently, they were sick and tired of having to mow the Driver plot twice a week, when the surrounding grass only needed doing once or twice a month at most.

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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Long Wharf | Josephine Queen

I sit on the deck, feet kicked up on the metal railing, and watch the sun sink into Long Island Sound. The husks of the food trucks lining the waterfront are silhouetted against the darkening sky. I drift off, remembering the happy chaos that used to fill the air of Long Wharf; the salsa music carried away across the water, the mouth-watering scents of cilantro and garlic, crowds of people chatting, eating, even dancing. Nathan and I would bring the boys down to the wharf—Jordan, Noah, Mason—I can't think of their names without a stab to the heart. Where are they? Are they okay? The distant roar of an engine snaps me out of my daydream.

I'm immediately on edge. No one drives these days, there's barely any fuel available. There are probably dredges left in the holding tanks, but they exploded so spectacularly during The Event, all that's left of them is bare bones and shredded metal. It'd be dangerous to venture out there. I see the truck down on the road that runs along the shore. It squeezes between the shells of the other food trucks and parks close to what used to be the Snack Shack—a small tourist place that sold burgers, and key chains with the silhouette of The Amistad printed on them.

Nothing happens here anymore, so this new development is going to bring the entire town out of their hidey-holes. I scramble down the outdoor steps and jog over to the truck, just as a giant of a man steps out of the cab and comes around to open the canopy. It's a blue and white striped awning, like one of those deckchairs on an English beach. The man side-eyes me and offers a grin filled with blackened teeth and purple gums. I flinch and start to turn, ready to run back to my shelter.

"Couldn't wait, huh?" His voice is gravelly, as if he just crawled out of a hole somewhere and hasn't rinsed the soil out of his mouth.

"Er..." Now he's talked directly to me, I feel conflicted—stay or go?

"Wait, yeah?" He finishes securing the awning, holds a grubby finger up to me, and disappears into the back of the truck. A second later his bald head appears in the hatch beneath the awning. "Hungry? How about a sandwich?"

Before I can answer, he's fired up a grill, slapped two slices of white bread on a plate and a hunk of mystery meat onto the grill top. The aroma that wafts from the truck makes the insides of my cheeks leak. I can't tell if my eyes are watering from the scent of frying onions or if I'm just so happy to smell real food again.

"Where are you from?" I ask. He doesn't seem to hear me, just keeps moving the food around with his half-melted spatula.

"Where did you come from?" I try again, raising my voice over the spitting of the greasy meat cooking on the grill. He looks up. His eyes are hooded and there's a glint in them. Something makes me uneasy, but before I can figure out what it is, a voice pipes up behind me.

"Hey, Clara!" It's Lenny. He's hopping from one foot to the other, as if he's waited too long to relieve himself and is now using motion to keep his bladder sealed. I know it's more likely the homemade meth he's cooked up.

"Hey there, Lenny." I smile. Lenny's a bit moth-eaten and squirrely. He's not someone I would have chosen to hang out with...before. But things changed and there aren't a whole lot of us left.

"What's this then?" Lenny asks, scratching at his arms and shoulders.

"Food truck," I say, raising my eyebrows. Lenny chuckles.

"Yeah, yeah," he says and laughs again. "Ha, he the cook then?" He nods towards the hatch, where fragrant smoke from the grill drifts luxuriously out towards The Sound.

I look at the man in the truck. The moniker, The Cook, suits him

"Another sandwich?" The Cook asks. "Maybe more." He waves his spatula and I turn to see a crowd of people making their way toward us. They join us by the truck and a lively chatter edges through. I recognize most of the faces.

"Any sign of Nathan?" Jodi, a fine-boned woman with gray dreadlocks wrapped in a green scarf, nudges up beside me.

I shake my head. "I don't think they made it."

"You don't know that," says Jodi. "You don't know what's out there."

I'd rather not know, if I'm honest. As long as I don't know for sure that they're gone, there's still a chance that they're out there. Schrodinger's Cat, if you will.

I shrug and look at The Cook, now piling more meat, laying out more slabs of bread. He looks up, meets my eyes. As if he knew I was watching him.

"How did you get here?" I try again.

"Drove the truck." He shovels meat and onions between the slices of bread and starts handing out the sandwiches to the people gathered around.

"Yeah, well that's obvious," I say. "I mean...there's nothing out there, right? Everything's just..."

"Been traveling for a while now," he says. "There's a lot of life left. Was, anyway."

"You the only one?" asks Jody. She's smiling at the man, but her eyes are wary. "Traveling alone?"

"No," the man grunts. "There's a few of us. More'n a few. A convoy if you will."

I turn to the road leading up to the wharf. It's lined with burnt out cars and minivans—soccer-moms interrupted—but there are no more food trucks in sight. Where would they get their food anyway? Are there grocery stores with food on their shelves? Farms loaded with livestock?

The man reaches through the hatch and hands me a sandwich. I frown, but take it. It's delicious. The meat is seasoned perfectly. Grease runs down my arms and I have to slow myself, so I don't throw it up. I've been living on nothing but canned vegetables, boxed macaroni and cheese, powdered milk, and dry crackers for over a year now. Meat is a hard commodity to come by. I'm not ready to hunt the packs of cats and dogs that roam the city yet. I trekked out to the woods in the weeks after The Event. I found a hunting rifle in one of the big houses in East Rock, and thought I could bag a deer. But there was no wildlife. Not even a bird or a squirrel. Why all the wildlife perished, but domesticated animals survived and banded together, who the hell knows? But, like I said, I can't bring myself to kill off Rover or Tabby—yet.

I hang around the truck, talking to the people who've gathered there. I stay for a second round of cooking and take food back to my conference room on the second floor of the Boathouse.

The view from the Boathouse is the reason I live here. I can see the entire harbor—from the bridge and the oil-holding tanks, to the nature trail and pier overlooking the beaches of West Haven. The conference room I call home has access to a deck and stairs down to the concrete plaza. My bike—a Harley pilfered from one of the dealers along I-95—sits, fueled up and ready to go. The interchange—a mess of highways and local roads, connected by a system of bridges and underpasses—sits next to the Boathouse, another reason for this choice of real estate. Not that I'm planning on going anywhere soon.

Once I've eaten, I check the locks on the doors and windows, a habit I don't want to break. I settle down for the night, look at the photos of my family I managed to salvage and fall asleep to the sound of the waves lapping the concrete and the hum of the generator of the lone food truck down by the wharf.

Something wakes me in the early hours. It's pitch black, but I feel like someone is watching me. Has someone managed to break in? I sit up and struggle out of my sleeping bag. I edge my way to the windows and look out into the night. At first I can't see anything in the darkness, but then a man-shaped shadow resolves itself and I start. The head is inclined up, looking towards where I stand at my window. I step back, out of sight. I'm sure it's The Cook. His hulking body is hard to mistake. I peer around again and watch him watching me. As my eyes become accustomed to the lack of light, I'm sure I can make out his eyes, leering under heavy brows.

Despite my fear of the previous night, I head down to the food truck as soon as the sun touches the sky. There are a handful of people hanging around, waiting for the food to cook, but not nearly as many as I thought there would be. I glance at all the faces, nodding and smiling at everyone. Neither Lenny nor Jodi are here. It's not surprising that Lenny's missing, but Jodi is usually up and out early. She'd want to do an unofficial headcount, check in with people, and she and I always discuss the possibility of other people surviving in other towns or cities. But she's nowhere to be seen. I wanted to share my concerns about The Cook also, about seeing him staring up at me in the middle of the night.

"How was the food?" The Cook asks.

I glance around.

"Good or not? How's the meat? Spicy?"

"Oh," I say. The bright morning dispels the fear from the night before. "Did I see you on the deck last night?" I ask.

"Huh? The deck? What deck?"

I frown. "Never mind."

His sneer follows me as I walk back down to the Boathouse. I sit on the edge of the concrete deck until lunch time rolls around and the crowd gathers again. Still, it's as sparse as before. I recognize a few faces, but there's no one I would usually pass the time of day with. Where's Jodi? Where's Lenny?

Everyone is piling the food in their mouths as if they haven't eaten for days. I suppose some of them haven't. I don't have the stomach for any more of the mystery meat. What if The Cook's taken the opportunity to hunt those packs of pets? I don't want to find out I've been eating someone's cherished furry friend. I know there's an irony there—what's the difference between a pig and a dog, anyway?

I go back inside as the sun sets, not wanting to be outside at night. I double check the locks and pull my sleeping bag into the furthest, darkest corner, away from the wall of windows. I wake at 3am, that creeping feeling of being observed skittering across my skin. The darkness feels too heavy, like a thing draped across the town, keeping me locked in, pressed down—smothered. I'm tired of being alone.

Nathan and the boys were visiting his parents in Maine when The Event happened. There wasn't much of a warning, the media was as surprised as we were. We had a few hours to prepare, not nearly enough time for me to get to Maine or for my family to get back to New Haven. We were on a video call—me, Nathan, and the boys—crying and saying 'I love you' over and over again, when It hit. That's not technically true. The call cut out at least half an hour before The Event, and I was left looking at a snow-white staticky screen, trying to make out the silhouettes of my boys. That was the last I saw of them. Or heard from them. I haven't been brave enough to make the journey and find out that, just as I feared, they're all dead. If Nathan is still alive, why hasn't he made the journey here?

When only three people show up at the food truck the next morning, it makes me nervous, so I check my motorcycle for fuel. It's full. I wish I had the courage to fill a couple of cans down by the holding tanks, but there's no room on the bike anyway. I hide in the conference room for the rest of the day, pacing up and down, peering out at the food truck every few seconds. It's late in the afternoon when I hear the rumble of trucks in the distance. The Cook was right, it sounds like a convoy, an endless line of food trucks traveling up the coast. It's time to leave. I roll my sleeping bag around the few items I have and strap it to the back of the bike. The city feels too quiet. I have to make sure my fears are real. Apart from the oncoming trucks, I need to have a good reason to make this journey.

I wait for The Cook to head off to the rushes down by the water. He's not the most hygienic of people, but I've noticed he keeps some distance from his truck when he heeds nature's call. I sneak down to the wharf and duck beside the food truck, taking care to stay out of sight. There's a pile of meat stacked in a large cooler by the side of the truck and blood-soaked canvas covers a pile of something behind it. I edge around the truck, I daren't approach the pile directly, I just want a peek at what might be under that canvas. A green scarf is poking out from one corner. I put my hands over my mouth. Jodi's green scarf.

I run to my motorcycle. No time to go back into the Boathouse. No time for sentimental goodbyes. The road between New Haven and Maine is long, but it's where I have to go, because maybe Nathan and the boys are there. Maybe Jodi was right and they *are* okay. I have to at least try. I can't make it all the way by bike, but the reservoir is just a few minutes away and there are places to hide out and no way a car—let alone a truck—can get through the forest that surrounds the lakes. It'll give me time to figure things out—hopefully.

The rumble of the food trucks sounds closer now. I can't stay here, with New Haven and its ghosts at my back. I jump on the bike and weave my way between the skeletons of cars and vans perched along the sides of the highway, and hope there's enough time to get away.

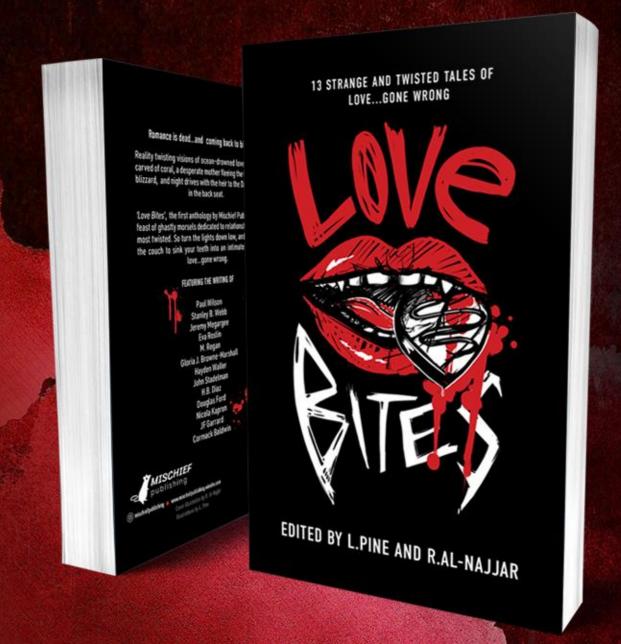
About the Author:

Josephine Queen grew up in England and now lives in the US. She writes short stories and drinks too much tea. She is represented by Alyssa Eisner Henkin of Birch Path Literary and is currently on submission. You can read her work in Devil's Party Press Halloween Party 2019, Exhumed, Mother Ghost's Grimm Volume 2, The Siren's Call, 81 Words, and 72 Hours of Insanity.

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ROMANCE IS DEAD... AND COMING BACK TO BITE YOU



FEATURING TALES BY

JEREMY MEGARGEE - DOUGLAS FORD - STANLEY B. WEBB AND MANY MORE

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Red Rapture | Joshua Skye

The lobby of the post office had gone gravely silent, but Aiden's ears quivered with a painful and deafening ring. The fleeting but relentless hail of bullets, that had shattered the quiet peace only moments before, had shredded displays, destroyed the lighting, and cut through bodies. The few bulbs that remained flickered eerily as they dangled from their sparking exposed wires. The dead lay in an expanding pool of blood. Sharon, the petite clerk with soft coils of auburn hair he'd been silently admiring while standing in line was a motionless thing draped over the counter, half her face gone, one eye dangling by its own gory wires.

A hunchbacked grandmother near the door was dazed, delirious, talking and reaching for someone that wasn't above her. Beside her were two children, their identities completely unknown, one of them was almost torn in two, the insides spilling out of the quivering gash. Were they her grandchildren? An older man, the old woman's son perhaps, sat up against the far wall with his hands covering the wounds in his chest. He coughed and sputtered a chunky mix of phlegm and blood. A teenage girl with dark, heavy, theatrical makeup and her two young male companions crawled across the floor toward the exit. Were they in some sort of play down at the community theater? So drenched in blood, Aiden couldn't tell where they'd been shot.

Turning onto his side, he looked down the curled length of his body and saw the four wounds he'd suffered, two in his left leg and two in his tummy beside his bellybutton. What oozed from those two was darker than that from the others. He wasn't a medical professional, but he knew damn well that wasn't a good sign. The internal damage was severe and he'd need help soon or he'd die. The pain was unbearable and only getting worse, an anguish that seemed to significantly increase the longer he looked at his injuries, but he couldn't close his eyes. When he did, he saw a loop of the shooter spinning in circles as he shot up the place, laughing maniacally all the while. It was a small town, but he didn't know the man.

Strangers. Mass shooters were always strangers.

Aiden thought that maybe, just maybe, if he lay on his back and stared at the ruined ceiling he could try and think of something else, something far away and of something happier. He was able to maneuver himself just so, but thoughts of anything but his pain and the horrors that had given birth to it refused to come. He wished he hadn't insisted on trotting down to the post office to mail the care package for his son who was deployed overseas. Winter was coming, night fell early, it was only six o'clock but already pitch black out. He didn't like driving at night, it was hard for him to see, but he'd procrastinated too long. For the package to arrive in time, he had to get it out that night and pay the extra fees for expedited shipping. He cursed himself for putting the errand off until the very last minute.

He'd worried endlessly about his only child going into the military, considering the fatal possibilities exponentially increased during times of great conflict. What a sick twist of fate this was, that he was gunned down by a military grade assault rifle as a civilian in what was generally considered a non-life-threatening situation on home soil. The shooter would never get his true comeuppance, he'd put the barrel of his weapon in his mouth and blown his skull apart in a shower of crimson soaked tissue and splintered bone. His body had fallen backwards into a strange wrinkled heap, the arteries in what was left of his head still spurted thick red geysers.

There were others, some close to Aiden who had been standing in line with him, wide-eyed dead lying in their sticky mess. The stench of the fired weapon hung heavy in the air, so substantial it made him choke if he gulped for breath. He tried not to panic gasp, but couldn't help it. His heart raced, felt as though it might burst through his chest, and his lungs burned like he wasn't breathing. He'd dream of all this, knew it as well as he knew his own name. Soldiers came back from the military with PTSD all the time, traumatized by what they'd experienced in faraway places, but it wasn't an incapacitating ordeal only they suffered. It was entirely possible that this moment in time, however fleeting, would shatter his entire world for the rest of his life. It was a terrible and terrifying thought that this horror would define him for always. But, of course, that was the grim possibility if he even survived.

His parents hadn't beat their cancers. His wife hadn't emerged from that car accident. His best friend he'd known his whole life had succumbed to a heart attack in his late forties, a little younger than Aiden was now. There were others, family, friends, acquaintances who hadn't defeated death and all their faces came to him when he blinked, strange instamatic images interplayed with the frighteningly waltzing killer with a massive magic wand of death in his hands. He'd conjured cracks of thunder, electrified explosions, crafting a barrage of detonations and a cascade of metal stingers that had wrought slaughter upon the startled patrons of a lowly post office in a small lonesome southern town. Aiden felt suddenly cold, and he knew too that wasn't a good sign, along with the black oozing blood, it meant imminent death.

But he wasn't dead yet, and he wasn't the only one to notice. One of the theater kids was looking down at him with furrowed brow. He might have been a good looking young man, but Aiden couldn't tell through his drying scarlet mask. The boy even announced it, "This one's still alive." It wasn't a hopeful tone. In fact, there wasn't much emotion to it at all, just a nonchalant observation. The older man wanted to speak, but couldn't, words refused to come out of him, his throat incapable, so he stared back in a vain attempt at trying to convey through a pleading expression his dire need for help. "That wasn't in your dream," the young man went on to say.

The older man wasn't being addressed, he knew that, but he was confused by the statement. He turned his face away, looking for the young man's friends. The other boy was hovering over the crumpled shooter, and the girl was reaching into the open gut of one of the fallen kids. "My dreams are never wrong," she said matter-of-factly. "If he's not, he will be. It's only a matter of time. His ruptured organs are oozing their poisons into his body right now." She pulled her hand out of the child and held it up, examining the thickness that ran down the length of it. "The blood's spoiled here too. Don't drink from those wounds, go for the ones in his leg." She leaned down closer to the body, moved her gaze up, her body undulating like a serpent, until she got to the head and then pressed her lips against an oozing hole in the temple. The other boy was slurping at the shooter's arterial spray as though it were a water fountain.

Aiden turned his attention back to the bloody boy looming over him just in time to see him grinning from ear to ear, the fangs as pearly white as the rest of his teeth. Aiden was even more confused, unable to process what he's just witnessed, a mad sight in the wake of countless others. The boy moved down, down, down discomfortingly close, until he was there by the bullet wounds. He licked his chops, kissed the leg, and began to suck. It was a morbidly perverse act accompanied by a sensual but painful tingling and grotesque sounds. With it, oddly enough, came another sensation. It was subtle at first, so much so he was barely able to feel it, but the longer the young man drank from him, the more intense it became.

He hadn't felt such a thing in years, decades even. It brought memories of his past, things he thought he'd forgotten from a period of his life that seemed like faded dreams so ruined by time they were incomplete. It was the sense of lust confused as love, teenage hormonal angst at the mere thought of sex, butterflies in the tummy upon seeing licentious splendor, all the pretty girls in high school and college. Every one of them had been a vision, an object of desire, a possibility. As crude as it was to admit, he'd been nothing more than some average horny teenager wanting to get laid, but he'd been reserved, socially awkward, the proverbial nerd no one paid attention to, no one until he'd met Rae Dawn, the woman that would become his wife.

He remembered the first time he'd seen her, a girl in the university coffee shop shaking the winter snow from her faux-fur coat. With her had come an icy breeze storming through the otherwise warm establishment, making everyone it touched shiver except for Aiden. As he'd gawked at her, she'd noticed him and smiled the sweetest smile he'd ever seen. That's when the butterflies inside him had been different somehow, not the swarming of desire, but the fluttering of something deeper.

She'd confess much later that she'd felt it too as soon as their eyes connected across the crowded café. She'd say she knew right away he'd be her husband, but she certainly hadn't made courtship easy. There was nothing easy about true love. And Rae Dawn had let that be known from the very start. She was worth having, and anything or anyone worth having was worth waiting for, fighting for, and cherishing. Friendship came before love, love before sex. She was an old fashioned girl, she'd tell him. And she expected to be genuinely wooed. Aiden had done so, gladly. It had taken more than a year for the words 'I love you' to be uttered, and he'd been the one to say them first. The same butterflies he'd experienced that long ago moment in the coffee shop he'd felt again when she'd said them back.

"I love you." The breathy whisper pulled him from his reverie. The young man was again in his face, so close they could have quite easily kissed. His shuttering eyes were rolled back and his expression was one of profound and profane ecstasy. His mouth was agape, lips quivering, fangs longer than they had been before. "You've got to try him," he muttered. "I haven't tasted anything this pure in decades. He's known true love and only once." And then with a shameless moan he cried, "Oh, what a delicacy!" The other two were quick to crawl through the deep puddles of blood to get to them. The boy impatiently waited his turn allowing the girl to suck first. The sensation was even more intense than before, so much so it shockingly aroused Aiden.

Somehow becoming that cruelly self-conscious teenager again, a deeply seeded embarrassment washed over him. Without thinking, he moved both hands over his crotch to hide his noticeable erection. Touching himself intensified the sensations coursing through him. From the bullet wounds in his legs to his throbbing manhood and beyond, he was transported to a time before Rae Dawn, before college, before he'd even had coils of hair wreathing his cock. Alone in his teenage bedroom, late at night, when summer was at its sultriest, the first time he'd dared touch himself in any significant way. It had felt so good, that initial discovery of corporeal pleasure.

Breathing heavily, letting out sweet audacious grunts, the obvious leader of the bloodsucking three pulled away from the wounds to let the third have his share. Her eyes too were rolled back. Her canines were so long she couldn't close her mouth, a distended tongue reached out to lick every luscious metallic drop from her face. Her gore-drenched hands roamed over her body, touched her male companions, reached for their sex and grasped their hardened bulges. They groaned loudly in response as Aiden reached his own pinnacle of strange gratification.

The orgasm came with a harrowing sense of falling as though his essence was sinking out of his body. It wasn't altogether unpleasant, but disturbing all the same. He knew what it meant, just as he knew what the black blood streaming from his stomach meant, and just as he knew what the cold of his skin meant. He closed his eyes and let his frosty numb hands fall away from his groin. In the darkness behind his eyelids his wife came to him. At first, she was a mere smudge of color, but she soon blossomed into the beauty he'd seen at the university café. She smiled at him and his butterflies fluttered

all the more. He reached for her through the dark and she took his hand. He fell completely from his body, the sensation of the ghoulish teenager sucking his blood faded as old memories from his younger days returned in complete, vivid glory.

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 Publication'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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Coming of Age | Nina D'Arcangela

It was meant to be a special day, her day; her quinceañera. The day a child became a woman at the tender age of fifteen. The church festooned with every shade of pink flower imaginable, the hall draped in bubblegum taffeta; the cake—strawberries and crème. Her friends gathered to celebrate, to wish her well, usher her into the next chapter of life. No expense spared; no detail left to chance. But first, the mass. The blessing of His holy grace upon their daughter's garishly tiaraed head. The priest turned to the assembly, spoke a few words, then began the lord's prayer. A stutter brought confused silence; he cleared his throat and apologized for the unfortunate interruption. In unison, they began again. Tears streamed from the officiant's eyes. His voice choked on the words as his breath rasped thin. A blessing it would be, but not one the family sought. With rapturous refrain, the first horn blew. As the echo died, a small word resounded, "Daddy?"

The second horn shattered the pregnant silence. The doors baring the narthex flew open, a violent wind roared through the cathedral. As he reached for his daughter, su hermosa hija, an unseen wraith flung him through the air; his spine shattered on the marble column six pews behind. Attendants and attendees began to wail in chorus as they rushed the aisles. The discord unrelenting, one voice rang out above the others. She screamed a petulant tone, "Daddy!"

The third horn sounded, the priest dove behind the altar, landing hard in the apse; his attempt a shame upon his soul. All covered their ears as the building groaned. A clawed hand rent the roof from the basilica; angelic light spilled through the opening. Again, stunned silence descended. Harsh, guttural breathing could be heard from above as a maelstrom of heat washed over the assembly. It reached in gently, as though arranging a dollhouse, and flicked the others away with a filth ridden talon. Its hand closed upon the child-woman as she shrieked a final time to ears that could no longer hear. The seraph sniffed her hair, her neck; her groin. The child was despoiled, and of no use; it would have to wait for another. As its hand opened, the girl fell to the concrete slab abutting the portico. Her bouquet of flowers rolled to a stop upon the steps she had so arrogantly ascended less than an hour before, its ribbon fluttering in the quiet 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*, runs the monthly *Ladies of Horror Picture-prompt Challenge* on SpreadingtheWritersWord.com, and is the owner and resident anarchist of *Dark Angel Photography*.

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LIZADDAGA

Dreams of a Dead God | Naching T. Kassa

There is nothing more frightening than madness.

And yet, I assure you, I am entirely sane.

I am a poet.

My work sold well commercially, but the critics found it bland. They called my verse cliché, my meter jarring. Their words stung and haunted me. I prayed for their approval, and when one god would not answer me, I turned to another.

He came to me in dreams.

The first, took place on a beautiful desert island, a place of lush green foliage, azure sea, and golden sand. The sea sparkled and undulated around me. The fine sand clung to the soles of my feet.

When my new god entered, I saw only his enormous shadow. I could never see his true form, for it blotted out the sun. He whispered to me, speaking a strange language I had never heard and would never forget.

When I awoke two days later, I found myself on the floor, surrounded by pages of ink-bound verse. The weakness, which often accompanied a fever, lay upon my bones. I dragged myself up from off the floor and collected the pages.

My agent called them brilliant.

The critics lauded them. I had finally achieved the adoration I so craved.

The night of the book launch, I slipped between the satin sheets of my bed and drifted off into slumber. Seconds later, I found myself on the island, the shadow rising above me. This time, I glimpsed the fearful countenance of my god. His mouth, a collection of tentacles, writhed as he whispered to me. And, against my will, he filled my head with words.

This time when I awoke, the comfort of my bedroom did not greet me. I lay upon a broken bed in a shabby room, a moth-eaten blanket covering me. It smelled of sweat and urine. A rat scurried across the floor.

The clean pages, covered in red ink, awaited me on a table near the window. I rose to gather them and almost tripped over the body on the floor. He stared past the ceiling with sightless eyes. A quill lay in the blood pooled near his left wrist.

I don't remember killing him. I'm not convinced I did. I guess it doesn't matter what I think. The police believed otherwise.

They pled insanity at the trial. My lawyers believed the move would save me from the death penalty. They sent me to Dunwich Asylum, my new home.

Donna, the orderly, was kind. She loved my poetry. I guess she was a fan.

Six months ago, she started smuggling books in for me to read. It was here I discovered the name of my god. He is Cthulhu the Dead God Who Dreams.

I wish I had not learned it. I wish I had never prayed to him.

I had the dream five days ago. Once again, I stood on that accursed island, my body chilled by the shadow which towered above me. And as before, he drove the words into my brain. The more I resisted, the worse my agony grew. It seemed as though a fire raged within me, burning and charring everything in reach. The lush vegetation burned in a great, swirling inferno, the sand grew black, and the sea boiled.

I awoke this morning in the infirmary, my hands charred black. Around me, on the clean white pages, symbols were scrawled. Only I can read them.

When the doctors come to visit, they tell me I tried to set myself alight—immolation, they called it. They said Donna tried to save me, but the fire took her life, and I used her ashes to write my poetry.

They've given me new medication. If it works, the dreams will cease.

My dreams will cease.

But I don't see how this will help.

If he still dreams of me.

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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The Door | Davey Cobb

The dead spill no secrets. A dunce could tell you that. There is nothing profound about such a revelation. It is a fact that corpses cannot speak, and I do not dispute that. I am no madman, despite how crazy the world makes me feel. But hear me out, would you?

Now, I know what you're going to say. I already know how you will react to what I am about to tell you. You'll laugh. Or perhaps you shake your head in disappointment. Or perhaps – and this is most likely the case—you will reach for your phone and call for someone to take me away and lock me up for good.

Before you suggest it, I am not mad.

What I am about to tell you is profound, for I have only just come to this conclusion. And when I did reach it, my heart and mind exploded in synchronised joy.

Okay, so here it goes.

The dead hold secrets. That is right. The dead remember everything they were told when they were living. The dead do not forget. Their minds do not forget things like the primitive human brain does.

But what do I mean by this? I mean that every single thought that you—yes, you who is reading this—conjure into existence inside your brain, is heard by every wandering spirit within proximity. Every. Single. Thought.

Oh, of course you are skeptical. I would be too, if I had heard this fact off some crackpot old fool with a typewriter. Aha, but it is there that you are wrong, my friend. I am no mere fool. You may think I am at present, but by the end of this account you will come to realise the truth. How can I be so sure of that? Everything I tell you you'll feel, you will feel.

Now that I have dealt with the skeptics among my readership, I shall deal with the second group of people: those that believe in the existence of ghosts and spirits but reject my claim that the beings can read their every thought. Test my theory now. Go on, give it a go. Think the most outlandish thought that your brain can possibly imagine. Think up a wild combination of words that makes absolutely no sense. Keep it in your mind. Do not speak the words aloud. Come back to me at the end of this account and tell me what happens. I can tell you now that something will.

And now I shall address the third and final group of my readers: individuals that believe in the existence of spirits, accept that said beings can read the thoughts of human beings, but do not believe that there are any ghosts gathered around them. Now, let me tell you something, you innocent little fool: ghosts are everywhere. Everywhere. Absolutely everywhere. There is no garden, nor house, nor room, nor street, nor forest, that is not filled to the brim with spirits. How many humans die daily? Go on, look it up on the internet if you want a figure for reference. Now, of those souls that die daily, how many of them do you suppose move on to the next life? Call it Heaven, call it Hell. Whatever, it's all the same. There are many that do, of course. And then, there are many, many more who do not. These souls—for whatever reason—are trapped upon this earth. Millions and millions of souls, banished to the earth until the end of time. Billions of souls, my friend. There are more dead upon the earth than there are living. So, tell me how you believe your home could possibly be devoid of spirits?

You have probably gathered by now that I have a gift. That I have knowledge. I know things, yes. I guess that is plain to see. But how have I gathered such wisdom? How have I come to possess such an ability to *know*?

I will tell you, then. I became enlightened.

There was a point in time when I knew nothing, much the same as you do now. I was a gormless teenager. A child in a young adult's body. I knew less than nothing. I was a dunce.

I had seen my fair share of ghosts. When I was a child, I was haunted by monstrous images. Terrible creatures that knocked at my bedroom door, squeezed it slowly open, padded across the floorboards, and watched me tremble in my bed. They were nightmares, the doctor assured my mother. I was a child with a vivid imagination. And one day, God willing, the nightmares would stop.

The nightmares did stop, and I chalked the experiences down to Dr Hendry's diagnosis. I had been a disturbed child, but now, at sixteen years old, I was no longer seeing the dead. But I did want to be dead.

College. It might as well be known as the ninth circle of Hell. Up until my first day at this wretched institution, I had believed that the ghoulish horrors that had once infiltrated my dreams were the most frightening forms to ever haunt my existence.

College threatened to cave my head in. The boys were coarse, brutal. The girls were venomous, baleful. I retreated into my shell, finding solace in my journals.

The library saved me, providing a place to nest and smile. Books brought me back to life. I breathed clean air for the first time in my life, air that was clean of the human stench. I digested the works of Dostoevsky and Nabokov. I dabbled in self-help books, and the biographies of celebrities I'd never heard of.

But the tome that really helped me, that truly saved me, was a small pamphlet entitled, *The Road to Joy*. At first glance, the advice that this emotional nitwit prescribed me seemed frivolous and generic. I leafed through the pages with a grin on my face, not enlightened by its wisdom but rather laughing at its simplicity. That was, until my eyes melted.

There, on the fourteenth page, was an illustration of a door. The door was red, with a round bronze handle. Its key—pictured beside it—was medieval in style. The text underneath the striking image read, *Open the door, and place your worries and concerns inside.* Stuff them all in there, every single one, and then close the door and lock it forever. Do what you must with the key—bury it or toss it into the sea—whatever it takes to ensure the door is never opened again.

I will do it. I promised the author as much. I convinced myself it would be a pointless exercise, but what was the harm in trying? After all, I was desperate.

It so happened that in the basement of the library, where the boring reference books were stored, there existed a red door. When I first encountered the door, I assumed it had to be a fire exit, but there was no sign above it. It was by no means as ornate as that which was drawn in *The Road to Joy*, but it would certainly suffice for the purpose of this little exercise.

I decided my latest journal would be sacrificed. There were already several terrible secrets stored within it—secrets that I was more than happy to cleanse my mind of forever— and I went about filling the journal to the brim. I poured every negative thought and emotion that I'd ever experienced into the book, and when there was no more left to divulge, I shut the journal forever and approached the red door.

You will probably say that this was all in my head, but I heard drums. A methodical beat carried me down the stairs into the basement, drawing me to the door. I clutched the journal between folded arms. Sweat trickled down my melting face.

The door opened as I approached it. Smiling down at my journal, I entered the darkness.

I should cherish old memories, think fondly of the happy times, but memories sicken me. The very concept of time, of movement, of decay, frightens me to the point of sleeplessness. I want to vomit this feeling away, to expel it from my body. But there is no escape from the demon that is time. There is no way that the past can be forgotten, lest I suck out my brain and cast it into the fire.

I know where this fear comes from. That is the worst part of all of this. I can rationalise my irrational fear. I can pinpoint the very moment that I first looked back in anger.

The door.

The door remained closed. It was supposed to. My father drilled it into me as soon as I was sentient.

'Never open the door,' he'd say, gripping my shoulder tight as he glared into my eyes, unblinking. 'Don't even think about opening it. You have your whole life ahead of you. Behind the door there exists only the past. We must put the past behind us. One day you will understand what I mean.'

Father died when I was seven. He burst into flames after he was trapped in a smouldering high-rise. Still, his words had already stained me at this point. The early memories I keep of his cigarette breath and his copper beard remain indelible, etched into the inside of my skull.

Here I go again, ignoring the golden rule. We must put the past behind us. Remember that, would you?

I am frightened of the door. It always frightened me. The moment I laid eyes on its smooth black surface, its glimmering silver handle, trepidation churned my gut. At first, I chalked the feeling down to fatigue. Seeing as how it was my first day on the job, I hadn't gotten much sleep the night before. I'm an anxious little thing, you see, so the idea of starting a career in special collections with no experience terrified me. Still, the petty fear of failing in the workplace was nothing compared to that which the door instigated within me.

The door of my college years was nothing compared to this portal. I question this door's dark hypnotism to this very day. Why do I feel implored to gaze into the void of its surface every morning and evening? Why do I spend my nights laying in a pool of sweat, yearning to discover what exists on the other side?

I should mention that I've attempted to discover where the door leads on several occasions, but every time I've been thwarted. But tonight, I will know. Yes, tonight is the night. They've given me a key and the code to deactivate the alarms. The imbeciles gave me unlimited access. And so, after the security guards have clocked off for the evening, I will make my move. I will unlock the door's secrets.

I should, however, elaborate on how exactly I got here. After all, I must deal with the possibility that the door will consume me, and that these scribblings may become my final testament. Very well, then. You had better listen carefully.

The day is the 4th of May 2018. It is Liverpool's first sunny day of the year. Of course, when I say sunny, I do not mean warm. What I'm describing is a lack of rain clouds.

The door holds back the memories, prevents them from surging into the museum and flooding it with the past. If the museum filled up with the liquid memories of all that came before, the present would cease to exist. The museum would sink and return to the earth. And then there would be nothing, no past, no present, nor future. There would be not the slightest inclination that the museum and its contents had ever existed.

The door must remain closed. Human will alone keeps it shut. And so, in this case, the sealing of the door falls to you. Yes, you. Keep it shut for as long as you're alive, and before strength fails you and you commence on the path to perishing,

pass your knowledge onto the next generation. A living force must keep the door from bursting open. It doesn't matter who that person is, they simply must exist.

There are more than skeletons behind the door. You don't want to know what resides within that realm. You may think that you do, but you don't. You really, really don't. Trust me. Trust me when I say you *must* trust me. Everything considered, you don't have a choice.

And before you even think to consider it, know now that you cannot run. Life would be much simpler if that were only an option, but sadly it is not. For once the door opens, its power will be released. And you will be pulled in. You will be served to its mouth.

I'm frightening you, aren't I? I'm sorry. But you *should* be frightened. It is good that you are. Fear guides us, forces us to make the right decisions. And in this case, that decision is to keep the door bolted shut at all times. Shove a cupboard in front of it if it makes you feel better. It won't make a slight bit of difference, but if it keeps you sane enough to keep the door closed, then go ahead and do it.

The most important thing—well, the *only* important thing, now that I come to think of it – is to ensure the door remains locked. There is only one key to lock and unlock the door, and it cannot be replicated. Judging by the fact you are reading this—and therefore the world still exists – the door is now locked. That means you have the simple, yet vital task of ensuring the key never gets lost, lest it falls into the wrong hands. And before you think of it: no, of course you can't destroy the key.

Did you really think it would be that simple?

The dead harbour secrets. If they are asked nicely, they often choose to share them.

I gave myself to the darkness, offered myself up to what resided beyond the door. For a hundred years, I swam in the black waters of its knowledge, bathing myself in all I could learn. My mind was infused with the thoughts and ideas of a thousand generations. I know all that there is to know now. The door led me to the other side, and then, when the time was right to return, it beckoned me back to the plane of reality.

I really had you frightened of the door, didn't I? I had you trembling under your bed sheets, fearing it would open and bring an end to the world as we know it.

Well, you should be frightened, friend. You should be trembling.

The truth is: any door could be this door. It might be the one at the end of your friend's hallway. It could be the one adjacent to platform four of Lime Street Station. Or maybe, just maybe, it is the door that appears at the end of your bed every time you are sleeping.

Every person has a door, somewhere. Every door, you see, is different. Most people never encounter their door. So, forget about my warning, if you please. But one day, perhaps, you will enter a hotel, stroll down a dimly lit hallway, and open your door, and it will be too late.

The door will lead you into darkness. And I doubt very much that you will find your way back to the light. For I never did.

About the Author:

Davey Cobb is a writer and illustrator from Manchester, England. His style drifts between dark fantasy, surrealism, and horror. Davey works in a beautiful Gothic Revival library, which inspires much of his creative work. He enjoys visiting coffee shops, long train journeys, and reading a good horror novel. His novelette, *Putridity*, is currently available on Amazon. His debut novel, *The Black Rook*, is coming soon.

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Knit and Natter and Murder | Robbie Porter

This was going down as one of the all-time classics: five coffin-dodging pensioners meet for the weekly Knit and Natter. Only four leave on their Zimmer frames. Number Five goes out in a box, kebabbed through the eye with a 4mm knitting needle.

The coroner ruled the death an unfortunate accident: Vikki fell asleep, dropped off the toilet and stabbed herself.

"She knitted everything for Craft Fayre," confided Mavis afterwards.

"Well she was just showing the rest of us up," agreed Sybil.

"We couldn't let her take all the credit," whispered Helen.

"We had to do something," said Doreen.

The Snowman | Robbie Porter

The girls spent all afternoon making their snowman. They gave him sticks for arms and a carrot for a nose. Older boys watched from a distance. They threw snowballs and threatened to knock the snowman down.

The girls ran home, crying.

That night it snowed, and the snowman grew bigger.

Next morning the girls came back. They were frightened of the bullies, but never saw them again. No one did.

The snowman watched, silent and impassive.

Then spring came, and the snowman melted to slush. Folk said it had the consistency of thick treacle, and a rancid odour pervaded it.

The dead like to dance, too | Robbie Porter

The dead like to dance, too.

Visit any cemetery at midnight and you'll see their strange gavotte. That diaphanous mist that hugs the ground and swirls around the monuments, that's them.

They're raving in the nave, tapping in the sacristy and bopping down the aisle. Not to mention pirouetting over the recently deceased, who have to be teased out of their dirt nap.

The dead have a saying: you're a long time dead, and life's wasted on the living.

All night the weird bacchanalia continues, the debauched Dance of the Defunct.

Until the daybreak, and the shadows flee away.

Mr. Chorazin | Robbie Porter

Mr. Chorazin was a charming, neat man of peculiar habits. Some called him misanthropic.

He gave me every consideration, although with the kind of discernment one would normally accord a side of beef at dinner. One could almost say he was eyeing me up for the main course. This was most disquieting, even before I realized the terrible truth about Mr. Chorazin.

A man of great perspicacity, his refusal of my wife's rosemary and garlic roast potatoes with chipolatas was demonstrably indicative of his awful malevolence.

We buried him at a crossroads staked and with his head between his feet.

About the Author:

Robbie Porter was born in Hawick, Scotland and studied English and History at the University of Sunderland. His fiction has been published in The Sirens Call, Shlock! Webzine and Ghosts and Scholars.



Horror written by the authors it created.



Find a Wheel | Nicole L. Nevel-Steighner

The third floor of Audrey's Uncle's house was her favorite place to spend a Saturday afternoon. A long hallway led to a series of interesting rooms. One of which, being her Uncle Peter's study. She admired his room that smelled of orange oil and pipe tobacco. Rows of handsome leather-bound books stood proudly within the shelves of the hardwood bookcases. While he was at work, she and her twin sister, Annie would sit in that room and read them and drink from the tea set that Miss Curtain would bring for them at four o'clock, along with a tray of sandwiches and scones. She, more fascinated by the books than Annie.

"Let's skate," Annie suggested, pulling a pair of Riedell panther-colored skates from the closet.

"Peter won't like us marking the hardwood floors." Audrey insisted. Even at twelve, she recognized how particular Peter was about his house. Their house to be exact, as he'd inherited it from his sister, upon her passing.

"Who cares?" Annie scoffed, tossing the box from the skates and tissue paper aside. "What's he going to do? Toss us out? Without us, there is no house."

Audrey sighed and crossed to the room to where he kept his turntable and stash of old albums. She chose his favorite Perry Como to play. The needle hitting the grooves, as it started to turn... Find a wheel and it goes round round round...

"That's a terrible thing to say about Pete." Audrey sniffed. "If not for him we would have been split up."

Annie tugged hard on the strings of the skates. Rising from the leather chair with ease, gaining her balance.

"You say that like it would have been a bad thing."
"You hate me, don't you, Annie?" Audrey whined. "I've only been nice to you."

"Audrey, the nice one. The one with good grades and a big brain. Nothing like stupid Annie."

"I told you not to change your marks on your card. The teacher knew that wasn't Uncle Pete's signature, either. Once he gets home and Miss Curtain shows him that, you are going to be grounded forever."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Annie asked, skating towards her. "You'll be the one going to Missy's skating party. Thank me for your invite. She didn't want a boring little brat like you hanging about. You owe all of your fun Saturday nights to me."

Audrey huffed, exiting the room, the sounds of Perry Como droning on.

Annie smirked, skating behind her. "Without me, you'd have no friends, other than those books and dear Uncle Peter."

Audrey turned sharply, halting her glide. How disgusting it was to face a beautiful, yet unpleasant mirror of herself. They both possessed the same long dark hair and soft green eyes. Other than the attitudes, they were identical.

"I'm glad you changed your marks," Audrey said. "You weren't smart enough to pass those classes with B's and everyone knows it. What a dummy."

"I'd rather be pretty and have friends!" Annie yelled, pushing Audrey hard.

"I am just as pretty as you are, Annie. I'm also not a dummy. My marks stand on their merit."

"Aren't you perfect? Perfect Audrey. I should tell Uncle Peter about the tens and twenties I found hidden in your underwear drawer. Along with the couple of bras that don't even begin to fit you yet. In a hurry to be a big girl?"

"Ugh!" Audrey exclaimed, shoving past Annie. "Fine! I will tell him about that boy I saw you playing cuddles with behind our shed."

"Girls, what are you doing up there?" Miss Curtain called up the stairs. "Tea will be soon."

"Nothing Miss Curtain," Annie chirped in a sing-song voice. "Just talking."

She quickly turned her attention back to Audrey, as she made for the landing.

"You better think twice about telling Uncle Peter anything about me and Bryce."

"Bryce is in junior high and ought to know better." Audrey sneered. "You're going to end up like Kendell Craig, your bullshit all over social media."

"What have you been up to, Audrey?" Annie skated quickly to catch up to her. "You better mind your own business."

"And you, yours," Audrey said, poking her in the chest. "Mom and Dad aren't here now to buy your sweetheart act. Uncle Peter sees through you."

"Audrey, we are one and the same. You cover your lies and tics with good grades and smiles, but I see you too. Deep down, you hate me and our family. Jealous of the love they had for me."

"I love our family." Audrey said, tears welling up, as Annie skated around her. "You are a horrible evil thing."

"True!" Annie spat, grabbing Audrey by her blouse. The look in her eyes was pure poison. "We are a horrible, evil thing."

"Let go of me!" Audrey struggled, attempting to pull the blouse from between Annie's slim fingers, as they neared the top of the stairs. "Let go of me!"

"As you wish," Annie said, with a laugh, partially moving one of Audrey's feet over the top step.

"Stop it!" Audrey wailed, grabbing hold of Annie's shoulders. She struggled, pulling her along with her to the sound of twelve thuds, denoting each one of the hardwood steps they plunged. The final result, two sets of arms and legs entwined together at the bottom of the second landing and Miss Curtain's scream.

The day before Audrey's eighteenth birthday had finally arrived. She and Uncle Peter sat in the study having a chat about what was yet to come.

"You are off to one of the most prestigious colleges in the country. There is a massive amount of pressure that goes with Harvard. Along with the other changes that are going to be paramount."

"You mean the money?" Audrey asked, sighing. "Everyone always means the money."

"That and the responsibility that goes along with it." He added. "How does it make you feel?"

"Sad," Audrey said. "I'm sad that Annie isn't here to share this with me, even though she used to torture the shit out of me."

"You were always the soft one."

"Yes." Audrey grimaced. "I tried to be."

Audrey straightened herself in the chair, a piece of leather curled beneath her hand.

"Death has that embrace you know, infinite. Aside from the obvious, there is something I'd like to run past you." Pete shrugged. "Go on."

"My friend Missy wants to give me a skating party for my birthday. I'm not sure I want to go. I haven't been on skates since I was twelve and I'm afraid of embarrassing myself."

"So you fall a couple of times, big deal." Pete chuckled. "Everyone falls."

"Not me," Audrey said, shaking her head. "Not after what happened to Annie."

"That day was a tragedy, but certainly not your fault. Annie is gone. No amount of beating yourself up will fix the events of that day."

"I got into Harvard, right? I should be able to go to a skating rink for my birthday."

"You are entitled to feel a certain way," Pete said. "I hate seeing you pass by opportunities to be with your friends out of loyalty to Annie."

"Annie's friends." Audrey sighed. "She would be pissed seeing me enjoy myself with them. Let alone, Bryce."

"Ah, yes, Bryce. Beginning his junior year there. What's he studying?"

"Psychology." She said, smiling. "Ironic, right? He'll need it to live with me."

"I'm sure he's over the moon about sharing an apartment with you."

"Yes. He seems excited. I just hope that it's coming from the right place."

"The place of enjoying your finances isn't up for debate," Peter said. "The apartment is one thing but you're certainly not buying him a car or any fancy trips. Don't let him take advantage of your kindness."

"I'm good at that." Audrey sighed. "I always have been."

There was a sense of urgency to Audrey's morning, putting her costume together. Missy suggested a roller disco 70's theme and she had obliged. She'd poured herself into a pair of vintage Calvin's and donned a red satin jacket. The salon had cut in a row of curtain bangs just like the ad she'd cut from one of her mother's Vogue collections.

Pulling into the parking lot, she checked her rear view mirror, deciding whether to add some lip gloss. Cherry bomb was the name on the tube. Perfect for the night ahead of her. Maybe later? Now she just had to reach the door and make her grand entrance.

