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The Collector | Miriam H. Harrison

George was greatly distressed by his uncle's passing. Not from any affection for the man—Uncle Henry had, in truth, been quite insufferable—but because George was the only relation well enough to settle the last of the miserable man's affairs.

Uncle Henry had never been wealthy, but he had nonetheless filled his simple country home with collections of the most lackluster variety: a cellar of dusty wine bottles, each with one last sip stoppered inside, long since rancid; wardrobes of what could have once been a gentleman's finery, now patched and repatched beyond utility; dozens of hats, each stained and frayed in its own fashion.

In life Uncle Henry had been heard to remark on several occasions that he had been cursed with a love of the finer things while the hateful Lord above made all too certain