"Surprise!" Missy screamed so loud in her ear that she shuddered. "Doesn't this place look amazing!"

Her usual crew surrounded her all decked out in their 70's skate attire. She had to hand it to Missy.

"Thanks, guys. You're the best." Audrey smiled, holding back a few tears. "I really appreciate this."

"Only the best for my bestie," Missy said, kissing her on the cheek. "Come on, let's get you into some skates."

"Oh, I don't know, I just think I'll say hi to everyone first," Audrey said, wiping the corners of her eyes.

"Bryce has something special for you." Missy chirped, her blonde ponytails bobbed excitedly.

Bryce, with a wide grin and his soft brown eyes, approached her, brightly wrapped box in hand. "Happy birthday sweetie. Open it!"

He ran his hand through his dark curls as he awaited her response.

Audrey tore away the paper and fixed her eyes on the contents of the box, revealing a pair of Riedell panther-colored skates. At a loss for words, Bryce plopped her down into a beanbag chair and began stripping her of her converse.

"Let's put these bad boys on you." He said, smiling and untying the laces.

"Can't I have some food first?" Audrey stammered, as the others snapped pics of her on their phones, the flashes nearly blinding her

"Hell, no." Bryce chuckled, practically pounding the bottoms of her feet into the skates. "I'm sure these fit. Stop squirming."

"Just stop!" Audrey snapped, pulling her feet back from him. "I've got this. Let me finish."

"Fine." Bryce huffed. "Someone has a case of the birthday bitchies."

"I'm not being bitchy." Audrey breathed out and finished lacing them up.

"Whew, hew!" Bryce yelled. "They fit. Come on! I want to take you for a spin."

She gingerly took his hand as he pulled her up beside him. Barely able to stand, she grabbed onto his arm.

"That's it, get it, girl." Missy laughed. "Those are amazing."

"I had to special order them," Bryce said. "Ate up the rest of my credit card."

Audrey felt the wheels beneath her shimmy.

"Come on." Bryce said, "I won't let you fall."

Despite the fear of landing on her ass, she grabbed onto Bryce and became the last of the conga line.

"Doing okay back there?" He shouted over his shoulder, the music intensifying.

"Sure." Audrey croaked out, as they neared the bathrooms. "I need to go real quick."

"See you on the next turn." He hollered, taking off with the rest of the line.

She managed to hold onto the doors of the bathroom stalls until she reached the sinks. The wheel of her skate hit a pool of water and she went down. There had been enough force to knock her back twisting her body beneath the row of sinks. Standing, she focused on the reflection in the mirror. Everything appeared to be fine. No bruising, no cuts, just her birthday girl reflection staring back at her.

Humming along to the music outside the door, she turned on the water and washed her hands enjoying the cool water on her wrists. Soon, the sink was full, and ran over onto her skates.

"Shit!" She exclaimed, quickly turning off the faucet. Had it been that many minutes of hand-washing? Looking down at the skates, she suddenly felt a wave of disgust. The echo of the song outside was suddenly different.

She felt an uncomfortable bulge in her side pocket and reached to retrieve the vintage-style tube of Cherry Bomb. Sighing, she gave it several turns to reveal the bright and familiar shade. Yes, this was the shade she remembered her mother wearing years ago. Now she would finally experience it. With an expert hand, she drew it onto her soft lips. Looking down she stared into the basin. Then, she slowly looked up again at her reflection and noted the spark in the green eyes staring back at her.

"Time to party." She said, making a kissy face into the mirror.

"What the hell took you so long?" Bryce barked, as she skated by him. She did a quick turn, facing him with an angelic smile.

"Just waking up." She teased, "Happy Birthday to me."

"Whatever." He huffed. "Everyone is waiting."

"Let 'em wait." She chucked, skating around him. "It's my night, isn't it? Stop being such a bastard."

"You're a brat. Got your period or something?"

"Not at all. I haven't felt this good in years. Let's skate."

She rolled ahead of him, taking the next lap on her own. This was so much better than skating up and down the halls of their old house. Here, she felt free.

The cake was next and the crew sang happy birthday. As she blew out her candles, she felt she'd already gotten her to wish.

With a knife shaped like a leg with a skate on the end of it, she cut herself a nice-sized sliver. Plopping down into one of the bean bags and devouring the goodness. The sugary icing coursing through her was electric.

"Hey, babe." Bryce smiled, shoving in beside her. "Where's mine?"

She rammed a piece into his mouth.

"Whoa." He gulped. "Not so rough."

Missy, who was busy with serving the guests, peeked her head up to survey the area.

"Hey, has anyone seen the knife?"

"Do you remember the last time you held my hand this tenderly?" She purred into his ear.

Smiling, he caressed her fingers. "When?"

"The backyard shed." She said, gazing up at him.

Repulsed, he let go of her hand, as if he was seeing her for the first time. Or was he?

His eyes filled with terror as she heard the blade of the knife move through his ribs. The swift movement of her hand had pushed him further back into the bean bag. He gasped for air, clutching at her.

"You were always cheap and disgusting. To think, Audrey would give you access to all of our money."

"Annie." He choked out. "Annie."

She raised a finger to her lips, "Shhhh."

Missy and the others, so consumed by taking selfies, ignored Bryce as he wallowed.

With a half kick to the door of the skating rink, Annie skated out into the parking lot and off into the night, humming. "Find a wheel... and it goes round, round, round."

About the Author:

Nicole L. Nevel-Steighner is a writer from Western Pennsylvania that enjoys dabbling in the horror and neo-noir genres. Her love for eccentric people shines through her work. She lives outside of Pittsburgh with her husband Gregory, mother and three crazy cats.

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Patient Fury | Gregory L. Steighner

Thomas knew the feelings were wrong, but once the switch flipped he had to indulge. Wasn't it too soon? It was here at North Park Mall he got the tingles the last time. They were truly a gift, guiding his career to living well. His best efforts began with them. The Cheesecake Factory's patio made an excellent vantage point to observe people in the afternoon.

A stylish girl walked past him, tall and slim, decked out in a black ensemble of a tank top and joggers, with an oversized purse. His senses awakened as she turned towards the science shop, holding a large brown coffee cup and soft pretzel in one hand and in the other flipping string of pearls that held an amulet.

Shoppers hurried through the mall like blood cells feeding the stores with their money. He followed her, dodging between people to avoid her sight. She posed in front of a store staring into the window, carelessly unaware of her fate.

She was flawless, from the way she wore the large black glasses atop her white-blonde pixie cut, to how her winged eyeliner and delicate pink lips sharpened her soft oval face. A perfect model to create a template.

Suddenly, he winced, a sharp dizziness overcame him for a second. As he recovered, two other girls paired up beside her.

"What are you looking at Holly?" Asked the one on to her right, she was a bit shorter than the first. A prize dropped out of the Britpop fashion wearing men's dark maroon sweater over a silver sequin shirt that fit her as a mini dress. She wore a crown of golden streaked hair.

"Just thinking, Nikole. If I'd just came here, Pete wouldn't have gone missing that day." Thomas liked the girl's name, Holly, and her voice's tragic tone added depth.

"You've got to stop doing this to yourself," said the mousy girl to her left, wearing a fumbled mess of clothing. A gray sports jacket over a frilly shirt and baggy pants, it echoed back his grunge days. "As Seth would say, 'don't be a stupid'."

They were a treasure. Any one of them would be perfect for his collection. But which one? Why not all? Thomas considered the risks involved in going after three prizes at once. Free-ranged was a tricky undertaking, being too many

uncontrollable variables came into play with just one. When more than one was involved, he relied on apps online. So much easier when they willingly come to you, especially if they are looking for danger.

"Mom harps on us being careful, Eliza." Holly scolded the mousy girl, giving away her name.

It had become impossible to choose. Sisters! Never did the tingles bring Thomas to sisters. Maybe he will walk away now? Avoid the problems before they manifest. Their exquisiteness trapped him.

"It wasn't his fault!" Eliza's anger erupted, she turned towards the two.

All Thomas had to do was bring them home. Soon the girls would become more alive than they could ever achieve on their own. Preparation vindicated his success, his hand tapped the can of spray which with one blast renders a person helpless. It required setting up the prize. To groom them into being comfortable with him. Most of the time, but not with teens in the open range. They were rightly suspicious of strangers.

Eliza calmed down, "We moving on? I've got something to find."

Her sisters nodded, but he noticed a slight turn with Holly. He quickly went into a nonchalant stance as she glanced over her shoulder. "That's why we are here."

Thomas kept his distance from the sisters, careful as to how and when they saw him. In malls people repeatedly run into each other all the time, they simply dismiss it as random encounters. The key is not attracting attention. These sisters certainly needed to learn that rule.

Watching them shop gave an insight into their natures. They had a pattern. First, they browsed the high-end stores; Burberry, Coach, yet they never purchased anything. Instead, they scampered to shops like H&M and Express, often finding the same style on the bargain racks.

Thomas kept his distance when they went into the Aerie store. It wasn't proper to watch them looking at intimate apparel. He stayed back, waiting for them to finish. His phone rang.

It was Justin, his workmate. Thomas answered, "Yes, what's going on?"

"Hey, buddy," There was a problem when Justin said that, "What's the status on those character models? The Dark Star modeling team needs the templates A.S.A.P., are they facing an end-of-the-month deadline."

The girls emerged from the store, heavy laden with bags, walking towards the mall exit.

Sweating, Thomas couldn't lose them now. He started after them, "Just a few tweaks are needed. I'll send them tomorrow afternoon at the latest."

Justin's relief flowed through the phone, "That's great. You're the best."

"I know. Talk to you later." He disconnected the call, not wanting to lose them

"I'll meet you at the hobby store," Nikole said, handing off three bags to her sisters.

A deep sense of relief eased his soul as Nikole proceeded to the far end of the mall. He watched the two girls scurry to the entrance with their treasures, before shadowing Nikole. He found her in the store browsing the movie posters. After a few moments, she pulled out the poster for How to Steal a Million.

An action figure stole Thomas' attention, it was one of his designs, a Vietnam War Special Forces soldier. He gazed on the figure, carefully packaged, with pride. It was one of his first-generation templates.

He saw David in the box, clutching his gear, ready to move out into the field. The thrill Thomas got scanning his body with a Lidar Wand, its lasers bounding back and forth in precise detailed information. Then he crafted a three-dimensional template, replicating David as a digital avatar. Thomas gave him immortality.

Nikole laughed. He looked up at her holding action figures of Dr. Strange and Gandalf. Her delicate smile brightened the room, as her turquoise eyes snared him.

Holding up both, she asked, "Which one is the better wizard?"

Thomas noticed that she wore a lock of hair banded around her right wrist and an ornate silver bracelet on the left. He stumbled out the answer, "Dr. Strange is actually a sorcerer, while Gandalf is one of the Maiar."

Nikole grinned, "Correct. Most people don't know the difference."

"Well," Thomas sheepishly explained, "I do freelance work in the gaming field."

"Really?" Her dark eyebrow arched upwards, "What games?"

"Have you played, Mystic Dominion?" He asked proudly.

One of the player characters was one of his avatars, a young boy he collected back in December.

"Yes, I have. My sisters and I really enjoyed it." She returned the figures back, her left hand clasped her right wrist, "Our brother, loved it. We reached the White Plume Mountains and got the extra edition last month."

Thomas got his hook out, now to set the bait. He retrieved his professional business card and a pen, on the card's back, "Follow these commands, they will open secret levels for you. Lots of great treasure there."

He handed the card off to her, Nikole looked at the cheat-codes on the back and flipped it over, "A photographer as well?"

"Yeah, portraits, mostly. It doesn't pay the bills." His photography barely provided a steady income. Learning three-dimensional modeling and programming opened up his career. The payoff began when he started collecting.

"Neat. I suppose you want my picture?" She asked innocently, adding, "I get asked that a lot."

Thomas could see that the way she was would attract the unsavory type. "That wouldn't be proper, you being underage."

She kept flipping the card several times until slipping into her red Chanel purse, "I turn eighteen in July. After the thirteenth maybe I can pose for you, and if you do me well with my clothes... on."

The offer stunned him. He never asked a model to do a nude shoot, allowing them to make the suggestion. She forced him into making a difficult choice. Accept her proposal and wait until she becomes of age to create an art profile. He would showcase her in the best galleries in the city, maybe a few in New York.

But she and her sisters would lose their chance at immortality. How can he deny them? "Well... That would be interesting. You have my information."

"I do." She beamed mischievously.

"Nikole! Our table is waiting at the Cheesecake Factory!" Eliza, the mousy younger sister called out from the front of the store.

"Maybe I'll hear from you next month?" He hated lying to her, but in a few hours, it wouldn't matter.

"Be assured of that." She winked, turned away to rejoin her sisters.

He hesitated to leave until they descended the escalator. Their dinner would last for a couple of hours, and now he had to wait. So, he walked the mall, envisioning what would follow.

Thomas followed the same methods as coroners used. Photographing and scanning them clothed and unclothed, capturing the intricacies of their bodies. The color and shape of their eyes, the texture of their hair, and the very nature of their skin, preserved as digital avatars. Their voices, however, would be lost.

In the beginning, he tried to record voices but failed. It required an even sounding calm voice for recording. His previous prizes panicked, pleaded, and cried incessantly. He vowed never to allow them to suffer.

Since those first attempts, he kept the prizes numb, in a semi-state of consciousness. Just enough for them to walk and understand simple instructions.

When he was done with them, he injected them with a simple drug. They went peacefully and not alone. Thomas found an abandoned cemetery in the south. It had an unused mausoleum, a perfect place to rest.

Afterward, his prizes started their new lives. Avatar templates are used to create anything with three-dimensional programming or printers. Miniatures for fantasy role-playing games, video game characters, mannequins, and once to create a fully detailed body for doctors to practice on.

Thomas envisioned the sisters posed in the frontage of a store, wearing glamorous fashion to adoring onlookers. Customized mannequins pay bills. But, he made one decision. Even if the client offered big money, he wouldn't sell their avatar templates to create sex dolls. The image of a sweating, oily person on any of the sisters sickened Thomas.

No, he would do right by them.

They exited the restaurant just after sunset. Squawking as teenage girls did, the sisters carried more bags. Eliza groaned, "They were just jerks! Money and clothes can't polish turds!"

"They aren't worth the trouble," Nikole said, shifting the bags in her hands.

Holly snickered, "Maybe a little."

"Holly!" Nikole's annoyance echoed in the lot.

Holly looked proud, "I'll tell you about it later."

Thomas needed to focus on the youngest sister first, then the others. Suddenly, Holly slipped, scattering her packages on the parking lot. Instantly, he rushed over to them.

At first, he startled them, but Nikole spoke up. "It's the photographer I told you about."

"Let me help you," He said, gathering the bags. "Did you enjoy your dinner?"

"Yes, we did. Except for some boys that got in our faces." Eliza's voice was harsh and direct at him.

Nikole helped to steady Holly, "Maybe we need to look to someone... older."

Thomas decided to take advantage of the moment.

"Girls, I could walk you to your car," he said, holding up their bags.

"Sure," Said Eliza, walking in front of him.

"Thanks," Nikole said.

They walked some distance down the barren lot. By coincidence, they were going to pass his white van. He reached into his pocket, pulled out the spray can and seized Eliza by the shoulders. Pressing the nozzle against her face, he ordered, "Don't do anything. This mace will burn her face off."

To his surprise, the older pair remained calm.

Holly looked at him with an icy stare. "What do you want from us?"

"Get in the van, quietly and easily." He commanded. They responded with a slight tilt of their heads. Thomas felt something was off. He added, "Toss your phones on the ground."

As the sisters reached into their purses, Eliza said, "We found him."

Thomas blinked, taken aback. Holly and Nikole removed paper notes from their respective purses.

"Blindness!" Holly shouted as the paper burst into flame.

Nikole tossed her note in the air, "Sleep!"

As the paper flared, Thomas's eyesight went black and he fell hard to the ground.

Thomas couldn't breathe. Something tight was around his chest. He was cold.

"We found him, Dad." Eliza's voice sliced the darkness with vile hatred.

"It was foolish. No, dangerous for you to try!" The voice of an angry father.

"We did the proper invocations, divinations, and blessings of the correct angels." Holly's voice had a sense of defensive pride.

"It worked, Dad. Does it matter now?" Nikole challenged.

A bright flash burned Thomas' eyes, but as the burning eased his vision cleared. He was in a cellar, a big one. Lashed to a steel pole, naked, and surrounded by the sisters. They stared at him with hatred. A man, standing on the stairs, said, "No. We'll discuss how to proceed when your mother returns."

"Yes, Dad." The sisters agreed together.

He walked up the stairs, "Double-check those ropes."

Eliza stepped in front of him, her dark emerald eyes radiating power, "You took our brother, Seth, back in December. When we saw his likeness in the game, we decided to find you."

"Having an object touched by you helped us make the proper divination rites, but we needed more." Holly stood there, holding up the amulet. "I invoked the angels of justice and findings."

"You're witches." Thomas choked out.

The girls laughed, Nikole leaned forward at him, "No! Theurgists actually, a hermetic order to which our family belongs."

Eliza stepped away from him, "He killed many. His aura stinks of it."

"We're going to find out how many lives you destroyed. We will bring closure to every family you harmed. All of us will have justice." Holly backed away from him and began walking up the stairs.

Nikole got into his face, "After we are done with you, maybe, just maybe we'll send you to Hell."

The sisters walked up the stairs, turning off the light to leave him in darkness save for the light coming through the door. The last sister stood in the frame, Eliza turned to look down at him.

"Don't bet on it."

The deep baritone voice came behind Thomas.

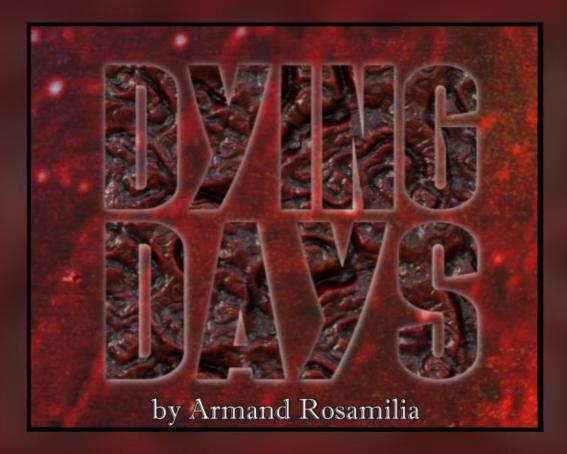
Eliza closed the door.

About the Author:

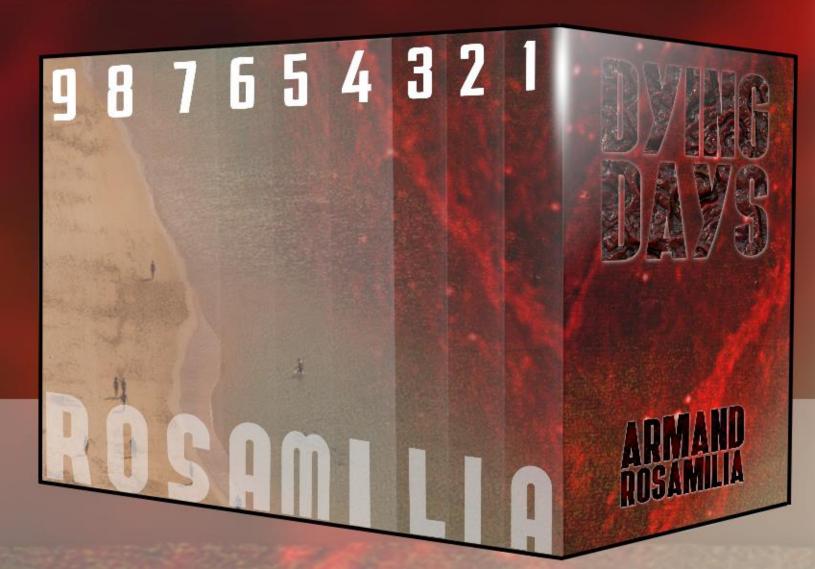
Gregg loves telling stories through words and pictures focused (mostly) the region around Pittsburgh. He resides with his wife Nikki, who is a writer, mother-in-law, and three energetic cats.

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Birthright | Ngo Binh Anh Khoa

When young, I'd often watch my father shed his disguise and lead the hunt for mortal flesh, returning at dawn with fur bathed in his prey's blood, his games stacked up for a feast.

How I wanted to be like him and claim my birthright with the full moon's blessing. My blood, however, remained dormant as time passed, which doused the pride in my father's eyes, leaving them darkened with disdain.

This year was it.

Now, I'm ahead of the pack, still trapped within the fragile flesh of man, as my younger cousins give chase, all hungry for their first kill.

Animated | Ngo Binh Anh Khoa

I approach grandfather's cold body. He was always so animated, so seeing him so still is disconcerting indeed.

I hug Mun, my pet cat, and hear grandmother talk with my parents, aunts and uncles, their words interrupted by sniffles and hiccups. They miss him, as do I.

With my mind made up, I further approach grandfather and toss Mun over his body. The black cat lands on its feet, hissing and bristling.

Grandfather's fingers start twitching. His eyes, pale-white and hazy, turn to me as he stiffly sits up. A scream briefly rings behind me before I know no more.

Welcome Home | Ngo Binh Anh Khoa

I grip my blanket and dream about Mommy's embrace, where I'm safe and warm and far away from this chilling, silent basement.

Wait! Someone's knocking! I know that pattern! That's the code Mommy taught me before she left with her rifle.

Immediately, I rush up the stairs and unlock the door.

"Welcome home, Mommy!" I cry, arms outstretched, yearning for a hug.

Mommy's staring at me, her eyes hazy and unfocused. Her tattered shirt's soaked with fresh blood dripping from her haphazard fangs.

Before I can react, Mommy's elongated arms trap me in a bone-crushing embrace. Pain. Screams. Then silence.

Replacement | Ngo Binh Anh Khoa

How long have I been here? Months? Years? Who knows.

I just want to leave this place, to feel the sunlight on my flesh again, to be warm again. But I can't. Not without someone to take my place.

A sound from above catches my attention. A lone fisherman! There's my replacement!

Hurriedly, I will my decayed limbs to move, swimming toward the water surface. He's oblivious still. Slowly, cautiously, I reach for his ankle.

Closer.

Closer.

Grab! And pull!

In a few minutes, he'll be a drowned ghost in my place, and I, at long last, shall be freed.

About the Author:

Ngo Binh Anh Khoa is a teacher of English from Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. In his free time, he enjoys reading fiction, daydreaming, and writing speculative poems for entertainment, some of which have appeared in New Myths, Star*Line, Weirdbook, Spectral Realms, Liquid Imagination, and other venues.

Facebook: Ngo Binh Anh Khoa

Blood Rose | Alison Armstrong

Throbbing, wet warmth cascades over me, red cyclones whirling behind my eyes, torrents gushing and drenching. A soft thud echoes in my ears as your bludgeon falls to the ground, and my swooning body follows the weapon's descent. Cushioned by moss, I hear my blood pummel the hungry soil.

Inside the pit where I lie everything is damp, dark, and fetid. Maggots sprout over me like tubers on cellar-sheltered potatoes, hordes of mouths sucking my putrescent juices, slowly gnawing away at my bones.

I am particles of earth in a miasmic mulch—leaves, roots, and animal carcasses stewing together, liquefying and mutating. My memories, however, remain apart from this annihilating broth. Some kernel of consciousness encapsulates them, and though my eyes have long ago turned to mush, my stoic spirit somehow watches the dissolution of my once-human form.

Above me, on the trampled grass, two girls dance, their gangly bodies thrashing like gallows' prey. From their honey-musk thighs, a fragrant sap trickles. sweet as mother's milk.

Convulsing limbs cavort as bodily fluids nurture the verdant ground. Their spindly bones are needlethin spears puncturing, punishing their pubertal flesh.

The soil drinks in their redolent gift, blood and brine and feral heat. Sustained and protected, I dream and am reborn within an errant, life-craving seed. Its hard, sheltering walls enclose me, keeping me safe yet letting in nutrients that help me to grow. Energy pulses through me, the yearning to reach out and break free. I push against my cramped confines, forcing my way out. Upward and downward I stretch, stem and leaves reaching towards the sky while my roots anchor themselves in the rot-rich soil.

Tethered to the ground, I can no longer dance, as I used to do when I would join the maidens in their nocturnal revels. My roots twitch, my leaves and stem sway, reflexes persisting even in plant form. Memories pulsate, spirit mind and earthbound roots invisibly connected.

Once, like these maidens, I was fierce and free, my body unconstrained, untouched by you or any other man. I had no need of you, no desire for any fairy tale prince or rogue to entice and ensnare my wild soul. I had no interest in the insipid, imprisoning dreams that had bewitched other girls I knew, softening their vital young bodies, dulling their defiant intellects, rendering them flaccid and passive.

I had dreams of my own, which you could never imagine, secrets I shared only with my best friend, Teresa. Escaping parental supervision, we would meet at our special sanctum in the woods, the one you later desecrated. Other girls would sometimes join us, bringing a drum or flute, and as we danced, we sang ballads about gallows trees, murdered lovers, and cannibalistic corpses. We writhed and cavorted like the wrathful victims in these songs passed down from generations before, our frenzied step and savage young voices pulsating with the trillings of amorous insects. Within us was the ancient, terrifying ecstasy that thrilled and maddened you.

As the oak trees shed their leaves and our celebrations grew more frantic, I became aware of your presence lurking amidst the still-lush pines. Sometimes I would see you when you checked your snares, snatching from the steel-jaw teeth the mangled martens and foxes caught in their merciless grip. When the wintry winds hissed, then howled, the chill air stifling and punitive, I seemed to feel the clutch of your cold hands grasping my legs, pulling me down into a deadly embrace and crushing my bones as if they were fragile kindling for a sacrificial fire.

I saw my destiny sketched out before me as a rough draft taking shape with heightened clarity. It began with a blur of red and black, sticky birth fluids covering my eyes and mouth as I screamed my first acrid breaths. My mother's voice, low and soothing, sang to me as I slept. The quivering notes of music reverberated, like a cat's purr, throughout my body, the words as yet a jumble of murmured sounds that softly pulsed with my mother's breath. Later, the words assumed meaning, and my tentative destiny became more firm and fixed. The melancholy words and melodies my mother sang while she rocked me to sleep or tended to her garden entrenched themselves into my consciousness. As she plucked the straggly weeds that suffocated her roses, she and I would sing together the somber ballads of innocence defiled and vengeance

fulfilled. I let these prophetic odes take root into my soul and nourish a ferocious seed. I felt the tug of yearning and grief as my life path slowly grew to fruition, intertwining with yours.

Closer and closer your traps advanced into the area where my friends and I danced. You taunted me with your gruesome gifts, offerings of torment whose twisted limbs and rictus grins proclaimed your power to imprison and destroy the wild animals I loved.

The night you murdered me you left your last, most grisly token of dominion. I did not notice it until after my friends had left. As I carefully made my way along the moonlit path a short distance behind them, I heard a muffled thrashing noise nearby. Approaching the sound, I found the fox you trapped but had not yet killed.

Fierce yet pleading, she stared at me, her slender black-tipped paw gnawed to bloody shreds, her fangs bared in futile fury. As she writhed in an attempt to free herself, I glimpsed her white belly and small, swollen nipples. Her kits, hidden somewhere, waited to be fed, and she fought with self-maiming desperation to return to them.

I heard your footsteps crunching on the dead, dry leaves, and I saw you then, close-up, for the first time as you raised your bludgeon and violently snuffed out the life of that magnificent russet creature. Her blood splattered onto your face, running down your cheeks like bitter, damning tears. You smiled, thinking perhaps that you had impressed or intimidated me into docile submission, but then you saw in my eyes that you were wrong and I would always despise you. Marked by her suffering, you looked at me and sensed my hate. In meeting your glance, I sealed my fate.

The wind whistled a chilling lament .as you raised again your bludgeon, slick with vixen gore, and smashed my skull. Curses gurgled from my lips, seeping into the mulch where the dead await rebirth.

Nourished by the vengeful blood, the soil gave me new life, a new form. Buds now spread out their tightly folded petals, and thorns, envenomed by rage, defend my beauty. All my hatred towards you, all the morbid magic and incantatory wrath of those ancient songs has permeated my being and lies potent within those thorns.

Wilder than any of the roses in my mother's garden, I flourish, exquisite yet deadly. Bees pay worshipful homage, burrowing deep within my velvet petals, wriggling, tickling, and probing to anoint themselves with my nectar. I savor their caresses while my thorns, protecting from unwanted advances, impale the flesh of those who try to abduct me. Blood trickles from the lacerated wounds of the trespassers, and my poison floods their veins. Bones lie in contorted tribute to my lethal allure.

I grow more tempting and malignant with each droplet I absorb. Yet, though I drink my fill of lecherous victims' blood, my vengeance remains unsatisfied. Immobile as a sleeping princess, I wait, barbed and venomous, thirsting for your dying kiss.

About the Author:

Alison Armstrong is the author of two literary horror novels: *Revenance* and *Toxicosis*, a novella *Vigil and Other Writings*, and a collection of writings addressing women and horror archetypes *Consorting with the Shadow: Phantasms and the Dark Side of Female Consciousness*. A member of the Horror Authors Guild, she loves living in New Orleans and exploring beautiful, eerie old places with an undying past.

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We will know when the gods are burned and dead...

The Book of the Nyanga, Book XXIX

Walking alone through trails of dense backwoods I am surrounded by the sound of wild birdsongs and the specters within the trees. There is a path which I am often compelled to follow but since it gives me an acute feeling of terror I usually avoid it. It follows along a creek towards a covering with overhanging boughs. There the trees become aligned, naked, and still–creating a hidden church-like enclosure. The trees are carved with lettering and symbols. It is a sacred spot for rituals and secrecy.

I notice the throbbing red cover of a book hiding among the wet leaves. Like a discarded human heart it seems to pump into an invisible body. Its metal binding is rusted and its pages damp. Picking up the book, I uncover a snake beneath lying in the leaves and coiled into a perfect spiral. At first it looks like a rubber hose from an old car, since people usually discard their junk and secrets in this part of the woods, but then it starts to move its scales, they are so geometric and beautiful, bending like a flawless machine. It is an intimidating presence with its shiny reptilian back and hissing red tongue. Its dazed head opens its eyes. The serpent had been sleeping and now glares at me in anger for letting the afternoon light in disturbing its delightful dream. The stripes on its back were vibrant yellow, red, and black. I couldn't remember if that meant that it was poisonous or not. This was beside the point, since it was now awake now and glaring at me. It was almost as if the snake was sleeping between the pages of the journal.

Ink was bleeding out of the book as though it were a dying animal lying helpless. I flipped though its pages which were full of tiny fast scribbled script. I read through, but the sprawling writing style was dense and nearly incomprehensible, the scrawling of a mad person filling up the whole book with their delicate ink. I didn't know what the passages were about, but they made me feel numb. Words floated into my head from the page and left me queasy and ill. It was an old style of writing, one which I could not recognize or easily comprehend and it had a way of infecting me.

Then I felt a pinch of pain shoot through my arms, neck, and back. It was like a jolt of electricity which continued to reverberate through my body amplifying greater with each circular pattern. I knew what I had done. The snake was angry. I notice his expression while my wrist began to swell and saw the two tiny marks on my skin bubbling with a clear liquid.

Slowly, I became hypnotized by a primal sensation encompassed my vision and overtaking my senses leaving me crippled. I was not reading the book anymore, since its words had started dissolving off the page and the book began to decompose in my hands floating off into to the wind like ash. Everything was slowly being burned: the book, the leaves, the branches, the water, and the birds.

Through a light in the woods I caught sight of a woman in a white gown walking through the fiery trees and underbrush and a man in a goat's-mask following her on horseback. He was wearing the fur of a dark haired animal, a buffalo, or bear perhaps. The horse was ashen grey. The goat horns on the man's head were large protruding into the blazing sky. His eyes were strange distorted loops, spinning endlessly. The woman was under his control, chained by the throat and they seemed to be walking towards a type of dilapidated subway station which appeared in the woods though I had never noticed it before.

It was like I had suddenly gone deaf and mute, since there weren't any sounds, just the slow crackling and burning away of all things. Slowly they descended the staircase into a solid black tunnel.

Finally, the snake closed its eyes and the season immediately began to change. Greenery drained from all plant life turning everything rotten and black. The trees lost their leaves and strength becoming frail figures sticking out from burning ground. The air was heavy with dead vines and mist that had come to choke the landscape.

In the distance I saw a deer emerge from the underbrush, it had bright white speckles on its back and was hiding from the sun in the dense leaves. There were animals staring at me from the trees and I saw myself washing my face in a stream, my hair dirty, my beard full of bees, my clothes worn with holes.

I've seen only the stars, they arrive every night soaring overhead reciting prose to the galaxies. I don't remember much about the city except that there weren't any stars, just people who thought they were going to become stars and people who were trapped in their own self imprisoned reality.

I write by moonlight when the pen is moving. I write fast chasing the deer through the forest as the stars write alongside using their river of ink.

This is the world we inhabit now and this is the wilderness of the mind and of the human heart. These are the dream songs glimmering like ripples of calm in an ocean of panic. My imagination is contorting along the banks catching the light for dinner or breakfast

I don't remember how bright the campfire was or the eclipses which lasted twelve years, when the heart stopped burning, while the forest was laughing the deer stood with their clipboards looking up the word AMNESIA in their medical books. I know there was a call on 'the other line' though there was not a payphone for hundreds of miles.

And I was back in my head and made a new shadow

I don't remember the sound of a subway train, only the mosaic impression of its noise, metal giving birth to clanking metal, screaming in a tiny room and screeching across my mind to a dangerous halt.

My eyes open. I am in a bright hospital room. I am so disoriented that I have no idea whether I am alive or not. It takes me days to regain my basic senses. There is a curtain wrapped around my bed. Tubes are running into my arm and body, machines surround me, I see red lights waving, and yellow numbers on black screens, they are all flickering, but I hear nothing. I look at my bandaged wrist, wrapped several times. My other wrist is chained to the bed. I move my eyes about the space.

"I'm Doctor S—," announces a man in a mask and glasses as he enters my room. He is holding something in his hands which he removes from a plastic casing.

"Is this yours?" he asks, "It was found beside you when they brought you in. Did you write this book? Is it your journal?"

"What is it?" I ask in response. He holds it up.

"It's a notebook. Did you write in this book? Is it yours?"

"I don't remember," is all I say.

"I've been researching it all week and found that the writing is similar to *The Book of the Nyanga*, do you know anything about that?"

"No, I don't know anything about that book. Wha-"

"It's a book of automatic writing. Do you know what automatic writing is?"

"You mean like Ouija board writing?"

"Well, it's when the writer is used as a channel in order for other voices to speak through them, perhaps from other worlds or dimensions or times. The writer doesn't think, they just write it out." Another doctor appeared standing at the door but did not come inside the room.

"Can Doctor L----- join us too?"

"Oh, yeah," another doctor with glasses comes into the room wearing a mask.

"I've showed Dr. L----- the notebook journal and he connected it to *The Book of the Nyanga*, but it is not an easily obtained book."

"Based on a few calls I made this morning, your journal is a very close transcription of the original text. How did you come across it?"

"I...I'm still waking up."

"Yes. We understand. Take your time." Both doctors look at each other.

"We'll come back another time," said the one doctor.

"And there are still a few empty pages left in the back," said the other as they left.

Later that night I found my hand was recording the events of a dream and writing them down in the notebook, which no one would ever see or read again. Words were flowing through onto the page with tremendous speed. I was no longer inside my body. I was no longer there but a being drifting weightlessly without gravity in the vacuum of silent space. I am a being driven without consciousness and control. From behind the curtain I saw a dark shadow with horns and knew that the man in the goat's mask had returned.

About the Author:

Over the past two decades Craig Shay's writing has appeared in many publications both in print and online. Most recently his work has appeared in The American Journal of Poetry and The Stickman Review. He teaches Creative Writing and Horror Literature at SUNY College at Old Westbury.

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Poetry

Regardless | Amy Zoellers

A full moon is a calming piece of jewelry, any variety of moon a sound companion a cashmere confidant— But no moon betrays me by caging my monster. My inward beast, in turn, heeds no occasion or ceremony, no calendar or satellite. The shadow I cast is truly a madwoman, rich in furs, razor-toothed and raving. Her howl is ecstasy. Her high is the night. In my anger she roves and transcends. I know nothing and all as I fall into cool and cradling rage. Only he who composed my song can adore me, in spite and light of my brawling beast yes, because of her. Let there be pain. Observing and cataloging my every mood, he sings of my light, intoxicated with the beast roaring out of me, entranced in my madness, clasping to him my pure silken horror with staring envy.

About the Author:

Amy Zoellers hosts two monthly poetry shows with Angela Yuriko Smith—*Cake and Hyperbull* on YouTube and *3rd Sunday Poetry* on Instagram. She writes poetry, ghost stories and whimsical songs. She draws oil-pastel portraits and creates handmade dolls for her Etsy shop. She lives with her husband and son in Independence, Missouri.

Instagram: @Hipness and Outrage



The Cauldron | Amanda Wells

Steam poured from the edge of the cauldron somewhere far off in the sky a crow cackles its maniacal laughter, deep in the woods something big and dark stirs, she pulls her shawl close to her body,

covering her skin from the cold.

The sun hangs low beneath the trees

darkness creeps in around her simmering brew

alone with her ritual, something begins to caress the back of her neck,

the hairs on her arms stand on end, goosebumps paint her porcelain flesh.

The wind blows through her copper hair, an ethereal energy flows through her veins, there's a spark in the air.

Her silence is broken by the intrusion of her light words

a gentle, soft-spoken chant pierces the wood.

Stillness before the storm. She peers into the blackened trees,

the horned head steps into the clearing,

as she smiles.

In My Element | Amanda Wells

The cold hands slipped from my grasp and hit the floor.

It's the kind of cold that seeps to the core of your bones,

the only warmth coming from the deep, dark red stains covering the floorboards sliding down my fingers,

the blank, icy blue eyes stare at me.

I walk out into the night,

with darkness surrounding me

the silver moon barely peeks through the clouds.

I am alone,

except for one woman strolling down the street

I get excited.

My heart starts pounding,

my breath quickens

I calmly take the knife out of my pocket.

The long blade glints in the moonlight for just a moment

as we move closer and closer,

adrenaline courses through my veins,

the sleeve of her coat brushes against my shoulder,

I make my move.

Her screams sing lovely melodies

blood repeats,

I am in my element.

About the Author:

Amanda Wells (she, her), a Certified Feline Behavior Trainer, is a neurodivergent artist and bookworm in her twenties who spends her days obsessively, dwelling in her drawing and writing within the company of her two dogs, three cats, and a ghost or two.

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Togetherness | Brian Rosenberger

Raw meat sizzles as it hits the pan.

Olive oil fireworks, burns my hands. I don't mind.

I'm accustomed to it. I'm cooking for Dad. For us.

The pan spatters as I chop the meat with the spatula.

It sounds like a war-zone.

I imagine I'm on the winning side but know that's untrue

I add onion, garlic, a pinch of black pepper for flavor.

I lean over the stove, inhaling the aroma.

It makes me cry. Maybe it's the onions.

Pureed tomatoes are next, fresh from Dad's garden.

He still maintains a garden—tomatoes, garlic, cucumbers, and assorted peppers.

It keeps him busy. It keeps him alive.

Our meal simmers. My tears add to the flavor in place of salt.

Dad waits silently at the dinner table. Three chairs.

We sit. Dad whispers grace. I just nod to appease him.

With tears in his eyes, Dad says "Delicious" as he swallows the first bite.

I can't argue. It's as good as any dish I've ever made.

We eat in mostly silence, each lost in our own memories,

Our individual hungers for what we have lost.

In the fridge, in preparation for our next meal,

My Mother's bones provide flavor for a stew. Her recipe, mostly.

Even in death, my mother, Dad's beloved, she still provides.

My Raising | Brian Rosenberger

I was born Dead. Zombie parents. Maybe?

Well, at least one parent. I can't point blame since neither parent

Claimed me as their offspring. I was born dead, a bastard.

Unwanted and unloved. My raising fell to my grandmother.

I went to school, rode the bus. Recess was my downfall.

I had decent grades but my classmates were too slow.

They taunted. They ran. I chased. I chomped.

The teachers were not happy. I tried chomping them too.

As a result, I was home-schooled. Grandmother enjoyed the diversion.

It gave her something to do outside of her gardening.

She set me loose on the fools who dared her doorbell.

Pest control people, tree cutters, Jehovah's Witnesses,

Pizza delivery drivers delivering to the wrong address.

They were quick and I was leashed. They got away. Whole.

Granny eventually died. Natural causes. She was 108.

Mother and Father came, seeking their inheritance.

I was still dead. My parents, divorced, weren't.

Not Zombie parents after all.

They offered no explanation to my origin. I had my guesses.

They patted my head like I was a family pet. Good Zombie.

My parents weren't dead. Then.

Mom and Dad proved much slower than my classmates.

Chomp!

Location | Brian Rosenberger

You have to actually look for the house.

The very end of a dead end street.

Trees and shadows keep it hidden.

A modest two-story with a two-car garage, build in the 70's,

Like most of the homes in the neighborhood.

Two bedrooms, two baths, a porch and a deck.

This one has a longer driveway than most.

The other homes, distinguished by their exteriors.

Forest Green, Sky Blue, Sunflower Yellow.

This home has the hue of a corpse.

Surrounded by dead or dying trees, bordering a cemetery

There's some question about the border.

The tombstones end at the fence line. The buried bodies don't.

The agent notes several former owners chose to be buried

Close to their last homes.

She conveniently neglects to say how the residents died.

I tell you, my potential neighbor—Murder or suicide.

Not discouraged, a Sold Sign appears on the grounds.

The new occupants, my new neighbors have settled.

Their new home, 2nd floor, one widow illuminated.

Back-lit the color of blood.

You'd only notice if standing in their front yard.

I watch as I've done with the previous occupants, silently chanting,

Not that anyone could hear. Not that anything could be done.

2nd floor window, overlooking the backyard, overlooking the cemetery.

Tentacles descend from dark Heavens.

The storm is here. Their time is now.

I brought an umbrella.

Home | Brian Rosenberger

The House has long shadows.

Darkness stretching from the decrepit porch,
The overgrown weeds and inch wide sidewalk cracks.
Lonely shadows desperate to greet,
Embrace any visitors, any strangers.
Something to appease their hunger.
The mailman knows to stay away
Based on the demise of past mailmen.
Even feral cats and homeless dogs
Give the house a wide birth,
Unless they desire to end up as bones for the crows.

The House sighs and leaves fall, crows take flight,
Squirrels scurry like hell, spiders retreat to their webs.
Their trapped dinner can wait.
The spiders, their webs frame the House's entrance,
Ancient, elaborate patterns. Cool images to photograph
By the artistic, the brave, those without next of kin.
Inside the House, it's a different exhibit, different art.
The severed limbs, the blood spirals, the arrangement of bones,
The moment of the scream. More of a sacrifice. A form of payment.
Cleaned up before the visit of the next potential owner.

In that sense, the House is almost a museum, A memorial to the past residents. Those who came, lived, and never left.

The hearse heralds a new arrival, an interested buyer. Bats spiral overhead beneath a blood-red moon. Cats screech, a back alley choir. The frogs, pond residents, are quiet. The spiders remain curious and hungry.

The current homeowners meet the client on the cob-webbed porch. No agent needed. The most recent agent, buried in the backyard With all the others agents.
Seller meets Buyer. Monster greets monster.
Shadows embrace them all.

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: <u>Brian Who Suffers</u> Instagram: <u>@brianwhosuffers</u>





Master of Riddles | Mary Parker

He was supposed to be my beloved, Appointed to me, Anointed as his bride-to-be, with enviable dowry, This chiseled man twice my age. But I lingered in my unbelief.

He remained a mystery to me:
Proper and well-off, late into the night we would talk
About the lifetimes he had lived before,
But had never loved.
His blue eyes were fiery against the candle's flame
And in the twilight he seemed younger,
Lean and pristine.

Me, he swore he adored.

Eventually I saw my deepest dreams
Reflected in the smoke and mirrors of his charming smile,
Bewitched by parlor tricks
High cheekbones and stately scruff.
Salt and pepper framed full lips,
His easy, low laughter and delicious tongue
Spilled a spell of desire
Consonants hard against perfect teeth.
I was blind to the inconsistencies
Of his bloody labyrinth
His winding maze that always begged an answer:
"Would you die for me?"

When he came for me,
Shrouded in midnight darkness,
His riddle finally exposed
All I could see were those perfect teeth:
White, longer now than before—
Bloodstained.

As he stood over my bed, my maidenhead, He repeated his call: "Would you die for me?"

The answer was always yes.

About the Author:

Mary Parker is a horror author, poet, and journalist from Southern Illinois. Her second short story collection, *Sweet Nightmares*, and a novella, *The Endless Hallway*, will be published in 2022.

Twitter: @MParkerHorror



Costume Party | C. Luke Kopperdal

You Are There Beneath The Moon | C. Luke Kopperdal

I'm not sure anyone is going

to recognize me

I mean,

this costume is a little tight

and also moist

(ew)

You really could've done better with the sizing

and like, why wouldn't you let me

take your face off

in one shot

Now everyone is going to think

I'm you with a scar

I suppose it could be ironic

What do you think

(spins)
Oh, right,

you don't anymore

This is so awkward

The first thing that happens is the bones break And the subsequent howl shatters the land

The second is the skin stretching As the bones reset to normal

The fur bursts out in a wave of agony And the jaw pushes forward into snout

The eyes yellow The tongue lolls

The nails jut out and round to claws

The body bends

And the words that want to flow can no longer form

The moon has changed you Its light has shown you the way With your tail still growing You charge into the wood To search for eternal life And a naked moon

On the Generosity of Ghosts | C. Luke Kopperdal

You see them In the golden vestiges of the setting sun People that aren't there

but are

They are the phantoms of the night Born, some say, of that dying light As those last rays disappear and twilight takes hold for its brief dominion

Voices whisper everywhere Though none are seen anywhere

A laugh, a giggle A moan, a wail

A diatribe on the interstitial nature of

hauntings around the world
They will walk past you
Roam through you
Seize your body
Scramble your mind
The phantoms of the night
are not a generous kind

About the Author:

C. Luke Kopperdal works as a cook by day under his real name, and a writer of things by night under pseudonyms. He is a bibliophile, a cynophile, a pluviophile, and a pogonophile. When not cooking, writing, or -philing, he enjoys spending time with his wife and dog in a little house on a long island off the southeastern tip of New York.

Instagram: oprobability junction
Twitter: oprobability junction

Virgil's Ongoing Researches | DJ Tyrer

The wizard Virgil
Long having abandoned poetry
For more arcane pursuits
Successfully completed the occult formulae
Necessary to achieve a research grant
To fund his studies
Into the secrets of Quantum Gravity
At the Innsmouth Institute
An annex of Miskatonic U.
Where he achieved a quantum success
That unleashed the Old Ones
In a flurry of febrile tentacles

Cthulhu Pneumatica | DJ Tyrer

O! What has mankind wrought?
A leviathan to tower above wave
A mechanical monstrosity that never ought
To tread the world that becomes our grave
Upon pneumatic legs it does stride
Steam belching from its every orifice
None from its tentacles of steel can hide
Their twitching grasp does never miss
That fearsome bulk that bestrides the world
Unmentioned in Necronomicon or Hermetica
Inspired by that being once from space hurled
The blasphemous Cthulhu Pneumatica

Ghost Story | DJ Tyrer

He asked me:

What is that noise?

The rat-a-tat rhythm in the roofspace

That allowed no quantum of solace.

The ghost.

The ghost? He laughs But, there's a fear. Fear haunts his eyes

Just as the ghost haunts the roofspace.

I don't feel fear For I'm the author The one writing this tale Choosing the right words To reveal a course of events

Send shivers up-and-down your spine.

Only, writing myself into it

I feel a twinge

A shiver along my own spine As the ghost knocks out its tune

Hidden in the roofspace Waiting for the moment When I write it out of there

And down here

To the desk where I write For the grand finale

The conclusion of my tale.

Flesh Puddle | DJ Tyrer

What is left

When the Bone-eater

Has eaten its fill?

A few fragments

Of well-gnawed bones

And, a puddle

Of flesh and blood

With a hint of a face

Floating upon it

Anguished and agonized

Or, just collapsed

Without emotion

Any more than mind or life

Sated, the Bone-eater

Stalks away

But, soon shall hunger

For more

And, any bones will do...

What is that sound

Outside your door?

Does it come for you?

About the Author:

DJ Tyrer studied history at the University of Wales at Aberystwyth, edits Atlantean Publishing, and has been published in various anthologies and magazines, such as Chilling Horror Short Stories (Flame Tree), What Dwells Below (Sirens Call Publications), and issues of The Horrorzine, and Tigershark, as well as having a novella available in paperback and on the Kindle, The Yellow House (Dunhams Manor).

Facebook: DJ Tyrer
Twitter: @DJTyrer

Perfecting Penelope P | Alex Grehy

You should be more like Penelope P, perfect Penelope P

My mother says so, my teachers too, as if I'm not perfect as me.

Penelope P please play with me, we can be perfect together.

Penelope P has thick blonde hair, blue eyes and curly long lashes

I flame-frizzed her hair sheared her lashes, stained her eyes brown with felt pens.

Penelope P has skin that's flawless and fair, with pretty peach cheeks. I dyed her with bronze added some freckles with a soldering iron.

Penelope P has cherry red lips, straight white teeth, an undimpled chin

I bleached her lips white, braced her teeth tight 'til they cracked, bisected her jaw.

Penelope P has an hourglass figure, long legs and cute feet.

I used daddy's tools to change all that, then swathed her in pigskin and fat.

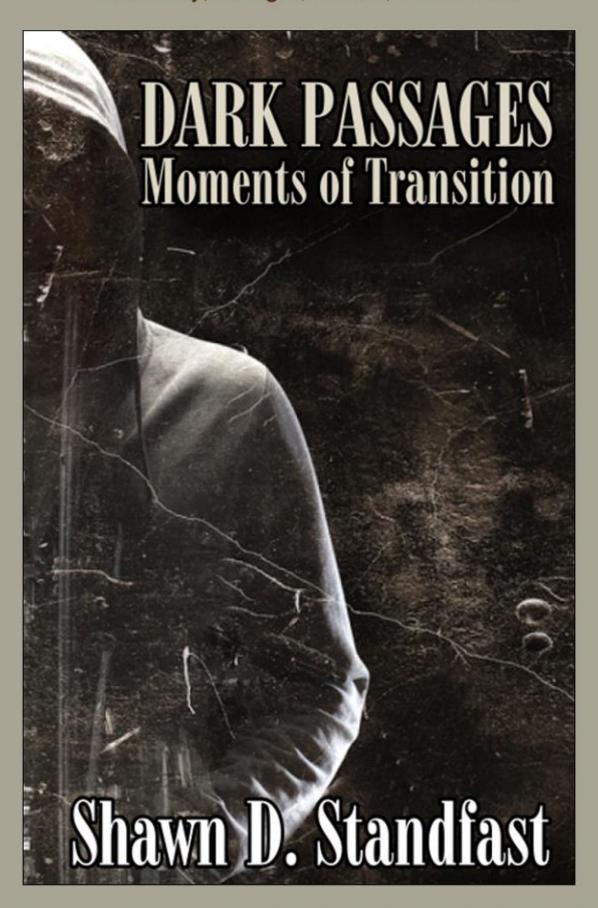
Penelope P has changed quite a bit, now she's as perfect as me.

About the Author:

After a lifetime of writing technical non-fiction, Alex Grehy is fulfilling her dream of writing works that engage the reader's emotions. Her stories and poems have been published worldwide. Her ingredients for contentment are narrowboating, greyhounds, singing and chocolate. It is a sweet life, yet Alex's original view of the world has led to her best friend to say 'For someone so lovely, you're very twisted!'

Blog: <u>Ideal Reader Blog</u>
Twitter: @Indigodreamers

A collection of poetry caught in shadow, interweaving the remnants of memory, thought, dream, and desire.



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

for all eternities | Linda M. Crate

the lovers danced together weaving in and out of the trees, as if they were still performing for crowds as they did when they were still living;

before they had been turned into the murderous creatures that they were now—

hand-in-hand the women stole a glance at one another exchanging small smirks before the vampires struck down one person after another in the campground as if they were nothing but lambs that were to be led to the slaughter;

when they were done they licked the blood from the faces of one another as they danced in the silent forest—

"will you love me for eternity?" one asked.
"for all eternities," the other answered.

every lyric of your sorrow | Linda M. Crate

lust was your weapon of choice, perhaps it kept others buried in the earth; i made an art of finding my way back out of that coffin—

this little damphyr has dreams, and she's sacrificed enough for the sake of others only to find herself abandoned and alone;

so walk in the sacred wood of my heart again and you will find no way out—

if it's not the monsters in my wood that will get you or all the angry animals, it will be me; and i promise i will make your death painful

have you begging for the blood in your veins to return to you in vain;

every lyric of your sorrow will bring me joy.

About the Author:

Linda M. Crate's works have been published in numerous magazines and anthologies both online and in print. She is a three time best of the net nominee. When Linda isn't writing she likes to enjoy nature walks, photography, reading, dancing, and music. Her favorite musical genres are industrial, indie, rock, and goth. She's always been a misfit, but she prides herself on always being herself.

Facebook: Linda M. Crate
Twitter: @thysilverdoe

Worshipers of Gravity | Ken Poyner

You would not like them so much

If you had seen the ends of their belief:

Splendid vases, a life's work

Of fine lines and hair-thin coloring:

Broken into hundreds of pieces.

There is no ambiguity.

The body of a favored dog or cat—

A family pet, or a stray nursed to health

By children, and now a grandmother's comfort:

Twisted into bone smashed splendor.

The dull kiss at the end of falling.

No sacred writings—just a few postulates,

And endless, numbing calculations.

The pure act of landing.

Yes, I can listen all day

To lectures and practical proofs

Dealing with how centripetal force,

For all its elegance and noise,

Is not quite the real thing,

Though it will do for emergencies.

I thrill at the narratives of

Distant relatives in a black and white past

Hung by the neck until presumed dead:

Broken, or strangled, a case of suspension.

No right, no wrong—

Only falling.

Their sermons are sublimely an electric poetry

Of physics and mechanical means.

It is the practical application that I fear.

It happens to everyone who believes:

One night in your dreams

You step out,

Falling—

The air around you virginal and baited

And you know that before you hit

You will wake up,

That you always wake up.

But this time you hit -

Just the dull weight of you launched

Unpretentiously outward in your dream -

Then you stand there,

Your velocity completed absorbed,

All of you being nothing more than something stopped.

It is at this ledge you wake,

Understanding the religion,

Suddenly heavy with hating it,

Gravity and falling, falling and gravity,

And you, the living: completing the trinity.

Development | *Ken Poyner*

When the devil was a baby He was not, then, such a bad Looker. Yes, only a mother Could love him, but others at Least could abide his presence, Allow him to play with their Families' more typical children. Like all children, at first All he knew was want, hunger, Immediate gratification. He Was but one of a homogeneous crowd. Later, after he had been disastrously weaned Too soon, after his sense Of inequality and short-change began To replace the love of now Disinterested parenting, did his mischief Grow ever more refined and directed: In the eyes of a disaffected part Of his kindergarten class, Desirable. When the school lesson Was the difference between good and evil He particularly excelled, took From the lesson that there was room For interpretation. And here his hunger fell in. The horns and hooves were an after-thought.

Gravity's Children | *Ken Poyner*

They imagine themselves loose On a wind that has no notice Of down. They fly Over packed soil and stunted trees. They peer down at the rocks, Reckless in the knowledge that Stone seen from above is unlike stone Seen from below. None of them Believes any one of them Is more substantial than Any other. All are free To drift, free to rise, Free to gather in ambiguous air. Or so they imagine. In actuality Flat on their backs, pumped With pure oxygen—as lungs at this Pressure would barely work—pinned In their sustaining iron cages Their soaring fantasies are measured, Recorded, broadcast across worlds. The lesson is fed to less constricted Beings and beasts, citizens of polyglot Nations and realms and empires. Thrive. You are not like these Tricked by mass into inaction. Ponder less, do more, consume. Dream only if you must.

Witch Burning | Ken Poyner

You can tell what type of witch The woman was by the color Of the smoke in her Burning. All gradient of power And spell can be chromatically Deciphered, specialties ascertained. Which witches curdled milk, which Conjured ague, which possessed The neighbors' ducks, which Soured love affairs or bedeviled Children, which made For stale bread, which Stunted the corn. It is A precise scale, pairing Dozens of hues to public poisons. With this one, as with So many others, she seems Unpaired to a particular evil, Her smoke mere gray and a tattered white, Signifying nothing special, judging Her former powers now powerless.

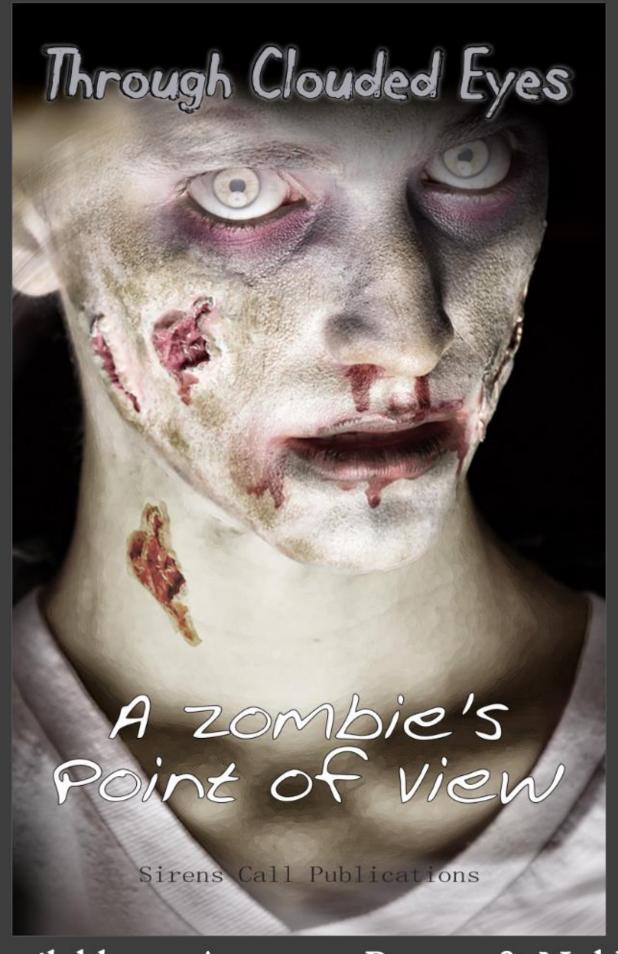
The Reason to Kill | Ken Poyner

It is no small work To murder a cache of enemies And even a few friends. But, if you want to continue With the program, you need to Figure out where to hide The bodies. Having a body To inspect, chart, chemically distort Gives the authorities so much To work with that even The best weaver of homicide Gets trapped in his smallest Mistake. No. Hiding the bodies Must be top of the plan, even Before deciding who is To be done in first And how. Personally I think it is the best part Of the affair, the game Within the game. Not all bodies Should be hidden in the same way. Burning, burial, mummification, Chemical dissipation. Each body suggests its own Manner of invisibility. Each Has its appropriate fit. In fact, I would say Hiding the bodies And how you hide them Is more important than The murder itself. Anyone Can murder. Only the artful Can get away with it. Hiding The bodies is how you Sustain the action, bring In the strong coda, speak To the joyful audience. I hid my body in plain Sight long, long ago. No one suspects The death of me.

About the Author:

Ken Poyner has put out three books of mini-fictions, and two collections of speculative poetry, all of which can be had at Amazon and other book selling sites. He has had recent work in *Analog, Asimov's, Café Irreal*, and other places, both print and web. He worked 33 years as a systems analyst, and now assists his wife in her world class pow er lifting career.

Author Website: Ken Poyner



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

The drummer boy | Mathias Jansson

Little Tom was a chubby boy He marched the streets With his little toy drum Eager one day to meet Someone to fulfil his dreams To play drums in a band

One day a black van stopped and picked him up from the street Little chubby boy your belly is fat When I drum on your skin The sound is deep and pure The singer said to Tom

Little chubby boy You skin is so soft and strong Will you join our band Playing drums for us?

And so Tom, the chubby boy
Joined the band and toured
Around the world
The public would always recognize
The deep sound from the drum
Made from the skin
Of Tom the little drummer boy
in a set made of other chubby boys.

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 Sirens Call Publications. 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 Website: Mathias Jansson
Amazon Author Page: Mathias Jansson



The Anatomist's Notebook | Meg Smith

I want to tell your stories in color, red, blue, black, white—
once was running, crying, tearing in birth—
in all ways, taking form of kingdoms, gutters, nights of rain flooding cobblestone streets and running with blood, piss, ale, remembrance. I want to tell your stories, all, in breathing as much now still, something not in sleep, the bleary marks of life.

Slumber of Familiars | Meg Smith

The cat is done with magic.

He curls on one side, a deflated moon, wheezing, pearls of spittle at the mouth. The world expects so much, like dancing around a fire.

The world expects so much, like healing spells and deathless love.

But for a warm, musky scent in the belly, and a dream without human desires.

About the Author:

Meg Smith is a writer, journalist, dancer and events producer living in Lowell, Mass. In addition to previously appearing in The Sirens Call, her poetry and fiction have appeared in Dark Moon Digest, The Horror Zine, Raven Cage, Blood Moon Rising Magazine, and many more. She is author of five poetry books and a short fiction collection, *The Plague Confessor*.

Website: Meg Smith Writer



Dreaming | Rachel Tyle

The whispers in the dark

Sought dreams from depravity

The decrepit cancer chanting in the moonlight

Hiding in the cool bright depths below sea level where I caught you dreaming—up atrocities

In the lost cities, screaming at eternity

The stone cold seas breeze pressing against the walls of your sanity

A tangible madness hidden behind the stars

Mirroring the ocean's floor

A bioluminescence creeping through the sea foam

Weaving its way in cacophonous vibrations through the parody of time

A mimicry of reality thickening the air

Clogging the lungs with humidity and these guttural fanatical ravings

Aching for the madness to reach the surface

Chilled humming in the water's slick blackness, calling me home

Enchanted by these vocalized nightmares

Masquerade | Rachel Tyle

Masquerade where the decayed played
A restless song as we danced along
Where worlds collide and we confide
Reciting the script we unlocked the crypt
But within our hands the shadows fanned
The spark that connected the selfish reflection
Playing along with the game, we fueled the flame
And darkness dwelled under a shallow spell
Where tired bones find their homes
Perhaps in your house when you're all alone

About the Author:

Rachel J. Tyle did not likely originate from this planet but currently resides in Houston Texas. She can often be found snuggling cats and making friends with an assortment of plants and animals. As a lifelong horror fan, she has enjoyed soaking up all that the genre has to offer with a special emphasis on cosmic horror.





Slow Bath | Oliver C. Senica

This is where I'll end it, among the trees and before the faces of frogs and flies. There will be no shout, no blood, no bullet, only fleeting breaths by a tucked-away pond. I'll let the water wrinkle my flesh and soak my soiled soul as the suicide seeds sprout inside my stomach, sending vines through my veins, and a stem up my throat.

Time moves and spins. The sun shines in blooms between the nights of hungry slugs. Rain falls and feeds me, filling my fertilized lungs. Tulips twirl through my eyes and rose thorns rest on my tongue. Ladybugs dance and birds sing and smile as my days become daisies planted on skin made of grass.

Soon, the wind will shake my silent pedals, leaving nothing but a garden as I rest in nature's tomb.

From bone to dirt, from flesh to clay, from the earth, I came, so, to earth, I'll return.

Abyss | Oliver C. Sencica

Like a blanket clinging against my helmet, the darkness is impenetrable.

I can hear the hungry groans, the gurgles of the beast somewhere in the forgotten chamber just beyond the black.

The demon is waiting, watching from the corner of the underworld, a place no human eyes could reach and never should.

My armor is heavy, filthy from the dirt, dented from the fall. But I stand on trembling legs as I see a sudden flash of red eyes that grow and multiply, shining like rubies against the night.

There's a thundering march, hooves across stone.
A shriek.
A stench of death, hot monster's breath.

With all my strength,
I clutch the grip of my sword
and swing straight
into the abyss
before it swallows me whole.

Borrowed by Ghosts | Oliver C. Sencica

I was by the water when they came for me. They had long, translucent arms that reached through the fog and grabbed onto me with invisible hands and sharp white fingers that dug into my skin somehow.

Their faces were hidden, their voices were whispers, echoes over the chilled air as they pulled me across the deep river until I was floating among the hanging mist.

They danced around, taunting me, poking me with their shaded claws, trying to make me just like them.

About the Author:

Oliver C. Seneca is a graduate of Pennsylvania State University. His first novel, *When the Sky Goes Dark*, was published by Sunbury Press in 2019. You can find his poetry and short fiction included in The Dillydoun Review, Bluing the Blade, and The Festival Review. He's also a giant nerd when it comes to music, film, and video games.

Website: Oliver C. Seneca Instagram: @olivercseneca



Eternally Mine | Brianna Malotke

Oh so delicate looking, your porcelain Skin seemingly flawless—and truly ice cold to the touch—your features exactly What I imagined, what my dreams foretold.

You'll rest here now, no more worries.

Elegant with your walk, calm and collected Your hair golden, like a marigold or primrose, To me you are beauty embodied, from the Outside looking in, a true work of art.

A simple smile, a pleasant chat, you didn't Know my feelings, your melodic tones were Alluring, I could spend endless days listening, Your voice unintentionally intoxicating.

You'll rest here now, safe and sound, tucked in, Your skin striking beautiful against the satin lining.

One day you'll forgive me, but in this moment you're mine—oh mine completely—my dear, from the moment we first met, I just knew we'd spend all eternity together, don't you fear

Being alone is what everyone is afraid of, but not me, and with us together, you'll never be alone, for when I bury you within the hallowed ground, I'll come back to join you; my absolute love shown.

You'll rest here now, no more worries.

You'll be a permanent part of my collection, Not just another added heart to shelves, but A feature to showcase, to illustrate how True love can be found, you are perfection.

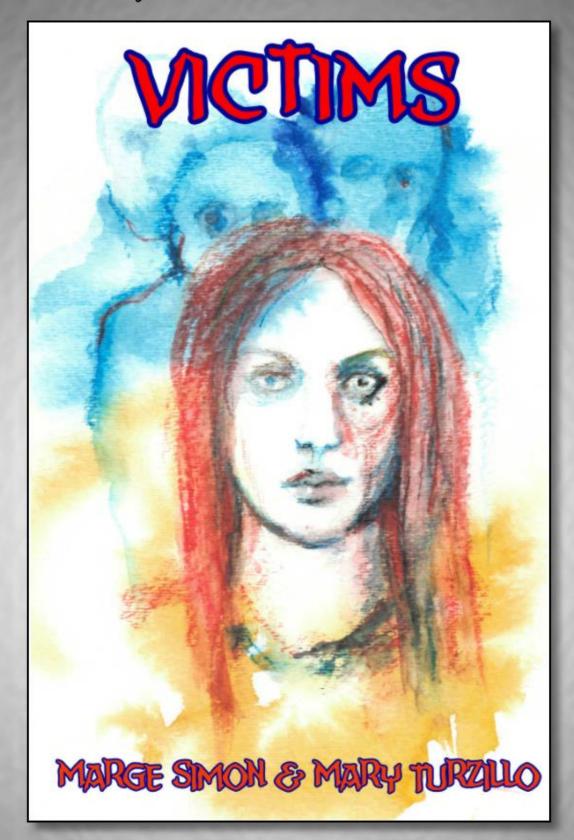
You'll rest here now, one day I will join you, I'll crawl into the casket; your heart is eternally mine.

About the Author:

Brianna Malotke is a member of the Horror Writers Association and when she's not writing she's boxing. Some of her most recent work can be found online at Witch House Amateur Magazine, Dark Entries Journal, and Chamber Magazine. She has pieces in the anthologies Beneath, Cosmos, *The Deep Beautiful Tragedies 2*, The Dire Circle and the upcoming Women in Horror Poetry Showcase, Under Her Skin.

Website: Malotke Writes
Instagram: @briannamalotke

Victims, a collection of dark poems by Marge Simon & Mary A. Turzillo, is a 2022 Bram Stoker Award® Finalist!



AVAILAIBILE ON AMAZON!

Recipe to Raise the Dead | E.F. Schraeder

Mix three ounces of salted tears and five pints of fresh grief.

Dip one sudden death into a sea of regret.

Toss with disappointments, stir in bitters to taste.

Ignore the sobbing and begin to pray.

Recite each incantation with careful words and intent.

Repeat. Wait for a sign: candle flickers whispered echoes, or lightning will do.

Slowly add spent dreams. Keep stirring, then chant until the words blur to life.

This shadowy gift won't last long—enjoy at once.

After the Apocalypse | E.F. Schraeder

The Apocalypse called collect last night, looking for sympathy.

Reverse the charges, the voice said.

I laughed.
Who uses the operator anymore?
Call me Cal, he said.

Thunder in the background. High winds. He was humorless, like you'd expect.

The nerve—chumming up like that, a cosmic punchline waiting for a hashtag. Cal talked until my ears itched.

Disasters. Shootings. Disease. Hoarding. All of it. Humans have nothing but base urges. You should see it from here.

For a moment, we're both quiet. A gut twisting silence, the kind that follows bad news.

Shock. Despair. Panic. It's your own fault, you know, keeping a landline, Cal said.

He was right.
I nodded.
Someone had to answer for this.

How I Came to Eat His Eyes | E.F. Schraeder

He stared, his gaze warm, tracing an exposed collarbone Desire is a kind of hunger even across the room, I felt that.

Then his pink feet slapped in ugly flip-flops, each step a colonization expecting a welcome. That confident nod instead of a hello.

He scanned my shoulder for a bra strap. His gaping, milky blue eyes behind glasses like two dead fish. *Your point was spot on*, he said.

Impatient, his foot tapped. Then his fingers grabbed me, hooked around my elbow. Tugging. *We should go out some time,* he said.

You've got to eat. He pulled my arm again. Expecting yes. Expecting he could smile me into it.

But I'm an unexpected vortex. All resistance. A tornado of striking fingers and claws. Bloody pressure bursts as they pop into my hands.

I swallow them like candy. Because it was easy. Because I could. The same way

he took a hundred women before and would've a hundred to follow, if he had eyes.

About the Author:

The author of *Liar: Memoir of a Haunting* (Omnium Gatherum, 2021) and other works, E.F. Schraeder usually writes about not quite real worlds. A rustbelt native, Schraeder is an avid gardener and hot pepper enthusiast who believes in ghosts, magic, and dogs.

Website: E.F. Scraeder



The Devil made me do it | Alex Nodopaka

Lit by firelight monsters in the bleeding heart of the forest I suddenly become aware

that the inner soul can be traded for a new persona. I choose a new aura and despite my stormy

past I search into my inner self and discover I am not alone. Others' shadows keep

mixing into mine. It all becomes sort of steamy and foggy and when in the cauldron

all the shadows coalesce I emerge a devil.

About the Author:

Alex Nodopaka originated last century in Ukraine. He speaks, reads and writes San Franciscan, Parisian, Kievan & Muscovite. Mumbles in English & sings in tongues after Vodka. Studied at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, Casablanca, Morocco. Presently full-time author, visual artist in the USA but considers his past irrelevant as he seeks new reincarnations.



About the Dark weather | Max Bindi

if you seem what you seem baby don't look so grim when the lights of the world start to grow dim If the darkness unzips its eyes in a nightmare alley if the tarot cards lie and fate dilly dallies the devil creeps under your skin when hell seethes under the floor well, people cry like the wind and they are no more Now rise down, baby fall up and show me where you found your sleep and your black clothes about the dark weather tell me more. If you are what you are baby don't brag about your phantom scars and joyride through the night in Death's haunted car every shadow is on the move and blood crawls under the door well, people are wind and they are no more Now rise down, baby fall up if your black money lasts more than your damned soul about the dark weather tell me more.

Confession of a monster | Max Bindi

I have changed my mind too many times and I have been blind for such a long while I have loved and lied and lost in some style well, I have made mistakes even worse than crimes yet still I have not found the way to die safe and sound I have touched the bottom of the endless pit and I have gone insane just to gain some wits I have searched without and I have searched within chased all the clouds under God's skin still I have not found the way to die safe and sound I have never really thought Death had much in store for me it was you to lead me forth my insecurity to set me free I have traveled around moving from eye to eye buried alive above the ground just to shout and cry Still I have not found the way to die safe and sound.

The Dark house | Max Bindi

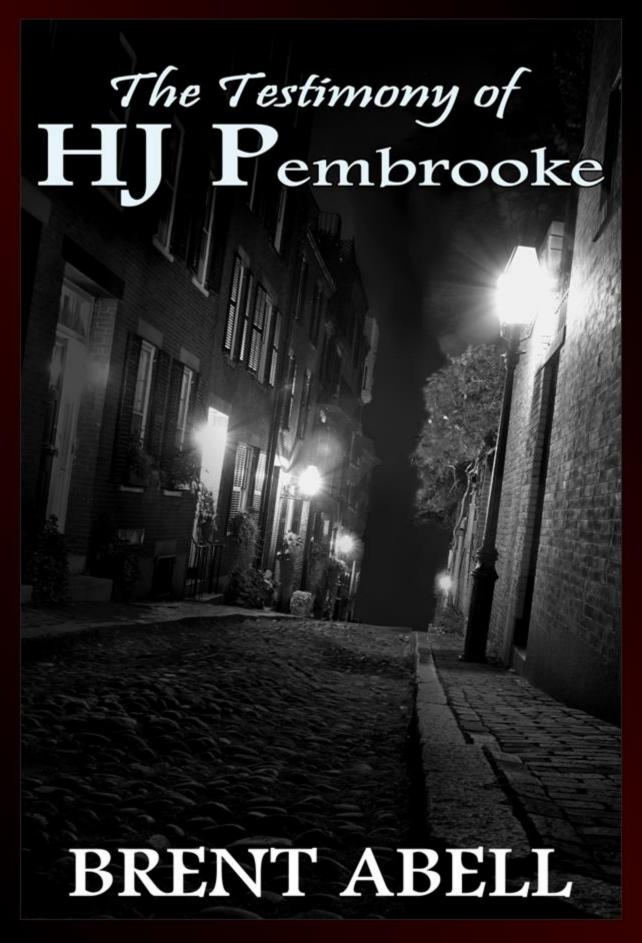
As I went down along the road A strange dark house I saw through the fog with no windows on the walls but a tall wide-open door. So I stepped inside mesmerized by the indoor music and the dim lights and weird things came to my sight like wild dreams before my eyes I walked through a somber cobwebbed hall which led to an ancient staircase and as I climbed the creaking steps I felt caught in a spellbound daze. So I came to a room on the upper floor where the music flew into a muffled roar and a white lady stood eerily there her face framed with long black raven hair she turned to me a long hypnotic stare and her eyes compelled me to follow her so both we went through a corridor's glare into the very seat of madness and despair we entered a chamber full of raging fires we sank into that hell as if in a deep mire and I saw the flames morph into snakes and their bites hurt like all my life's mistakes and then those poisonous fangs reached for my neck and all around me went completely black. When I woke up it was almost dawn the house and the fog were both gone leaving no mark on my flesh and bones but a maiden's name etched in my heart of stone.

About the Author:

Max Bindi is an Italian English teacher, translator poet/singer/songwriter. His work has been featured in Poetry Anthologies, Childrens' books and Poetry magazines. He has also been extremely active in the alternative electronic music scene with his darkwave/synth pop/goth project 'Outpost of progress' publishing a large number of songs in Europe and USA.

Facebook: <u>Max Bindi</u>
Instagram: <u>@outpostofprogress</u>





AVAILABLE TO PURCHASE OR BORROW ON AMAZON

Cinema Stills | Will H. Blackwell, Jr.

Inside the wide rectangle of tree-sentinels the cemetery spreads its dim, permanently open stage—frozen into many rigid props. These seemingly placid, spaced stones of the dead stand erect as pale glimmers in the breathless nascent darkness; sparse moonlight scans these similarly labeled, honed faces like repetitive lines in a boring play—without depth, or understanding, or even meaning. It seems, somehow, there should be something left to say—in this static, nocturnal panorama. But, no. This is the final Film Noir—a muted chiaroscuro, set in evenly separated still-lives a motionless silent-film for the ages in which the scene must, without sound, carry the narrative of souls—slowly, invisibly leaching into the capturing screen of banal clay souls that, if given choice once more, would gather themselves into being and rise as bravura players—shadow-curtain cast back, broadly opened to a new, reanimated theater and at last, again, speak! But this is not to be. These redacted character-actors—once, incarnate bearers of complex, often vibrant personalities are forever simplified, voiceless under the oppressive, if nebulous, overburden of gaining blankness, blackness of this recurrently stolid scene. All colors, even the flower-sprays left weekly by loved ones, drain into a unity of dullness—an unlit, celluloid-like coating now appearing to pervade everything. The various personas, momentarily verging on visibility, slip back into the starkness of a perpetual latent horror—fading once again, as by mystical dissolve control, to the simple-surfaced dimensions of nothing, nothing but irrevocable iterated rows of residual form—waiting—beneath hardened slabs—waiting, without option, without rescue, through the long night, each night—every night—waiting merely for the thin, useless light allowed by the tall guardian-border of trees to briefly pass, without warmth, over this purposefully leveled glade each next, identical, and only superficially illuminating, day.

About the Author:

Will H. Blackwell, Jr. is a retired professor (botany) living in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. His poems have appeared in: Aphelion, Black Petals, Blue Unicorn, Disturbed Digest, Illumen, Poem, Raven Cage Zine, Scifaikuest, Slant, and Star*Line.

A Prayer for the Graveyard Girl | Jen Gardner

May your nights be blessed with silent rain to cleanse the earth from your rotted hair and soften the bed where you have lain For you, my dear, I pray for rain

May the grass grow long as you walk by your bony footsteps quiet as hymns whispered over lonely stones where long-forgotten lovers lie I pray the grass will never die

May daybreak wrap you in repose a rest well-earned in restless life may all the pain that plagued your heart be left to rot and decompose That weary eyes may finally close I pray for you, my graveyard girl

Not Your Ghost | *Jen Gardner*

She will crawl inside your marrow if you let her She'll slip back into the womb and rot your insides like a blight until you crumple on your back and gasp for sunlight

She will tell you just how cold it is outside now for a memory, untethered and unwilling to let go she is groping, she is flailing stinking sweetly of despair as she tries to plunge a root into your sympathetic ear

You must let her wither it's the kindest thing to do because she'd cling to you forever even though she wasn't yours she would hunger as you weaken and she'd never feel whole and you'd ache with all emptiness you tried to take from her

About the Author:

Jen Gardner lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota with her partner and dog. She started writing as a young adult as a way to process grief, and has drawn further inspiration from long, dark winters spent in Southeast Alaska. More of her work can be found in Grim and Gilded.



Eldritch Insight | Bryan C. Laesh

This was how the man discovered what he was, For the Entity was committed to what It does; Due to the interference of the outer-interloper, It defiled the man's mind like a perverse groper. It exists far beyond the plane of Man Committing acts only a god can, Attempting to transform Man into Beast, Altering civility 'to a desire for violence and feast.

But how is it that such a form is taken,
That man's faith in himself or God is shaken?
Surely the Entity calls upon a spirit prime,
Sharing genes with animals is no crime.
However that is not the case,
Man's nature is all the more base.
By magnifying desires and tempers foul,
Man's back bends as he begins to howl.

As the beast begins to take control,
The greater vices the subhuman doth extol;
So in his craving for maiden's flesh,
Lust for another is borne a-fresh;
He dispenses of any honor due her dignity,
And hates and spurns proper masculinity.
He demeans her worth for his own pleasure,
Reveling in sick depravity, his truest treasure.

But wherein his true madness lies,
Love for himself easily dies;
Realizing who he truly wants to kill,
His sanity departs and he craves every ill.
Self-loathing hath he always possessed,
For he knew himself a beast, not unlike the rest—
Knowing the facts well between him and animal,
He knows he is the more damnable.

And so the Entity has finished Its work, Up in space—but created one to lurk; For who could say what rhyme or reason, To understand the Entity is treason; For if one could comprehend it, It would be the end of his spirit; Hence betraying his mother's race,

The beast within he doth embrace.
And by embracing his vilest flaws,
He takes on fur, fangs, and claws.
Thus revealed is his true nature,
And having cost evolution its wager
The man's fate as a beast is sealed
Damning him to wander forest and field.
The man's form is born a-new
And his days are his to rue.

About the Author:

Bryan C. Laesch calls himself the Omni-Genre Writer, despite some evidence to the contrary. He writes in every genre and has written in every style...that he likes. His main interest lies in Gothic horror as it allows for a unique combination of genres, including romance, fantasy, sci-fi, mystery, erotica, action, and Christian. He also blogs about MBTI and owns the t-shirt business Transcendent Tees.

Website/Blog: Brain C. Laesch Instagram: @bryanclaesch













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Random Voodoo | Lori R. Lopez

Half Past Forever | Lori R. Lopez

A pigtailed creature, a mere wisp of a thing, halted before the carton of simple cloth dolls on a low-lying shelf at the Secondhand Store. Just the right height for an inquisitive girl—too low for most adults to pay much mind; to give a wonder about who might craft what appeared to be a box of Voodoo Dolls! Questions better left unspoken. The child lifted a dolly off the stack, plain, ungarnished, and felt an immediate surge of contact. A jolt of affection. The doll had chosen her, that was how it seemed.

"You don't want this. It ain't finished."

A woman plucked the object from her grasp.

Poppy heard a silent squeal and shouted
"Give it back! You made her cry!"

Reaching for the doll, her hand was snatched.
"Come along, Poppy. I can make you a doll.

Something nicer. Those are rags. Who knows where they been!" Nanny-Nette tugged in disapproval. Poppy refused to be towed from the aisle. "I don't want another doll. I want this one! It's special!" A squall of protest.
"Aw, let her have it. No charge."

Sighing, Nanette scowled at the Shopkeeper. "Thanks, Ben." She swallowed her distaste. "Are you sure? It isn't done. No face or hair. And not a stitch of clothes! We could look for somethin' else, or I'll make you one a whole lot prettier." A kind offer, but the child yelled "It won't be the same!" And that was that. No sense arguing. "A gift." Ben came around the counter, placing the doll in Poppy's arms. "I can fix her myself," the girl claimed. At home she drew black eyes, scary lips. Her Grammy shivered at the sight.

What a creepy little thing! She phoned Ben to ask who made the doll. "Mama Simone. Folks called her a Witch. She's gone now. Had a following in the Woods, did random acts of Voodoo. They all perished from a fire. Too many candles." Frightening. Poppy would whisper to Ugly Sue. Mean girls ran home upset, like the doll could grant her wishes! She didn't know it was her, or that she was an Orphan. Foster Parents had died when she got mad as a Toddler. Nanny-Nette vowed to keep her happy. Though the doll never smiled... Poppy always got her way.

They're approaching, encroaching Which hour they will come unknown. Living on edge your life, your thoughts Can only dangle in spidery suspense Existence pared down to essential items The bare bones and basics of survival This is our limit, all we can cope with and Fret over, in addition to that ominous Warning—nerves and senses tuned

Why won't the advancers leave us alone? I still dare such innocent callow fantasies You have to forgive the young their follies There is too much yet to learn, figure out Experience. We cannot imagine how much We don't understand. I remember Grasping a glimmer of light in my palm Now and then a fleeting hope escapes... A wisp of will or Will-O-Wisp

Either way, its candle burned out. Alert I squint at the horizon, vision scathed by Distance, particles on the wind. Penning A verse. Longing for the goggles cracked By a fall. So easy to slip and tumble down Gritty rocken slopes. Impossible to stand Your ground when it refuses to stay In one place. A low eerie warble reaches Cold ears. Or some form of rumble

My heart does a wild dance in my chest I can hear them, not just feel! Whatever Whoever, they must be near. Panic throttles My voice. I am the Watch, responsible for Notifying the others. Always a misfit I choke Then croak "Wake up!" An inaudible yell Dutifully entrusted to sound the alarm My throat is clenched, choked with terror I imagined this moment over and over

The arrival, breaking our intense wait
Providing clarity to theories, whispers
The gnaw of curious natures. What if
The ground-shakers trample us? Tear us
To shreds? Devour us with sharp enormous
Teeth? Surround, conquer, enslave?
Half Past Forever....any minute I will glean
The fey, unavoidable, excruciating answer—
But my family may die in their dreams.

Dusk | Lori R. Lopez

There's a sinister loneliness as Dusk descends, replacing the dregs of Day with Night. Smudging every surface not illuminated, how an ink-spill crosses the paper's white...

Conveying a change in mood and temper, a quickening of pulses and bracing of nerves. Transforming the scenes from everyday life into stark mistrust and hairpin curves!

Yet this is the period I feel the safest — when it's quiet and calm; no harbingers tread who work Nine to Five in a clockwork domain for the joy of inflicting fear or dread.

Woes and tribulations. Dinosaur dilemmas that trap you in Tar Pits and rob your health, reduce you to bone, a series of numbers, and judge you on status; your level of wealth.

After Dusk I am freer to relax and unwind, forget till the Dawn what threats lie in store, when the wily set traps to crush limbs and souls, and I hunker in fright of what lurks at my door!

Some Monsters stalk boldly in broad daylight. Those are the kind to nail boards and keep out. I'm less scared of ones found in movies and books.

It's the others who fill me with terror and doubt.

Give me Nocturne when Time is less glaring, and Stars wink down like they know our name. While any trepidation the shadows contain can be softened by the amber hue from a flame.

I savor these moments of relative peace, well-aware underneath, idle hours won't last. Just let me enjoy the dark while I may, ere they haul us away for sins of the past.

We all share fault in someone's perspective, in an age where lives can be canceled at whim. I make worries await the last traces of umbra, faded from sight by the morning glim...

And count down each minute to Dusk's return, breathing easier the instant Evenshade arrives — fending off the leagues of Popular Opinion; plucking out the blades of Society's knives.

Words are now examined under Microscopes, and Freedom is a topic of ceaseless debate, the most contended and defended Definition; with a cacophony of meanings to litigate.

Insomnia keeps rising, faster than the Seas, and the Weather's become a horrifying beast. Still I cherish the Gloaming, snug in my haven, which I haven't been kicked out of, at least.

Doomed Horizon | Lori R. Lopez

A tall, grim, bone-white Lighthouse blinked—stark flashes; beams of hope as I dragged myself ashore, waterlogged, battered from an abrupt squall whipped out of nowhere, capsizing my boat midday, a sunny afternoon. Swept by king-sized waves, virulent winds off the charted course, into a dark pitch of sea toward my doom: a remote isle that existed on no map.

Foggen particles seemed to float from the brine—gray as Mushroom Broth, thicker than Potato Soup. Whatever texture and consistency, a carnivorous mist arrived in a swooping fell: a plague of organisms bent on pillage, intent upon a bitter biting assail that wounded a soggy salt-crusted carcass with every unheard chomp in a forward-roiling maelstrom of potent famished lust for meat.

Near-drowned, I hugged the beach in gratitude—only to plead for mercy my next breath as needles of ire stabbed through cloth and flesh. Piquant raging lances of redhot keening wrath, a firestorm's sharpest cinders alighting. The ashes and embers of contempt held bated until an expulsion of over-inflated past-the-limit temperament erupted. I weathered that surge, that caustic upheaval.

Gnawing, ravaging down to the marrow's depth—while I scrabbled for sanctuary in coarse but kind granules of sand. Skin and soul tattered, I burrowed then lay in the grave, bleeding, my adventurous will sorely shattered. The rumpus of devil-drops flowed like a rampant scourge of minute Sea Monsters spouted from the lips of a whirlpool. A foul breath gusted in rancor, encircling the island.

Woozy, terrified and faint, I held my breath—suffocating. Chewed up and spat out. Awakened from a bed of bones, I no longer felt the agonizing stings. I glimpsed a Ghost Lighthouse vanish, then reappear, composed of stardust beasts that twinkle in moonlight and feed on mariners, ocean creatures. Hunting in clouds of brume. Aided by tempests, gales. Worse than Pulgas and Piranhas!

These parasitic glowbugs guard what is now my haunt, if not my home. 'Tis their domain, their habitat, not mine. I was the Invasive Species, an unnatural threat for their swarm to eradicate. Here I pace, sharing a cursed beach, a fertile scrap of soil collected on a rock. Together we roam—

an eternal loop — watching the Sun rise and set. My fate the same as others who perished....

Navigating the sky, the seas, in a quest for fame or freedom. Crossing a doomed horizon.

Security | Lori R. Lopez

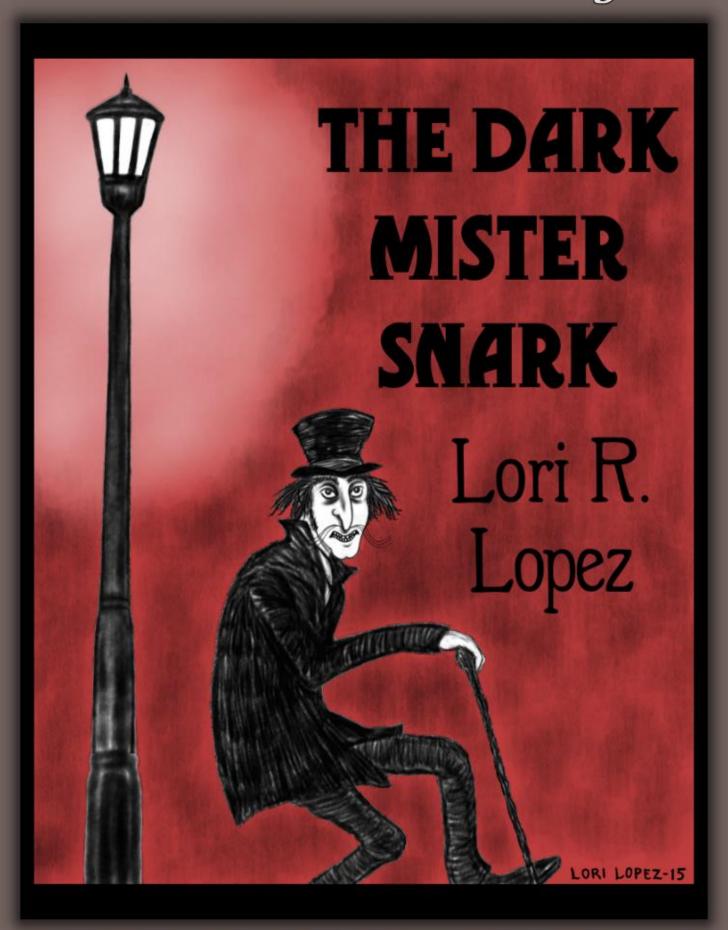
Looking back at the destruction and loss, the charred smoking ruins of a calamitous night, growing smaller. Framed by a rear window, mind and heart preserve the image like a snapshot carried along, tucked neatly away, forever reminding that dreams are fragile creatures; that Security always borders on Insecurity; and that trauma, ravages and horrors take far more time to heal than leave behind. But I am free, cleansed of the family's motives, their secret united scorn and disapproval. I was on to their tactics, the polite undermining lessons and relentless scrutiny. The haughtiness of rules for my own good, when I could never fit in, never be "good" enough to please. Yet I do not blame my rescuers, who placed me there, behind the doors of that confinement. A jail-house, hiding its restraints. Clean and shiny on the surface. Cheerful, serene, a model home to visitors, outsiders. I knew better. I always do. The Carringtons were to blame, not me. I wanted to like them, truly I did. The hatred grew. Uncontrollable... The fumes ran wild. Molten rage fed the flames, burning bridges, unlocking the cage, melting the key. My gaze a cold inferno, a deadpan stare—absent sentiment, a spark. Masked by candor, bold sarcastic wit. And now, the best part of the firestorm: I can be adopted again.

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, Space & Time Magazine, Oddball Magazine, Bewildering Stories, Illumen, Altered Reality Magazine, California Screamin' (the Foreword Poem) and more. Books include *The Dark Mister Snark*, *Odds And Ends*, *Leery Lane*, and *Darkverse: The Shadow Hours*. Lori has been nominated for the Elgin and Rhysling Awards.

Facebook: Lori R. Lopez

Beware! Mister Snark is lurking...



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!



Chilling Collections: A Peek Inside the Fortress of Horrortude!

I'm Terry M. West, the hardest working horror author you've never heard of. I'm also a very passionate collector of horror memorabilia and I've turned my love of collecting into a video podcast!

'The Horror Collector hosted by Terry M. West' is available as a Youtube channel and is currently up to episode five. It's an audience participation show as viewers are encouraged to submit pics and videos of their most cherished items.

I will often discuss items on my #horrorbucketlist and episodes generally have a theme. For example, episode three focuses on Elvira, Mistress of the Dark and the many collectible items inspired by her.

Now, I'd be hard pressed to discuss my favorite horror items. I will list the three properties that I've collected the most of.

First, as you may have guessed by the *Elvira* wall in my office (aka Fortress of Horrortude!) I have diligently collected Elvira memorabilia since my late teens. I've followed Elvira (Cassandra Peterson) since her beginnings as the Movie Macabre hostess.

My goal with the *Vampirella* portion of my collection is to acquire every issue of the silver/bronze Warren series. All 113 issues. I'm currently at 28 issues with the lowest being issue #2.



Night of the Living Dead stands as my favorite horror movie ever. I've collected soundtracks, autographs, paperback adaptations and comics. I've had the pleasure of meeting most of the cast as well as George Romero.

As far as my favorite pieces within those top 3? Watch my dang show and find out! The current Elvira episode covers an item that I guarantee is on most Elvira collectors' bucket list.





Here's the press release with all the 'deets' as the kids say!

Terry M. West is a veteran horror writer with both traditional and indie credits. He's also a lifelong horror fan and memorabilia collector. He's collected thousands of horror related items since his youth and he's become a bit of an expert on the subject.

Terry has turned that love of horror collecting into a Youtube video podcast. *The Horror Collector* is a project that he's been developing for the last two years. Originally conceived as a book project, Terry decided to go the Podcast route instead. It gives him the opportunity to show off his own collectibles and he invites viewers to submit pictures or videos of their own cherished horror items for him to spotlight.

"Collectors love showing off," Terry maintains. "I love showing off. My show gives them that opportunity. I add a bit of background info on the items if it's needed and I'm able. If you learn something new or interesting about a certain collectible, all the better."

Terry also gives advice on how to collect, what to look for in an item, what to avoid when buying, and little tricks of the trade.

Broadcasting from Terry's home office in Southern California (which he refers to as his Fortress of Horrortude!) and surrounded by his own dark toys, *The Horror Collector* is currently on its third episode.

The show has covered such items as Grindhouse pressbooks, Horrorclix, movie tie-ins, signed Boris Karloff items, Ed Wood movie stills, Aurora monster kits, Funko horror pops, and the third episode is devoted mostly to the career and collectibles of Elvira, Mistress of the Dark.



You can find <u>The Horror Collector Youtube channel here</u>. There's also a <u>Horror Collector page</u> on Terry's website.

About The Horror Collector and Author:

Terry M. West is an American horror author. His best-known works: What Price Gory, Transfer, Turning Face, Car Nex, and his Night Things series. He was a finalist for 2 International Horror Guild Awards and he was featured on the TV Guide Sci-Fi hot list for his YA graphic novel series, Confessions of a Teenage Vampire. Terry was born in Texas, lived in New York for two decades and he currently hangs his hat in California. He lives with his family: wife Regina, son Terrence, and three doggies. Terry is also a passionate horror collector. He has an entire room devoted to books, videos, comics, magazines, and all things Elvira, Mistress of the Dark, and Night of the Living Dead. He is currently trying to complete his magazine run of the bronze age Vampirella title.

Website: www.terrymwest.com
Instagram: @terrymwest.com



Liver | Jim Mountfield

As usual, breakfast was difficult.

I picked at my bowl of bran flakes, banana slices and skimmed milk, while trying not to look across the table at the mound of fried bacon, fried sausage, fried onions, fried bread and fried black pudding that my father was digging into. Also, I tried not to listen to the sounds of him chomping and chewing.

Suddenly, his jaws stilled and he squeezed a few words past the fried food in his mouth. "There's a cow that's broken a leg." He chomped and chewed for another minute, then stopped and added, "Stupid bitch."

I almost replied facetiously, "A bitch is a dog. Why'd you say it was a cow?" But I held back because he didn't like being mocked about the frequent inconsistencies and inaccuracies in his speech. Such mockery always led to trouble. He'd accuse me of being a suburban snob who was ashamed of his country roots. And then he'd gloat: "Well, you're not so high and mighty now. Lost your fancy job. Lost your fancy house. Lost your fancy wife. Had to come back to sponge off my charity, eh? Eh?"

So instead, I asked, "Is a cow breaking a leg serious?"

That annoyed him anyway. "It's serious enough for Robinson the vet to come out," he growled and looked at me as if I was simple-minded. He looked at me that way a lot. "Plus, Charlie Harris."

I didn't know who Charlie Harris was, but didn't ask any more questions. My father peppered his conversation with names from the local agricultural community—names of hill farmers, shepherds, tractor-men, dyke-builders, veterinarians, animal-feed suppliers, fertilizer suppliers, machinery dealers—to which I couldn't put faces. They worked long hours in remote places and I never met them. My father seemed to know them all via a telepathic network accessible only to farmers.

Then I prepared sandwiches of brown bread, low-fat margarine, salad, brie and a smear of cranberry for my packed lunch. My father watched from the kitchen table while he forked his breakfast into his mouth. He looked disgusted. Pan-grease trickled down his chin. Ignoring him, I went out and fetched my bicycle from one of the sheds. A piteous moaning that I assumed was the broken-legged cow came from a stall at the shed's far end. Ignoring that too, I climbed onto the saddle and set off for my new workplace in the town two miles away, the Tesco supermarket where I stacked shelves all day.

From whizz-kid accountant to supermarket shelf-stacker in the space of two years... Well, I thought, I could've ended up worse. I could be in prison right now.

When I arrived back that evening my father wasn't in the farmhouse. A ceramic serving platter that hadn't been used since the days when my mother was alive sat on the kitchen table. Heaped on it was a huge gummy thing whose surface glistened with blood and whose edges oozed over the rim and dripped more blood onto the tabletop. For a moment I didn't know what it was. Then I remembered seeing liver on sale in the butcher's shop in the town, one of the few old-style family shops that Tesco hadn't put out of business. I realized this was liver too, only the most humongous portion of it I'd ever encountered.

The name of the town butcher's shop was Harris and Sons. I realized the Charlie Harris my father had mentioned came from there.

"Aye," said my father when he appeared. "Once Robinson put that daft cow out of her misery I got young Harris to carve her up. He's filled the freezer with cuts of meat. But the liver—the liver's the best part. I thought I'd bring it in and cut off a big chunk to eat now." He paused and I noticed how sly his expression was. "Aye, it looks delicious. How can anyone *not* like liver?"

He was challenging me. And I thought, *right!* I'd take the old bugger up on this. So instead of eating the teriyaki chicken I'd planned to have that evening, I sawed a chunk off the cow's liver for myself too and fried it. Then I ate it with noodles.

Liver and noodles... Weird, but not entirely bad.

The next morning when I entered the kitchen my father was eating his usual fry-up, though the sausages, bacon, onions, bread and black pudding had been pushed to one side to make room for a slab of fried liver. His eyes met mine and again I realized he was challenging me. I opened the fridge. Taking up most of one shelf was a mass of crumpled tinfoil, containing a segment my father had cut from the liver before sticking it in the freezer with the cow's other parts. I peeled back the tinfoil, carved a segment from the segment, sliced it, fried it and added it to my sandwiches.

At lunchtime, while I munched my sandwiches in the staffroom at Tesco, I decided that liver and brie was not as bad a combination as I'd feared.

That evening I stuck the dongle into my laptop—my father's farm had no wi-fi because he believed everything to do with computers and the internet was idiotic—and looked up some liver recipes online. When I entered the kitchen, my father was there but hadn't eaten dinner yet. I noticed a red trickle below his lips, ending with a red bead that hung on his chin.

I pointed and said, "You're bleeding."

He rubbed the blood away. "That must have been when I was shaving."

"You shave in the evening?"

He got grouchy. "Well, I've spent all day spreading dung on the fields. What's the point of shaving *before* I get splattered with shite?"

His stubbly jaw didn't look like it'd been shaved, but I dropped the topic. Instead, I said, "Tonight I'm going to make a dish called Boxty. And because I'm feeling generous I'll make enough for two."

"Box what? Oh no. I'm not eating any of that hippy crap you call food."

"Relax. Boxty isn't a hippy dish, it's an Irish one. Potato pancakes served with bacon, cabbage and liver." "Liver?"

"Aye, liver."

Later, while we sat at the table and I heard the old man chomping contentedly, at times greedily, I realized this was the first time in years we'd eaten the same food together.

After that we acquired new eating habits. I abandoned the bran-flakes and ate liver for breakfast. I put liver in the sandwiches I made for my lunch break at Tesco. In the evenings I cooked for both of us: liver and bacon hotpot, liver and onion kebabs, liver and mushroom in a rosemary-flavoured pie. My father took seconds. He took thirds. I'd never seen him so mellow, so well-tempered. And strangely, no matter how much liver we hacked off the block in the freezer, it didn't seem to get smaller. It retained its proportions even as it kept giving.

Occasionally my father would do something unexpected. He'd smile at me. Not a weak smile, but a proper smile where the lips parted and showed teeth, though mostly false teeth in his case. A smile that revealed shreds of liver snagged between those teeth.

One night I woke up and got out of bed to visit the toilet. When I stepped onto the landing, I saw a glow coming up the stairwell. A light was on downstairs. I descended and found that the door to the utility room was half-open and the room's fluorescent ceiling-light was shining behind it. I went through. Set against the opposite wall was a chest freezer. Its lid was pushed up and a figure in pajamas leaned over its rim, belly pressing on the rubber seal. The figure's upper half was dipped into the icy space inside and for a moment all I saw of it were its haunches, legs and bare white feet.

Then the figure wrestled itself up out of the freezer and turned towards me. It was my father. In his hands he held the package containing the cow's liver, half-unwrapped, and I could see how a fresh chunk had been removed from it. This chunk hadn't been cut off, but bitten off —for the liver displayed a new semi-circular hole, rimmed with little indentations made by teeth, false and real.

Globs of frozen raw liver protruded from my father's mouth. His chin and cheeks were smudged with crystallised blood so that he looked like someone had drunkenly applied lipstick to him.

Despite the liver-globs and blood-smudges, I could see he was smiling.

I turned and fled. I ran past the stairs and out through the farmhouse's back-door. Immediately past that back-door were a half-dozen stone steps. Every day of my childhood I'd gone up and down those steps and I thought I knew them by heart. I knew, for instance, that the second-top step was slightly higher than the others. But tonight, I forgot about that step's irregularity. When my foot went down it and didn't land where I expected it to land, I lost my balance. I lurched down the remaining steps and my left foot struck the ground heavily and at a skewed angle. Pain seared up my left leg and I toppled over.

The pain didn't lessen while I lay on the ground. It got worse. I groped along the leg and touched a thin, sharpended thing sticking up through a warm, wet patch in the fabric of my pajama-bottoms.

Then I fainted.

When my senses returned I'd been carried upstairs and laid on my bed. Pain still pulsed out of my broken leg, but it didn't overwhelm me so much that I couldn't focus on other things in the room. I noticed, for example, that a man was sitting in a chair beside my bed.

"Aye," said the man, who was obviously a doctor, "that was a nasty old fall you had. But don't worry. I'll give you a jag of something to, uh, take your mind off it."

As the doctor lifted a syringe and a small bottle out of his case, it occurred to me that his voice had sounded very much like that of Robinson the vet. I shifted my head on the pillow to get a better look at him. Yes, it was Robinson the vet. He flashed a smile to reassure me. But I wasn't reassured by the glimpse I got of red slivers filling the cracks between his teeth.

And I noticed somebody else in the room with us, standing near the door, too far away for me to see if his teeth were clogged with liver-particles too. This other person was a young man and he bore a resemblance, a family resemblance, to old Harris who owned the butcher's shop in the town.

About the Author:

Jim Mountfield was born in Northern Ireland, grew up there and in Scotland, and has since lived and worked in Europe, Africa and Asia. He currently lives in Sri Lanka. His fiction has appeared in Aphelion, Blood Moon Rising, Death Head's Grin, Flashes in the Dark, Hellfire Crossroads, Horla, Horrified Magazine, the Horror Zine, Hungur, Schlock! Webzine and Shotgun Honey.

Blog: Blood and Porridge

The Feeling | Jen Gardner

When I wake, my teeth are throbbing again. I run a troubled tongue across their edges, and no longer recognize them as my own. Too many bones in a crowded grave. Death, always close to the surface these days, is a craving that drives me and turns my stomach sour. Hungry teeth. I want them gone. *You chose this*, chides the sad, sanctimonious voice inside my head. *Get out*, I growl at it. Yes, I chose it. The way a child would snatch at a candy bar if it dangled in front of its sticky face. I had no idea what I'd be unwrapping. Can you consent to a future you have no possible way of comprehending? An eternal one at that?

Absently, I run a finger across the twin scars punctuating the soft skin of my neck. I remember what it was like to feel a pulse there, not so very long ago. God, how I miss it. I never knew how much my world revolved around that rhythm until I was filled with nothing but silence. Agony is the feeling of blood thickening to sap in limp veins. It is the acrid stench of stale air in expired lungs. I'm so tired of the quiet.

It's shockingly easy to find a surgeon on the dark web willing to experiment on someone like me. There are hundreds of them, would-be-Dr.-Frankensteins, eager to slip a gloved finger into the thorax of the undead. If it takes, I'll be the first of my kind with my very own heartbeat. Maybe it's vain, to want what for others is the only divide between cognition and cadaver. For me, it's superfluous. What sustains the living will serve as my pulsating scrapbook of sorts, a physical beating memory of what I used to be in all my squalid human splendor. I miss edging toward a finite end. I miss fearing it. And as the scalpel slices into me, I feel it. Stronger than the alluring scent of death that pervades my dreams. More painful than the hunger that tugs at my aching teeth. I feel hope.

About the Author:

Jen Gardner lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota with her partner and dog. As a young adult, she started writing as a way to process grief, and has drawn further inspiration from long, dark winters spent in Southeast Alaska. More of her work can be found in *Grim and Gilded*.



Rod Serling Writing School | *Jonathan Worlde*

I opened the door to greet the sales representative from the Rod Serling School of Writing. Mr. Gregg stood awkwardly on the stoop. He attempted a smile but his expression indicated he'd rather be somewhere else. He was a tall, thin, Icabod Cranish type of fellow with oddly bulging eyes. Rather than wearing a suit and tie, he wore an ironed oversized sweatshirt that said, Bugs R Us, with a stencil of a cockroach; baggy black jeans, and white high-top Converse sneakers. I figured maybe his outfit was in line with the Rod Serling theme of weirdness. I invited him into the family room, which was typical late 1960's middle class with the ubiquitous painting of a tall ship at sea and the graduate photos of my older brothers on the mantel.

Dad had glasses of lemonade on the coffee table and was waiting to hear Mr. Gregg's spiel. My Dad, love his soul, would do anything for me, his only daughter. He'd taught me to ride a bike when I was five, and to shoot skeet when I was fifteen. He got me my Mossberg 500 pump-action when I turned sixteen, and came to all my girls' wrestling events during the season. But I objected to his nosing his way into my dream of a writing career and the decision to use my own hard-earned summer cannery money on this school—he always had to act like he knew everything.

I'd been seeing ads in magazines and on TV for the Rod Serling School of Writing for some time. I was raised on black and white shows of Twilight Zone, Thriller, and The Outer Limits. I had filled out the aptitude test, written a short story, and sent off everything in the hopes of being selected and having my writing reviewed by my hero Rod Serling.

Sitting across the table from us, his long legs at an uncomfortable oblique angle, Mr. Gregg spent a few minutes explaining how fifty thousand students were enrolled in the correspondence course around the United States, and what a great opportunity it was for an aspiring writer to have the chance to have her work reviewed by Rod Serling and other professionals in the television industry, which by the way was desperate for aspiring writers like myself. He pulled a number of binders out of a briefcase, explaining how these were the kind of insider trade workbooks that all enrolled students were entitled to.

Dad let him say his piece and then leaned into him.

"Now you don't really mean to tell us that Rod Serling himself is going to be reviewing Katie's stories, do you?"

Mr. Gregg's expression changed from nervously optimistic to perturbed. "Not always, of course, because Mr. Serling himself is naturally very busy, but I assure you his assistants from the industry will be reviewing every piece."

Dad parried and jabbed. "And by assistants from the industry just exactly who are you referring to?"

"I mean, you know, people whose job it is to edit and assist Mr. Serling in the school."

I timidly interjected, "Can you give us any names? Anyone who we might have seen their credits somewhere?"

Mr. Gregg was sweating now, his face had taken on an unhealthy pallor, and I noticed a reddish rash developing around his neck.

"I don't have any with me directly, no, but I can provide..."

Dad: "Isn't it so that at best you probably have college students reading and editing and that Rod Serling will never see anything Katie writes?"

Mr Gregg looked at his shoes for a moment, marshaling an answer. I was surprised by how Dad was exposing this apparent scam.

"And we've got some college professors signed up too."

I saw victory in Dad's eyes.

"So unpublished students and second-rate professors will be reading Katie's work, rather than Rod Serling or, let's see here, Richard Matheson and other people listed in your advertising? And for that we're supposed to pay a thousand dollars for a two year commitment?"

I was super-impressed by Dad's relentless interrogation.

Mr. Gregg was beginning to tremble, and his skin was bursting out in ugly boils. Even his eyes seemed to be pulsating. I could see Dad realized he'd made his point and better lay off. "I thank you kindly for coming all this way, but we'll be passing on your school. Katie can take correspondence courses from the college right here in town at a much better rate."

"But...I have a wife and kids to feed!"

"Thanks but no thanks."

As Dad and I stood to shake his hand, Mr. Gregg was gripped by some kind of seizure. He let out a tortured noise, sounding more like a night owl than a human, and suddenly his skin erupted, cracking along invisible seams. He stood to his full height, head bumping the ceiling. With one motion he discarded his outer clothing and skin, like an exoskeleton. A giant praying mantis-like insect stood before us. Dad gestured me to get back.

"Katie, I'll hold him off, you go call the police."

The creature jumped for Dad, horrible slashing mandibles reaching for his throat. Dad grabbed Grandpa's Marine Corps sword off the wall and was able to keep the blade between him and those gnashing scythes. I ran for my room, grabbed my Mossberg from my closet and pumped three shells into it. Returning to the struggle, where Dad was being overpowered by the monster's sheer strength, I hollered,

"Dad, roll away now!" Just as he did so I discharged buckshot into that creature's head and torso. It exploded in a horrible green goo splattering the white walls, our furniture and piano and both of us.

My ears were ringing. Dad got up from the floor and put his arm around me. Shaken, we pondered the mess of vile carapace, steaming viscous innards and turgid liquids befouling the carpet.

Dad squeezed me warmly. "That's my gal."

I hugged him back. "That's my dad!"

About the Author:

Jonathan Worlde is the fiction byline of Paul Grussendorf, who is an attorney representing refugees and a consultant to the UN Refugee Agency. Paul Grussendorf's legal memoir is *My Trials: Inside America's Deportation Factories*. (Available on Amazon). Jonathan Worlde's neo-noir mystery novel *Latex Monkey with Banana* was winner of the Hollywood Discovery Award.

Facebook: Paul Grussendorf

The Grin Grass | DJ Tyrer

Robert should've been careful where he stepped. Ever since he'd been a little child, he'd been warned, but one moment's carelessness was all it took. Robert had stepped on a patch of Grin Grin Grass and he hadn't stopped smiling since

Smiling. Such an innocent word. To be honest, Robert had never quite taken the threat of Grin Grin Grass seriously: step on it and grin away. What's so bad about that? If you step on a landmine, it's standard procedure to scatter your body parts about over a wide area and, then, die. But, smile?

It was awful! For a start, your jaw, your entire face, starts to ache. But, that's just the start. You can't eat and drinking is near-impossible. That's no fun after a few days.

Robert was wasting away. By now, he looked like a skeleton wrapped loosely in skin. A skeleton with a rictus grin.

"You'll be dead soon," said his mother, sadly, shaking her head. "Why couldn't you watch were you were going?"

Robert didn't try to reply: It's difficult to speak when your lips are locked into a manic grin.

His mother was right; he died soon after, still smiling.

"Well, he died happy," observed his brother as they nailed the coffin lid down on his still-grinning corpse.

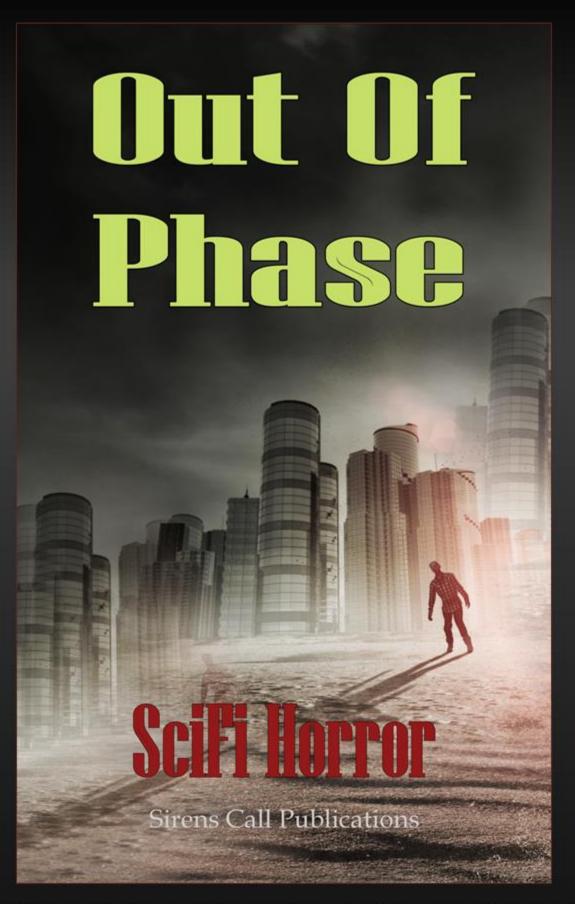
In fact, that assessment was far from accurate, for Robert had felt quite miserable in his final days, but people seldom bother to look below the surface and he was smiling.

Even in his grave, once all his remaining flesh had decayed away, leaving only bone, Robert continued to smile, grinning his way into eternity.

About the Author:

DJ Tyrer studied history at the University of Wales at Aberystwyth, edits Atlantean Publishing, and has been published in various anthologies and magazines, such as Chilling Horror Short Stories (Flame Tree), What Dwells Below (Sirens Call Publications), and issues of The Horrorzine, and Tigershark, as well as having a novella available in paperback and on the Kindle, The Yellow House (Dunhams Manor).

Facebook: DJ Tyrer
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AVAILABLE ON AMAZON, BARNES & NOBLE, KOBO, AND ITUNES

Slice of Life | Quinn Parker

Jasmine balled her fists, glaring at her husband, the hammer of her heart trying to smash him and that stupid clock to pieces.

"Damn it, Jerry, stop that!" she hissed through her teeth.

They'd both been there, in the kitchen, moving back and forth over the cracked linoleum, for longer than either could track. This is where they had their arguments. The kitchen served as both temple and Thunderdome, allowing them to cherish each other and pray over meals one day, then to throw pans and brandish knives the next.

But this? This was new.

Jerry swiveled his head loosely from her to the clock, disjointed and tired. Jasmine had no idea where Jerry had gotten the clock. Jerry had no idea when he'd gotten it, but supposed that was the point. He probably always had it. Or maybe he never did. Maybe he still didn't, and what he saw was just some kind of access to the clock itself, the way he could pound off to all the internet porn he wanted but didn't have a way to touch the people in the videos.

His right hand rested on the top of its marble frame, a thumb dangling down over the face, hovering just over the oddly warm hands, their wrought iron jabbing forward, as if to pierce the ether.

With him looking away, Jasmine had one maybe of a half-chance at getting him to stop this nonsense. She didn't want to do anything drastic. Just to reason with him.

She took a step closer.

His eyes twitched toward her without moving his head, thumb pushing the minute hand backward. A hollow carved itself into his center, draining him from himself, leaving a coldness, an emptiness, behind, a cold kind of empty that bore the terror of mountain winds, burying hikers in the snow. Across from him, Jasmine flickered, an old show viewed on a bad TV as her actions reversed her across the kitchen. He decided to push things further this time. Not just three minutes. No. He was going for fucking ten.

All fell still.

The front door creaked open.

Jasmine stepped into the room, looking at him with her mouth slightly open, as if on the verge of speaking, like she'd been about to talk and found herself interrupted. Her pearlescent teeth gleaming in the almost-light of their kitchen, which had barely two bulbs clinging to life out of five possible fixtures. Her right arm remained out of sight, her left at her side, watch in place on her wrist, as ever.

"Hi, Jerry," she said, gaze falling on the clock. "New clock?"

Did it matter what this was?

Jerry had relived this conversation a few times now. It didn't always play out the same way, but he knew how it would end. This would be argument sixteen.

Time to skip past that.

He wound the minute hand forward, himself hollowed, divested of its attachment to the space-time continuum, adrift in existence as she jittered and jerked forward, backward, side to side, like that girl from The Ring doing the Cha-Cha Slide, hair whipping around in a facsimile of anger.

Then it got interesting. Her head snapped to the side. Then her body bent double, she flung herself against the wall, head pulling away then slamming into the wall again, which spiderwebbed with cracks all along the faux-wood paneling. He couldn't hear any of this. Whatever happened here had not happened to him. It simply would happen, but it had not happened yet, despite already happening in front of him, and if he had had the chance to live these events, he would have already heard them. He would have had the experience to fill in this blank, but did not, so his stomach knotted, brow furrowing as he struggled to understand the scene in front of him without leaping to the obvious conclusion.

There were no others though. They'd fought often enough, occasionally throwing things, at times yelling or storming around, but never this. He wound forward to the point where she stopped moving. Her body lay still on the floor, chest no longer rising or falling. Without anyone else present, without seeing who did this, the only reasonable assumption deduced that he had, in fact, beaten his wife to death. Or, would have had done this, had the tumor of his existence not been cleanly excised from the timestream.

Jerry got up, knees creaking in protest, and examined her. Jasmine's skin remained smooth as ever, albeit sweaty now, pale in most places while bruised in others. Her watch ticked furiously on her wrist, each an exacting sound, tick with an enunciated CK, a cowboy's spurs before a duel, a gun's hammer cocking, a mechanical arm with fingers tapping impatiently against granite.

This offered a unique opportunity. A wonderful, horrible, once-in-a-lifetime moment that would come over and over and over again, if he so desired. He picked up Jasmine's arm, running his hands along its length. Strong, but supple. Good.

He all but unhinged his jaw, sinking his teeth into his wife and tearing off a chunk. It didn't occur until after he did this that he'd be consuming *raw* meat, which was just gross. Still. Human had an interesting flavor. Maybe each person would taste different based on their diet and experiences?

Jasmine's flesh was gamey with hints of cayenne and honey. Tasting her meat on his tongue brought a profound sense of longing, made him feel the years she spent in foster care. Eating her allowed him to see desolate halls when she remained one of the few unadopted children, just before the home shuttered its doors due to lack of funding. The spice of her hatred for her birth parents mixed with the sweet of her love for the family she found in friends throughout the years since.

Still, this was raw meat, hot from being recently alive, but blood spilled across his skin and god damn did this take a while to chew. He couldn't believe he'd debased himself to this. Why hadn't he thought to cut her apart and cook her first like a civilized person?

Eventually, Jerry forced himself to swallow that one-off hunk of his wife, staring down at the wound with disgust as it bled all over the floor. No, that simply wouldn't do.

Returning to the table, he rewound to unwound the cadaver, accidentally going back too far, to mid-argument while Jasmine glared at him.

'It's just a new clock,' Jerry had said, the words as much echo as memory 'It's for keeping time.'

"Cut the shit," she growled, her hand on her watch.

He flickered time forward again to post-mortem. Now came the real work. He got a contractor bag, laying that out under her as best he could because he didn't have those giant plastic tarp spreads from crime shows, not that it really mattered. Looking her over, Jerry thought about his favorite cuts of meat. Sure, ribs were great, but he couldn't do that to his wife's breasts. Not without ruining their sex life if he ever decided to let time restart its natural flow. Same applied to the rump. Pig shoulder always made for nice pulled pork, but this wasn't the right moment to go for the slow cooker. Besides, human was more like beef.

Ultimately, Jerry cut a few slices off her arm and a few off her calf, looking to compare, see if the muscle tasted different between body parts. He could probably look up more on which parts of a person to eat, and how to treat a human body, later on. The internet would obviously have a forum on this somewhere.

It really wasn't that long before he sat at the table beside a plate of sliced off human muscle tissue, accompanied by a bed of sauteed spinach, butternut squash, and—out of respect for the original—a nice Chianti. He'd done a damn fine job at cooking this, too, finding his meal savory enough to consider a business doing this. Wouldn't be hard to source new material, as it were.

He'd at least made enough for seconds, so he finished up, devouring every morsel he'd cooked along with a second, then a third, glass of wine. Okay, maybe Doctor Lecter wouldn't have indulged so heavily at the height of his career, but surely he'd lived it up a bit the first time around, right? Not like Hannibal could rewind time, either.

Jerry finished everything, and then some, sitting back in his chair with a contented sigh. The alcohol didn't take long to hit, even with the heavy meal. He found himself staring down at the mutilated corpse on the kitchen floor, gaze flicking over to the empty chair across from him.

Life offered all sorts of things that Jerry wanted. For a long time now, he wanted to try human meat, at least once. He'd wanted a chance to rewind, to fix things, to get a redo to have a more preferable outcome to his life's events. Above all, no longer fighting with his wife. Making it so they weren't screaming at each other three times a week.

This, though? No longer hungry, no longer facing his furious wife, his guard lowered by alcohol, he had to admit: this wasn't what he wanted. In fact, this sucked. If he didn't rewind, his wife's chair would remain empty. The house stood all around him, empty, silent, judgmental, its walls soaking up every ounce of this scene, a testament to how quickly he'd abused the ability to change time. Everywhere he looked, he could almost see her, a haze thickening the air, her presence lingering.

He couldn't—wouldn't—do this.

Jerry rewound the clock, watching the plate before him disappear, the spices, the pans, everything rearranging itself back in the cupboard. What he'd taken from his wife regrew, her body intact, then standing, reversing through whatever brawl they would have had, spurred by things he hadn't actually said yet, to the point where she stood in the doorway to the kitchen, then let go.

"Hi, honey," he smiled up at her.

Scowling, without reply, she reached over to the pin on her watch.

Click.

Click.

His hands hurt. Something thick, a cloth of some kind—a dish towel or a sock, maybe—had been shoved in his mouth. A pull on his cheeks suggested duct tape. Jerry still sat in his chair, but a thick rope wound around them, and he had to guess they were tied to the chair. His feet were, too.

Jasmine stood over him with a carving knife in hand.

"Fun fact: I remember everything. Even had an out of body experience while I watched you *eat me*, you sicko." His wife stared directly into his eyes with a fire so intense that Superman's laser vision would've tickled in comparison. "Something else? I got a new watch."

She held her wrist up. It had the same ornate, timeless design as the clock on the table, its miniature iron hands ticking with the intensity of a nail being hammered into a coffin.

"Tit for tat, Jerry. Or is it tick for tock?" She smirked a little. "Doesn't matter. You're all mine, now. And honey?" She grinned wide.

"I'm gonna take my time with you."

About the Author:

Quinn Parker is a novelist, screenwriter, cyborg, transwoman, and coffee lover from New Jersey who has published under nearly a dozen other names. She's best known for works like *Nova EXE* and *These Walls Don't Talk, They Scream,* as well as editing *Crash Code*. When not writing or working, she's probably playing video games or encouraging people to get pet chickens.

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Spelling | Patrick J.Wynn

It had been a long day and Father Ken sat down at the kitchen table. Sipping at his lukewarm coffee Father Ken closes his eyes and tries to ease himself into calmness. Today's funeral and service hadn't gone well. The family argued at the service over trivial things as their husband, brother, son lay in the casket. As the family bickered Father Ken noticed how little they actually grieved over the dead family members. As a priest he'd seen it all before, but it didn't make it any easier to take or understand. Finishing his coffee Father Ken stood up and placed the cup in the sink then turned to head toward his bedroom and a good long shower. Turning down the hall he stopped as a sound from outside reached his ears. The sound of banging on stone was one he had heard before and he knew what it was, kids. The church had in the past had problems with kids running through the cemetery. On some occasions the kids liked to damage the headstone, breaking them or turning them over. The disrespect angered Father Ken deeply.

"Damn kids." Father Ken growled as he threw open the door and ran toward the cemetery.

As he ran down the sidewalk next to the church the sound grew louder, and it was joined by the sounds of someone cursing.

"BITCH, FUCKING BITCH." The voice yelled.

Father Ken entered through the gates and ran toward the sounds. As he approached the scene was not what he expected. A single man knelt before the grave banging a rock against a headstone.

"BITCH. Oh, I'll get that BITCH." The man said as he slammed the rock against the headstone.

"Sir, please. Do not destroy the headstone." Father Ken said as he approached.

"Why not, it's mine." The man whispered.

It was then Father Ken noticed they were standing over the grave of the man he buried this morning.

The man rose from the grave and turned toward Father Ken. The man's face was gray, the eyes milky white, lips a dark smear where the lipstick the funeral home put on smudged.

"MY BITCH WIFE MISSPELLED MY NAME." The man growled. "SHE PUT UP THE HEADSTONE SO FAST AND DID THIS ON PURPOSE." The dead man screamed.

Father Ken backed up a step tripping over another headstone and falling to the ground. He sprawled on the ground not believing what his eyes took in.

"I'll get that bitch." The dead man giggled as he raised his hands that were covered in dirt from digging himself out of the grave. "I'll Get that bitch." He whispered as he stepped over Father Ken. "And when I get her, she'll pay."

About the Author:

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



The Street Doesn't Work | Radar DeBoard

The filthy hand shot out towards Stephen. He jumped to the right at the last minute, barely avoiding it. The grime covered appendage belonged to a homeless beggar occupying that part of the sidewalk. His filthy fingers would have certainly ruined Stephen's expensive, black business suit. The beggar looked up towards Stephen from where he sat, and their eyes met.

"The street doesn't work," the homeless man mumbled.

A look of confusion crossed Stephen's face, "What?"

The man coughed, clearing his throat, then pointed towards the black pavement, "The street doesn't work," he said much louder.

Stephen turned his head to see if there was anyone else witnessing this strange occurrence. He found no one on the street behind or in front of him. In fact, as he looked around, he didn't see a single person, not even a parked car. Stephen found it strange that there was no one on this street, especially in the morning, and on a workday no less.

"The street doesn't work!"

The homeless man's yell snapped Stephen's attention back to him. He was already late enough for work as it was, and this odd encounter wasn't helping him any. "Crazy vagrants," he muttered underneath his breath as he started walking down the sidewalk again.

Only a few steps and he had reached the end of the sidewalk. He took a pause as the homeless man continued to shout at him. He stepped down onto the black asphalt before him, ignoring the beggar's words. After a few steps forward he came to a sudden halt. For some reason his left foot seemed to be caught on something. He looked down, scanning for anything it could be stuck on. His eyes couldn't see anything keeping him from moving it. He tried again to bring it up, and found that it wouldn't budge from where it was.

Bending down slightly, he took a closer look at his well-kept, brown dress shoe. At that moment, he noticed the black substance attached to the side of it. It looked as though some of the asphalt had become stuck to his shoe. He took his hand swiping across the spot it was located, but it did not come loose. Licking his finger, he tried rubbing it off.

"Why won't this come off," Stephen muttered as the anger began to rise in him.

With one last effort, he stood up and yanked with all his might. The foot came loose, almost causing Stephen to lose his balance. His reflexes acted just fast enough for him to bring his left foot down and keep him from falling. His eyes stayed focused on the shoe that had not moved a single inch. "What the hell is going on!" he screamed.

Frustrated, he decided to move on to the sidewalk and cool down. This would prove to be harder than he thought, as now his right foot seemed to be stuck as well. His eyes moved to his right shoe, seeing that there was now a small amount of asphalt connected to it as well. A slight tingling of pain brought his attention back to the left foot. Now there were several small lines of the material sticking tightly to his sock. His eyes darted back and forth between the appendages; something was definitely wrong.

The asphalt had moved, with more of it now clinging to him. Sweat was forming on the sides of his face as panic began to take hold. The material had now made its way half-way up his right shoe. The same pain that he had felt in his left foot now shot into his right. He let out a scream as the sensation turned into an unbearable burning. He looked down to see that his ankles had been enveloped in black. In fact, his feet were no longer visible at all.

It was then that he realized the street seemed closer to him. The asphalt now making its way slowly up his calves made it finally click in his head. The asphalt wasn't trying to cover him, he was sinking into it. The pain grew even more intense as his knees began to disappear. His eyes darted back over his shoulder towards the sidewalk he had come from.

Seeing the homeless man still sitting there he cried out, "Help me!"

The man just sat there, watching as Stephen slowly sunk further into the street.

Now Stephen's waist was starting to disappear, leaving him more desperate. "Please God! Help me!" he cried to the vagrant.

The man lifted his hand straight up just above his shoulder. The pain brought tears into Stephen's eyes as half his stomach fell below the asphalt. Stephen looked back over his shoulder towards the man, as the tears now flowed freely.

"Please, I'll do anything! Just help me out of here!" his cries echoing off the nearby buildings.

The homeless man started to move his hand, waving at Stephen. A grin began to creep over the discarded man's face as Stephen sunk down to just below his chest.

Stephen could barely think as the pain had become the only thing he was able to focus on. He found it almost impossible to breathe as his chest became covered by the asphalt. "I don't want to die!" he managed to gasp out.

His chest finally became buried by the asphalt, squeezing the air out of his lungs. He was only able to take in quick, sharp gasps of air. His lips turned purple from the sharp decrease in oxygen. Now the asphalt was up to his neck, the pain pulsating through his head. It was so intense that his eyes were only able to see white, making them completely useless. His only sense that still functioned was his hearing. Which worked just enough to hear the new sound bursting through the air. A light chuckle penetrated Stephen's ears. The homeless man's chuckle broke into a full, uncontrolled cackle.

Stephen took his last breath through his nose, as it descended into the street. A final tear rolled down Stephen's doomed face. The homeless man continued his awful laughter as the last remains of Stephen's head disappeared into the street. No trace was left of him, and the street looked seamless. The asphalt was a smooth, level surface without any traces of blemishes. The vagrant's laughter began to decrease in volume, finally dying out. The man reached behind him, taking a large stick from the ground. He used it to balance himself as he stood and walked to the edge of the street. Just in time to watch as Stephan's shoes, wallet, and keys came rising to the street's surface.

Using the large stick, he began to pull each item towards him, so as to avoid stepping onto the street. He didn't know why the street did what it did, and he didn't care. To him every person who walked onto that street deserved to die. Bending down he scooped up the items, and made his way back to his spot. With one hand he grabbed a hold of a blanket. Pulling it aside it revealed a pile of several people's belongings. He tossed Stephen's things on top, then covered up the pile again.

All these business types were always in too much of a hurry. Too busy to listen to the beggars' warnings. They thought they were too good to even give him the time of day. That is, until the street took care of them. If they're too busy to listen, then they're too busy to live their lives. He thought of each soul taken by the street as a mercy killing. Plus, he got to keep the belongings that the street spit back out. It was a system he would exploit until the city got rid of the street or people actually started listening to him, whichever came first.

He sat back against the wall; his rotting teeth formed into a grin. His gruff, raspy voice uttering, "The street doesn't work."

The Usual Bet | Radar DeBoard

Naomi glanced around the bar at the crowd that was there. She looked back towards Agatha and shook her head. "There's no way," Naomi said in disagreement.

"Really?" Agatha replied with an inflection of hurt in her voice, "You don't think I could do it?"

"It'll be way harder than normal," Naomi said, taking a sip of her beer, "Half the guys in here don't even look like they're worth it."

"I don't know," Agatha smiled as she noticed a guy staring at her at the end of the bar. "I think there may be a few," she chuckled.

Naomi rolled her eyes, "Do you wanna bet on it or something?"

Agatha thought about it for a moment before nodding her head, "I think I do."

Naomi sighed, "So what are we betting?"

"The usual," Agatha said standing up, "I'll be back in a few."

Naomi took another sip of her beer as she watched Agatha walk up to the guy she had been scoping out and start talking to him. She watched for a good minute until Agatha turned to her and smiled. Naomi rolled her eyes as she brought up her phone and took a picture. She couldn't believe that Agatha was actually going through with it. Naomi sighed before downing the rest of her beer. She stood up and slowly walked over to Agatha who was still talking up the guy.

"Hey!" she shouted over all the noise, "I left my wallet in your car. I need your keys!"

Agatha sighed, "You're always forgetting stuff." She handed her keys off to Naomi and yelled, "Don't take too long!"

Naomi shot her a smile, "Don't worry, I won't."

She pushed her way through the drunken patrons of the crowded bar and outside into the parking lot. Naomi made her way over to Agatha's large van and unlocked it. She would never admit it to Agatha, but Naomi was glad that she had installed tinted windows. Naomi opened the back door and crawled inside. She shut the door as quickly as possible. Naomi checked out the window to make sure that no one was around, and breathed a sigh of relief when she didn't see anything.

Naomi smiled as she turned to the miniature altar she and Agatha had constructed. She unlocked her phone and selected the picture she had taken of the guy Agatha had been flirting with in the bar. Naomi began to quietly recite a chant and closed her eyes as the photo was slowly brought out of her phone and into the world. She opened her eyes and smiled at the photograph she had just created. Naomi reached into her pocket and pulled out the napkin that Agatha had slipped her that had a bit of the guy's hair in it. She placed the photograph and the hair on the altar then began the ritual.

"Lord Paymon I pray that you hear the calls of your humble servant. I bring to you a sacrifice to show mine and my sister Agatha's allegiance to you," she took the knife off the altar, "I give you my blood, as your humble servant." Naomi made a small cut across her hand with the knife and let her blood drip over the photograph and hair on the altar. She continued, "And I present the image and a piece of the sacrifice for you to enjoy." She bowed to the altar, "May it be to your liking."

The photograph and hair suddenly caught on fire and quickly burned up. Naomi slowly lifted her head and smiled. She moved out of the back and climbed into the driver's seat just as Agatha opened the passenger door.

"Did Paymon accept the offering?" Naomi asked.

"Yup," Agatha smiled, "He dropped dead right in the middle of the floor." She winked at Naomi, "I think you know what that means."

"Yeah, yeah," Naomi grumbled as she turned the engine on, "I'll get the next two sacrifices."

"What was that?" Agatha asked, "I think there's something else that goes along with our bet."

Naomi let out a deep sigh, "Alright! I'll get the next two child sacrifices." She glared at Agatha, "You happy?" Agatha smiled, "Absolutely! Now let's get out of this hellhole."

To Receive Power | Radar DeBoard

Jonathan had made his mind up on his goal for the new year. Simply put, he wanted more power. And not just a simple promotion at work or to get jacked at the gym. No, Jonathan wanted a different kind of power, one that was ancient and overwhelming in might.

Of course, for such a power, there were sacrifices that needed to be made. Jonathan knew the power would cost a great deal, but he was resolute in his efforts to gain it. So upon finding out that all he needed was the blood of a newborn, Jonathan didn't hesitate.

Drowning Away | *Radar DeBoard*

Marcus had said, "I wish I could just drown myself in whisky right now."

And that was the precise verbiage the genie used to grant Marcus' wish. Using all the magical powers bestowed upon it to create a massive tidal wave of some of the finest whisky in the state.

Normally, Marcus would have delighted in such a fine quality product, but it was difficult to do so when one couldn't breathe. A fact that Marcus quickly discovered as he was enveloped by the strong-smelling liquid. His last sight being the brown liquor as he slowly drowned in it.

About the Author:

Radar is a horror movie and novel enthusiast who resides in Wichita, Kansas. When he's not living in his own nightmares, he's writing horrifying tales to help others find theirs. He's had stories published by Gypsum Sound Tales, Eerie Lake Publications, Macabre Ladies Publishing, Black Hare Press, Black Ink Fiction, and Little Demon Publishing.

Facebook: Writer Radar DeBoard

Rope | Pamela K. Kinney

Eleven-year-old Jackie Lancer never understood her mother's fascination with the antique shops in Petersburg. There was nothing but junk in them. Mom did say if she went with her on this—what did she call it? — oh yeah, excursion, that she would take her to lunch at Saucy's Barbecue afterward, and then, they would hit Walmart near their house in Chesterfield to pick up Jackie's favorite pint of ice cream to eat while watching her favorite movie on Netflix. So, Jackie suffered the jaunt in silence. If she didn't, Mom would take back the promise.

Mom did that a lot.

Jackie stared out the passenger window as Mom pulled the car into a space in the parking lot. Her mother said this would be the last place they would check out, and then they would get lunch. Jackie hoped so, but she wouldn't hold her breath.

While her mother checked out a shelf cluttered with various figurines, the girl wandered around the store. She paused when she saw four dolls sitting side by side on a shelf in a corner. They all had dirty skins made of white plastic, and their clothes looked dingy. When she'd picked up one and brought it closer, she wrinkled her nose in disgust.

Phew! The stupid doll stinks.

It reminded her of the dolls dressed in old-fashioned clothing her grandma kept in a room at the back of her house. They smelled old and musty, too. Except those were porcelain, unlike these dolls in the shop. Grandma's dollies always gave her the creeps, as she thought their eyes followed her whenever she entered the room and walked around. She hated them.

Jackie tossed the doll back onto the shelf and continued her stroll around the shop. She came upon a dark corner and saw a box sitting on a shelf there. What it had inside thrilled her.

Oh, cool! It's a jump rope! I could use it for a jump rope. Okay, not the kind of jump rope sold in the toy section at Walmart, but still, she could use it for skipping rope. It lay coiled like a snake in a cardboard box. Putting her hands upon it, Jackie lifted it and took a couple of steps back, bringing the rope into the shop's light where she could see it better. The light appeared as dingy as everywhere else in the building. But it was better than the shadow-ridden spot she'd stood in a moment before.

The cordage no longer had the tan shading but was a washed-out gray, with black spots dappling here and there. A nasty scent wafted off it, and she made a face. She would need to clean it, though, before using it.

Jackie carried it over to her mother, who stood at the checkout counter. The sales clerk, an older African American woman with frizzy, short hair, wrinkly dark skin, and wearing green glasses, was punching the price of a figurine her mother was buying into the cash register. The woman paused when the girl halted beside her mother.

Jackie grinned. "Look, Mom. I found this rope in a box in a corner. It would make a great jump rope." She turned to the clerk "How much would it be?"

The cash register pinged, and the woman ripped off the receipt, handing both it and the

figurine in a bag to Mrs. Lancer. The woman leaned over the counter to peer at the rope.

She asked, "Where did you find it?"

Jackie pointed back into the room. "Back there, in some cardboard box in a dark corner."

The woman shook her head. "It's not ours. We don't sell anything like that. I admit it looks old, but even an old piece of rope isn't considered an antique."

Jackie clutched the rope tighter. "But I want it."

"How about you take it then? I think my boss must have mixed it with some antiques he'd bought at an estate sale and had forgotten to toss it in the garbage."

Jackie's eyes shone. "You're giving it to me for free?"

The woman nodded. "Yes, although your mother should soak it in bleach to get it clean before you use it. It smells filthy even from here." Reaching beneath the counter, she withdrew a big bag and handed it to Jackie's mother. "Here, stuff it in this."

Mrs. Lancer reached for the rope, but she paused as she sneezed. "Are you sure, Jackie? It stinks like something that died."

The girl pressed the rope to her chest. "I'm sure, Mom. Give me the bag!" It shocked Jackie at the snarl in her voice.

Mrs. Lancer stared down at her daughter, her eyebrows merging in a black arch over glittering dark eyes. She hissed at Jackie. "Don't you use that tone with me, Jacqueline Lancer, or you can forget about this rope. You know, the whole time you have been with me at the other stores, you haven't been on your best behavior after promising you would be. You don't need the rope and not the lunch at Saucy's or the ice cream either."

Knowing that she had screwed up, Jackie hung her head low and apologized. "I'm sorry, Mom." She glanced up with tears in her eyes.

Her mother hesitated, then the moment passed, and she took the rope from Jackie, gingerly slipping it into the bag. After handing the bag over to her daughter, she asked the clerk for a wet towel to wipe her hands, before using it to wipe Jackie's and the front of Jackie's clothing.

Her mother said, wrinkling her nose. "There's still muck besides a hint of stink on your top from that thing. We need to go straight home and get you cleaned up and put what you're wearing in the wash."

Jackie opened her mouth to whine about the lunch and ice cream, but she quickly closed it. Otherwise, her mother might tell her to forget the rope.

Jackie and Mrs. Lancer left the shop, and ten minutes later, they were heading home.

It took a few hours of her mother soaking the rope in a tub of bleach water, rinsing it off with water from the garden hose, before she stretched it out in the backyard to dry in the sun. While her mother did that, Jackie took a shower and tossed what she now admitted were 'awfully stinky clothes' into the washing machine.

Afterward, the girl ate a tuna fish sandwich and a salad, although she preferred fries instead.

"Mom," she asked, "can I use my jump rope after lunch?"

Her mother shook her head. "It's still wet. Give it until tomorrow. The hot sun should dry it, and the fresh air should take out the bleach smell."

After lunch, Jackie went to her bedroom and curled up in the old recliner her parents had given her when they bought a new one for the living room. It couldn't recline anymore but still proved good enough for her to sit in to read a book or color in her coloring books on a tray on her lap. Unable to settle down, she tossed the book she'd tried reading to the floor and slipped off the chair to kneel on her window seat. The window looked out at the backyard. Her chin nestled on folded arms, she stared through the glass at the rope stretched out like a sleeping snake soaking up the sun.

Almost nodding off, her eyes almost closing, that's when she heard them—the voices.

One of them was a man's. *I didn't do it, Master, I didn't steal the Mistress's necklace*! Next came the blows of flesh being struck, along with the man's cries and another's grunts.

Shaken, Jackie sat up and, pressing her hands against the window, stared down at the rope. More voices filled the bedroom, but she didn't see any of the people. Some of the voices pleaded while others cried and yelled. There were so many different tones of fear. Suddenly, the voices sounded angry, yelling about killing the white slave owners. A coldness filled her. Her heart raced, trying to break free of her chest. She wanted to run, and yet, she felt as if she'd been turned to stone, unable to move.

A man's baritone voice in a deep Southern accent suddenly sounded closer, curling into her ears. *Come on, play with the rope. It's waiting for you. It wants you to come to it. No, it needs you to do it.*

Her fear dissipated, and she nodded. "Yes, yes. I want to play."

Jackie left her room and crept down the stairs to the back door in the kitchen. She snuck past the doorway, where she saw her mother sitting in the living room, watching a game show on TV.

See, your mama won't know if you use the rope early. The invisible man snickered. You'll get away with it. Jackie wanted to correct the man that she never called her mother mama when a tall shadow appeared in front of her and swooshed into her before she could scream.

Something else looked out of Jackie's eyes as a wicked grin crossed her lips, and the possessed girl opened the door quietly and slipped out.

Mrs. Lancer lifted her cup of hot, milk-laced coffee as she watched the *Price Is Right*, wondering if the woman from Los Angeles would spin the wheel and win. Just as the cup's rim met her lips, something tightened around her neck. The coffee splashed across her lower face and blouse, burning her. But she didn't feel the pain as whatever circled her neck began tightening in a stranglehold, cutting off air. The mug hit the floor as she struggled,

trying to get a grip on whatever was trying to harm her. Harm her? It was choking the life out of her! Just before blackness filled her vision, she saw her daughter standing in front of her.

"It's okay, Mom. The rope's dry, and the man promised that if I let him hang a few people like you, I can use it as a jump rope and play." The girl's eyes narrowed and went all black. A man's laugh escaped her mouth as she grounded out with a deep, male voice, "You shouldn't have been mean to the girl and made her go with you to all those crappy stores full of old junk. You're gonna hang for that. Just like old white Master did to me."

Mrs. Lancer felt herself being lifted and carried out of the house to the backyard. She found herself floating up the old oak tree. The freed end of the rope around her neck looped around the most robust branch. Fortunately for her, she lost consciousness and never felt her neck snap as her body dropped.

Doctor Lancer arrived home from work at the hospital four hours later. He didn't find his wife or daughter anywhere in the house.

Maybe they're outside.

He opened the back door and stepped out. His daughter sat in a kneeling position on the grass under the oak tree, her face intent as she used a crayon in a coloring book. Above her head, his wife hung from a branch, dead. Shock and horror filled him.

Jackie quit coloring and looked up, flashing him a smile. "You need to bury Mom in the backyard." Her smile dropped, replaced by an ugly look. Her eyes turned black and her face molding into a masculine mask, as a man's voice came out of her mouth. "Do it quickly. Otherwise, I'll add you to the list of those white people I'm gonna hang."

Article in the *Progress-Index*, June 13, 2021:

Doctor John Lancer was arrested for the alleged killing of his wife, Lily Lancer, and the deaths of four local, prominent people in the Petersburg community yesterday. The bodies were discovered buried in the same yard. There is no reason why he did this, although this reporter heard from sources that the man claimed his daughter was possessed and the spirit had forced him to hang the people in an oak tree in his backyard. He claims though, that he never hung his wife, that the possessed girl did it. The police report that they are still investigating this affair while the Petersburg Courthouse has set Lancer's first trial date for September 11th. The Lancers' eleven-year-old daughter, Jackie, has been placed in foster care for now until they locate relatives. The girl was upset that the police had taken away the rope, claiming that the man told her it was hers to keep. This reporter assumes that the man she mentioned was her father.

As an added report to this bizarre murder case, the police are searching for whoever might have taken the rope from the hangings placed in their evidence locker, as it has gone missing this morning.

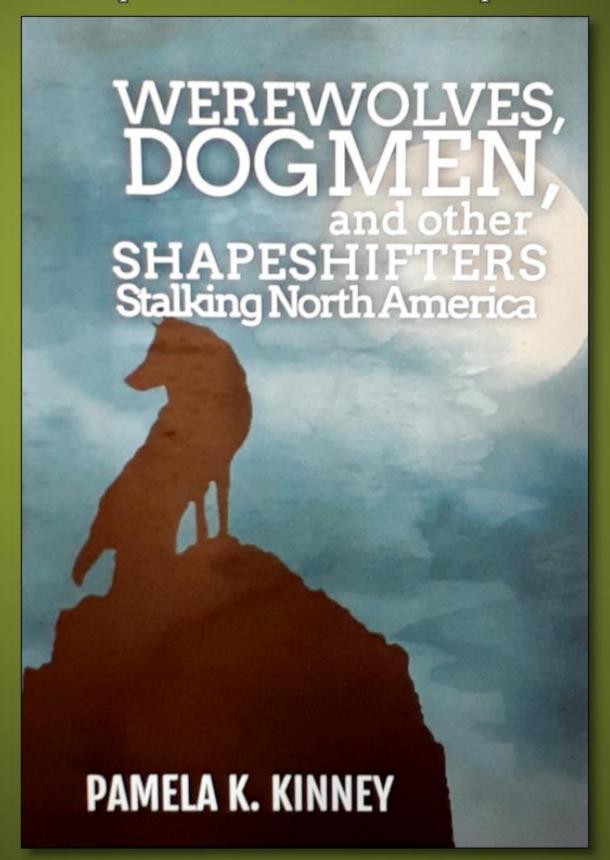
About the Author:

Pamela K. Kinney gave up long ago trying not to listen to the voices in her head and gave into the madness of writing horror, fantasy, science fiction, and nonfiction books on the paranormal ever since. She is a member of Horror Writers Association and Virginia Writers Club.

Facebook: <u>Pamela K. Kinney</u>
Twitter: @<u>PamelaKKinney</u>



What stalks the United States? Releases April 26, 2022, from Dreampunk Press.



AVAILABLE FOR PRE-ORDER ON AMAZON!

The Interloper | Alyson Faye

We're sitting together by the fire, Jake's toasting s'mores, in silence. Strangely, despite the pile of burning logs in the hearth, I cannot get warm. I still feel chilly after my long journey here, to get to Jake and the off-grid cottage in the woods. *Our woods*. I remember our walks with a wave of affection.

But he's worth the journey. Jake's a wonderful fella. And he's mine. I snuggle deeper into the armchair and watch my husband's face, tinged reddy-gold in the firelight, and wallow in my feelings for him. I am on the verge of dozing off, when Jake turns as though towards me, but instead he shouts up the stairs, "Are you comin' down any time yet?"

I wonder who he's talking to? I smile at him, but he's too busy staring at the flames to notice. I realize he's been doing that a lot; not paying me any attention.

I hear footsteps overhead, light, pattering. Then, to my shock, a young pretty woman appears on the landing. She is wearing my dressing gown, the pink satin slinky number Jake bought me last year. "Coming lover," she calls, and blows Jake a kiss.

I watch stunned, as this interloper wiggles down the stairs, walks over to Jake and sits on his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing him.

Worse still, Jake responds with passion. They are necking right in front of me.

"Jake!" I cry. "Stop, please."

He ignores me. Again.

I get to my feet and reach out to touch his arm. He brushes me away, as though I am nothing, just an insect landing on him.

"Darling, it's getting chilly in here. Is there a draft?" The interloper says.

I look around at the snug, cozy cabin. This home I'd decorated, paid for, and moved us into. Our hideaway love nest in the woods.

Jake stares right at me, but his face is blank. A terrible notion is taking root in my head. I feel as though bees are buzzing inside my skull. The walls are rippling.

When my darling Jake speaks, it is to her. "I'll put more logs on, darling. Go open us a bottle." He pats her bottom. The woman strolls away towards my kitchen. She certainly knows her way around the place.

A moment of frozen silence, then Jake turns towards me, his face red, but with fury. "For God's sake, Lucy, you're not supposed to be here. You do know that you're—dead? You're just a sad ghost hanging around, where you're not wanted. Now just push off to your grave, bloody stay there and leave me, us, alone."

He turns back to the fire and the browning s'mores. If he could have hit me at that moment, I knew he would have. *Hit me* ...that's when I remember—the force of Jake's blows with the wood shovel on the back of my head. Yes, that very shovel, now cleaned up and standing harmless, by the fire.

Images flood into my head—me on the doorstep, my back turned, when he'd struck. We'd been rowing, about money, as usual. I had it, Jake wanted more of it. Another image—Jake in black, his face, grief stricken, at my funeral, where a few old friends hover on the fringes, uneasy and unwelcome. I hear clods of earth landing on the coffin lid and then... nothing... for I don't know how long.

Just emptiness...next I am walking, barefooted, in these woods. I am light, free, as though made of air and water, and the tentacles of love and hate tug me—towards home, the last one I'd ever known. Pull me back to the last man I'd ever loved.

About the Author:

Alyson Faye lives in the UK with her family and rescue animals; she is often out on the moors near where the Brontes lived with Roxy, her Lab. cross. She swims, tutors, edits for an indie press, is a old movie buff. She always wanted to dance with Fred Astaire and catch a train with Cary Grant, whose birthday she shares.

Blog: Black Angel Press
Twitter: @AlysonFaye2



A Tour in My Wilderness | Harrison Kim

I'm the driver of a charter bus, my hat on tight, hands assertive to the wheel. I pick up the tourists at the Hotel. The mostly senior folks are British and German, by their accents. This Rocky Mountain experience is on their bucket list.

They say "Oh, a different driver today," and I tell them "Yes, Mac's got a day off."

"The mountains look superb in the early light," says a youngish blonde lady introducing herself as Emily.

I say "Indeed, you seem so wild too, like a mountain cat lady."

She rolls her eyes and I roll the bus up the highway, then onto the winding gravel road where I've planned the day's activities.

"Is it far to the hot springs?" asks Emily, because that's what's on the official agenda today.

I reply "Certainly, it is a bit of a drive along this route."

"Wow, we are really in the wilderness?" asks an older man with a band aid over his forehead.

"Yes!" I say. "Hey, there's an elk!"

I point to a highest hill, everyone looks. I know there's no elk there but that gives them a bit of a rush. They reach for their cameras.

"I thought the hot springs were to the Northwest of Lake Louise," says Emily. "My phone says we're heading Northeast."

"You have to go Northeast before you can go Northwest in these parts," I tell her.

"There's no cellular service now," she continues.

"Indeed, there isn't in this vast uninhabited area," I tell her, "And there wasn't when I was a kid, either!"

I laugh at my own joke. I turn off a side road. There's a wriggly kind of track through to the hot springs from here, the bus should make it.

"I wanted you to experience the real Canadian backwoods," I tell the passengers, and as if on cue there's a brown bear and two cubs sitting up on an embankment. I slow the vehicle down. "A photo opportunity, folks," and Emily gets a pic through the front window before the animals tear off into the trees.

"I want to give something back to the world," I tell the passengers. "What are we but merely the sum of our experiences?"

"The scenery is astounding," says an older man with a German accent.

He stands up, clicking photos of the river far below. A group of ladies at the side gape together at the rugged cliffs that soar above us to the snow line. I negotiate some potholed curves. The bus sways from side to side and splashes through.

"Are you sure this is the right route?" asks Emily.

"Oh yes, I'm sure," I tell her. "You have to be a hundred percent sure of anything. When I woke up this morning, I was one hundred percent sure I was alive."

The engine strains as we begin the grade up to the pass.

An older lady with a big red lipsticked mouth staggers forward up the aisle and shouts in my ear "I think I hear some banging under the bus."

"I heard something yelling a while back too," says Emily. "I wasn't sure if it came from inside or outside."

"There's a lot of mysterious things going on in these hills," I tell them, "Ghost towns and mad trappers. I came up here when I was a teen, made campfires, one midnight got jumped, bitten, and my shoulders scratched all to ribbons by a mysterious half-cat half-woman creature." I look at her. "I'm not sure if she wanted to kill me or mate with me. Do you want to see my back?"

"No," she says, pale face regarding me. "I'm fine."

"Skeptics say it was all in my imagination," I tell her, "Hard to say what's real and what isn't sometimes."

I round the last hill and curve, and we emerge on the top of the pass. We peak at the summit, at the exquisite, round and turquoise tarn lake. "That was some cool switchback driving, eh?" I say.

I look back and a few old folks are retching into the supplied paper bags. I turn off the engine and pocket the keys.

"This was where I was born again," I point outward, "by this jewel of creation where I experienced the scratches of the female cat beast. Everyone off, it's photo time!"

I step from the bus and several tourists shuffle into the day. Emily won't take my steadying hand.

"There's that yelling again," she says, and everyone can hear it now.

"Seems to be coming from the baggage compartment," I admit. "Let's open up and find out."

I unlock and lift the baggage door and of course, everyone sees there's a man in there, bruised and wriggling around. His arms and legs are tied and he's wearing a gag. He must've regained consciousness awhile back.

"It's Driver Mac!" yells the red lipsticked woman.

I grab my huge packsack out of the side compartment.

"You're not the real driver!" The man with the band aid on his head quavers at me.

"I knew you were strange," said Emily. "I should have known." She gazes around her. "Such a beautiful place. How could you?"

"Because I could," I say. "Explore, my friends. Explore."

I turn, take off with my packsack bouncing, I lope across the alpine on my long skinny legs, and down into a group of black spruce trees. I will challenge myself against the mountains, and the cat creature. I brought her some human gifts, so she may be better disposed this time. She may pick off some of them, but I will remain, and fight or mate with her for dominance of this territory. Most of these tourists will struggle their way out. Sure, I've kept the bus keys, but in exchange they have the experience of my wilderness.

About the Author:

Harrison Kim spent a lot of time in the Canadian Rockies, and although he never encountered a cat creature, he knew a friend who did. Harrison also worked many years at a Forensic Psychiatric Hospital and became 'somewhat' knowledgeable re: psychotic behavior. He lives and writes in the spooky town of Victoria, Canada.

Blogspot: <u>Harrison Kim</u> **Facebook:** <u>Harrison Kim</u>

Sue | K.A. Johnson

Sue was jolted awake, but she didn't know what caused it. She looked around the room, and there was no light anywhere, which made her very uneasy. Then, the room suddenly filled with intense light, creating odd shadows everywhere. After the light had vanished, an explosive noise, so fierce the bed itself rattled, filled the air. That was enough to make Sue decide the bed was no longer a safe haven.

Sue flew off the bed. The flash of light had made it so Sue had trouble seeing. She moved her feet over the carpet, trying to be as quiet as possible. Trying to remember the room's layout so she didn't hit any of the furniture, she made it to the hallway before another flash of illumination caused the room to light again. This flash was followed by another gigantic boom that caused her to bolt down the hallway as fast as possible.

Sue took the corner of the hallway into the kitchen too fast, and when her feet hit the tile, she skidded out and fell over. She shook off her pain and realized that the kitchen cabinets would make a great safe shelter. She saw one that hadn't been entirely closed and opened the door. Sue crouched into the cramped cabinet space pulling the door over behind her. Sue cowered in fear, hearing something slamming into the exterior wall behind her. Next, she heard more of the gigantic booms, which shook everything inside the cabinet each time. Finally, after Sue had been in the cupboard for what seemed like an eternity, she heard a friendly voice calling out her name.

"Sue," called out a female voice. "Suzie, where are you? Are you okay?"

She cautiously pushed the cabinet door open and went back into the kitchen.

"Sue?"

Sue left the kitchen and went into the living room, where the voice was coming from. Sue saw that the room had been lit with candles. Sue bounded across the room and jumped up onto the woman's lap.

"Sue, I was so worried about you."

The lady reached down and started petting Sue on her head. Sue started to relax, feeling safe for the first time since she had been awakened. Suddenly another flash of light filled the room, which was quickly followed by another crash of noise. Sue instinctively sank her claws into the woman's lap and bolted. She pulled herself under the couch and decided to remain there until her world was safe again.

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.

Blog: <u>K.A. Johnson</u> **Twitter:** @kenjohnsontnh

I Just Wanted Closure | L. Pine

I never meant for this to happen!

I am so sorry; This is all my fault.

I really never tried to be a stalker or anything like that. I've always tried to be a stable, rational person.

I just wanted to tell you how I feel! That's not wrong, is it?

I've had a few crushes over the course of my life, but they always end the same way: I'm friends with a guy, and the more I get to know him, the more I end up liking him. But when I try giving off signals, they're completely ignored, and nothing ever happens between us.

Some people call it the Friendzone. I choose to call it the Mobius because you just go right back to where you started from.

I've always been stuck in this continuous loop of waiting and hoping, trying and getting nowhere...

I was always told that girls shouldn't make the first move. That it isn't ladylike... but if the guys don't make the first move, what are you supposed to do?

Every time I like someone, it just ends in disappointment. I have always felt like I lacked—something... like I was invisible.

I felt so hollow, all of the time.

So when I met you, I thought things would be different.

I thought you liked me!

We liked all the same things, had the same values in life, you laughed at my jokes—you were perfect.

And once again, I was just a cowardly little mess, waiting and hoping.

Only this time it was more painful than ever, because I *knew* my track record—I *knew* how this was going to end, and I was so, so desperate to break the cycle!

I was going to tell you how I felt, one way or another.

That's really all I wanted—to grow some balls and confess to you. I was done being ladylike.

But... I'm a coward. Whenever I tried to tell you it was either a bad time, or I talked myself out of it—and I just sort of spiraled into doubt. I was always second-guessing myself, wondering if I just misread your behavior towards me or if I was looking too deeply into it.

This self-doubt and fear was turning me into an unstable person—and I have *never* had that happen before; even when one of my crushes married my best friend, I *still* never broke down.

Guess you just had the bad luck of becoming the straw that broke the camel's back.

I'm so sorry... I really didn't mean to upset you.

I know I was acting obsessive. I was just so focused on getting up the nerve to tell you how I felt and trying to approach you—I know I showed up a little too often. You looked upset when you saw me standing outside your apartment... I was planning on knocking like a normal person, I swear...

I just lost the nerve and ran away.

I made you uncomfortable. I could tell. You had this distressed look on your face whenever you saw me, so I'd lose my courage all over again. Then I'd try to tell myself that I'd just imagined it or was overthinking everything.

I didn't mean for things to go this badly...

I wasn't going to kill you so no one else could have you—or lock you in my basement, or sneak into your house to steal your used tissues... I just wanted to tell someone my feelings, for *once* in my pathetic, miserable life!

I didn't even care if you reciprocated. You could have told me you hated me for all I cared. At least then, I'd know instead of being in that horrible, awful cycle of 'what ifs' I've been stuck in for so long. If you said you liked me, then great! But if you said you didn't feel the same way, then I would have been able to let go and move on. Whichever answer you gave me would bring me the closure I was just so desperate for, so I saw either option as a win-win, you know?

But you were so, so scared.

I'm really, really sorry.

If I'd known it would end like this, I would have left you alone. I shouldn't have followed you to your apartment. I just wanted to catch you before you got your keys in the door!

I know that I've been dead for a few years. I probably don't look so good anymore.

But I didn't realize that I was going to scare you so badly that you'd fall down all eight flights of stairs.

But I guess...

That probably answers my question.

About the Author:

Inspired by the works of Jan Svankmajer and Jim Henson, L.Pine is partial to the perfect blend of horror and humor and has a penchant for the peculiar side of media. They focus on painting and creative writing in a valiant effort to carve out a living that will justify their Bachelor of Fine Arts degree.

Instagram: @ghosthoarder
Twitter: @apathysack

Omnipresent | KC Anderson

Looking at the car to my left, I noticed that the driver had a very familiar face.

My mother's.

It couldn't be her. My mom can't drive a car.

After the light turned green, I drove forward and pulled into the Walgreens parking lot.

I shopped for what I needed and walked up to the cashier.

The man's face... was my mother's!

"You find everything okay?" he asked.

I nodded.

My phone rang. It was my mother's phone number.

"Hey Mom," I answered. "You wouldn't believe..."

"Bro, it's Trevor. I'm using Mom's phone... She... passed away a few minutes ago."

Submersion | KC Anderson

She pushed me off the boat and I fell into the river.

I swam my way back up.

"Why did you push me?"

Her response, a chuckle.

I attempted to climb back into the boat, but she hit my hands with the paddle.

"Ow! What the hell!?"

Suddenly, my legs were grabbed. I looked down but couldn't see through the murky water.

I looked at her. She appeared relieved.

"Sorry," she said. "Better you than me."

I opened my mouth to yell for help, but it filled up with water as I was quickly dragged to the bottom, and beyond.

About the Author:

Although KC Anderson has a full-time career, he just can't help but work part-time in various fields such as a Sergeant in the Army Reserves, a security guard at the state fair in the summer, a cashier at the animal shelter, a substitute teacher for the local school district, etc. Writing horror is just one of the many avenues that Mr. Anderson enjoys doing.

Amazon author page: KC Anderson





Created by BOB LIZARRAGA

A Cautionary Tale for the Uncivil | P.A. Frank

"I want my money back." Jenna Mills, fitness influencer, life hack expert, and coffee aficionado, barely let the door to the herbal store close before striding to the counter and making her imperious demand.

The herbalist looked up from the book she'd been reading and smiled in surprise. "Ah, Ms. Mills! So nice to see you!"

Jenna ignored the greeting. "I want my money back. The latest supplement you sold me didn't help at all." "But Ms. Mills—"

Jenna waved the herbalist's protest away with a scowl. "I told you, I need something where I can really feel the calories burning when I work out. I've been coming to you for weeks about this and you've yet to sell me something that works."

The herbalist sighed and closed the book. "It's true, you've visited me for several pre-workout blends, Ms. Mills." She checked the calendar pinned on the wall by the cash register. "You started this one only three days ago. I told you the effects would be cumulative. Perhaps if you were to give it a few more workouts...?"

"No!" Jenna's delicate features contorted in anger as she pointed an accusatory finger at the herbalist. "You're supposed to be the best herbalist in the city, but you've sold me crap so far and charged me a fortune for it! I need something that works!" Her angry tone changed to one of contemptuous triumph. "I'm going to trash your store in my next video. I'll make sure everyone knows you're a fake who sells stuff that doesn't work!"

The herbalist looked at Jenna in silence for several moments, seeming at a loss for the proper response. When next she spoke, her tone was conciliatory. "Now, Ms. Mills, there's no need to get upset. I *am* the best in the city; I swear you'll find none better than me. Now I ask you, did the custom mask mixture I sold you not clear the acne from your skin with one application?"

Jenna touched her face and calmed visibly. "Well, yes, within minutes, actually. And my skin looks great now, even with no makeup."

The herbalist nodded. "And did the body lotion I compounded for you not give you the softest, smoothest skin you've ever had?"

"Well, yes, and it *does* have a great scent..." Jenna spoke with grudging appreciation.

"And when your boyfriend Thomas had that trouble..." The herbalist glanced down conspicuously. Jenna blushed. "All right, what's your point?"

"Only that there's no one better to find an herbal mixture right for you, I promise you that. My ancestors traveled to the most remote parts of the world to find and study the uses of plants and herbs. Their knowledge has been passed down for generations. That knowledge now rests within me." The herbalist glanced around, ascertaining the store was empty. "I do have one more thing you could try..."

Jenna smirked. "I thought so." She flipped her ponytail over her shoulder triumphantly. "What have you got?" The herbalist leaned forward and lowered her voice, speaking in a confidential tone. "It's a very rare special blend that I sometimes put together for my more... noteworthy clients."

Jenna's perfectly shaped brows drew together in alarm. "It's not steroids, is it?"

"No, no, nothing like that. You'll feel the burn, though. Come back in thirty minutes; I'll have a batch ready for you."

"Huh. All right." Jenna went to the coffee shop down the street. While there, she complained about the service and threatened to post further complaints online until the manager came out to apologize, promising her a free latte on her next visit. She gloated over her victory. *People will do almost anything to avoid bad publicity,* she thought, watching the hapless man retreat behind the counter. *How pathetic.* She sat unabashedly in a booth, ignoring the barista's indignant looks while she finished her caramel macchiato.

Thirty minutes later, the bells tinkled a second time as she entered the store. "Well?" She stopped a few steps inside, hands on her hips. "Where's this special blend of yours?"

"Right here." Smiling, the herbalist placed a thimble-sized vial of white powder on the counter and beckoned her closer.

Jenna came to the counter and eyed it suspiciously. "Is that coke?"

"Absolutely not! I would never sully my family name or my business with something so vile." The herbalist spoke in wounded tones.

Jenna smiled briefly, then the smile changed to a glare. "If I try this and it doesn't work..."

The herbalist smiled patiently. "I understand your skepticism, Ms. Mills. Let's make a bet, shall we? I bet this supplement will help you burn calories like never before."

Jenna's eyes gleamed. The herbalist was turning out to be less pathetic than she'd first thought. "Okay. What do you want if you win the bet?"

The herbalist shrugged. "If I win, there will be no need to waste time in one of your lovely videos speaking ill of my store, will there?"

Jenna pursed her lips, then nodded. "All right. And if this does nothing for me and I win the bet?"

The herbalist shrugged again. "I'll refund every cent you've spent here and you may say what you like in your video."

Jenna's eyes widened appreciatively. "Deal." She held the vial up to her eye for closer examination. "So, do I drink this stuff or snort it or what?"

The herbalist gave her a pained look. "Again, Ms. Mills, it's not 'coke.' I do not, in fact, sell anything that should be snorted, legal or otherwise. This—" she pointed to the powder,"—must be mixed with something digestible."

"Okay, then. Can I mix it in with my morning smoothie?"

"Of course. It mixes well in any liquid, including coffee, and won't lose potency."

"Good. Any other instructions?"

"Make sure you take it no less than twenty minutes before you start your workout. It's important that it has time to metabolize."

"Okay, got it." Jenna tucked the vial into her purse with a greedy smile and left.

The herbalist shook her head. She'd been in business for years, operating from the same corner building as her mother and grandmother. Her family was well known in the community and her reputation as the best in the city was hard earned. It was a reputation she expected to keep.

Most of her younger clients were okay, but the Digital Divas (as she had dubbed the 'influencers' like Ms. Mills who patronized her store) were insufferable. Ms. Mills had been difficult from the beginning, demanding first one thing, then the next, and behaving obnoxiously whenever she didn't get the exact results she felt entitled to. None of the Divas had any respect, and Ms. Mills was the worst of a bad lot. The herbalist looked out the window in time to see her get into the bright red convertible parked in the handicap spot in front of the store and sniffed in disdain. *So inconsiderate*. Well, Ms. Mills' wish to feel the calories burning would be satisfied. She opened her book and resumed reading as the impertinent young woman drove away.

The next morning, Jenna mixed the powder into her smoothie. She took a small sip, tasting the mixture, and smiled. "Wow, no funky taste. Excellent." She drank the concoction and headed off to the gym.

Warmth flooded through her body as she stretched. Whoa, I think it's already working. She finished stretching, inserted her ear buds, and stepped onto the elliptical as her workout playlist began. She felt the first beads of sweat as the exercise warmed her body. Huh. This stuff's pretty good.

She raised the resistance on the machine and pushed herself harder. More heat built within her and she switched the machine's fan on, enjoying the feel of sweat tickling her scalp and trickling down her back. The heat grew more intense, but it was a pleasant sensation that urged her to work harder.

She turned the music up and kept going. A glance at the calorie counter on her fitness tracker sent a thrill of excitement through her. She'd already burnt twice the amount of calories as usual! At last, that charlatan gave me something that works! This is fantastic! Sweat ran down her arms and legs, dripping onto the floor. She ignored it and pushed harder still, elated as the number on the calorie counter shot up.

The woman on the elliptical to her right pointed at her and screamed. Jenna looked down to see oily black tendrils of smoke rising from her skin. She had just enough time to wonder what was happening before her hair burst into flame. There was a strange double-pop, then everything went dark as the heat shriveled her eyes in their sockets. The smell of cooking meat filled her nose, overwhelming her. Her last bewildered thought was of barbecue.

[&]quot;Well, there's not much of it."

[&]quot;It takes very little to get results."

[&]quot;When will I feel it working?"

[&]quot;Oh, you'll notice right away. I guarantee it."

[&]quot;Hmm." Jenna tapped her lacquered nails on the counter, considering the powder. "How much is it?" The herbalist shook her head. "Ms. Mills, I wouldn't dream of charging you. This one is on the house."

"Damnedest thing I've ever seen," the fire chief said the next day. He and the lead detective watched the security footage for the third time. "PCP, you think?" Though well-intentioned, he'd only recently been promoted to the position, and his inexperience showed.

In the video provided by the gym manager, the young woman, one Jenna Mills, finished stretching, stepped onto one of the gym's ellipticals, and began a workout. Everything was fine until ten minutes into the recording. Sweat dampened her hair and gleamed everywhere on her skin. She's really busting her buns, the detective thought, and then the sweat became smoke. Ten seconds later, she was a human torch. The crazy thing was, instead of falling to the floor trying to smother the flames, she stayed on the elliptical. Less than thirty seconds after that, an employee ran up with a fire extinguisher, and a white cloud enveloped the woman and the machine. A charred and smoking shape hit the floor soon after.

The detective shook his head. "I know PCP does some weird stuff to people, but I never heard of it doing anything like *that*. Besides, we've been all over her house, talked to her close friends, checked her social media, the whole nine yards. She was a health nut, not a drug user." He grimaced and blew his nose. The entire gym had reeked of chemicals mixed with burned flesh. The stench had lodged itself in his sinuses and no matter what he tried, he couldn't rid himself of it.

"Well, what then?" The fire chief looked at him quizzically.

The detective had spent twenty-five years in law enforcement, starting in Traffic as a rookie before doing a fifteen year tour of duty in Vice, then transferring to Homicide where he currently worked. He'd seen a lot. His gut told him what had happened to the woman in the security footage was something better left alone, and after twenty-five years he'd learned to trust his gut. *Nope. Not messin' with this one.*

"Detective?" The Fire Chief was still looking at him. On the TV behind him, the footage looped back to the beginning and the young woman stepped onto the elliptical.

The detective shook his head again. "Hell, I dunno what did it. I'm gonna stick this one in the Weird Files and move on. You should too." He left without waiting for the Fire Chief's reply.

About the Author:

P.A. Frank is a modern-day medicine maker turned writer living in North Carolina. Her days are spent making things up and writing them down in hopes that people might want to read them, ignoring her cats' wishes to be left alone, and embarking on various land, sea, and sky adventures with her family.

Facebook: <u>Patricia.A.Frank</u>
Twitter: <u>@Trish wrote it</u>

Extinction | *KC Anderson*

Don't ask me how, but I have a mirror that allows me to see into the future for one full minute.

All I have to do is ask it to show me a day and place.

The first time I used it, I viewed the next day. Nothing that interesting.

The next time, a year. A new building was starting to get built in Sacramento. Big whoop.

It was fun to see different locations at different future times.

That was until I asked it to show me the universe in the year 2300, and I saw nothing but pitch black.

About the Author:

Although KC Anderson has a full-time career, he just can't help but work part-time in various fields such as a Sergeant in the Army Reserves, a security guard at the state fair in the summer, a cashier at the animal shelter, a substitute teacher for the local school district, etc. Writing horror is just one of the many avenues that Mr. Anderson enjoys doing.

Amazon author page: KC Anderson

Two For the Price of One | *Grant Butler*

The minute Ed Hathaway walked in my office I could tell he was a schemer. The kind who was always preoccupied with some perceived plot against him and was constantly on the lookout for any threats, real or imagined. You don't wear that kind of suit and that kind of watch without wondering who wants to take it from you. Although he looked anything but comfortable in those clothes. Hathaway was also a nervous fidgeter, a shuffler, and a poster child for restless leg syndrome. A client with endless neuroses is a dream for any private investigator.

"Can I offer you a drink?" I asked when he sat down in front of my desk.

"Please," he looked relieved by the offer.

"Pick your poison, I have gin, scotch, whiskey, and vodka."

"Scotch please."

I got up and filled a glass with ice before pouring in a generous helping of the amber liquid. Hathaway drained it in three quick gulps.

"Thanks,"

"No problem. So what brings you here?"

"I think my wife may be unfaithful, she's been acting very suspicious lately," he informed me while slowly twisting the chunky gold ring on his hand. No surprise there, Hathaway seemed like the kind of guy who lived by the doctrine of if they couldn't have it, then no one could. To guys like him, wives were just another status symbol, no different from his suit or watch. This wasn't a guy who merely suspected infidelity, this was someone who sat up late at night and mentally recounted his wife's potential illicit lovers. Family, friends, household employees, or people who work for him were all potential suspects. I've dealt with many men like Hathaway, and I knew he had several favorite potential suspects already lined up.

"What do you mean by suspicious?" I said once I was done making a few notes.

"Her attitude seems totally different and she is suddenly busy doing things out of the house that she never did before,"

"Well I understand that, but what makes you think it's infidelity specifically?"

"I just know, ok? Look, I'm not stupid. I know she's a lot younger than me and I'm getting older. This is what she looks like," he added while taking out a photo and sliding it across my desk. She was indeed a looker. "I have an iron clad prenup so if I'm right I just want to get it over with and move on with my life. Some of my friends have had great luck with private investigators and you come highly recommended Mr. Napier, so here I am."

I didn't think Hathaway had much to go on, but since I needed the cash and there is no better customer than a paranoid spouse, I accepted the offer. He then gave me his address and told me when he would be out of town next, which was in less than two weeks. That way, I could keep an eye on Mrs. Hathaway and whatever she decided to do when her husband was gone.

When the day came for Hathaway to leave, I waited until that evening to make my way to the house. A brand-new McMansion with too many windows sitting on the end of a cul-de-sac. The sun was setting as I parked my car on a road opposite the cul-de-sac. From my position, I had an excellent view of the driveway and was far enough away, so my car wasn't obvious. As always, my tinted windows helped keep my presence discrete. Reclining back in my seat, I plugged my phone into the charger and began browsing through the various audiobooks I could listen to. After settling on a new biography of Teddy Roosevelt, I leaned back and settled in for the evening. No matter what I found, I knew it wouldn't comfort Hathaway at all. People like him always find some reason to be paranoid about their spouse.

Darkness slowly crept up on the neighborhood around me. It was pitch black out when I noticed a figure walking slowly towards the Hathaway residence. Finally, something to report on. I grabbed my binoculars and focused in on the person. I couldn't see the person clearly yet, but I could tell they were tall with a heavier build. They were about half a mile away, approaching slowly on the brand-new sidewalks. Then the figure walked under a streetlight and I did a double take. It was Hathaway. My jaw almost hit the floor in shock. What was he up to? Did he have some mental issue going on? I thought quickly and grabbed my phone and dialed his number. It rang twice.

"Hello?" his voice answered on the other end. The figure walking towards the house neither answered his phone, nor showed any sign of noticing anything. He just kept walking towards his house at a slow pace. He was even wearing the exact same suit he wore to my office.

"Hey Ed, it's me. I'm not quite sure how to put this, but there's someone who looks identical to you walking towards your house right now."

"You're not serious?"

"I'm completely serious. Here." I said while taking a picture of the figure and sending it to him. He paused for a second.

"That's insane." The shock was evident in his voice.

"You're telling me."

"What is he doing?"

"Walking towards your house. And he walks just like you too. It's eerie."

"My house?"

"Yes. What do you want me to do?"

"Watch unless he tries going in."

I did just that while I kept him on the line. I sat there on edge, watching the figure slowly walk close to the Hathaway house, only to pass it without so much as a second glance.

"Whoever that is just walked right past your house. Didn't even look at it," I said, relief flooding through me. "Now he's walking out of the neighborhood and away. What do you want me to do?"

"Go home Pete, you've done your job. My wife is always asleep at this hour anyways. Thanks for doing a good job tonight. I'm sending you the money now as per the contract."

"Thanks Ed. Get some rest tonight."

As I ended the call, my phone dinged to announce the transfer of the rest of my fee for the nights work. I've had strange things happen while on a job before, but this takes the cake. I drove home, had a quick snack, unwound with some TV, then fell asleep quickly despite the strange occurrence. Later the next morning, I switched on the TV, made a bowl of cereal, and plopped down on the couch. While I ate, I scrolled through my phone to look through the latest headlines. After scrolling past a few pieces of clickbait, I noticed an article about a disturbing hotel room discovery at a luxury place in the Bahamas. I clicked on it and it was a live feed of a well-dressed Bahamian official detailing how the body of one Edward Hathaway was found dead in his hotel room. I almost dropped my cereal in shock. According to reports, a nearby guest had called the front desk when they heard a scream next door. When hotel security arrived, they opened the door and found Hathaway dead from an apparent heart attack. As I sat there stunned, my viewing was interrupted by an incoming call. A chill went up my spine when I saw the name on caller ID.

Ed Hathaway.

About the Author:

Grant Butler is the author of the novel *The Heroin Heiress* and his short fiction has been published in Sick Cruising and Mardi Gras Mysteries. Some of his literary influences include Stephen King, Ira Levin, Agatha Christie, and Thomas Harris. Cinema is also a big influence on his storytelling and some of his favorite films are Jaws, The Godfather, Goodfellas, and Psycho.

Facebook: Grant the Author
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Cult of the Box



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It Came Back | Ivanka Fear

We all carry it with us. Like that backpack that weighs us down even though it's behind us, out of sight, it's still there nevertheless. Sure, there are times when we forget about it momentarily and carry on as though it doesn't exist. But something always reminds us.

The strangest things happen. One incident, in isolation, can be easily overlooked. But when a series of connected events presents on your doorstep, you tend to take notice. So it was during the summer of the squirrel.

Now I know that some people have no use for squirrels. They see them as rodents, pests that can do a lot of damage to their homes and yards. And don't get me wrong, I certainly understand their point of view. But there are always more sides to a story.

It was during that summer that I finally began to put it behind me. The start of summer has always been my favorite time of year with its warmth and sunshine, its renewed growth and color. The longer days and the return of wildlife and plants bring with them an optimism.

I was sitting on my front porch as I so often did during those coveted days of summer. I love the view from there, the farm fields with their expanse of corn, the sky that stretches on and on. One of the perks of living in the country is all that space. Space for relaxation, space for meditation, space in which to appreciate nature. I was sitting on my comfy cushion, pillow behind my back, feet up on the railing, book on my lap, when a black squirrel climbed up the steps and looked at me.

"Oh, hello there. Look at you. Aren't you cute?" I crooned. With a shake of his tail, he scurried off into the flower bed. Excited by this close encounter, I naturally went inside to tell my husband.

Although I'm not sure he shared my enthusiasm, he, too, is a lover of animals. "I'm surprised it would come right up to you like that," he said.

"Yeah, I'm not sure what he was looking for," I replied. Incident number one, not all that memorable.

Several days later, I was walking around the house checking on the status of my flower gardens, when I noticed someone had carefully removed a plant, roots intact, from one of my large planters. "Why would someone come here and do that?" I asked my husband.

"It's kind of weird that they would just uproot that one plant and lay it so carefully on top of the bricks of the flower box," he answered.

As I began to replant the poor thing, I pondered whether it was possible that the squirrel had done this. Certainly there were plenty of nuts planted all over our beds, waiting to be dug out during some future famine. The thing we've never understood is where these come from, as there are no walnut trees near us. In any case, the plant was returned to its proper place, having been left there, courtesy of a thoughtful squirrel or some strange human.

Although I don't appreciate all the 'gifts' of nuts buried throughout our flower beds and in the lawn (tough on the lawn mower), I love watching the frisky little critters scurrying around the yard, running from tree to tree. Not only do I enjoy their playful antics and interaction with each other, I admire their strong work ethic. Scampering here and there like some crazed relay runner, transferring nuts from one location to another, they wear me out just watching them. So much do we enjoy these characters that we have a name for them. "There's 'our' squirrel," we'd exclaim upon spotting a black squirrel on our front lawn. Now, I'm not sure how many squirrels there actually were, but regardless, each was 'our' squirrel. So you can imagine how upset I was by what happened to them.

One morning as Brian, my husband, was heading to work, he noticed a black shape lying on the side of the road in front of our house. Upon closer inspection, he saw that it was a squirrel, intact, but immobile. Not having time to deal with the situation immediately, he decided to bury it after work. Imagine his surprise when he came back later and it was gone. Not only was it not on the side of the road, it was nowhere to be found. Gone, as in vanished. And so we speculated whether someone might have come along (there is little traffic on our road) and stopped to bury it. Or perhaps something stranger had occurred.

"I wonder if he fell off the hydro wire and was just stunned for a while, then wandered off," Brian said to me.

"I can't imagine he would survive a fall from that height," I replied. To this day we have never solved the case of the missing squirrel. I'm convinced he lived on somehow, though, at least for a while.

It was later on that summer during a big windstorm when we found ourselves facing another squirrelly mystery. Looking out our large front bow window at twilight, I noticed a dark shape in the ditch next to the road. "What is that?" I asked.

"I don't know. I can't really see that well," answered Brian.

"Is that a squirrel?" I suggested.

"Maybe...I think it might be. What's it doing?" asked Brian. Teeter-tottering in place, furry tail up then down, it seemed to be digging for something. "Why would he be out in this weather scrounging around for nuts?" he exclaimed. The squirrel moved a little further to the right along the ditch. He continued his teeter-tottering motion.

It was while we were watching this squirrel activity, mesmerized, that our son came into the room. "Watcha doin'?" he inquired.

"We're just wondering what that is. Can you see? Is it a squirrel or is that something else? If it's a squirrel, it's acting really strangely," we explained to him.

Being young and wiser than his parents, he decided there was one sure way to find out. By this point it was fairly dark and stormy, of course. So out he went to investigate and report back. "Well, it was a squirrel, but not anymore. There's not much left to it. It still has its bushy tail, but the rest of it looks like it's been dead for a while. Either that or it's been singed."

Once again we speculated what might have brought this squirrel to the front of our home.

"Maybe he was already dead and the wind blew him here from somewhere else," I offered as an explanation.

"Maybe he was on the hydro wire and the wind caused the wires to cross, giving him a shock," my husband suggested.

"It does look like he's been fried," our son agreed.

I wondered if this was the same squirrel who had apparently died in front of our house several weeks earlier. Needless to say, we were very sad to see 'our' squirrel had passed away, for good this time. Brian provided a proper burial.

What a surprise it was the day Brian was cutting the grass and came upon the body of said squirrel. Grave dug up, dirt on one side and body on the other. "It's come back again!" he shouted, "That squirrel's out of the hole I dug!"

Not wanting to see it, I took his word for it. Getting his shovel, he dug around the squirrel carefully, dug under the sod, and buried it again with the sod covering it, then filled the hole with dirt. Not much chance of it coming back again.

Weeks passed again, and late summer became early autumn. All summer we had enjoyed our nightly walks through our small village. As we live on the last street, facing the countryside, it tends to be a bit eerie out here at night. That's why I do my solo walks in the daytime. It was during one of these solo walks that I saw them. I wish I hadn't. Two black squirrels trapped in cages, frantically turning this way and that, looking for escape. When I say 'I wish I hadn't', I mean to say that I wished there was something I could do for them. My impulse was to set them free, but my logical mind told me that trespassing and doing so wasn't the answer. Apparently, there is no law against taking steps to rid one's property of rodents. We've certainly set our share of mouse traps for such a purpose. But it haunted me—the image of those two squirrels trapped and frantic. Later in the day, we walked past there together to check if they were still suffering. Thankfully, they were gone. Whether released or humanely destroyed, I don't know. But gone they were.

I haven't seen 'our' squirrel lately. I'm sure he'll be back, though. We haven't been hearing the pitter patter of little paws on the roof, (actually more like a herd of elephants). The spirit of the squirrel remains with us, though. It never dies.

There's a lot to be learned from squirrels. They remind us of what life is really about. Work hard, play hard. I had forgotten about the playing part. Trapped by my own guilt and grief, I didn't allow myself the freedom to let go and frolic once in a while. There comes a time when you have to let it go, your baggage. Bury what needs to be buried, and live in the moment. That's not to say you should forget what you've buried; it will always be there.

A few days ago, we drove into our driveway and heard a crunch. "What was that?" Brian asked. "That's not that squirrel again, is it?"

About the Author:

Ivanka Fear is a Canadian writer. Her poems and stories appear innumerous publications, including The Sirens Call, Scarlet Leaf Review, Mystery Tribune, October Hill, Close to the Bone, and elsewhere. The debut novel of her mystery series is scheduled for release by Level Best Books in January 2023.

Website: <u>Ivanka Fear</u>
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Julian's Place | K. A. Williams

The black-garbed figure crossed the white barren landscape as I set down a few small logs and closed the woodshed's door against the snow. I grabbed up the logs again, the rough wood scratching my woolen gloves, and met the stranger at the cabin door.

"Are you Morgan?" he asked.

"Who else would I be?"

His head turned toward the two vehicles in the driveway while I studied him as best I could in the moonlight. Tall, medium build, and between me and my car.

I stomped some loose snow from my shoes, placed my free hand on the doorknob and opened the door. Light streamed from a lantern set atop a round wooden table.

"Come inside," I said, stepping in and dropping the firewood upon the floor in front of a wood stove.

I opened the stove cautiously, threw the logs on top of the roaring fire within, and swiftly closed the door. When I turned, the stranger was scrutinizing me with dark eyes.

He brushed snowflakes from his black hair with long fingers. "Do you know who I am and why I'm here?" "No."

"I thought as much when you invited me in."

"I have to go outside for more wood. The fire is almost out," I lied. "Make yourself at home."

He stood in front of the door.

"Just let me pass. I have no grudge against you," I said, putting my right hand in my coat pocket.

He looked briefly startled, then smiled, displaying the longest canine teeth I'd ever seen. "You're not Morgan, are you? Where is he?"

I pulled the gun from my pocket and pointed it at him. "Dead, would you like to join him?"

"So am I. Would you like to join me?"

I didn't get it. Not then. I thought he had a hidden weapon or something. Actually, I'm not sure what went through my mind as I fired the rest of my bullets into his chest. My first bullet had found a home in Morgan's heart.

The stranger just stood there, smiling. He hadn't fallen down dead, and there was no blood. I felt suddenly colder, as he forced the gun from my trembling hand.

"Who are you and why did you kill Morgan?" he asked.

He must be a cop wearing a bulletproof vest, although I thought he would have at least flinched from the impact of the bullets.

"I never confessed to killing Morgan. I just said he was dead."

He laughed. "You think I'm a cop?"

"Why else would you be interested in what happened to Morgan? You obviously didn't know him."

"I knew of him. I wanted him dead too," the stranger admitted. "We both know you killed him. But why?"

Tears welled up in my eyes. "He murdered my brother. No witnesses. No evidence against him at all. I had heard about his lunatic obsession with vampires, though. So when my brother was found dead with a wooden stake in his heart, I knew who killed him."

I wiped my eyes and continued. "I found out where Morgan lived, drove up here, and shot him. I had just hidden his body in the wood shed when you came. Since you thought I was Morgan, I pretended to be him. I hoped you would leave before you guessed the truth. I didn't want to hurt anyone else."

The stranger studied me intently. "Yes, I see the resemblance now."

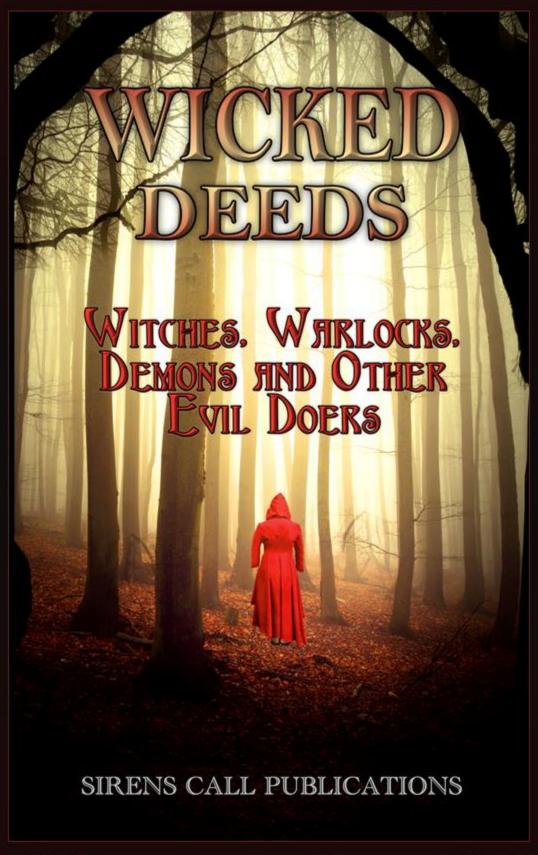
I was surprised. "You knew my brother, Julian?"

"Yes, of course I did. I felt him die, so I came here to deal with Morgan personally, for killing one of my children. In honor of dispatching my greatest enemy, you shall join my family, and take Julian's place."

About the Author:

K. A. Williams lives in North Carolina and writes speculative, mystery/crime, general fiction, and poetry. Over 200 of her stories and poems have been published in various magazines including The Sirens Call, Page & Spine, The Creativity Webzine, Corner Bar, Mysterical-E, Calliope, The Chamber, 365 Tomorrows, and Aphelion. Apart from writing, she enjoys rock music, Scrabble, and CYOA games.

Sometimes wicked people do wicked things...



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

The Strange Wasteland | S. E. Cyborski

A cold wind blows over a strange, desolate wasteland. A fine powder of dark purple sand covers everything, little eddies swirling up into the cold wind as it passes. Every once in a while, the wind uncovers odd little artifacts, pieces of polished ebony so dark they glimmer in the sullen red light of the sun. These artifacts are eerily similar yet oddly different at the same time. They almost look as if they were bones, though from no known creature. It's only a few of them that have that aura. The others just look like pieces of rock or glass. But those few that look like bones are compelling and impossible to forget.

Through this wasteland of purple and black and angry red, a lone figure walks. It's a man, covered head to toe in flapping rags that wave like flags in the cold wind that is ever-present. At least, we shall call him a man.

He walks with a measured tread, determined steps through shifting sands. His shoulders are slumped with exhaustion, putting the lie to his energetic steps. He has been walking for what feels like years. What even may be years. Where he started, he doesn't remember anymore nor does he remember what he was walking towards. Maybe nothing, maybe everything. Now, it doesn't matter. All that matters is putting one foot in front of the other.

A particularly strong gust of wind rips away a piece of his clothes, a little triangular pennant of faded black that flies for a short distance before dropping to the purple sand. Another errant breeze swirls sand over the cloth and its gone, buried and lost forever. The man doesn't even notice, doesn't even look down from his view of the horizon. It wasn't the first piece he'd lost from his enveloping black robes nor would it be the last. Even his boots, once made of sturdy leather, had pieces missing.

For a moment, the cold wind stops and the man lifts a hand to his covered face. Goggles glitter over his eyes, the glass tinted darkly brown. The color makes it difficult to see, muting the purple and red to muddy browns, but it stops the sullen red light from making his eyes ache. He'd learned that lesson early on, when there were still others on the path with him. He'd traded a bottle of water for the goggles, confident that he'd be able to find more water when he'd need it. Of course, now, he hadn't seen water in a very long time. A long red tongue licked out from between cracked lips in an effort to moisten them. All he can taste is grit and sand, a musky and somewhat sour flavor that he aches to be rid of. Even with the fabric covering his face, the dark purple sand finds its way beneath his clothes. The last time he'd looked at a piece of his bare skin, it had had a purple tinge instead of the green he was used to.

As the wind starts up again, the man lets out an exhausted sigh and starts plodding forward again. His arms swing slowly with his gait, the fingers twitching erratically. He was tired, so very tired. It was bone-deep now, soul-deep, a crushing, wrenching tired that he feared would be the last thing he ever felt. Snatches of memory drift through his mind, people and places and sounds and sights long gone. A wailing, discordant tune accompanied the sight of a smiling face and a rare smile graced the man's face. It had been too long since he'd remembered her, remembered the song she loved. But, like a flash, the memory fades away and he can't remember what it was he'd been thinking. Another memory appears, fantastical, round buildings clustered around a central yellow pool, people moving to and fro around it. It is gone before he can fully recognize it, replaced by the cold wind as he moves on.

As the man walks, the wind erases any sign of his passing. The footsteps in the soft sand are scoured away, filled in by swirling eddies. Another piece is torn from his clothing and buried just as quickly as the first. The wind blows harder, whistling angrily as it flows past the walking man. More and more polished ebony artifacts are uncovered, looking more and more like bones. Just as the sun dips to the horizon, shining in the man's face and blinding him, he stumbles over some of the artifacts and falls to the ground. Blinking his eyes to clear the sullen red light, the man studies what he tripped over. Then, he recoils in horror.

Lying in the sand, mostly unburied now by the vagaries of the cruel, cold wind, is a skeleton made of polished, black bone. There are still shreds of boots on the skeleton's feet and goggles with dark brown-tinted lenses still rest on the skeleton's head. The man trembles as he sees the remains of himself at his feet. An ominous feeling rises from deep in his chest, a terror that he'd been pushing away as hard as the wind had been blowing. Rising slowly to his feet, the man looks behind him. Directly behind him, in a path that he knew he'd been walking, were several more sets of skeletons. Each was the same, shreds of boots and goggles on polished black bone. Each was him.

The man lets out a wail of desperation, covering his goggled eyes with his hands. The wind blows, shrieking in anger as the man cowers beneath its onslaught. Memory crashes down upon him, each death striking him anew with pain and fear and loss. Then, like before, memory fades and he forgets. He drops his hands and rises to his feet, turning towards the horizon again. He doesn't know where he came from nor what he's walking towards. But he knows he needs to go.

The wind slows again, the shrieking fading into the quiet moaning of before. It has lost again as the man begins to walk, slowly. It had thought to keep him this time, that the weight of all his deaths would crush him. No matter. The wind has all the time in the universe to win. It would only take once.

A cold wind blows over a strange, desolate wasteland. A fine powder of dark purple sand covers everything, eddying away from humps in the ground. Those humps resolve into glittering, polished black artifacts, ignored by the man who walks past them. They hold no import for him, have no meaning beyond being in the wasteland he is walking through. And now, there is only one thought in his mind as the last of his memories are scoured away: he must continue no matter the cost. He cannot stop and cannot lose.

About the Author:

S. E. Cyborski is an indie author and poet. She has written the novels of The Accidental Heroes Chronicles, A Weight Relieved, Underneath, Shadows and a Touch of Magic, and the children's series Gerald the Chicken. She is also an #ownvoices writer.

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Micro Monsters | John H. Dromey

Hungry, Hungry Hippocampus

Brandon finished dead last in the race for a good place at the table. He was easily outpaced by his companions. For the third morning in a row, the poor fellow would have to settle for leftover brains for breakfast. That's the price he paid for being a slow zombie.

A Passing Fancy

Anton went to his grave loving Emily.

When he resurfaced as a full-fledged vampire, undead Anton found Emily had not just one but numerous new suitors. In his altered state of mind and body, however, he preferred to think of them not as interlopers, or rivals, but as midnight snacks.

Be Careful What You Fish For

Pirates sat on the deck mending sails.

"You fish for compliments whene'er the Cap'n's around," one commented. "Would you say you're his chum?" "Ay," another replied.

"Better you than me."

"Whv?"

"Cap'n Carter's craving shark fin soup. To attract the main ingredient, he'll likely toss some chum in the water."

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, Thriller Magazine, several previous issues of The Sirens Call, and elsewhere.

Full Moon Madness | Frank Talber

Drumbeats, hearts melting. Your memory haunts the corridors of my sequestered dreams, where silhouettes of mountains fill the horizon and tinkles of orchestrated mewlings shatter the chill of a full moon night in northern British Columbia. A land I swore I'd never caress again, especially on All Hallows Eve, the only night these mystical doorways can be traversed. A dimension where nothing is real and everything revolves around dreamtime perception. The realm of the witch called Ximena.

I shiver in anticipation and fall to your arms as I have fallen in eternity. Stars skim by with dizzying velocity as cackles of entrapment seduce me and pull me in. You are there, everywhere and nowhere. Your voice, a breath like spirit things that steals across abandoned graveyards at the stroke of midnight, races along the ends of my hairs. Clouds pulse with vibrancy, and even the dirt stirs beneath each tentative step I take, unsettling me with the undulation of something sentient as I walk. Where does it begin? Where does it end and where are you?

A kiss from sanities edges rests suddenly, on my lips. I wait. A thrumming like chants of Arcadian monks breaks the silence. Razor-edged talons sing across my back, stealing at my soul. Sweat pierces my skin and your finger, born of unearthly matter, appears to whisk blood and perspiration away to your lips. I fall to my knees, the breath of my eagerness mingling with the night air and skitters like ten thousand crabs on echoing porcelain are tugging at the void. Where are you? I question the foggy veils.

Your face parts the clouds with the same ease as the moon that slides behind them. Dawn's light will banish me from this place and return me to my reality, but only if – I pause in whispered prayer – if I live through this night. The twisted reality of loving a witch.

Melodic laughter, I look up, you are sauntering across the glade wrapped only in layers of diaphanous silk, full breasts swaying with each step, awaiting the taste of my lips. Air incensed with the cloying enticements of sandalwood swirls at your approach and I remind myself that this was my idea to open the doorway back into this region of sybaritic pleasures. A domain so arcane and bizarre, I can only weep in sorrow at your plight and feed you even more, an environment where the hiss of a breath bears more actuality than sun-sustained vitality, where my fear fuels your sustenance and my sweat feeds your soul's growth in ways I'll not comprehend. Nor care to, when the taste of your lips is sweeter than honey drizzled down my throat from ten thousand bees fed the purest of nectar and just as intoxicating.

You stand before me now, naked, wonderfully naked beneath the silk, a smile spreads across your face and draws me in with the entrapment of a spider's web. Will my plan succeed?

"You return." Disembodied whispers lick at me with the severity of an icicle thrust against my neck as light races from your eyes into enveloping pools of darkness. Seduction unparalleled. I'd forgotten the exquisite carnality you wreck as the sheer lust of my response becomes a throbbing, aching hunger, to have you, to be possessed by you.

"Help," I cry to the fraying threads of rationality binding my barely clinging sanity. Sanity's stolid gaze answers back, "this is what you truly crave. This will be your reward." Reassuring arms vanish, threads snap and instead of anchoring me from this lunacy, my sub consciousness kicks me from the cliffs of reason. I scream in the delirium and fling myself instead into the depths of your passions.

It began as my father lay on his deathbed. He told me of the unbearable ecstasy of loving you, and died making me swear I'd never visit you. I agreed, but I think he feared otherwise.

Rapturous insanity begins as appendages melt away and rough scales begin to cover my body. Warm rocks scrape beneath me and my tongue slithers between unhinged jaws. Tasting the air, sensing for you. A rattler's warning disturbs the hush and you uncoil from the darkness. I slide towards you, rattles buzzing in excitement as you lunge and wrap around me. We twist, tumbling between the rocks, reveling in the flexibility as scales scrape where hands once used to. Touching, fondling, arousing, each seeking to twine about the other, lost in the power of long muscles coiling and uncoiling in a macabre hypnotic waltz.

Who are you? This past year I've studied my father's papers trying to decipher or understand your existence, and more importantly, how to stop you. Dad was a professor of anthropology and native studies at UBC, how he discovered you I'll never know, but he paid a heavy price for loving a witch. I know you'll return every year to bleed away at my life essence like you did his. Last year's encounter left me in hospital for months, hovering between life and derangement. I have other designs on my fate this time and press a shaman's soul catcher underneath my tongue, praying it will work.

I grasp you tight and squeeze. Your skin splits and feathers sprout, wings burst free, a phoenix reborn. Your new body shakes free from the snake's shell and flies away, cackling that age-old cackle that creaks like ancient bones on sacred rocks. Splitting this form I take flight, relishing the strength of this avian species, comfortable with each beat of my raptor's wings. Two warriors, predators on the hunt as we dip and soar in Valhalla's pillowy canyons until losing you in veils of vapor, I panic.

A screech. Claws scour my back and in the blink of a hawk's eye you're gone. Reminding me this is your world and your territory. I know I cannot play this game long and hope to survive. Blood flows free from jagged wounds. My life force, your meal, leaves me in a red spray as I plummet, feigning death. You cleave through the clouds again, talons extended, that killer's stare centered in the core of those black eyes. At the last possible moment, I twist and let you hurtle by.

Darkness again. I blink my eyes open and hear the crunch of snow beneath my ursine paws. The moribund whiteness of the Arctic ice cap spreads as far as I can see. You've taken control again.

A glance. Snow, mountains of bluish white and jagged ridges of ice everywhere. Thick padded paws thump down. Ursine breath grates in the thin air as I lumber over snow and ice blending into the moribund hell of the northern wasteland. Breath condenses in the chilly arctic air, with only the brittle crunch of ice dried of any moisture, ringing in my ears. I sniff, knowing in this form my vision is useless, but I can smell a rotting carcass ten kilometers away. I sniff again and begin to pick up my pace. The hunt is on, she's near, the musk of her hunger gives her away and this time it will be me that takes her.

I roar, clearing a mound of snow. Ximena turns, not expecting me. She closes her eyes as I lung for her throat and all goes black.

On it goes through the evening, becoming creature after creature. Changing, reveling in the sensual pleasures of the myriad forms, but finally the night nears to a tiring end and it is time for my plan.

Feline eyes wink from the shadows and you spring on a cougar's padded paws. Snarling, I fling aside passivity's covers and leap first, my jaws sinking into your throat's softness, enough to hold you and not crush your windpipe. You resist in rage, spitting, snarling.

Fear sinks into your eyes and as you struggle to escape. I have you. We shift into a madness of forms: eagle, lizard, orca, grizzly bear, lion, and finally back to our true forms, but never does my grasp let you go.

"How dare you! This is my game." Your voice pounds inside my head. My grip doesn't relinquish. The soul catcher has done its job. *You are mine*.

The witch, the mistress, caught at her own game.

The fevered contact of your body, its sinewy suppleness sends cravings to my loins, resonating desires as old as creation. I thrust forward, not caring if you're ready, because I know you are: you're always ready. You cry out as I enter and for a moment become lost in ecstasies throes, flinging yourself towards freedom from the damning ache inside. The same ache I suffer for you.

As we make love, shudders ripple the surface of this land. The dawn, the harbinger of the night's end, is here. I've timed this precisely. Desperation mirrors in your gaze as you struggle with renewed effort. The need to release from within wanes beneath the more basic need of survival. The one who thrilled to the adrenaline of the hunt, and lived off the fear in the eyes of the helpless knows she must now escape with the coming collapse of her world. Our forms blur, the landscape a maelstrom, driving you on, your eyes noiselessly screaming for mercy as you sense your demise.

Everything wavers as cracks streak the sky, revealing another view behind the one plane we stand on. Reality for some, the other side of the magical looking glass, for others. A spidery multitude of ever-smaller splinters of realism fissures this realm until all that's left is the vision of me still clenching your throat, fragmented over a million slivers of silver. "How can you do this?" You plead in terror. "I loved you."

You're lying, I know it. You have to be.

But I cannot doubt myself now; this has to end. I couldn't survive another year. *As did I*, I tell myself and that is why I must continue this to the very end. *As did I*.

Everything falls away like a blanket pulled from a painting, uncovering my reality. You attempt to melt away but can't, this is my world now. I pull the shaman's soul catcher from my mouth and fling it into the ice waters of a mountain stream. You wail like a dozen gypsies burning at the stake at the realization of what I've done, but it is too late. Whatever remains of your world is sucked into a cavernous void. Drained beyond belief, I sink into blackness, knowing I've won.

I cling to the boughs of life, fading in and out of consciousness. Haunting my every moment she is constantly there, pulling at those spirit threads of love and desire that I've tried to sever. So hard to believe these are mere dreams, I fight to wean myself from the cradle of her arms, the voracity of her lips. Finally I stare out at the snow fluttering over the Northern BC terrain and sit up in my hospital bed. A nurse enters.

"How's it going?" she asks. "I see you've finally decided to join us."

"Where am I and how long have I been here?"

"Prince George Hospital and today is the twenty-fifth of November."

I've been out nearly a month.

"The doctors, as you can imagine, have a few questions to ask you. Especially why you'd get lost in the woods a second time."

"Who said I got lost in the woods?" I hadn't told anyone.

"Your wife. She found you. Apparently you'd been wandering in the wilderness for a couple of weeks."

"My wife? I don't have a -"

With the flowing grace of a loon gliding over serene midnight waters, a native woman enters the room. Cascading moonlight dances from her soul in the flood of raven-colored hair down her back. Elegant, yet fierce lines her earthy face that I've never seen before, yet I've known her forever.

"Hi, darling," she purrs with a familiar feline growl. Around her neck, dangling on a leather necklace, rests the soul catcher. How? "I'm glad you're feeling better. I was so worried about you."

Her touch is electric. I already know the feel of her softness pressed naked up against me, and the throb of my want calls from deep within.

An eerie question haunts my realization as my head falls back into the security of the pillow. Who caught who?

Often on full moon nights I catch the soul catcher nestled between her full breasts, glowing with an ethereal brilliance and smile knowing I've brought home the witch of my heart.

About the Author:

Literature written beyond the realms of genre he is known to grab readers; kicking, screaming, laughing or crying and drag them into his novels. Or as he has often said: Write like your soul is on fire and the pencil is your voice screaming. You don't have to be mad to be a writer, but it sure helps. Frank Talaber, **Canada's Foremost Off-beat Author.**

Webpage: Frank Talaber, Writer by Soul





Off the Wagon | Andrew P. Weston

The two communities of Mirkweed and Graystone sat opposite each other on adjacent mountain peaks, separated by the gaping chasm of Resonance Gorge. Travel between them was long and arduous, a fifty mile journey of narrow paths, murderous defiles, and treacherous arêtes. There was a quicker route—Black Bridge—an eldritch device made from an unholy blend of ancient mountain oak and simmering malice. Crossing there would cut a weary traveler's journey in half, but people hadn't used it for centuries because of the curse.

That dark span edged the hermit's territory, Trollshelm, a granite fistula of densely packed woods and meadows protected on both sides by a sheer drop and the drenching miasma of Suicide Falls. On brighter days, when sunshine threw back the glittering veil, sheep could be seen grazing Tollhelm's pastures while eagles wheeled along its precipices, hunting for prey.

Even as the nearby villages grew over the years and the old tales faded into memory, few dared to venture where ill omens and bad luck were known to dwell. Although that was most likely due to the multitude of signs littering the trails.

No Trespassing; Private Property; Keep Out; That means you!

No one ever saw who placed them there, but each year on All Hallows Eve, a new set would appear, freshly adorned in bone-white and blood-red paint. Generations passed, and townsfolk got into the habit of staying away and not asking questions. They kept to themselves, and the hermit kept to himself.

An arrangement that suited everybody—most of the time.

**

Old Haggai Niggleback sat in the shade of his willow tree and enjoyed a rare moment free of pain. The birds twittered, Suicide Falls thrummed softly in the distance as its lifeblood spilled into the cataract below, and all was well in the world. Except for Haggai's bones. They creaked alarmingly. But they did that a lot these days.

Not surprising, I suppose. I am getting on a bit now.

Haggai had lived in the mountains for what seemed an age, and knew them with an intimacy surpassed by no one. He'd personally experienced the chill of every pike and tarn the range had to offer. Wandered the vibrant lowland lakes and lush meadows. Watched the sap rising in every leaf on every tree. And here, within his own little kingdom where he knew every nut, and seed, and growing thing with a passion that had become woven into his memory like a tapestry, he always felt at peace.

From time to time he would reminisce on days gone by.

In his youth he'd been a terror, feared by everyone. Inevitably, the years had taken their toll. His knees were the first to go. Followed by his back. And lately, his shoulder plagued him when mists from the falls saturated the air.

Then of course there was his eye.

Curse those damn Gruff brothers!

He fingered the patch covering his empty socket. Despite its absence, the phantom orb ached dully, reminding him of a terrible fall onto sharp rocks and a bitterness only thoughts of revenge could assuage.

Thankfully, his good eye was as sharp as ever, and had never let him down. So, strangling his disquieting thoughts, Haggai leaned back in his rocking chair, puffed his pipe, and enjoyed the idyllic tranquility of the surrounding trees and the warmth of the summer sun on his face.

A gleaming golden coin danced lazily through his still nimble fingers. Every now and again, Haggai would pause and look fondly at the number etched upon it. 100. It held a special significance to Haggai, and he liked to recall the achievement it represented.

Or he would have, had a familiar scent not reached out to pluck at his memories.

His nostrils twitched. He sniffed the air in quick, suspicious breaths. There was a human about, a child if his nose wasn't deceiving him. Besides goats, there wasn't anything that caused Haggai as much concern as children.

Tricky things. Cunning and devious. They can't be trusted.

The coin ceased its dance. The chair stopped rocking.

No! I don't like this one bit.

Haggai looked across his lawn and studied the path leading toward the bridge. As if obeying a hidden compulsion, a boy stepped out from behind a tree. He was sixteen, maybe seventeen years old at most. Tall and skinny, he possessed a shock of carrot colored hair and freckles that made it look as if his face had been rolled in golden breadcrumbs.

Hmmh! Not much meat on him.

The child's eyes widened when he saw Haggai, and he attempted to hide one hand behind his back. Too late! Haggai saw the bright red skin of a juicy apple clutched within the boy's dirty fingers.

A thief! He's been at my orchard.

"Didn't you see the signs?" Haggai snapped, leaning forward in his chair and pointing the stem of his pipe toward the intruder. "There are enough of them." Bottom of Form

"I did...I didn't think anyone lived in these parts anymore." The boy stammered, panicking.

Blood tinged his already rosy cheeks bright pink.

And a liar too!

Haggai felt the little hairs on the back of his neck stand up. He opened his mouth, exposing the glands at the back of his throat and savored the breeze. An almost forgotten bouquet of coppery saltiness made him salivate. He closed his eyes as recollections of crunchy bone and sweet marrow made his chest heave. A shiver trickled along his spine. When Haggai's eyelids fluttered open again, the sunlight glinted on his coin.

He peered down. One hundred years. That's too long to just throw away, isn't it? Especially on a bag-o-bones like this?

The boy was becoming more fearful. Haggai could see him glancing between the coin and the track. Weighing things up. Determining if he'd make it.

Struggling to control himself, Haggai groaned. "What's your name, boy?"

"Er, Billy." The youth lied, shuffling backward a few steps.

A thrill of rage sharpened Haggai's gaze. An omen! And another poor attempt to deceive me.

"Did you leave a tithe in the box?"

"Tithe?" Billy squeaked.

"That's right. For using my bridge. You didn't think it was free, did you?"

"I... I didn't re... No." Billy jutted his angular chin in the air and adopted a defiant attitude. "I was just famished is all. With Ma' and Da' away, I didn't think anyone would miss one lousy apple."

And anything else you could have laid your filthy little hands on.

"If you're hungry, Billy, there's a tasty bit of lamb roasting on a spit inside my house." It was an old trick, but it was one that seemed to work on children. "Or a candy cane. What would you prefer, sweet or savory?"

C'mon, just a bit closer.

Haggai stood and tried to smile. But it had been so long since he'd last conversed with anyone that the attempt looked more like a grimace.

"Haven't you got any goat?" Billy shot back. "I love goat."

The insult was too much. Haggai's visage darkened and his skin turned a luminous shade of green. "Goat!" he roared. "I'll give you more than goat, you cheeky little vagabond."

Billy turned to run, but a wave of Haggai's hand put an end to the boy's flight. Haggai stalked toward his captive, glancing for one last time at the precious coin in his palm.

"I see you have heard the tales about me," Haggai snarled as Billy struggled against the invisible bonds dragging him to the ground. "Thought a missing eye would make me next to useless, did you? Well don't you worry. You'll learn your lesson soon enough."

Billy sucked in air, trying to scream, but a smothering veil wrapped itself around him, muffling his calls for help. Haggai smiled sadly as he tucked the coin in his waistcoat pocket, and stood above his moment of weakness.

He looks even thinner now he's all trussed up and ready for cooking. Is this really worth falling off the wagon for?

When someone goes missing from a small community, it causes quite a stink, even when the person involved is a homeless urchin from out of town. In Billy's case, it was several years before the hullabaloo died down. Nevertheless, as often happens when there are no clues or witnesses to what really took place, people start to forget.

Oh, the stories might circulate for a while longer, but so long as you're determined to ignore them and are careful not to add fuel to the fire, life will go on.

And that's what happened for old Haggai.

Contrite that he had fallen so easily by the wayside, he took to patrolling his domain with a little more vigor than before, resolute that such a hiccup must never happen again.

There were benefits of course. His unexpected feast had taken decades from his countenance and put a fresh spring into his step. Even his knees didn't cause him the grief they used to.

And so it was, on a fine spring morning not three years later, Haggai Niggleback found himself ambling through the woods near the gorge, puffing his pipe, and humming a merry tune he'd heard in a tavern once, somewhere far, far across the sea. A burnished bronze coin danced merrily between his fingers as he walked. Every so often, Haggai would pause and look with regret at the number etched upon it. 3. It held a poignant significance of two steps forward and one step back.

It'll be a long time before I work my way back up to gold and a century of abstinence, but I'm sure I'll do better this time.

Something at the edge of perception caught his attention. He paused and listened. A faint, trip-trap, trip trap, trip trap, echoed through the trees from the direction of the bridge.

Then the breeze shifted and a familiar odor tickled his nostrils.

The coin stopped spinning.

Oh no! Not again!

About the Author:

Andrew P. Weston is a bestselling author from the UK who lives with a large amount of rescue cats in a medium sized house on a small Greek island. According to his wife, he is also an expert nuisance. So, he contributes to the harmony of the household by locking himself away in a tiny room, where he makes things up before writing them down.

Blog: Andrew P. Weston
Twitter: @WestonAndrew

Cosmesis | Jay Sykes

She flexed her right arm and extended her feet. They waved enticingly in the gentle current from an open window. Attention wandering from the grizzly task at hand, she took in her simple dwelling, a hole bored into a sponge that had been rendered vacant when a local shrimp was eaten by an octopus. She hoped her little trim wouldn't leave any stains, she liked the delicate peach walls the way they were.

An adjustment of internal hydraulics scooped up the toothpick knife atop her scallop shell dresser and pinned it to her jagged form. Holding things was always a little difficult; the knife kept wavering, threatening to float out of her grip. She drew her arm across her body and in front of her opening, resting the fish tooth-encrusted tool between her left arm and her top one. Bracing, she forced its bite, then began to saw. It was harder than she thought it would be; but then, she'd only practised on fish bones. The monotony of the sound was hypnotic; she got lost in it as the feet of her left arm drooped and deflated, row after row. As she broke through her plates, devastated tendrils of her ovaries, testicles and digestive tract delicately replaced her dying tube feet in the flow. She'd always wondered what they looked like and now she knew, a beautiful coral garden inside her all along! Beautiful, but as short-lived as the branching forms that used to shield her inherited sponge from view. Soon, the repetitive motion had ripped her organs away entirely, and a viscous fluid insinuated upwards from the ruined viscera. Not long now! Just one last set of thick bony obstacles.

She was halfway through them when she got impatient. Tossing her makeshift blade to the watery breeze, she grasped her nearly severed arm with every foot on the other and yanked down. There was a crunch and a cloud of powdery substance. Through the dull awareness left to her by pain it looked like a tiny shoal fleeing a predator. It was done. She admired her reflection; her simple eyes skating down the elegant line from her top arm to her left leg. Internally, she congratulated herself. This was definitely the best she'd ever looked, she couldn't wait to show her friends. Maybe they'd want her to do their arms as well!

A mote of regret threatened to take root in her mind, but agitated writhing whirled it away. After all, even if she got sick of it, it would grow back.

About the Author:

Jay Sykes is a non-binary creative and academic from Tasmania, Australia. They delight in writing, painting and performing works that disturb whilst maintaining a sense of wonder and beauty. So far, they've had work accepted in Black Hare Press anthologies and have been published on The Creatives Journal's website. They hope to continue spreading a vague sense of unease far and wide!

The Face in the Mirror | Tom Koperwas

Monte Henderson leaned forward on his dresser, and stared intently at the image of a headless man in a gray pinstripe suit standing in the mirror before him. Monte's square jaw quivered slightly as he slowly drew his dark eyes toward the spot above the figure's shoulders where its head should be. A pale outline of a face appeared out of the emptiness. Swirling blobs of colour began to fill in the facial features: the cheeks, forehead, and chin. Soon, a faint, unstable image of a face bearing a cruel and savage mien emerged. Sweat poured down Monte's brow. The ordeal of staring at the horror in the glass was exhausting, but the middle-aged man persisted, knowing this might be the only way to get a glimpse of the headless man's face.

A loud bang shattered the silence in the twilit room, breaking Monte's concentration. Lowering his eyes from the mirror, he gazed at the hairbrush that had been standing on the edge of the dresser a moment before, now rolling about on the wooden parquet floor.

"Dammit!" he shouted angrily. "I must have shaken the dresser." Looking back at the mirror, he saw that the image of the headless man was gone.

Stepping back from the dresser, Monte dropped down into a large wing chair. He closed his eyes and wiped the sweat from his brow. Knowing the headless man wouldn't appear again till another twilight on another day, he began to relax. With a haunted expression on his chiseled face, he sent his thoughts back to the first time he'd seen the apparition in the mirror.

He was just a boy back then, and the sight of the headless man in his gray pinstripe suit made him wet his pants. His immediate reaction was to look away from the gruesome sight. When he finally mustered the courage to look back, he found the image had disappeared from the mirror. Unfortunately, in the weeks, months, and years to come, it reappeared again and again; and always at twilight.

Then one day, when Monte was feeling exceptionally low and tired from his ordeal, he searched the Internet... and to his surprise, he discovered a community of fellow sufferers tormented by the same affliction: the sight of a headless person in a mirror. Reading their accounts, he learned that the headless one appeared in many guises: dressed as a man or woman, young, old, thin, large, tall or short. The varying accounts made Monte think of how he'd always felt trapped in his own private hell. Now he didn't feel so alone. He still felt haunted by the headless man, but he didn't believe, as some of the others did, that the person in the mirror was a ghost. There was even the ridiculous explanation that it was an alien from outer space, trying to use the mirror as a communication device. Some of them believed the headless person was an illusion or hallucination. Someone even suggested it was a devil from the netherworld.

None of these explanations satisfied Monte.

There was only one thing to do. Monte decided he would attempt to find out just who the headless person was. To accomplish this, he would have to face his fears and confront the image in the mirror. He would force it to reveal its face, if it had one. So Monte devised a plan. He would simply stare at the place where the face of the headless man should be when he reappeared.

And that was what he'd just done. To his amazement, a face did begin to form: a horrific face, hot, molten, pliable, bright and shiny, colourful, shifting and unstable, almost liquid-like. Monte opened his eyes and gazed at the blank mirror. Deep inside, he knew he would see the face in its entirety the next time the headless man appeared.

The next day, when he got home from work, he cleared all the objects from the surface of the dresser, shut off his phone, drew the curtains, and locked the door. Soon, the light outside the room began to dim. It was twilight time again. When the headless man appeared, Monte stared ferociously at the place where its head should be. Soon an outline of a face took form, coloured shapes filling in its features. Then Monte choked; the angry, demonic-looking face that was forming looked familiar.

"You're no ghost or alien!" he shouted. "And you're certainly no devil from the netherworld! You're a monstrous version of *me*! A mirror-image reflection of my inner self, residing in the darkest corner of my subconscious mind... feral and violent!"

Pointing at the mirror, he yelled, "No wonder none of us could see the faces of our inner selves. The sight is too horrible to bear!"

Suddenly, the mouth on the face in the mirror solidified and smiled, confirming Monte's worst fears. Monte's eyes rolled up into his head, and he fainted away onto the floor.

The man in the pinstriped suit looked down at Monte's prostrate body. Most of the features in his amorphous face had slowed their various unstable motions. Soon they would stop, solidify, and become lifelike.

He wouldn't fade away as he had in the past. The demon had risen from the inner darkness for the final time, to take his rightful place in the world.

About the Author:

Thomas Koperwas is a retired teacher living in Windsor, Ontario with his wife (his # 1 editor) and enjoys writing short stories of horror, crime, fantasy, and science fiction. His work has appeared, or is forthcoming in: Anotherealm; Jakob's Horror Box; Literally Stories; The Literary Hatchet; Literary Veganism; Bombfire; Pulp Modern Flash; Savage Planets; Blood Moon Rising Magazine; Corner Bar Magazine; Free Bundle Magazine.

The Kingdom of My Left Foot | DJ Tyrer

The little people who live on my left foot have gone to war, marching legions up my left leg to claim the calflands and the hinterland that is my thigh. It's amusing, really, that such tiny beings are in such need of living space and quite so vicious in obtaining it.

I watched with interest as they dispatched expeditions to explore my right leg and stomach, discovering other nations as mighty and adventurous as their own. Naturally, further wars ensued, one after another, as they struggled for domination, borders surging up and down my body.

As always, conflict stimulated innovation and they advanced from weapon to weapon, inventing new and ingenious ways to kill one another through a further series of wars and revolutions until I could feel the sharp pinprick jabs as they carpet-bombed each others' nations.

Then, one night, I woke with a start to a sudden burning pain, as if someone had just stubbed a cigarette out on my thigh. I yelped and looked down to see a tiny mushroom cloud arising from my flesh: They had reached the nuclear age! There was going to be a scar and it stung for some time.

As in our world, where one state developed the nuclear bomb, others followed, creating parity that led to a certain sort of precarious peace.

Things quietened down after that, just the occasional minor skirmish and proxy wars fought between the tiny statelets in the vicinity of my hips. That was good; I could do without the distraction of their squabbling. After all, I have a life of my own to live.

Only... the carefully-maintained balance seems to be tilting. Their arguments and threats grow more shrill and war seems almost inevitable. The only thing keeping the peace is Mutually-Assured Destruction. MAD: It certainly is! If they go to war now, they'll destroy each other along with their whole world: The only problem is, that's me!

About the Author:

DJ Tyrer studied history at the University of Wales at Aberystwyth, edits Atlantean Publishing, and has been published in various anthologies and magazines, such as Chilling Horror Short Stories (Flame Tree), What Dwells Below (Sirens Call Publications), and issues of The Horrorzine, and Tigershark, as well as having a novella available in paperback and on the Kindle, The Yellow House (Dunhams Manor).

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SIRENS CALL PUBLICATIONS

WHAT DWELLS BELOW



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He Killed My Mistress | Donal Greigh

I'm a despondent man.

My soul had been ripped from the interior of my being. My counterpart, my vessel, and my fortress were abruptly shattered into pieces without warning.

I had been having an affair for over five years with my soulmate, Raja du Monde. We were both married and had made concrete plans to be with one another one day. We had our ups and downs during the relationship, but the bond we solidified during that intense period was unbreakable. Solid. Unrelenting.

We almost made it to the promised land. We truly almost made it.

That was before her husband, Manhattan Police Chief Edgar du Monde put two bullets in her head. It was twenty-four hours before we were set to flee New York City, once and for all, and head down South for a new, better life.

He knew of our plans. He stopped our plans.

We had no children in either of our marriages, so the stage was set. We could both realistically run away and start over. My wife was disabled and Raja's husband was in law enforcement, two obstacles that delayed our plans for years.

Edgar du Monde is a crooked cop. He was known to be on the take and supported Raja with an extravagant lifestyle with a lot of off-the-books payola. He was in cahoots with every major gangster and illegal gambling syndicate in town.

Raja was killed a week ago. He had made it look like a robbery gone wrong. According to the local news, the killer had not been caught, yet and there were no viable suspects.

Only I knew the truth.

Little did he or Raja know that I'm quite the jealous and possessive type. I have always had secret cameras in their apartment, which I remotely monitored from my home office. I wanted to make sure she truly wasn't sleeping with him, like she told me. Based on the live feeds I obsessively watched day in and day out, the love of my life was telling me the truth. The two were truly roommates in every sense of the word.

Had I been faithful to my mistress? No. Hypocritical? Yes. I'm as toxically masculine as one can get. I enforce the double standard proudly. I admit that.

I chuckle when I think of how messy affairs can be. We can be unfaithful to our spouses but then be expected to be faithful to our affair partners. Humans are ridiculous. I am ridiculous. We were ridiculous.

I hadn't eaten. I hadn't slept. I only smoked. Pack and after pack. Cigarette after cigarette. Bourbon shot after bourbon shot followed by black coffee.

Planning. Plotting. Strategizing.

Murder.

I walked up the stairs from the subway stop on 34th Street and 6th Avenue. It had been storming all night and continued to rain throughout the day, which provided for a nice cover.

Dressed in my trench coat, blazer, tie, slacks, and derby hat, I was dressed for success, to say the least.

I was the only person in the street without an umbrella. Let it rain on me.

I reached the front of their apartment building on the corner of 37th and 5th Avenue.

Based on his normal schedule, Edgar was to meet his bookie for their weekly meeting at 2 PM sharp. If you don't know what a bookie is, it's slang for a bookmaker. The illegal connection many of us had in New York who made unsanctioned sporting bets on our behalf. As far as I knew, Edgar was making at least \$5000 worth of bets each week.

I looked to the left.

I looked to the right.

No one was in sight on this rainy day.

I pulled out my stainless-steel Ruger GP100 .357 magnum with a 6-inch barrel, which was loaded with six Semi Jacketed Hollow Point 158 Grain rounds.

Hollow point bullets expand once they enter one's body, so they in effect explode within the target instead of shooting through the body. It makes for a quicker, more painful death.

I pushed through the main door on the first floor. Raja and Edgar lived in a small apartment building with one elevator and no doorman. It was an older style type of building. Each apartment was worth millions.

I raised my right wrist and checked my watch.

1:58.

I stood directly in front of the elevator.

I began to mouth the Lord's prayer to myself as I dropped the gun to my right side and cocked the hammer back, waiting for the elevator doors to open.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done... on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil...

The elevator door opened.

The problem was, it was Edgar and an older lady. He was not alone. I had seen her before. It was his mother.

Pain as deep as I felt was only reconcilable by delving out pain of equal or greater amounts. When someone says two wrongs don't make a right, they're correct.

Three wrongs make a right.

I raised my weapon and pointed at the two who both put their hands up, simultaneously.

Edgar knew who I was and I knew who he was.

A look of hate lasered through his eyes and connected with mine. He knew I had been the true husband to Raja.

His mother just looked confused and scared.

It was all slow motion.

Even the bullets I shot seemed to fly out in slow motion.

Three hit the elderly woman in the middle of her chest. She crumpled to the ground slowly and seemed to die instantly.

I did that on purpose. She was an added bonus. It was my chance to experience his pain of loss prior to ending it all for him.

"That was for Raja," I hissed. "Get on your knees."

"Maaa....," he whimpered, as he closed his eyes awaiting his doomed fate.

Then, I thought about it.

"Edgar," I said. "If you check your apartment, you'll see it's outfitted with secret cameras within the crown molding. I have Raja's murder on tape."

Edgar looked up at me with confusion and shock. His tears had stopped.

"I was going to kill you," I continued. "But we're even now."

"Stew in it," I barked.

His mother laid slumped over in a pool of blood beside him.

"Bye, Mom!" I yelled, letting out a hearty laugh.

I walked back out into the rain and toward the subway stop.

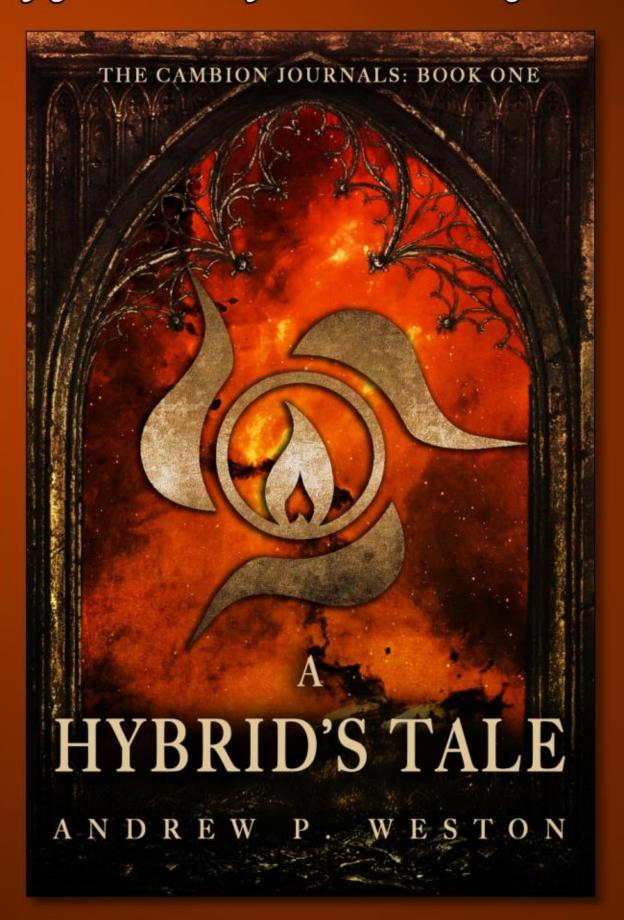
About the Author:

Donal Greigh is a writer of fiction and true crime aficionado. He is the founder of The Greigh Area publication and editor of The Short Place publication on Medium.

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To fight monsters, you need something worse...



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

To Be a Goddess in a Diner | JB Corso

The two women sat across from each other across the chipped, hardened table top inside the run-down diner. Their absolute focus trained squarely on one another, having little regard for the lack of patrons or padded blanket of silence. The ice in their complimentary, yellow-brown plastic water cups had long ago melted into ambiguity. The effortlessly sun presented its light through the cobweb cornered, pane glass window that hadn't seen the presence of soap in what appeared to be decades.

"So this is how it ends?" The younger woman asked as dust danced between them.

"Well, now that's all up to you." Her older counterpart replied, eyes locked onto the target.

They looked at each other this close for the first time since the beginning of this universe. Each woman managing an eternal hate for the other. Janice had antagonized Cleo through various destruction of her world building or attacks on her creations with Cleo retaliating in kind. Those on Hy Mountain who kept order in the multiverses had enough of the senseless conflict. They mutually decided that a final, non-violent confrontation needed to happen before the two immortal goddesses began hurling stars at one another.

The beings had agreed to take the shape of a human woman. Neither would come to give ground in agreeing on representing any other life form. The same mediators had offered to assign the meeting location. Janice offered to take responsibility for that detail. Cleo accepted the generosity, knowing that this invitation could possibly become a massive advantage to her victory.

The two consented to a duel of wits, with the winner becoming the sole goddess of their realm. The loser would be reduced to whatever insignificance the winner chose by uttering the word "fhtagen" at the battle's conclusion. The mediators explained that they would be trapped in the provided structure until a winner had been determined, regardless of time or condition.

"Can I ask you a question?" Cleo started off the assault, the large orange-red sun shining on the left side of her face.

"You can ask me anything," Janice responded ready to play, "should you," she leaned forward to drive home her words, "would be... the better question."

"I'll take my chances," the younger of them smirked with contempt. "Why a diner? Why a diner on the lone planet of an unremarkable solar system." Cleo painted her words with simplicity.

Goddess Janice became struck with surprise. Of all the possible strategies to find victory, this had been the one her competition had chosen. A question about a fucking diner.

"Why not a diner?" Janice offered with a nonchalant flip of her mocha hand, attempting to disregard what she didn't fully understand.

"How blasé. I mean, c'mon, you could have made any structure or none and you choose a diner." The young woman spread her ebony hands with contempt.

The women continued to look at one another, both shifting deeper into the impasse while probing the other.

"I suppose you wanted something grand with a large, Trandilian staircase and sparkling chandeliers over a Ghulian fountain." Janice offered maneuvering her arms for effect.

"See, that would have been worth our time together."

"Who says *your* time has any worth?" Janice looked her companion up and down. Cleo decided she needed to shift focus.

"How can you be so sure that I didn't blink you into existence?" Cleo lobbed into the discussion, curious to know how her nemesis would react to such audacity.

"How can you be so sure that *I* didn't blink *you* into existence? I may have been here for lifetimes before you even showed up." Janice parried and countered with a bluff.

"Technically, technically that's possibly true," Cleo stalled for a pause. "But what if I made you and just remained in the multiverse background watching you fuck up everything?"

Janice's face registered unmistakable displeasure at Cleo's idea as the young woman continued. "Then when the time was right, 'pop' here I am." Cleo flipped her hand, palm facing the diner ceiling as if holding an invisible tray. "Your mommy has returned, baby doll."

Janice took the bait. The anger of the audacious statement festered like atom fire. "You... are... not... my... mommy, egg-bearer, father, parent, anything to me other than a brash, underdeveloped 'flim-flam entity,'" the older woman looked through squinted eyes, "that couldn't even pass through a black hole." She allowed the insult a long moment to marinate in the air. "I am the significant one in all dimensions."

Cleo smiled at her plan finally beginning to show definitive results. "Oh, is goddess grandma getting cranky," she offered with a pouting face. "Maybe creating the back water dive devoid of any real substance has worn you out." She sat back with arms crossed, proudly displaying confidence at the power of her insult.

The second of the triple suns rotated through the lower sky casting expanded shadows throughout the empty building. Both women caught the sun rays across their expressions.

"It will be dark soon, maybe you should run away to the Hy Mountain and into Wise Ones' Grand Room like you always do when things get rough." Janice lobbed the hurtful comment like a spoken grenade. The emotional shrapnel worked as planned.

"I only did that once—" Cleo stammered before being cut short.

"Proving once and for all... that you're not a true goddess, only a sham copy of me." Janice interjected.

Panic fluttered across Cleo's eyes. She hadn't expected to be on the defensive so soon after being ahead in the battle. She did everything possible to hide her insecurity.

"I can't be you because I... am 'Très Goddess, Extraordinaire.'" Cleo painted over her festered concern with embellished hubris while bringing up a hand in front of her chest, fingers winding tall to a point under her chin as if personal regalia of a queen.

"Well, I'm sure you're correct." Janice looked outside across the barren landscape offering a healthy disregard for such a bold statement. "Then tell me this, why did the Wise One's allow me to create this solemn place for our meeting if you're so all powerful?" Janice turned back to face Cleo, waiting for the response.

Janice had clearly decided to play directly for the win. The younger looking Cleo stalled. This was the question that she feared. Her mind raced for the mental bookshelf for the correct response. Time ticked ahead as she sped read through her thoughts. A spotlight lit behind her almond eyes trickling into a sly smile full of confidence.

"Queens don't do servant work. Servants do servant work." Cleo leaned forward on the lacquer table with its wrapped silverware, catching Janice in a true moment of victory. "And, you, did servant work just fine."

Janice's eyes widened. No, she said to herself in panic, it's not possible.

This hadn't been foretold by the Wise Ones atop the Hy Mountains. She shouldn't be reduced to insignificance over her own dominant offer for controlling the location. Silence held its breath in the long, window laden room. Cleo enjoyed watching her bested opponent begin to emotionally wither before her eyes.

"What's wrong there, did I say something to upset you?" Sarcasm slowly oozing off of every one of Cleo's specifically chosen words. She leaned in, grabbing Janice's wrist. "Only one more word and you forever become as meaningless as a piece of rust on an iron rock, right outside these walls." She flashed her thumb towards the window pane.

Cleo leaned in to drive deeper her point, tapping her fingernails on the table. Her full lips smiled widely, further insulting the trapped Janice.

"One more word. That's all it would take. Fht..." Cleo then contemplated her options. Her expressive eyes looked upward in thought. "Or," She passed through a long mental hall of decision-making doors until coming up to the one that read *Nothing More*. "I could say nothing more and leave you here in the hell of your creation. Every passing second you would be forced to pray for the one of these three fireballs to blow up large enough to engulf your dreary diner within its embrace."

Janice fought against her new immobility, acquired at the moment of her loss. She had never experienced an inability before. A new star for an established solar system. Poof, done. Teleport across a galaxy. Poof, done. Rest inside a supernova as the moment of explosion. Poof, done. Her mind raced for anything to counter this insane, new disability. She dreaded the nightmare of living powerless to do what she wanted as she wanted.

Cleo let go of Janice's wrist, fresh brown dust falling to the Greek, inspired bordered place mat. She dusted her hands off while sitting back against the cracked plastic, red bench. Their eyes locked.

"I'm not going to say the last word, the final word, to give you the mercy of existing insignificance because not so long ago, you told me something important." Janice looked on with absolute worry, sensing her situation would continue to deteriorate until Cleo left the diner.

Cleo sounded out perfectly in Janice's voice."'I am the significant one in all dimensions,"

Her tone returned to normal. "And I wholeheartedly agree that you are. So here you will sit looking at whatever creature I put in front of you on this decrepit, plastic bench. Maybe a shrieking Julindian snatcher or a pair of Retre lizard-rock hybrids, like the ones you so very often infested my creations' dwellings with, or..."

The sudden realization became as clear as the older woman herself in front of Cleo. A thought so profound and amazing that she would relish her brilliance into the birth of the next universe. She savored the idea as one savors the last bite of a homemade cake that won't ever be made again.

"You." The words slowly passed through Cleo's lips for effect.

Janice looked on without recourse. *No, no, not that,* she thought, *anything but that*. She immediately regretted every single incident of despair she had created with the blatant intent of causing Cleo or her creations harm.

The victorious woman casually slid her borrowed form towards the open end of the bench. The calloused balls of her bare feet pivoted on the broken, checkered tile. She leaned over the side of the single post supported table. She telepathically caused Janice's head to turn towards her gaze.

"Don't fret, Janice. I'm going to make sure you have you to keep, well, you company. But not the impotent, pathetic new version of you. The self doubting, loathing, insecure version of you hidden deep inside." Cleo snapped her fingers. Second Janice popped into the warmed seat and began talking at a volume several times louder than necessary for two people in an empty building.

"I am so scared of everything. I can't do anything right. No one loves me. Everyone is out to get me." Janice stared at Second Janice as her identical being began the unending, verbal chain of nearly screaming, negative commentary.

Cleo blinked, causing her new creation to become muted.

"Now, you're probably asking yourself, 'why is Second Janice so loud when it's just the two of you?"

No, no, no, no, no Janice thought to herself immediately figuring out Cleo's chess game. Second Janice continued to move her lips without volume. Her facial expression squinting with self doubt. Her eyes becoming tear filled from time to time.

"As the premier, immortal being now, it would be cruel for me to leave you in this empty diner with only one person to keep you company. I mean, look at where you put this place. On a rock planet void of all but the simplest of life under its soil, not of any interest for any intelligence to give a fuck about and with all these empty seats that could be occupied by those of your caliber." Cleo smiled.

She snapped her fingers three times. The diner's entirety immediately filled every bare, red plastic seat with Third Janice, Fourth Janice, Fifth Janice and so on, all reminding each other of their deepest faults. Their conversation immediately filled the silence with a deafening clutter of harsh criticisms regarding all matters of self observation. Several waitresses began walking from table to table taking orders on order pads, wearing cheaply sewn name badges reading *Janice*. Each lamented their nearly indistinguishable patrons with cruel observations. Hair netted, short order cooks behind the open faced wall lamented their abilities to make simple entrees. A silver bell on the serving counter would ding every 11.4278 seconds with the comment "My pathetic meal is ready."

Cleo grimaced at the stimulation overload. "Such a loud place. Well, toots, it's about time for us *important* deities to get on with business. I'm sure Second Janice will keep you entertained for the next ten," Cleo snapped her fingers, "make that fifteen and a half, million years when the sun finally goes red giant. Until then, I suggest you ask one of the Waitress Janice's about the soup de jour. Spoiler alert, it's the same soup day in, day out. Ta-ta, loser."

Cleo began to walk away, her shoulders held back in satisfaction. She reached the cashier near the front door and slammed a large, gold-bronze paper money note on the glass counter, nearly knocking back a cup of cheap candy suckers. She looked at Cashier Janice manning the arcane register.

"Give the change as a tip to our waitress. I think her name may have been Janice. I could be wrong." Cleo shrugged.

Cashier Janice looked at her. "Yes, ma'am. I won't fail like I've done so often. I don't deserve this job."

"Good girl." Cleo pivoted to the door. She stopped with her left hand wrapped around the black, metal door handle. She froze in contemplation among the incessant chatter and background, bell dings. "My pathetic meal is ready. I'm sorry for being sub-average."

Her eyes worked along the concrete ceiling, searching its smoke, yellowed paint for an answer to a taxing question.

"I feel like I forgot something. Purse, phone, keys, immortal ability to do anything? No, it's all here." She wondered to herself openly.

Cleo's eyes popped open with the delight of someone finding a forgotten wad of cash in their pants pockets. She snapped her fingers. Janice's head rotated back to her doppelganger. Through the verbal waterfall, Cleo could hear Second Janice's voice take life again.

"What a worthless piece of garbage I am. I fail at everything. Who would want to love me? I don't value myself because I have no value..." Second Janice continued without pause.

"Better." Cleo blinked her form out into the starry universe as the overlapping conversations of all but one Janice lamented inside the obscure diner. Incessant bell rings littered the background every 11.4278 seconds with fifteen million years to go.

About the Author:

JB Corso is a mental health professional who has worked in helping the mentally ill and geriatric populations for the last 20 years. He enjoys spending time with his children, writing, and pondering existential questions. He lives with his supportive partner in the Midwest and enjoys their car rides together listening to the Grateful Dead with a warm cup of coffee.

Facebook: JB Corso
Blog: JB Corso's Imagination Run Wild

The Tough Morning | Christopher T. Dabrowski

When I woke up, I was at risk of depression. That's what the daily report showed. Fortunately, the bio-controller implant triggered a dopamine surge.

Just in case, the algorithm composed an anti-depressive song based on the analysis of my favourite moodenhancing songs.

The food processor made a joy-inducing dish.

I ate breakfast while watching a film created by special algorithms. I liked it, as it met my expectations. The cast featured my favourite actors, both living and dead. Perfect digital copies.

Then I received recommendations on how to act to improve the next incarnation and I could start my day.

The Time Machine | Christopher T. Dabrowski

I've built a time travel machine.

First, the turned-on camera travelled. All worked, the recording confirmed it.

Now, my turn!

I left the camera on the table and set the timer five years back. Nothing.

After a few attempts, I hit the desktop with my fist.

Then something flashed and I was in a living room.

They're shocked. Me too. I was both in the machine and at the table as the head of the family! But I don't have children or a wife...

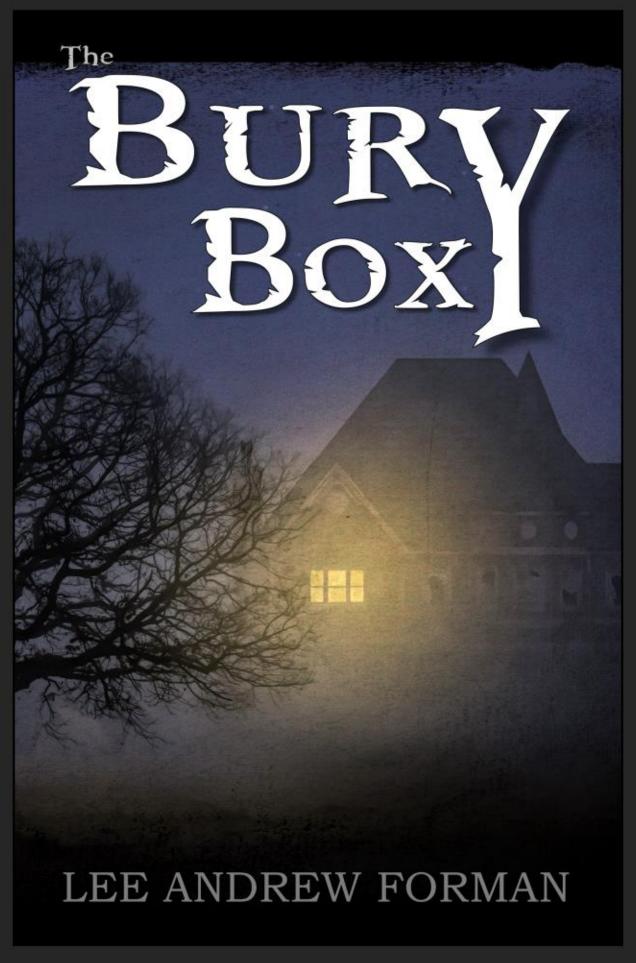
Suddenly I realized

I'm in an alternative reality...

The machine squeaked and then broke down.

About the Author:

Christopher T. Dabrowski is a Polish writer and screenwriter. His books have been published in Poland, the USA, Spain and Germany. His stories were published in many countries: USA, England, Australia, Canada, Poland, Russia, Germany, India, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Brazil, Spain, Argentina, Italy, Hungary, Mexico, Albania & Nigeria.



Available on Amazon

The Break-Up | K.A. Johnson

Marc stood outside the door to the worst decision he had ever made. His hand hesitated before extending his finger and pushing the doorbell. Marc heard the synthetic sounding chime inside the small single story house and a moment later, the door opened revealing Mia, inside.

"I'm glad to see you came to my dinner party," Mia said.

"It wasn't like you gave me much of an option."

"Whether or not you had an option, it is nice you came over. Would you like to come in?"

"Not really, but I will. Again, it isn't like you've given me an option in any of this."

Marc stepped into Mia's cute house. A flood of memories ran through him. All the good times that he had spent with Mia here—before it had all gone wrong. He couldn't help but be nostalgic.

"Dinner isn't quite ready. Can I offer you wine in the living room?"

"Sure. You know this isn't going to change anything, right."

"I know, but it's nice to have one more night, you and I."

Mia led Marc to the living room. He took a seat on the couch and Mia left the room. She had the fake fireplace on, giving the small room a cozy feel. She returned with two glasses of red wine. She handed one to Marc, then sat down next to him.

"I'm glad to see you dressed up for tonight," Mia said.

"You told me to."

"It's still nice you listened."

"What are we doing?"

"What do you mean?"

"What's all this about?"

"You mean the dinner party?"

"Yes, your weird little dinner party, where you're acting like everything is still okay."

"As I said, I just wanted one more night before it all went away. Do you like my dress?"

"I ought to, I bought it for you."

"I thought you would appreciate that I wore it tonight."

"You do realize that if you hadn't threatened to tell my wife about us, I wouldn't be here tonight."

"I know."

"And don't forget you promised, no more threats since I came tonight."

"No more threats, Marc. After tonight, the two of us are no more. So now, please, can't we enjoy our final dinner party."

"Fine."

"Thank you. Is your wife going to wonder why you haven't come home from work yet?"

"No, I left her a note this morning saying I had to work late."

The sound of a timer going off in the kitchen broke the moment.

"Wait here while I get the kitchen nook ready for dining," Mia said.

After she left the living room, Marc sighed. Despite it all, he still liked Mia, even if things could never work out between them. Mia returned, faster than Marc expected her to from the door that went to the dining nook.

"Come, the food is ready."

Marc got up from the couch, grabbed their stemware, and went over to the door. Mia held it open for him, and he entered. He saw that she had laid an elegant cloth tablecloth over the table. On the top were two lit candles in empty wine bottles. This was the most effort she had ever put into sprucing up the room for him for a meal. The only other light source in the room was the wall sconces that were set on low. Looking through the kitchen pass-through, he could see that the only light illuminating the kitchen was coming from the hood over the stove. Mia pulled out his chair for him. Sitting down, Marc saw that Mia had set the table with elegant cloth napkins he'd never seen before. He set down his wine glass and handed Mia hers.

"Thank you," Mia said. "I'll go get our dinner now."

Mia went through the swinging doors into the kitchen. Marc saw her put two plates on the pass-through, followed by two bowls. She also put up a wine bottle. Mia came back through the doors and picked up a plate and bowl. She walked over to Marc, then she set them down in front of him.

"Meatballs All'Amatriciana and an arugula, Parmesan, and balsamic salad," Mia said. "Your favorite."

Mia went back over to the pass-through and returned with the wine bottle, and topped off Marc's glass. Next, she topped off her own and set the bottle down in the middle of the table. She then collected her dinner from the shelf and sat down at the table. Marc took a bite of his dinner. The good-sized meatballs were velvety, perfectly finished with tomato sauce with the right amount of guanciale and a sprinkle of shaved Parmesan cheese.

"Did you make the meal yourself?" Marc asked.

"I did. Do you like it?"

"The meal is amazing. But don't think this changes anything."

"Marc, I just wanted a better closure to our relationship, that's all. It was a jarring end to it all finding out you had a child with her. We never had a proper ending."

"And this is a proper ending?"

"Yes, a lovely meal together that neither one of us will forget. This way, I can remember our relationship in a positive light."

Marc and Mia finished their meal in mostly silence. Marc didn't know what to say to Mia since everything was over, and Mia didn't seem to feel like filling the silence. At the end of the meal, Mia rose and started to clear the table. Marc stood up.

"Can I help you with that?" Marc asked.

"No, I'll get them in the dishwasher and start it. Please go sit in the living room."

Marc went back to the living room and sat down on the couch. Mia entered a few minutes later. Marc stood.

"Can I leave now?" Marc asked.

"First, can I tell you a secret?"

"What is the point? Dinner is over, and I'll never see you again after tonight. You promised."

"Yes, but it will help me feel better about our closure."

"Fine, go ahead. Let it all off your chest."

"I knew you weren't going to leave her a while back. It became obvious you were using me for sex. The sad thing is, I loved you. Do you hear me? I really loved you."

"Sure. You love me."

"I did. But when I figured out you didn't reciprocate the feeling, I started putting together tonight's plan. Our final dinner party. Tonight. After months of planning, I invited you over. You threw a giant wrench in the whole plan by breaking up with me. I wasn't sure I'd get you to come over. But luckily, you still came, so afraid your dear wife would find out. And you got to join my dinner party. There is something you should know about tonight's dinner."

"And what's that? Did you spit in it?"

"Nothing so grotesque. Who do you take me for? This morning I went to your house."

"You did what, you fucking bitch?"

"I went to your house. Your wife and your darling little baby were there."

"What the fuck have you done?"

"I told her everything about you and me. All the filthy things we did together."

"You fucking whore!"

"Don't worry. She didn't believe me. It didn't matter. I wanted her to know. To know before..."

"Before what?"

"Before I killed her."

"You killed my wife?"

"And your little kid. But that isn't the best part."

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"Then I ground part of them up."

"You what?"

"I ground some of them up in your house. I left everything there for you, except the meat I ground."

"You did what?"

"Then I made your meatballs. The meatballs you just ate."

"You fucking psycho. You put my wife and my child in my meatballs?"

"We still haven't gotten to the best part."

"I'm calling the cops, you fucking freak!"

"That's the best part. I called the cops. I told them that I didn't know you were married. I told them that when I found out, you started rambling about how you would kill and eat them to prove to me you loved me. I told them you were on your way here just a few minutes ago."

"I'll tell them what you did. You ate the meatballs, too."

"No, Marc, they were just in yours. Mine was cow meat."

"Why in the fuck did you do this?"

"Because, Marc, because it wasn't fair."

"What the fuck wasn't fair?"

"If I couldn't have you, why should they?"

"She was my fucking wife!"

"Yes, but I had no idea about her when we started seeing each other. And if I can't have you, she and your son can't have you either."

Marc couldn't control his rage anymore and punched Mia in the face. She fell to the floor. Marc fell to the floor weeping as flashing blue lights filled the window.

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.

Blog: <u>K.A. Johnson</u> **Twitter:** @kenjohnsontnh

The Mirror | Emmy Teague

The mirror seemed normal, at first.

A slightly water-spotted expanse of glass, the piece was decent enough. Larger than expected when the new owners had gotten it offline, but that was fine. It had a nice silver edging on it—fancy, but not old-looking, so it fit in the new home furnished with IKEA and hasty prayers. There was a deep crack on one side of the frame, the fashionably tarnished silver metal splitting down to the glass, but that was to be expected—it came from eBay, after all.

So that was how Violet ended up deciding that maybe the new acquisition shouldn't go in the living room with pride of place as planned, and it took her all afternoon to drag it to the hallway. She noticed the crack and frowned, then frowned again as she eyed it in its new place. There was a smudge that wouldn't seem to rub out, but even as she shifted from side to side, the smudge stayed in the same place—just above her shoulder. Annoying. There must be a problem with the actual backing, then—it was scratched or messed up, and so the reflection would always have a weird aberration.

Whatever. They were broke, and it was good enough to do hair and makeup in, which is what mattered.

The dog no one had noticed was sick died of tumors about a week later. Although he *had* been acting funny, Violet agreed as her girlfriend Jenna stroked poor Tobey's side, eyes shiny with tears. He hadn't wanted to go into the hallway anymore, and absolutely refused to go any further than past the hall table where the girls stood and did their makeup in the big silver mirror every day. The vet told them that given that all of the house plants Violet loved so dearly had died a few days earlier, perhaps there was an issue with gas or something, an environmental issue that was spreading toxins. They had been very lucky not to be affected themselves. He advised them to open all the windows, air out the house, and count their blessings.

It wasn't until a few days later when they noticed that the mirror, which before had sat on its nail just above head height and right above the top of the hall table, now almost reached the ceiling and the bottom of the frame was gently resting below the upper lip of the table. Violet sat and stared at it, confused. Inexplicably, it had grown. Somehow, it had gotten *larger*. Which, of course, mirrors didn't do.

Jenna, still distraught over the loss of her beloved beagle, snapped that her partner was crazy and it had probably always been that tall. Mirrors didn't grow. Mirrors didn't change. She closed herself up in their room and cried, leaving Violet to watch her own uneasy reflection alone and move slightly side to side, watching the smudge move with her.

When the next batch of plants and flowers died, the girls called their landlord. He hired a maintenance man who found nothing, and noted to himself as he left that the hallway mirror was way too large for the space- it jutted down beneath the table and was far too tall for the area. It would do better by itself at the end of the hall.

When the new puppy that Violet had purchased to soothe Jenna's grief fell ill as well and began to weaken by the day, the girl's uneasiness grew. Jenna sent the puppy off to live with her sister, and the little Labrador flourished there. It had only been in their home for a few days, Violet told her girlfriend, stroking her hair back in the dark as the puppy's now-former owner cried silently. It would be fine. Whatever poison was spreading through their walls clearly hadn't set in enough to make it sick.

Jenna accepted this. Violet, older and wiser to the way that things weren't always that simple, did not.

The fish Violet brought in a few days later died. As did the next set of plants. And the hamster that Violet carefully left in its cage just in front of the mirror overnight was dead in the morning, a tiny furry ball still and cold.

Jenna ignored these signs and told Violet that she was being ridiculous, bemoaning the death of the rodent and accusing the piping or the stove of poisoning the tiny creature. Sure, the mirror seemed a lot bigger, but everything seemed bigger when you were comfortable with it. The house *itself* felt bigger than when they'd moved in. She slammed the door on her way to class and Violet looked at the mirror for a long time when her partner was gone, the glass innocently reflecting everything from the very bottom of the wooden trim at the top of the wall almost to the curl at the bottom of the table legs now, fully the size of her arms completely outstretched and then some.

She also noticed that the crack in the frame seemed quite a bit wider, and the edges looked less tarnished and more *burned*, the metal almost crunched where the darkness curled outward. Disconcerted, she tried to move the mirror, resolving to move it outside and put it on the curb, sixty dollars they'd paid for it be damned, and quickly realized it was too heavy, unwieldy and unmoving as it perched on the wall. The aberration, the smudge, seemed to have gotten worse, she noted as she looked at it uneasily, almost taking a shape of some kind over her shoulder.

It was three days later when she was rushed to the hospital after having a seizure in the middle of a lecture hall. Jenna held her hand, crying, and the doctor told a mute Violet as gently as he could that there was a very small and potentially malignant tumor up near her brainstem. He wasn't sure if it was operable or not—they would need to get an expert opinion... but it didn't look good.

When Jenna came home that evening after a quick grocery run to get ingredients for jambalaya, she found her girlfriend crumpled in the hallway with her neck bent back the wrong way. Their friends assumed that Violet had chosen to leap off the table and into the heavy glass mirror to keep from hearing a fatal prognosis of cancer, to keep Jenna from having to live through that. No one could make head or tail of why she'd had a large hammer in her left hand, but grief does strange things, her friends consoled each other. The dead girl's partner sat in the middle of the people in black, a small rock in a dark stream as people milled about her, and hid her deep coughs in one hand, crushing red-spotted Kleenex between her fingers.

Just a cold, she assured a friend numbly. No big deal.

And yes, the mirror was huge. They had gotten one hell of a deal on it.

About the Author:

Emmy Teaque is a bisexual disaster who is probably playing Skyrim and eating latkes instead of writing or working on grad school. She lives in Cincinnati, OH with her partner and way too many cats. Her main writing genre is horror/supernatural, although she has been known to venture into Young Adult, historical fiction, romance, and poetry when the urge strikes.

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Not Criminally Responsible | Harrison Kim

Waking into the world. Mind arrival, after a disturbing dream. First outside the body visual... another odd spot on the ceiling. Look at the shape. Like an inner organ. You understand, as you awaken, that It might all be your fault. Not the spot, though it has a strange form. We're talking about the killing. From the writing in your dream. In the dream, you did your own research. First, came the feeling, through a heavy mist. You perceived yourself moving in a swirling, as if inside your thoughts, a grey whitewash of cloud come to earth. You became corporeal, walking from a car towards the front of a gated institution, you realized you possessed the persona of a staff member, approaching daily work at the Forensic Psychiatric Hospital....the hospital for the criminally insane. You walked in this persona, up a road which bridges over a dike put in to repel high water and separates the hospital from the surrounding farmland. You observed the manmade hill with the oak tree at its height. You stepped by the sixteen-foot-high fence and the wall cameras. You opened the blue iron gate with your electronic fob and your keys and entered the inner grounds. The pastel buildings lay about at diamond angles, over a small rise the Central Hall. You looked through the early morning staff person's bleary gaze. Over his brain riven thoughts came your own motivation—the need to know the written truth, what exactly happened. You possessed the staff's body and followed his path, and his path led you into the hospital office. Poplar Central Ward. You pulled out the written records, thumbed through files, and reached your own chart. You then opened it, viewed the documents with the other's eyes. Written on that purple cover 'Travis Hales'. Right away, the open police report. Murder x1 it said. Loud and bold. But also, it read that Travis Hales 'is found not criminally responsible'. By reason of a mental disorder. Very clear. If this was a dream, then nothing ever really happened at all. But if it was a real chart, even without any staff possession, then there's documented proof. Travis Hales, Murder times one. Not criminally responsible. You know now, as you awaken, that the central matter becomes whether you are the staff or the patient? If it is a case of a dream following through another's eyes, then you lack the central staff identity, his Forensic number, his name tag. You are merely possessing his temporary vision, released upon your awakening.

Open your eyes and become the eyes of Travis Hales. It comes slowly, but patient is your role, Travis. You're in the bed for a sick reason. If you can't reason the sickness, you can look up to the ceiling spot. The spot is the clue. Looks like a lung, or a kidney. An art representation of part of a familiar body. Let the picture come clear now, as it forms above you. It was a damaged body. The body you dragged around the yard, your mom's backyard, under the old tamarack tree and past the trellis with the flowers, trying to find the giant clay pots to put some pieces in. There used to be pieces of robin's eggs in the trellis. You touched their eggs. The colours so pretty, you showed your mom. She yelled that your touch killed the eggs. Robin parents do not care for eggs touched by a human hand. They abandon their nest, because of the scent. Look back and see Mom. Hear her concern for the animals. She's standing up, very alive. So angry, "Leave nature alone!" she yells. "This world makes me sick!"

Stay away, son. Stay away from hurtful things that pain your mother. "Son do not take medication from those pill pushers. I don't want a zombie boy."

Maybe she would go away like the robins if you touched those pills...so you don't, and though your mom approved and gave you handfuls of vitamins instead, everything became so scary, then terrifying, full of moving spots and growling voices. Mom knew the right path, though, and she followed it. She did not hesitate to commit. She loved you. When you were eight years old, she saved your life. Swam out into the lake and scooped you up from the deep water and onto an inner tube. You, out of your depth and no one else around. Going under. She took you in when everyone else kicked you out. Lifted you up from the streets and gave you a room to stay. Your dad would not share with you. Crystal meth kept you awake and skateboarding in his kitchen. At least, skateboarding's what you thought you accomplished. Dad said you mostly paced up and down up and down. He's a late-night musician but he also needs his rest. So, you gave him rest. You left him and moved in with Mom. Mom never minded the skateboarding. She said it was just working off steam.

Now, you feel entirely sedated. That's why it takes so long to wake up. A long contemplation time. You wanted that sedation and maybe you need more right now. It depends how awake you become. Concentrate only at that spot on the ceiling. Do not move from that spot. A far-off voice is calling. It wants to take you from your reverie. Maybe your mother is calling, or a nurse notifying medication time. They can wait. You are a grown man, 20 now and can make your own decisions. You need to ponder guilt. That is the major question. Can you be guilty if it was your possessed body acting out another's evil whim? Just as you possessed the staff in your dream, someone or something possessed you to murder your mom. That's why you are not criminally responsible. It wasn't you, merely a hollow, diseased facsimile. You can rest now, look at something other than that ceiling spot. Yet that doesn't seem right. The spot seems to strengthen

and fade, with every glance. The changes in themselves compel you to blink, study again. You wonder if you're still diseased. Not guilty, but still sick. The spot bulges. Could it just be the alteration of the light?

Over the last few months, as the hospital staff needle you with inter muscular medication, you begin to doubt your not criminally responsible status. You also begin to doubt the original idea of demonic possession. Or if there was even an evil brother who took over your mind, as you had originally believed. You do have one real brother, Dan, who lives with your dad and drives a delivery truck. He came to visit you; he bought some chocolate and apples. So, he must not blame you, maybe he knows you didn't do it. Otherwise, he'd just wish you to starve. But maybe he's been told and is now convinced that the act was no one's responsibility. It was a force of nature, a demon hand, a sickness. This is something you're becoming more aware of each day, as the nurses needle you and give you pills and the doctor talks with you about the nature of untreated mental illness. The truth comes closer, as you are born again into a new form, the Travis in remission.

How might a person kill his mother? The doctor says it's when a person, exactly like you, believes his mother's body's been possessed, filled with someone else, and that evil soul can be vanquished by killing its physical form. The killing becomes a hero's quest. It's a serious error in thinking, says the doctor, caused by faulty brain chemicals. There are changing modes and mixtures of brain chemicals. Just like right now. You are possessed by the new, changing Travis. Your thinking has become more outward, and the voices you are hearing are not something you need to kill, like the sound of your mother screaming. They are much softer, gentler, informative rather than commanding. You hear the new Travis outside your mind, too, in the voices of the nurses, or maybe your doctor, Dr. Pollan, speaking to you. He says that it wasn't the Travis waking up today who killed your mom. It was the body and mind of the Travis who woke up a year ago, terrified and full of fear. Who ran stumbling and wild out into the garden, and into the garage, and held high the axe. Now, over time, a different Travis has emerged. From deep slumber, your true self has woken up, and you are meditating on a ceiling spot that represents the past and your memories of a demon destroyed life. You are not walking out into the garden. You are not rubbing your thumbs along the edges of a double-bladed axe, so that the blood flows.

There is a crossover between old Travis and new Travis, because you both possessed and still possess the same memories. And these often come out in dreams. You hear voices from those dreams. One voice hooks you through to the outside. A voice of reason, that's becoming stronger. At least, you like to think so. "You are not criminally responsible."

It doesn't do you good to ruminate about the axe, and the blood, and the clay pots beneath the robin's egg trellis. It just sets you back. You want to progress, don't you?

You have guilt. Don't negate that. You feel terrible about your mother's death. So much that you begged for sedatives all through the first year at the Forensic Psychiatric Hospital. You were on your knees, crying in seclusion rooms, crying in front of the doctor and the treatment team, pleading for release of any kind from the flashbacks and the voices. No crystal meth here, no cutting knives. If you had a cutting knife, you would have tried it. Just the sharp slice like that of the axe, down your own arms rather than hers. Now, just anti-depressants and benzos, measured out by professionals, quiet your wildness. The anti-psychotics ease the voices and the shimmering illusions, the moving spots across ceilings and walls. A year after, you understand a little more, as you look back just a small bit. You are now able to make change with a ten-dollar bill. You are able to concentrate enough to brush your teeth and have a shower. You can pick up litter and put it in the garbage can. You can pull on matching socks, comb your own hair, and you are coming to the realization of what your body did without reason, under your own name, and who is to blame for that. Or rather, what is to blame. There is only one spot now, placing itself in front of you mostly upon your awakening. It shimmers for contemplation, not to possess.

Your dad has visited. He says he'll support you all the way. He said your mom was not to blame for the way she was, either. He said she had schizophrenia, too. He couldn't live with her illness; she would not use standard medication. That's why they split up, and it's not anyone's fault. But that's maybe where you got your sickness, Travis. From the one who saved your life.

You were ten years old. One evening, your mother drove the Old Winnebago up the back roads behind Adams Lake, to a lonesome beach. You, your mom, and her friend Angela. From the beach you leapt splashing into deep water, towards the setting sun. It was a child's summer paradise, moving through the blue lake under green shining mountains, stroking forward towards the dusk. The world felt warm from the sky to the water, and every move was a reach forward into the lake. You swam out further and further, just to see how long your limbs could stretch under that fading summer sun. All that season you knew a growing, changing power in your arms and legs. You felt purpose for adventure, to move out beyond the edge of the trees, to eye the approach of a farther shore. The trees grew tall by the opposite lakeside, a

hazy line far off shimmering in the August heat. Your mom swam also, not too far away, yet when you turned around, she had stopped, her head a small black half-moon above the still waters. You felt driven to continue for a while, with the rush of being the lead swimmer with so much energy inside. But then, you noticed the sun had retreated, gone behind the hills. You spun about, in sudden awareness of the disappearing light. As you turned, a pain pushed into your side, growing with each kick of your legs, and push of your arms. You'd been swimming with your mind in a haze, dreaming of that far shore, not quite flying, but very close. Now, you felt exhausted and cramped, woken up by weariness. You had to go back, with the shore so far. You began to cry for help, for your mom, the one you knew best. You waved, yelled and witnessed Angela waving back, she'd moved to a far point, but she would not swim. She stood there, waving. No boats motored this lake either. The glassy blue and silver mirror surface lay flat all the way to the other side. You pushed your arms and legs, and it was as if they were not yours anymore, like something held them, and pulled hard, and no matter how you struggled and flailed, your legs would sink, your head would go under. You'd push your face up, then it would fall beneath the water again. You needed more air, and you could not get it.

That day, you heard the voices for the first time, loud and insistent, coming into your head from out of the deep. "Give in, give in" they commanded, and repeated this again and again. You peered up to the haze covered mountains and yelled for help and sank a little more. The more frantically you struggled and shouted, the less you stayed on the surface, and the louder the voices urged you down. Then your mom was there. She arrived so fast, pushing the inflated inner tube in front. She shoved the tube to you, and you held on, picturing vividly and exactly her curly hair, the touch of her hand on your arm and across your back, her voice breaking through, cancelling the others.

Now you lie on your back in the hospital bed and picture your mom's worried face, a lumpy, appearing and disappearing form on the ceiling. Very faintly, it repeats and repeats that phrase from years ago.

"Son, are you okay? Tell me you're okay."

About the Author:

Harrison Kim worked many years as a teacher at a Forensic Psychiatric Hospital, where he taught many people found 'Not Criminally Responsible' to obtain their GED or Grade 12 and return to society better educated and hopefully less likely to re-offend. He lives and writes in Victoria, Canada.

Blogspot: <u>Harrison Kim</u> **Facebook:** Harrison Kim

Over the Moon | Nina D'Arcangela

This is home, or rather the place I find myself confined. The light never dims, the moon a mockery of what I'll never gaze upon again. The man in it no friend to me. He watches with a kink of his brow, not to assure my safety, but to disallow the attempt least I jump, and I have. He was not kind in his recovery.

I made it across the bridge once. The scroll that sings sung the praises of what lay beyond, so I forced the will to crawl only to find blinding disappointment. Eyes seared from their sockets, it was an agonizing retreat – all the while his voice lulled, *jump back over the moon*.

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*, runs the monthly *Ladies of Horror Picture-prompt Challenge* on SpreadingtheWritersWord.com, and is the owner and resident anarchist of *Dark Angel Photography*.

Author Blog: <u>Sotet Angyal</u> Intagram: @DarcNina

Make Your Own Luck | B. T. Petro

Some say that my potion Make Your Own Luck is just a scam. I'm proud to say, however, that it has a money-back guarantee and I've never had to issue a refund.

Some say there's got to be a catch. There is indeed a disclaimer of liability buried in the terms of use 'For some individuals, the amount of good luck they have is fixed at birth. This product is designed to pull some good luck forward, but has been known to result in a commensurate amount of bad luck in the future.'

But try it. You might get lucky.

The Troubadour Plays | B. T. Petro

It was the idea of my Grand Chancellor to allow the troubadour to play at the Yule Celebration. "My Lady, your subjects will be appeased by the music of Rodolfo," he advised. "They have labored hard and long in your service these past years of hardship."

Sweet sounds of a roundelay from Rodolfo's lute moved many to dance that evening. He then sang of the exploits of Nikolai the Brave, and moved many more to tears. But he gave them something that I could never, would never give them: hope.

Troubadour and chancellor will be executed together on the morrow.

Like Father, Like Son | B. T. Petro

As the arch-mage of the realm of Tatras, it will be my privilege to serve as advisor to King Juro II upon his coronation on the morrow, like his father.

Juro has been educated and tutored by me since childhood, and will dispense the king's judgments swiftly and justly, like his father.

He will marry early in his reign, taking as his queen one whose alliance will strengthen Tatras' standing among the neighboring kingdoms, like his father.

A daily drop of my elixir in his food will ensure his compliancy until I deem him no longer needed, like his father.

Professor Pott's Goodbye | B. T. Petro

Madame Arcanum looked sadly at Professor Pott draped in his lab coat in his casket. "He never was a Level-1 Mad Scientist like us."

"Agreed," said Doctor Dreadnaught, "which begs the question why his last wishes included asking us to be his pallbearers."

Fatale deftly slid her stiletto into the corpse's heart area. "He was never evil enough."

"And his focus on enhanced-radiation weapons never made him a world domination threat," sighed Count Ballistro as he closed the casket.

The closure triggered the shuttering of the showing room doors. A recording boomed warning, "ERW detonation commencing in ten seconds. Goodbye."

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.



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



Available for Purchase or Borrow Exclusively on Amazon

The Boss Man Cometh | Christopher Hivner

Hell found me. To be honest I hadn't used the greatest hiding place. I admit it, I was lazy. I was hanging out in the paint section of a Pittsburgh Walmart, sniffing cans of sealer when Hell snuck up behind me and stabbed me with a garden stake.

"Dude, what the... hell?" I yelled while laughing and bleeding at the same time.

"You didn't even try this time," Hell said, brushing a wisp of black hair out of his eyes. "If I have to chase you, at least make it fun."

I pulled the stake out, and the wound closed up. I tossed the stake back to Hell, who laughed as he twirled it in his palm.

"I didn't have it in me to be creative today," I said with a shrug of my shoulders, my own long, blond hair rising and falling with the movement. "I'm bored."

"Yeah, well, the Boss Man wants you back for a little talk." Hell tugged on his denim jacket in a semi-cool way and started to leave.

"Nah," I said. "I'm not going back this time."

Hell turned back to look at me with a nasty gleam in his eye.

"Don't," he said.

"You can't stop me."

"I'm his top assistant, practically management. I have admin privileges on his Facebook account. Not Twitter, he likes to troll politicians."

"Yeah, I..."

"I'm the only one allowed to actually use the name Hell. I'm being groomed."

"I know your powers," I said with a shrug. "The first 1,000 times I left wasn't just for fun. They were trial runs. This is the end though. I'm not going back."

"I like you, dude. We have fun together, like at the orphanages whispering to little kids that they'll never be adopted and no one loves them. Or when we posed as salesmen at that music store and convinced that college kid to buy a \$3000 guitar because that would get him the girls. Remember when he tried to play it? The sound was worse than anything we play in hell. Good times man, but I can't let you go."

"I know what your job is. I'm prepared."

Hell shook his head. "You're not."

I felt movement behind me. I turned to see a tall man dressed in black pumps and a silver cocktail dress walking towards me. He had said hi to me earlier. I think his name was Sylvia. Cutting past the paint mixing machine, I saw the old lady who had greeted me when I entered the store. Now she was cracking her knuckles. I looked at Hell, and behind him two more people approached. One was Hispanic, wearing a backward ball cap. The other had a sleeveless Harley Davidson shirt on that exaggerated his thick upper arms. I was surrounded.

Hell moved closer. "Did you really think he didn't know about what the trips to the corporeal world were doing to you? He figured it out before you did."

So the boss knew that each trip topside was making me more human and less demon. I still thought if I timed it right, I could escape. The way I was feeling when I was at home in the abyss told me I was close to total transformation. All the things I used to like doing, the torture and mental anguish, felt hollow now. And the heat. Don't get me started on the heat. Does it always have to be a million degrees? Why do we even have air conditioning if we're never going to use it?

My humanity was seeping from my pores. I wanted to take walks on the beach with a pretty girl rather than whisper in her ear that she's a loser and should just kill herself. I wanted to stay up all night and watch the sun rise rather than come up with a plan to blow up the Sun to wipe out life on Earth.

I was almost human. I couldn't be sure, but I thought this trip might be the one to change my DNA, wiping the demon out of me completely. The fact that the boss sent so many minions to retrieve me told me I was right.

"Not quite," Hell said. "I can see the hope in your eyes and delight in telling you, you're wrong. There's still enough demon in you that the faith in your heart and the crucifix in your pocket won't save you."

I searched internally and found the last pocket of hell inside of me, tucked away in the pancreas. Of course, the last place I would have looked.

Okay, I had been wrong about this trip, but I knew if I went back, I would never see the world again. Grandma had been inching closer to me for the past few minutes. She was itching to run me down. She must need the points. The Boss Man gave out Hellfire Points for certain tasks completed. You could turn them in for small prizes or a free Coke at the cafeteria. The soda was served boiling so that was a waste. Brimstone Bucks are given out for higher level jobs. They can be traded in for better prizes like jet skis that you can ride across the lake of fire. The only one in this motley assortment of demons that had any B Bucks was Hell himself. I knew I could get away from these other losers.

Granny made her move with a sloppy cross body dive. I had already flipped off the cap to the can I was holding, and now I brought it up and sprayed her in the eyes with gloss sealer. I turned to the rest of the crew and gave them each a cloud of acetone in the eyes. While they clawed at their faces, I jumped up and over the shelves to the next aisle.

I popped a talon out from my index finger and tore the fabric of space-time, slipping into the third astral plane. Before I could close the opening, a figure stepped through.

"Hey, boss," I said when I saw his face.

The Devil stood before me, hands clasped behind him, his reddish-black skin glistening in the fog of the third plane. He was a hundred feet tall. I had to tilt my head back as far as I could without falling over to look him in the eyes. You always had to look the Devil in the eyes. If you stared at his misshapen third nipple say hello to eternity working in the Abyss gift shop.

He had a twinkle in his eye as he stood before me. It was dark and maggot infested, but it was a genuine twinkle.

"Did you like my costume?" The Devil asked.

"I didn't see you," I replied.

The Devil stuck out a leg, and off his hoof dangled a black high heeled shoe.

"You were Sylvia?"

"Sylvia Marie Schlichter, divorced mother of two boys, adjunct professor of geology at a local university. Stopped in at Walmart for lipstick before going on her first date in five years."

I shook my head in confusion.

"I like to have a back story when I mingle with the rabble," the Devil said with a debonair wink of the eye.

I nodded and then said, "So what now?"

"You aren't the first to want to leave. I can be a bit of a hard ass."

"It wasn't the work, at first. It was that it never ended. I don't want immortality."

"It's not meant for everyone. I love it, but I'm a go-getter."

"If I'm not the first, what happened to the rest?"

"In the abyss known as 'home sweet home'. Bobbing in the lake of fire for eternity, down the bottomless mine digging for diamonds. A few are still on Earth as game show hosts or rock station morning show DJs."

"You've never let anyone go?"

"One. She impressed me. She stood up to me with more courage than I've ever had when dealing with God. Oh sure, I talk about him behind his back like a pro, but I wilt when he shows up unannounced for coffee."

"Did I impress you?"

"My nephew, who thinks he's ready for management but can't fill out a requisition properly, was good at finding you and bringing you back. But when you wanted to, you found a way to escape, even if it was temporary. And you discovered the dirty little secret of what happens each time you leave the abyss. You are clever."

"So what now?" I repeated my question.

"I have wars to start and political careers to end. Time to move on."

The fog thickened, sliding down my throat, choking me. I was blind as well. I fell to my knees, coughing, hands searching for purchase. An indistinct noise started from below and intensified until it was all around me. I was trapped in the center of a tornado, under the wheels of a speeding train, between two horses galloping in different directions. I thought my head was going to explode from the pressure.

And then it was quiet. I was curled in a ball on the ground. I opened my eyes to see a pair of bedroom slippers. When I tilted my head up, the plump face of an elderly woman was looking down at me.

"Are you all right, sonny?" she asked.

I looked back down and saw I was lying on a tile floor. I rolled over on my other side to see rows of paint cans on a shelf. When I looked up, my eyes were met by bright filament lights.

"Can you help me, or do I need to get a manager?" the elderly woman asked.

I stood up. Only then did I notice I was wearing the blue vest of a Walmart employee. My name tag read 'Troy'. The kindly old lady had two brands of silver spray paint in her hands and an inquisitive look on her face.

"Very funny, Boss Man," I mumbled. Deep inside my ear canal I heard a rumble of laughter. I smiled. The old lady smiled back.

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "What can I help you with?"

About the Author:

Christopher Hivner is an introvert who has pretty much lived like he was in quarantine all his life. He has recently been published in The Horror Zine and Blood Moon Rising.

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Feral | T. L. Beeding

One of the calves was missing from the herd.

I assumed she'd just strayed too far from the others, lost out there in the pasture by her lonesome. The herd had grazed pretty far from the barn that day, gathering by the perimeter fence separating the field from the woods beyond. But the mother wasn't acting right. She brayed and gnashed, kept turning back to the field. Eyes darting in panic. I searched as far as I could see, along the crest of the hill. Swallowing down dread. It wouldn't have been the first time one of the girls had been jumped by something out there. A coyote lurked in those woods, one that liked to pick at my cattle when opportunity struck. I'd caught it a few times, slinking between the trees with a strip of bloody hide in its jowls. But it had never been successful in its hunting—and I hoped it wasn't now.

By the time I got the rest of the cattle penned, night was beginning to fall. Arming myself with a flashlight and a rifle, I struck out across the field and scanned for any signs of where the calf might have gone. Searching for tracks, manure...anything. I called out for her, sweeping my light across the grass. But there was nothing. Only a gentle breeze that shivered through the corn stalks. Rustling trees in the woods across the way. I shined my light that direction the closer I got, but it never seemed to penetrate the shadow. It was dark and thick, an inky blot against the rapidly dimming horizon.

At the perimeter fence my flashlight revealed a hole in the chain links, pulled apart and chewed off in jagged points. Stained crimson with blood. It was too big a hole to be the wily coyote; it had to have been something larger. A bear, maybe. I aimed my beam of light into the trees across the road, finding a slick, red stain smearing the asphalt leading into the woods. A gruesome path, inviting me to follow. My gut churned. Now that the bear —or whatever it was— had a taste of cattle, it would surely be back for more. I could have left it alone, reported it to the sheriff...but the tracks looked fresh. The creature couldn't be too far ahead.

The trail wound between ancient gnarled trunks, growing clotted the further in it led rather than fading away in the dirt. It streaked the deep drag lines gouged into the earth, unfettered stench attracting biting insects that hoped for more. Along the way, there began to be more than just blood. Tufts of black and white fur speckled thorny twigs jutting from the brush. Bile rose in my throat as I followed the tracks to the edge of a clearing, where I found the underbrush torn from the ground in the narrow space between two trees. Bloody chunks of flesh stuck to the jagged roots and bark on either side, still warm. Still dripping.

A rustle beyond the brush stopped my heart. I dropped the flashlight, hoisting the rifle in trembling hands toward the clearing. Jaundiced light shown in patchwork spots, illuminating the face of a crumbling, rusted facade I barely recognized as a building. Something sprawled across the path before a sagging door frame in a pool of blood, surrounded by bits of jagged metal and rocks. It squirmed and moaned, legs beating the dirt in spasms. Bleating quietly, helplessly.

"Shit."

I stomped through the brush, keeping my rifle close. I could already tell she was beyond salvation, but I wanted a closer look regardless. To see what kind of animal could have done so much damage. I slowed, stomach churning. Finding her belly ripped open, organs stretched the length of the clearing. I found another set of tracks leading into the dilapidated building, stained with her coagulated blood and tissue. By the looks of them, the predator was massive; the imprints were heavy, dug deep into the soil. But they were in pairs of two, not pairs of four. I knelt beside the calf, squinting.

The other prints were human.

Something squelched inside the building. I jerked my head up, staring into the darkness. Heart pounding into my throat. My eyes finally adjusted to find a shadow lurking in the doorway, hunched over the trail of decimated organs. It slurped and grunted, only stopping when it finally seemed to notice I was there. A sickening gurgle emanated from the shadow; a slow, wet suction of breath, rattling deep from the chest. A chuckle. I shot to my feet, shakily raising the rifle toward the dark.

"Show yourself! Now!"

The chuckling continued. The shadow rose, filling the entirety of the doorframe. With a vicious pull, the calf's entrails were ripped free, slithering away into the darkness toward the hulking shape. Hot blood splattered my coveralls. The calf gave a raspy scream, flailing one last time before falling still. Then more slurping took up from the building.

Fear iced my blood, driving me back through the brush toward the trail. The flashlight crunched beneath my boot, casting me in complete darkness with whatever—whoever— mutilated my calf. Somehow I lost my rifle along the way, striking every tree and getting stung by every insect in my blind flight out of the woods. The soothing lights of my

farmhouse appeared between the trunks, and I barreled for it as fast as I could. I leapt over the perimeter fence and in through the back door before the adrenaline wore off and collapsed me onto the kitchen counter.

I don't know how long I spent catching my breath before I called the sheriff, but it seemed like hours. When they finally arrived they scoured the woods with bloodhounds and flashlights. I directed them to the drag marks and bloodstains, but refused to follow. I didn't want to relive terror like that so soon after. Eventually the police returned, somehow empty-handed. Only finding evidence of the blood and tissue.

"You sure of what you saw?"

"Damn sure." I bit my thumbnail. "It was a man, I'm tellin' you."

"We didn't find nothin' but blood and footprints." The sheriff hooked his thumbs in his belt. "If you say it was a man, then that man's gotta be stronger than an ox. Strong enough to drag a calf through the woods, and away again after you startled him. Did you get a good look at him?"

"No. He never came out of that building. But he chuckled at me. Slurped my cow's guts at me." I shook my head. "Who the hell does those kinds of things?"

The sheriff's face went sour. "If he's feral...God only knows." After a long moment, he clicked his tongue and nodded. "Well, I suggest you repair that fence and maybe get a guard dog. We've had some other reports of animals gone missing lately 'round these parts. We'll keep an eye out a little longer. But keep yourself safe, you hear?"

I sat up the rest of the night in my kitchen with every light on, facing the window that led toward the woods. Scanning each shadow, scrutinizing every sound. Praying for anything to remove that awful sound from my head. The slurping and the chuckling, and bloody soil squelching between bare toes. Praying that I would never witness something so heinous again.

But if that man was feral...God only knows.

About the Author:

T.L. Beeding was born and raised in Sacramento, CA. She is co-editor of Crow's Feet Journal and Paramour Ink, and is a featured author for Black Ink Fiction. She has also written for Ghost Orchid Press, Vanishing Point Magazine, and October Hill Magazine, among other literary publications. When she is not writing, T.L. enjoys seeking misadventures with her daughter, two cats, and boyfriend at their home in the Hudson Valley.

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The Part-Time Librarian | Corinne Pollard

My university's library has no ghosts. Probably because there were hardly any students. It was perfect for a part time job. Quiet. Peaceful.

I weirdly found it therapeutic with transporting academic journals up a ladder on wheels and stacking them in the dewey decimal system.

666.6921 AST then 666.6912 BISH

I sighed as I began to switch them around.

666.6912 BISH fell over.

Dusty, cobwebbed bones rattled behind the bookshelf. The human jaw flexed into a silent scream.

I sighed again as I straightened the journal.

It was a great job with hardly any students. Alive ones.

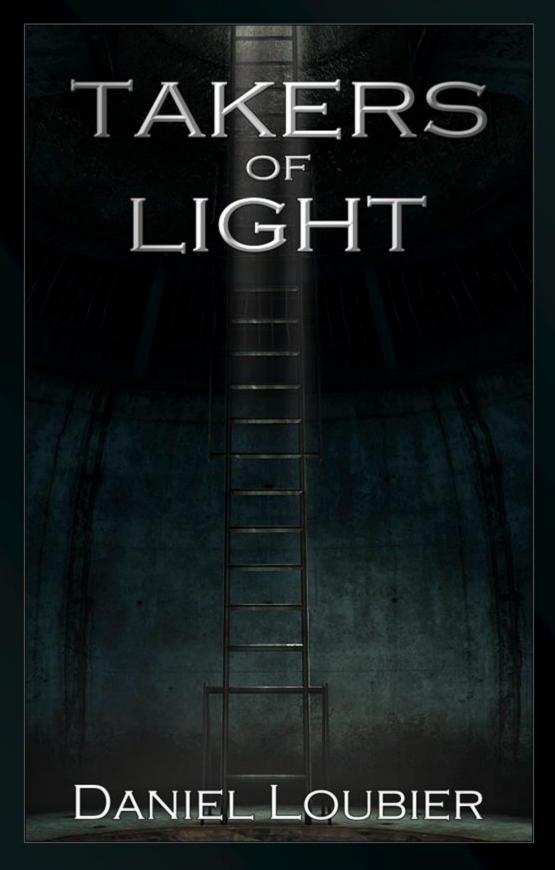
About the Author:

Corinne Pollard is a disabled horror writer from West Yorkshire, UK with published works in The Sirens Call and Trembling with Fear. With a degree in English Lit and Creative Writing, Corinne has always enjoyed the world of dark fantasy. Aside from writing, Corinne enjoys metal music, visits to graveyards and shopping for books to read.

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Driven underground by those of the light...

Now known as The Dark Dwellers...



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The Potato | Hillary Lyon

"So when do we get to dig up this special potato—isn't it about time?" Buddy rubbed his hands together. If this potato came out of the ground in good condition, that would mean they'd get the go-ahead to plant more, and that would mean big bucks from the government.

Old Mike Ferguson looked over his shoulder at the farm supply calendar on the wall behind him. A buxom lass in jean cut-offs and a red bandanna shirt leaned seductively against a yellow tractor. Mike called her Ellie Mae. "Lets see what Ellie Mae has to say about the matter." He tapped a knobby finger on the date circled in blue on the calendar. "Looks like today's the day." He turned back to Buddy and grinned. "Let's go see what delight Mother Nature has birthed for us."

Mike leaned on his shovel, watching Buddy dig deep, and then deeper, into the soft, yielding earth. The potato was huge, as it turned out. Mike was surprised at how large the hole was becoming; and still, the potato was more than half buried.

Buddy stopped digging to catch his breath. "This thing is enormous," he wheezed, stating the obvious. Buddy wiped his brow with the back of his hand, and succeeded in smearing a streak of sweat-mud across his face.

"And that's a good thing," Mike replied. "From what I was told, the USDA wanted us to grow a single potato big enough to feed a family of four." And with our burgeoning population—thanks to the flood of immigrants, both legal and otherwise—the government has to find a way to feed all those hungry mouths, Mike reminded himself. To Buddy he continued, "Irradiated potatoes, fortified with vitamins, nutrients, and unpronounceable chemicals—well, we're growing a super potato for our fellow countrymen. Remember golden rice?"

Buddy looked up at Mike, and squinted. "Sure, sure. Fed all those people starving in—where was it? India? Iran? Indonesia? Genetically engineered, nutritionally enhanced rice, I read." Buddy recommenced digging. "Was a great thing in the 2000's. Also saved lots of folk from blindness, from what I recall."

"Right. And now our government has its own super-food program," Mike rubbed the ache in his arthritic hands. "We're lucky to be a test partner, and if this works out then we—"

"Hey!" Buddy interrupted. "Looks like I'm almost done. Help me haul this titanic tuber out of this ridiculous hole." Rocking the potato back and forth to loosen the lower fourth from the soil, the two men grunted and struggled, until they finally freed it. Buddy had the idea of tying a rope around its midsection to heave it up out of the hole.

"Jeez, would you look at that!" Buddy half gasped, half laughed, when they at last had the tater out of its earthen bed. "It looks more like a giant mandrake root, than a potato." He snickered at the absurd root vegetable on the ground at his feet. "An enormous, man-shaped spud." Buddy shook his head. "So many jokes to be made."

"Probably just a fluke." Mike glanced back at his beat-up truck, which he had decided would be the first thing he replaced when the money came in from this government project. He unlatched the tailgate. "Grab that end of this tuber-beast, and let's haul it into the back of the truck. We'll store it in the barn tonight."

"Yeah, cause it won't fit anywhere else," Buddy grunted, as he helped Mike raise the thing onto the truck's bed.

Before they moved the potato into the barn, Mike wanted to rinse the dirt off to get a better look at the thing. With the water on, he set his thumb over the mouth of the hose, creating a low-pressure spray. It did the job rinsing off the clods of earth clinging to the tuber's skin.

"Now that's odd," Buddy said, looking over Mike's shoulder. "Don't taters always have brown or red or purple skin? Why do ya think this one is white? You think maybe we dug it up too soon?"

"Some potatoes have light golden skin," Mike answered, chewing his lip. He had followed the government's detailed, printed instructions. He had checked the date on the calendar. He'd done everything right. He straightened his back. "It's likely because of all the irradiation, all the fortified extras bestowed upon it." He squinted at Buddy, almost daring him to disagree.

Buddy enthusiastically nodded his agreement. "Yeah, yeah, sure! That makes sense." It had to be the case, Buddy thought, otherwise, they wouldn't see a penny of the government payout. "Lets get this beast in the barn and call it a day."

After dinner, after dark, after two tumblers of rye, Mike could no longer keep his curiosity on the leash, and so lumbered out to his barn to get a better look at his giant potato. As there was no electrical hook-up to the barn, he took his LED lantern, holding it up to light his way. If anyone had seen him, the witness would have been struck by how much he looked like a character out of classical lore. Somewhat like old Diogenes looking for an honest man, he was an old man looking for an honest windfall.

Once inside the rickety wooden structure, he walked straight to the potato, which he and Buddy had leaned against the wall. Propped up that way, in the distorting shadows cast by the lantern, the tuber even more resembled a man than it had when they pulled it out of the earth.

Mike held the light close to the tuber, looking it up and down. Perhaps it was due to his two hits of rye, or his weariness from the day's chores—but that potato looked for all the world like it had rudimentary fingers and toes sprouting from its appendages. He raised his lamp up towards the top of the tuber, where you would expect to find a head, and found what appeared to be a vestigial face—like the visage of a well-formed fetus. Eyelids down, lips pursed, a small flat nose—even the smooth sea shell shaped ears.

The old farmer rubbed his eyes. This had to be a trick of the light, an hallucination caused by exhaustion and liquor imbibed by an old man. He set the lantern down and reached a hand out to the giant tuber. Mike noted an odd, long vertical seam in the spud's midsection. He thumped it, testing its firmness. To his surprise, not only did the tuber's midriff flex against the blow—the potato grunted.

"Hey Mike, You in here?" Buddy shouted through the screen door of the old farmer's house. The front door was open, but the screen door was closed; an odd situation, as Mike was very careful about not 'air-conditioning the whole outdoors,' as he often chided Buddy, who tended to be sloppy about closing doors all the way.

"Let's go check out your tuber-baby," he yelled, after getting no reply from Mike. *Must be in the barn already,* Buddy decided. *I'll join him.* He trundled over the well-worn path to the barn and noted, once again, that Mike had left a door wide open. Very unlike him. Buddy sighed and worried that if Mike was getting too old to keep up with the little things on his farm, then—

He slipped through the open door and walked toward the enormous potato. Mike's lantern stood at its feet, still switched on and illuminating that dim corner of the barn. Head on a swivel, Buddy scanned the area around him, but Mike was nowhere to be seen. Where might he have gone—and why leave his lantern here? His truck was still parked by the house, so he hadn't gone into town—maybe he should go back to the house, and this time go inside to look for Mike. Maybe he'd had an accident, or a heart-attack, or—

The potato moaned. Buddy whipped his head around and leaned in close to the giant tuber, to listen. It had a face! But did it really? Buddy had read that humans saw faces in everything; we are hard-wired to do so. That's all this had to be, and that groan—did he really hear that? Or was he getting squirrely with worry?

The potato opened its eyes.

"Gaaah!" Buddy shrieked, backing away. He intended to run out of the barn, to barge into Mike's house and phone the—who? The police? The FDA? His cousin Dan with the flame-thrower he'd bought from Elon Musk? But Buddy didn't get that far, as a hand-shaped something firmly grabbed him by his shoulder and a dozen sturdy vines shot out to wrap around his chest, his neck, arms and legs, and yank him back. Buddy flailed, choking, as ropy vines with delicate white flowers pulled him into the enormous fanged and gaping maw that opened in the center of the potato.

In his struggle, Buddy knocked the lantern over. Its light blinked out as it rolled away.

The officials poured out of their unmarked vans onto old Mike Ferguson's farm, accompanied by a small cohort of armed guards. This entourage marched straight to the barn, where the potato stood at attention, waiting for their arrival.

"Get that thing some clothes—a proper uniform," barked the scientist in charge. "It looks naked."

"Yeah, a naked mannequin," a soldier scoffed under his breath to the fellow beside him. "I mean, the spud's got no di—"

"What was that?" the scientist hissed. "Soldier, no genitalia means NO distractions! It will also have NO personality, NO free will! Unlike *some* in my presence, it WILL follow orders and it will NOT cause problems."

The grunt swallowed hard and straightened his back. "What you see here, young man," the scientist continued with undisguised condescension, "is the future of ground warfare." He eyed the soldier disdainfully. "You will be grateful when the next world-wide conflict erupts." He turned away from the grunt, back to the soldier spud before him, which he eyed with unabashed loving adoration and pride. "And conflict will arise," he whispered. "Oh, yes. It will."

Still admiring the organically grown, fortified potato trooper before him, the scientist jerked his cell phone out from his inside jacket pocket, and called the project chief directly. Good news *must* be shared. Bad news can wait—if one considers the disappearance of the old farmer and his hired-hand bad news. The scientist shrugged off this dilemma: He wasn't sure if that actually qualified, or not. As far as he was concerned, it fell into the 'not' category. Collateral damage, and all that.

"General, it's a go!" the scientist's tinny voice chirped over the speakerphone on General Obermeyer's clean mahogany desk.

"Excellent!" General cried in reply, gleefully rubbing his soft, well-manicured hands together. "Best news we've had in months." He turned to his secretary, and motioned silently for the slim young man to bring him the red phone. "I will inform the President of our success."

About the Author:

For 20 years, Hillary Lyon acted as senior editor for the independent poetry publisher, Subsynchronous Press. Her speculative stories have appeared in numerous print and online publications. When not writing, she loves to hand-paint furniture and accessories in the dia de los muertos style. Hillary also creates illustrations for horror/sci-fi, and pulp fiction sites.

Blog: Hillary Lyon

Deals and Desperation | Lance Slusher IV

Tristan looked up as storm clouds built up as the forest's trees captured the last bit of the setting sun. "Be mindful while you are on sentinel duty!"

Tristan looked over his shoulder to the watch sergeant. The man was older but was in the same caste as him. No matter how good a warrior, scholar any of it, he would never hold knighthood. The sergeant had constantly reminded him as others had before him. A soft breeze from the forest kicked up; Tristan looked down at the blue star pendant with a blooming flower; it rested on a silver chain in his chest. His memories stirred toward earlier in the week.

A tournament of arms winning the right to be a permanent man at arms to the woman he loved. "Eleanor," he spoke to the darkness, closing his eyes tight, holding, her image in his mind. She had soft brown hair resting around her shoulders, blue eyes, the dimple she had on the right side of her face but not the left, the under-bite she had, soft skin, and nimble fingers.

"You'll never have her." He opened his eyes to the forest as it grew darker from the quickly approaching storm. Eleanor, the woman he loved, was the third daughter of Count; an arranged marriage solidified an alliance with a Duke and would offer in the future. His left hand closed on the pendant; the words of his former liege lord echoed forever in his mind: "You fought bravely today. You will protect and watch over her as will be your duty. Watch her marry this man. You will watch as her belly grows, and she has children. You will protect them as well." The Count's words replayed in his mind. The man sneered at him. "You are bound to be her protector and nothing more. You will forever be doomed to watch and never have what you desire most." A flash of lightning followed by a clap of thunder brought his mind back to the present, the memory faded.

Tristan kept his eyes on the road.; he had been lost in thought for too long.

Lightning flashed, illuminating the world only to plunge back into darkness. Heavy rain began to fall, Tristan could feel his feet sink into the now-forming mud. Another flash of lightning illuminated the world, he focused his eyes.

His left hand dropped from the pendant, reaching for the warning horn to alert the camp. He focused his eyes again to confirm what he saw with the lightning flash. He lifted the horn to his lips with the next moment of lighting; he began to blow; it was muffled by a clap of thunder. Sharp pain and a loss of breath greeted him, dropping to his knees, breathless a cold fire in his stomach and chest. A pair of bolts had found their marks. The pair of men burst from nearby an underbrush, reloading their crossbows as they charged forward.

The sky erupted with another flash of lighting as more men ran past him. "I have failed her," Tristan gasped out, his gaze turned to the encampment, a heavy breath escaped his lips, the ground caught his body as he fell into the cold mud. He could feel his nose and mouth mix with warm blood and stony soil. Sounds of battle rang in his ears. "One last chance to save her, please, I beg you, God, please." He moaned out, grasping in vain in the mud with his hand searching under his dying body. His hand grabbed a hold of his sword hilt. "Please God...." he paused, his hand slipping from the handle, his body began to grow heavier. "Anyone who is listening...please" He saw the world fading into darkness, the sounds of battle growing quieter. "Eleanor..." he breathed out. The world grew dark.

A faint white light pulsed in front of him, "What is your offering?" The voice that spoke to him was raspy and had a slight echo; it reminded him of a whisper when you turned your head, the speaker was gone.

Tristan blinked at the light; he looked down; the wounds from the bolts were gone; he stood before the light wearing a simple white linen gown that covered him. "My offering?" he spoke to the light.

"Your rage and desperation called out to me as you died. I can give you the strength to live again and save Eleanor." The light pulsed as if contemplating, "That is your desire, is it not?"

"Are you God?" Tristan looked around; it was only him and the light; he felt as if he was floating in the water.

"I am what you might consider a God, but I am not your Christian God." the light pulsed again, growing brighter, "You called out to him. He did not answer; next, you called out to anyone who would help." The voice seemed annoyed, "I have answered you, Tristan, the man who seeks to save the woman he loves. Whom you meet in secret, yet you never give in to your human desires merely out of respect for her?" The light pulsed again, growing darker. "Give me what I want, and you can save Eleanor, the woman you love. I will even give you the chance to hold her in your arms one last time."

"Name your price, and I will give it!" Tristan shouted.

The light pulsed almost in a laughing manner. "What I want and what you desire are two different things, mortal man." It seemed to pause as if thinking, "The boon mortal is a simple one. I shall give you the strength that cannot be equaled, speed beyond reason. All I require is your body. Your soul is yours to keep. Lastly, the thing I want; is your rage. Your desperation is yours to keep; it may fuel your desire to save Eleanor."

Tristan took a breath, he closed his eyes, picturing Eleanor; he knew the answer. "I accept your boon. Please, just let me save her."

The light faded as the voice laughed. "This boon is granted to you, mortal. Live again and show your enemies the true monster that lives within all mortal's."

Tristan woke up spitting the blood and mud from his mouth, the rain fell steadily on him, his tongue was swollen from some unknown injury. Slowly, he pushed himself into a sitting position. His right eye was caked in a mixture of blood and mud, attempting to wipe it away, only seeming to add more. Giving up, he glanced around. In the distance, a large fire burned from the encampment. The forest was eerily silent save for the rain. "Elle." he tried standing. The pain from the two bolts sent him tumbling back onto his knees. "You promised, you devil, you promised you'd give me the strength to save her." Lighting lanced the sky, a dirk rested in the mud, the rain slowly washing the mud away. "Unleash the monster within," Tristan spoke towards the dirk. He felt something moving inside his chest. The dirk was of simple make, black sheath with silver enameling, the hilt ended with a wolf head shaped to make it a silent howl. Reaching down, he took as deep a breath as his body would permit and pulled out the first bolt; he let out a cry of pain as it left his body. His gaze returned to the fire people walked around it; he could gauge from the shadows they cast there were twenty if his counting proved accurate. He reached up, grabbed the second bolt, and pulled it free. A wave of relief rushed over his body, and the stirring in his body grew strong as he felt himself growing weaker. His hands worked quickly, undoing buckles and clasps that held his armor on, the leather plate fell from his body. He worked for his numbing hands at the rivets that held the chain-mail; his eyes looked at the dirk again. The blade seemed to call out to him, a strange blood-lust in the back of his throat.

"Tristan!" he looked up from where the scream came, his heartbeat faster, "Tristan! Help me!" he recognized the cry; it was Eleanor. He attempted to stand; his legs would not move; he reached down with his right hand grasping the dirk. Tristan pulled the blade free of the scabbard and cut the chain-mail free of his body; it fell away as if he were cutting cloth. "Unleash the monster that lives within." He plunged the dirk into his bare chest just below his sternum,

"God forgive me." he gasped. He drove the blade into his stomach with both hands and pulled it upwards in his chest. Tristan looked towards the sky "Eleanor!"

Tristan reached into his wound, feeling the second set of muscular hands interlacing with his fingers. Screaming in absolute pain, Tristan began pulling his body apart as the world went dark again as the fire came into view and the large, clawed hands touched the forest floor.

Tristan crawled from the husk of what was his human body; he tasted the air with his new sense of smell and allowed himself to mentally explore his new body.

The scream from the woods made everyone turn towards the sound. Eleanor realized who it was instantly, "Tristan!" she called back into the forest. The man that held her delivered a swift backhand; she fell to the ground.

"Your would-be hero won't be coming to save you," he growled.

"You don't know, my Tristan fool!" she spat a glob of blood onto his boots; he raised his hand to strike her again. "Maybe he needs a show!" He reached down and started undoing the ties on his pants; he sneered, showing rotting yellow teeth. A large creature tackled him to the ground and began tearing him apart. His screams sounded like pigs being slaughtered and burned alive simultaneously. Men rushed over, weapons drawn; the creature leaped into the forest, disappearing.

Eleanor looked around the tree line, her heart pounding so hard she couldn't hear the men shouting. Crawling towards the fire, she looked around. The soldiers pointed at the trees, others towards the sky when the creature would take another from behind. After every kill, it would howl; it shook her very body and soul.

Eleanor clutched her crucifix. "God, please, save me. Let me see him one more time. Let me live and not be this creature's meal." She closed her eyes, repeating her prayer over and over. Another howl Eleanor covered her ears and buried her face into the soft mud crying; the cold ground and warm fire left her feeling light-headed and dizzy.

Eleanor lifted her head slowly; the creature stood looming at least ten feet away; it was at least a head taller than an average man and its shoulders twice as wide. Gore from its victims glistened in the fire, light off its brown fur. Its lips parted; saliva hung from its jowls showing its teeth. "Werewolf." She looked around the camp; the bodies of the men sworn to protect her, and the mercenaries' lifeless bodies were scattered around the camp, some torn to pieces, others died from the attack, none belonged to whom she sought.

"God, please." she looked back at the werewolf as it stalked slowly towards her, using its hands as feet. It slowly moved towards her. Eleanor slid back towards the fire, the heat becoming more intense. The beast stalked closer, the firelight illuminating it more. She froze; her hand found a handle; she lifted it to confirm it had weight and guessed at its length. The werewolf lunged forward; she thrust out her weapon and closed her eyes, seeing the claws swiping towards her face "TRISTAN, SAVE ME!" Eleanor screamed out.

The gentle caress of an all too familiar hand opened her eyes. Tristan smiled at her blood pouring from his mouth and nose. The dirk was buried to its hilt in his chest. "I love you, Eleanor." she pulled him close, wrapping her arms around him, "I love you too." he pulled back from the embrace; his green eyes showed only love, the light slowly faded from them, his body started going limp "Eleanor..." he gasped out. She pressed her lips to his, "Please, God; no, let him live." She held his hand to her face; his eyes grew dark. "Please, anyone, save him." She closed her eyes and opened them again. She was floating; an orb of light floated in front of her. "You truly want to save him? We can make a deal." The voice was raspy and echoed. Eleanor looked around; she wore a simple white gown. "Are you God?" The light pulsed as it laughed.

About the Author:

Lance Slusher IV was born in Oklahoma and raised in St. Louis, where he spent most of his time in the wilderness having personal adventures. Often, he would struggle with school due to his imagination. Recently he graduated from SNHU with a bachelor's in creative writing to pursue his master's in creative writing later this year. He currently resides in Arvada CO with his wife and two children.

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Starless Night | Susan E. Wigget

Jane wishes she could hasten to the abandoned mansion on the hill. But the bag she pulls inch by inch across the dry earth and crabgrass is heavy. Her arms feel sore from dragging it. Out of breath, she stops behind a rhododendron tree to wipe her perspiring brow.

The mansion hasn't been occupied in thirty years and is boarded up with 'No Trespassing' signs. The tree grows at the base of the hill.

Jane gazes up the grassy and weedy slope and calculates what route she'll take. It is tricky, with a cloudy sky, no stars, and only faint moonlight. She spots a plateau and figures that will be a good place to stop and rest next, barring any vehicles driving past with their brights on. An old Craftsman farmhouse, this mansion is out in the country.

Her sister Meg and she owned a little red wagon when they were children. Jane now pictures placing this heavy bagged burden in such a wagon. But the corpse would be too large and awkward. At least the body of her sister's rapist is contained in a bag. She doesn't have to worry about arms flailing or hanging out or, Goddess forbid, hitting her while she drags the corpse up the hill.

His name was Charlie. He was Meg's boyfriend for over a year, and his abuse escalated, as it so often does in such relationships. Jane never felt comfortable around him—his energy made the hair stand up on the back of her neck. She kept almost suggesting to her sister that they break up, but she knew what family was like. Meg would get creepy and yell at her to mind her own business. You could never walk on eggshells enough around family members.

Fortunately, it's dark out and the moon is a narrow crescent. If anyone walks by, they won't see the bloodstains on the bag or get suspicious because it is roughly the size of a corpse. Of course, this is such an out of the way place in rural Oregon—she isn't terribly concerned about getting caught.

The last time Jane saw Charlie and her sister Meg, the couple were in the living room of their shared apartment. Jane was walking up the stairs of the apartment building. She heard yelling before she reached the top step. She glanced at the closed apartment doors on either side of Meg's door and wondered if any neighbors were concerned.

Jane reached the door and banged her fist on it. The yelling continued. With it came slapping sounds. Jane banged on the door again and pressed her ear against it. She heard a cracking sound—she interpreted it as a punch—followed by a gasp and a thud. Heart fluttering in panic, she pounded on the door frantically. She grabbed the doorknob—it wasn't even locked. She threw the door open.

Jane grabbed the first heavy object she saw, an aluminum baseball bat leaning against the wall by the door. Apparently Meg took harm from strangers more seriously than harm from her boyfriend. Jane saw her sister lying on the carpet. She scarcely thought before swinging the baseball bat. She aimed for Charlie's head.

Now it takes Jane a while to reach the plateau gasping and perspiring. She drops the bag and collapses onto the crabgrass. She heard rumors about this house, that it has a sinister reputation. People think it's creepy and haunted, so nobody comes here. She isn't sure she believes in ghosts, so she isn't afraid of seeing any. Dead people strike her as less threatening than live ones.

After numerous more breaks up the hill to stop and catch her breath, Jane reaches the summit. Gasping and panting, she drops the bag and rubs her shoulders. She's lucky she didn't dislocate them. She scans the back of the house in the dark.

The back door has a short flight of steps and a small porch. Graffitied wooden boards cover all the ground floor windows. What are the chances that the door might be unlocked? Jane wouldn't need to do anything destructive like pry off boards or break down the door. That would be too lucky.

To Jane's astonishment, when she turns the doorknob, the door swings open. The doorknob feels loose in her hands and detaches from the door. Widening her eyes, she peers into the dark of the house while her heart pounds fast. She reminds herself that nobody lives here. Surely even squatters wouldn't wish to live so far out in the country, especially not with this house's reputation.

Jane sits on the steps and waits to catch her breath. She rubs her aching shoulders. As exhausted as she feels, she knows she can't dally for long. Where will she bury the body? Surely she won't leave the bagged corpse lying in the middle of a room.

She exhales, scowls at the bag, and gets up. *Get this over with.* She drags the bag one last time, up the back stairs and through the door.

Out of breath, Jane drops the corpse onto a wooden floor. Reaching into her jeans pocket, she pulls out her cell phone and turns on the flashlight setting. Shining the light around the room, she perceives she's in a kitchen that was last updated in perhaps the 1970s.

She peers down at the floorboards. Those haven't been replaced in a long time, she figures. Surely moderns would have switched to tile. She steps into the center of the room and reaches down to randomly try prying up a floorboard. It doesn't budge. She searches around, further toward a corner, and a floorboard creaks under her sneakers.

Jane bends down and, using the phone light, finds an edge of the board. She slips her fingernails into it... and can't get much of a grip. Anticipating she'd pull up floorboards or a wall panel, she brought tools. She pulls a hammer and a small pry bar out of her capacious jacket pockets and gets to work, prying up a floorboard.

Some of the nails stick up slightly out of the floor. Those are easy to yank out with the back of the hammer. When she has barely enough floorboards pulled up to shove the corpse inside, she sees something—fabric—under the floor.

Jane sees a small crawl space, enough space to store bodies. But... it is already occupied.

She holds up the flashlight in a trembling hand. She shines her light at various angles. Skeletons and raggedy cloth fill the space. Someone has been here before.

She gasps and sees her breath before her eyes. The room feels much colder than it did seconds ago.

Jane realizes she's shaking from head to toe. But she must finish this quickly. Surely adding another body here, to this place where other murders happened long ago, won't be a bad idea. *Get it over with.* Charlie was a terrible person, and even if a rapist doesn't end up murdered, the authorities don't have enough sympathy for their victims. That's why she took his dead body away instead of calling the emergency number.

Yes, Jane decides, she'll go ahead and bury Charlie here anyway. He'll have company. She turns back to the body bag. It is gone.

Heart hammering in panic, Jane peers wide-eyed around the room. Where could the body have gone? Should she just... leave?

A floorboard creaks. She freezes, shoulders tense. She turns to the back door.

A shadowy figure stands between her and the door. Hair sticks up on her arms and at the back of her neck, and her heart pounds even faster. "Hello?"

Jane shines the light. A tall, stocky man stands in front of the door. But he doesn't look quite... alive. His skin is grayish. He has dark shadows under his eyes. Jane's phone light shines on bloodshot eyes.

"Are you trying to dig up my bodies? That floor is my hiding place, not yours."

Staring, Jane rises from the floor. Her legs tremble. "Oh. Shit. Okay. Um, I'll be leaving now."

She runs for the door leading toward the front of the house. It shouldn't be too difficult to figure out the layout—Craftsman houses are quintessential Portland architecture. Shining her light around, Jane sees that she's in what was once an elegant dining room. Her light reveals a stained-glass side window.

She keeps running toward the front of the house. Her feet thud against creaking floorboards as she progresses through large, high-ceilinged rooms. She hears the creaking of the man's footsteps behind her. He walks slowly, which gives her hope, but makes the hair stand up on the back of her neck.

Jane enters a front hallway with a steep staircase. She sees the front door and lunges at it. The doorknob comes off in her hand. She gasps, looking down at it. *Seriously? Both doors?* She drops the doorknob. It thumps on the floor.

Jane reaches for the door and manages to shove it open with both hands. Still hearing those lumbering steps behind her, she darts from the front door to the steps.

Descending the porch steps, Jane's foot falls in through a rotten board. *Shit*. She yanks it out. Wincing at the pain of splinters rubbing against her ankle, she knows this isn't a time to pause. She hears the thump of the man's feet on the front entrance's threshold.

Jane runs as fast as she can down the hill in the dark. She's gasping for breath by the time she reaches the rhododendron bush. She knows she shouldn't glance back, but she pauses and peers up at the house anyway. Clouds shift, revealing the moon. In the moonlight, the porch is vacant.

Jane runs the rest of the way to her car, parked on a narrow path. She doesn't stop running until she's locked inside. The wheels shriek as she speeds away. It's not until she's on the highway that she recalls: the strange man was translucent.

About the Author:

S. E. Wigget has an MS in Writing from Portland State University. Her novel *Skeleton from the Closet* and her series *Rowanwick Witches* are available on Amazon.com. Her novella *Witch's Familiar* is in the Wormhole Electric Anthology. She lives in Oregon with multiple black cats.

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The Road | Robert Runté

Riggs became aware of the Angel of Death hovering over the foot of his bed, a black cloud with feathered wings and an impossibly handsome but disapproving face. Riggs' heart missed a beat, more from startlement than fear, and then never beat again.

"Oh, so that's it then?"

Riggs faced death with the same optimism that had characterized his life. Lately, his world had shrunk to what he could see from his bed in the residence, his interactions with others restricted to the always too harried staff, the deaf and demented Mr. Barks who shared the room, and the annoying Hatti Donaldson who roamed the halls with a misplaced missionary zeal. Riggs, though no man of action, had habitually lived life on the move until his shattered hip, and now grown weary of a bedridden life. The implications that there was to be an afterlife came as a pleasing surprise, though without the strong feelings he might have expected. Already floating languidly above his former body, he discovered himself disconnected from the chemistry of actual emotion.

The Angel of Death arched its great black wings as arms emerged from the roiling cloud of dark energy to push down towards where Riggs felt himself to be. The too beautiful face contorted with anger and disgust, eliciting in Riggs an existential terror beyond anything his body could have felt.

"Down? But why?"

Riggs felt himself sinking back through his body, then through the floor, through the basement of the care center, as the Angel of Death pushed him down into the Earth with all the weight of the universe.

"I've done nothing to deserve this!"

Flashes of memory, tiny disconnected images and sounds and smells from a life well lived, laid out every misdemeanor Riggs had ever committed. The fragments came without context, but Riggs nevertheless recognized each as the unkind word or thoughtless action represented.

Riggs was about to protest that none of these had been *that* bad, when a vortex of emptiness, of things left unsaid and undone, vacuumed up all of space-time into a singularity of omissions and missed opportunities.

"Okay. I see that. But it's not like I murdered anyone."

Images of innocents blown to pieces by drones, of refugee families adrift on a sinking raft, of death squads bursting in at 3 AM, of starving kids struggling to carry water back to their families, swirled around him as he plummeted downward.

"But I didn't vote for any of that! I was always vocal on those issues! I, I posted against those things on Facebook ..."

As he was pushed through the lithosphere into the asthenosphere, Riggs knew the Angel of Death leered at him in anticipation of the perpetual torture that awaited below.

"But I don't believe in Hell! It's an appalling concept." Riggs folded his phantom arms tightly against his phantom chest and willed his self to slow its descent. "I refuse to recognize such an afterlife."

He hovered in the earth's mantle for a moment as he dismissed the very idea of an Angel of Death. That was not any part of his committed beliefs; merely a remnant of a forgotten religious upbringing he had turned strongly against as an adult. He believed in reincarnation now; or perhaps a free-floating existence travelling between the stars, to boldly go where living flesh never could.

A self-satisfied smile reshaped the beatific face of the Angel of Death as it stretched out a hand to release a sound bubble of Hatti Donaldson praying.

"God bless the unbeliever, Harold Riggs, that he may enter the Afterlife and be Judged according to his deeds, though he knows not the Truth of Thy Glory, and has not walked in Thy Ways for many years. Though he hast rejected Thy Word—and was needlessly and cruelly rude to Thy Servant, who strove continuously to bring him to The Light—I beg thee not to leave him rot in the ground, but Raise him Up for Judgment."

And then the Angel of Death shoved Riggs through the metal core of the Earth into a dimension to which Riggs had not consented, and against the existence of which he had occasionally posted on Facebook.

About the Author:

Robert Runté is Senior Editor with EssentialEdits.ca. A former professor, he has won three Aurora Awards for his literary criticism. His own fiction has been published in over forty venues, four of his short stories have been reprinted in annual 'best of' collections, such as *Imaginarium* and *Canadian Shorts II*. He spends too much time on Facebook writer, editing, and publishing sites because feedback is faster than actual publishing

Blog: <u>Robert Runté</u> Twitter: <u>@runte</u>

An Old Man's Rant About Horror

I'm old and I'm fine with that. Fifty-two might not be ancient, but I've been around the block a few times. I have been through several 'horror is dead' and 'horror is the new black' periods. I've seen it all, in fact.

I grew up reading Dean Koontz (all-time favorite) as well as any paperback with a giant spider, a hairy creature with tooth and nail, or a dark blob on the cover. Hundreds of them, in fact.

Paperbacks From Hell is a checklist for me. I've read quite a few of those books, and even remember a few, too. It gave me a baseline for good horror books and allowed me to read what I liked and realize what I did not like.

Have my tastes changed? Very much so. Back in the eighties, I wanted gore. Lots of death. The more violence and profanity, the better. Kill 'em all and let Cthulhu sort 'em out.

Now? Quiet horror. Give me character over killing. I want to feel something other than cheap shlock shock. Yes, it is still horror. Yes, someone is going to get hurt. Someone is going to die. I get it. I still enjoy it, but maybe not as much as I used to as a teenager.

Dude with a hockey mask and a machete? Boring. Read it (seen it) so many times it is a cliché beyond cliché.

My own writing has definitely changed as well. No more mindless, cheesy serial killer rampages, story after story. The sex and violence and profanity has also dropped off about ninety percent, too. I don't need to toss in an F-bomb every other page in order to show the horror.

Yes, there will still be the occasional F-Bomb, though. You can take the boy outta New Jersey, but...

Am I angry about all of this? Nah. I'm enjoying this part of my career, in fact. I will still write the occasional splatterpunk/extreme short story for an anthology. I still get a kick out of the craziness still in my head that needs to come out.

But, for the most part... I like writing and reading quiet horror. I enjoy the characters, the plots and subplots. Writing a horror story where no one has a hockey mask, or a machete is fun.

And... of course, someone is going to die.

We're writing horror here, boys and girls.

Is there even a point to all of this?

Nah. Just an old man ranting because he has seen it all. Thirty years in the writing and horror community. Over ten years writing full-time and making a living telling stories that might or might not involve hockey masks and machetes.

But mostly, especially lately, not involving them at all.

Now get off my damn lawn, you kids!

About the Author:

Armand Rosamilia is a New Jersey boy currently living in sunny Florida, where he writes when he's not sleeping. He's happily married to a woman who helps his career and is supportive, which is all he ever wanted in life...

He's written over 200 stories that are currently available, including crime thrillers, supernatural thrillers, horror, zombies, contemporary fiction, nonfiction and more. His goal is to write a good story and not worry about genre labels.

He is also a successful podcaster, too!

The Mando Method Podcast with co-host Chuck Buda - talking about writing and publishing

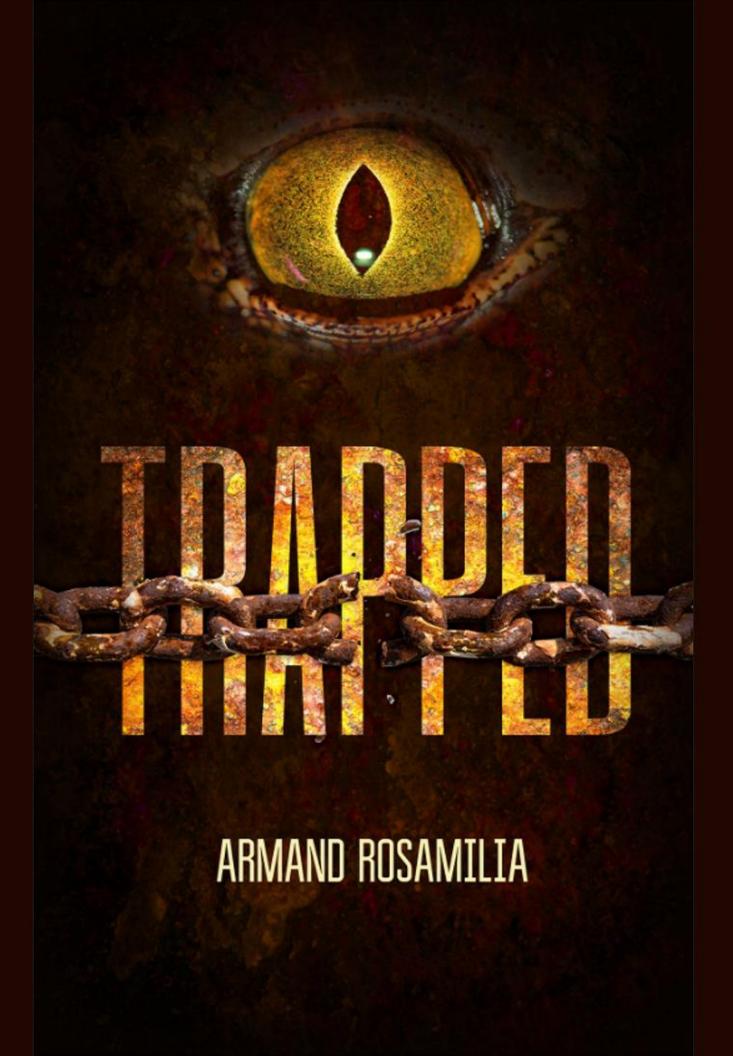
He also loves to talk in third person... because he's really that cool.

You can find him at https://armandrosamilia.com for all his information as well as random things he enjoys.

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Chapter One

It had been touch and go since the weather turned to a sheet of white snow, but Captain Fielding chalked it up to flying in and out of Colorado. He'd flown in worse than this, he reminded himself.

Luckily this wasn't a commercial flight, so he had a handful of military personnel in back with the cargo and Donnie, his copilot, up front with him. Giving him a look.

"What?" Fielding asked. "Don't get soft on me now, kid. We got a plane to land in this blinding whiteout."

"The tower isn't going to let us land in this," Donnie said.

"And they don't have a choice. We're carrying important cargo for the government, whatever it is." Captain Fielding smiled. They were getting a ridiculous amount of money to fly this crate, which meant it was top secret and they didn't want a military pilot in the event something went wrong.

Like trying to land in a blizzard and crashing.

"Flight Eleven Twenty-One, you are not cleared to land," the message came. "I repeat..."

Captain Fielding sighed. "Give them the ID and protocol numbers as instructed. They'll clear a runway."

They have to. We're running low on fuel, he thought. They'd been given strict instructions to land no matter what. The cargo, whatever it was, needed to keep moving. Landing at DIA (Denver International Airport) was only the first step from what Fielding gathered.

He'd been chosen because he'd always been discreet, he was an excellent pilot, and he had a perfect record. He also wasn't stupid, and knew if anything went wrong, it would be his reputation and butt on the line.

Donnie called it in and after a minute of radio silence, while Captain Fielding kept his course and prayed they'd let him land, the air traffic controller got back on the radio. He sounded annoyed but gave them the runway they'd be landing at and said he'd walk them through it. Personally.

"This is going to be fun," Donnie said. He glanced over his shoulder. "I wonder how our packages and guards are doing."

Captain Fielding shrugged. "Not our concern. We're flying this plane because we don't ask questions."

"I know, but I still wonder. Don't you? What's so darn important back there?" Donnie asked, putting his hands up. "I know. I get it. Let's get onto the ground and grab a drink."

Captain Fielding smiled. It would be nice to relax. He hadn't flown in a couple of weeks. His time had been spent in briefings about this flight, but he'd been paid for missed work as well as a nice advance for the next month. He had a paid vacation he wasn't expecting, and all he had to do was fly a bunch of crates to Denver. Easy enough.

Except the snow was getting thicker, visibility a few feet in front of him now. This wasn't going to be so easy.

It only takes seconds, Fielding thought. He was watching his speed and altitude. These days, the plane flies itself with all the technology. Not like the now-ancient planes he'd flown in Desert Shield. He could autopilot this plane to the ground but he preferred to do it himself. Hands on.

That might've been the mistake, because when he touched down onto the runway, the ice and snow piling up too fast to clear took control.

The plane slid to the right, beginning to fishtail.

Captain Fielding took a deep breath and righted it, slowing the plane down and knowing he'd stop it in plenty of time and without incident.

He didn't know he'd overcorrected. Everything on the ground was white, the runway lights buried. The overhead lights dim with the falling snow.

The right wing clipped a snowplow or maybe a crane on top of a snowbank, raising it into the air.

One second the plane was fine and the next it was shaking and spinning, the right side slamming into a snowbank and turning.

Fielding and Donnie were both whipped around, their seatbelts keeping them in place but banging their bodies with such force they were both knocked out.

When Captain Fielding came to, his head was pounding. He felt his forehead and his hand came away bloody. He called out for Donnie but got no answer. The cockpit was dark, the snow already piling up on the windows.

He unhooked his seat belt and stumbled out of the cockpit.

"Hello?" Fielding couldn't see in the darkness, although it looked like the doors were open. He felt the cold and saw a few snowflakes swirling inside. The door was on an angle and he knew he'd have to reach and pull himself up if he wanted to get out of the plane.

Why don't I hear sirens? Rescue should be coming, he thought.

He found a flashlight in the supply cabinet and wished he hadn't.

When he scanned the plane, he saw carnage: blood spattered on the walls. Body parts. Donnie's upper torso, his legs missing. His eyes wide and unseeing.

The crates had been cracked apart, wood splinters on the floor.

Captain Fielding glanced at the opening again. The snow was already piling up.

He thought he heard sirens in the distance, but it could've been the howling wind.

What had happened to Donnie and the soldiers? The crates?

"Hello?" He knew it was a stupid thing to say, but he didn't know what else to do. As captain, he wasn't going to leave anyone behind. His mind screamed to climb up and out, but he refused until he knew the entire situation.

Something clanged toward the back of the plane.

Fielding moved cautiously, scanning with the flashlight.

The noise came again.

Get out. Get out. Get out filled his thoughts.

He was following a blood trail, which led him directly to...

What in Hell was it?

Captain Fielding didn't have time for his brain to comprehend what the small creature, feasting on the leg of a soldier, was, before it lunged at him.

It wasn't alone, either.

Fielding's screams were cut off as he was ripped apart.

Chapter Two

The spoiled brat seated next to Hunter Shaya was driving him crazy. He kept kicking the bar under the seat, shaking all of them. With every seat taken due to the snowstorm that had swung around and hit the Denver Airport, Hunter had three choices: take it in silence, take a walk and find another seat, or open his mouth and say something.

He chose the last option, leaning closer to the kid. "Stop."

The kid stuck out his tongue and kicked the seat harder. His parents, on the other side, had their earbuds in and were on their phones, ignoring Junior.

Hunter smiled. "Ever seen a Guatemalan beaded lizard?" He took out his phone and scrolled through his pictures. "Cool, right?" He showed the boy the picture. The boy shrugged. "Not only is it the rarest lizard in the world, and not only did I find one and film it for my TV show, but it will also rip your face apart. It will eat your giant stupid ears and wipe that dumb look off your face. Definitely fix your lazy eye, too, you little runt brat. That thing between your legs? It will yank it off so hard you'll pass out. You'll wake up and your fingers and toes will be bitten off one at a time while the lizard pees in your mouth."

The boy shrieked. His parents didn't say a word until he started crawling on them, tears running down his face.

"My work here is done," Hunter said, winking at the couple across the aisle who'd watched it unfold and were both covering their mouths and laughing. "Time for a drink or three."

The bar was crowded. Hunter pushed his way through with a lot of smiles and elbows. He eyed everyone seated and willed at least one of them to leave so he could sit down. He knew with the snowstorm raging outside his flight was likely to be delayed or canceled.

Hunter's small crew was late. He'd flown in from Los Angeles, where he'd had a meeting with execs at some of the top channels like Travel Channel, Destination America, Science Channel and even Food Network to pitch his cable show to a bigger audience. After what he'd encountered at the South Pole a year ago, he knew he needed to strike while the iron was hot.

Not that anyone believed he'd seen and fought an alien creature who absorbed humans. The government had shut him down. Threatened jail time. Confiscated all of his equipment and accounts... until he shut up about it.

Hunter knew people had been paying attention, though, and he wanted to use it as a springboard to work with a company, Discovery Channel and their umbrella shows, who had the resources and could pay better.

"The meetings went well," Hunter said to the guy next to him. "Thanks for asking."

The bartender finally saw him waving and Hunter ordered a draft beer. "Anything local if you got it."

"Even the Food Network pitch about me finding exotic dishes tied to cryptids seemed to work." Hunter leaned toward the guy. "I'm hoping to get a call back. Since it looks like I'll be living in this damn airport, maybe they'll get back and I can hop a flight back to L.A."

The man had been trying to ignore Hunter, but he finally swiveled his chair away and walked off. Hunter chuckled and took his seat.

Four beers later, Hunter was glad he'd found a spot. The lines for the bartenders were six deep in spots. He checked his phone again but he barely had a bar. He was hoping his crew would text or call and let him know where they were. They were flying in from New York with the idea of staying in Denver for a few days and doing an episode about Denver International Airport.

Hunter was fascinated by the things he'd missed despite being in and out of this airport so many times: the demon horse, the apocalyptic murals, gargoyle statues, secret tunnels leading from the airport to NORAD, and a dozen other conspiracy theories.

He wanted to research all of them, and he'd landed in Denver six hours early to do that. Except he'd found a quiet corner on the catwalk at one end of the airport, rolled up his jacket and put his head down and slept for most of it.

The guy seated across from him looked familiar. Maybe a TV exec? Someone who'd worked on his show? Someone Hunter had interviewed?

Another beer later it was still nagging him. The man was in his mid-fifties. He looked tired. His eyes never stopped moving as he sipped a beer and stared at the glass.

Hunter knew he'd lose his seat but he needed to find out who the guy was. He walked off, his body not all the way out of the chair before someone had already taken his spot.

"Hey, how's it going?" Hunter gave the man a warm smile, standing next to him now after fighting through the crowd.

The man looked at Hunter. At first he seemed to look right through him, deep in thought. Then his eyes went wide and he frowned. "Can this day get any worse?" the man groaned.

Hunter was confused but played along. Obviously, the guy knew him. "I'm glad to see you, too. Can I buy you a drink?"

The man stood. "You can keep away from me. I'm not interested."

Hunter grinned. He'd done nothing as far as he could tell but had gotten deep under this guy's skin. "Not interested in a free beer?"

The guy poked Hunter in the chest with a finger. "Not from the likes of you, Shaya. How did you find me? Are you following me, you scumbag?"

Hunter put his hand up. "Woah, buddy. I just came over to say hi. I'm sorry you're having a monumentally bad day. I truly am."

"My lawyer will hear about this."

Hunter wondered if there was a restraining order involved. He didn't think so, although he had a few standouts between former wives, girlfriends, crew and guests.

Then it hit Hunter. "You're Jeremy Schaffer. The teenager who says he battled Bigfoot in New Jersey."

"I want to be left alone," Jeremy said. "I'm not interested in your basic cable show."

Hunter tried to look offended and failed. "I just had a meeting with Travel Channel. My show might be going nationwide, Jeremy. You'd make a great first interview, too."

Jeremy Schaffer shook his head and turned, pushing through the crowd.

Hunter wanted to chase after, but knew there was nowhere to go. Jeremy was trapped in Denver just like Hunter was.

That guy hasn't aged well, Hunter thought. He took Jeremy's seat before someone else could. He tried to remember when he'd supposedly seen a giant monster in some park in the middle of godawful New Jersey. Mideighties? Early nineties? It was at least thirty years ago, Hunter thought. I believe him, too, especially now that I see how quickly the government shuts down these things.

Hunter decided, if he ran into Jeremy Shaffer again, he'd tell him he believed his story and tell him what he'd encountered as well. It could be a bonding moment between the two men, and maybe lead to a prized first interview for the new show on Destination America.

Maybe Jeremy knew how to cook, and they could do an episode of a cryptid cooking show...

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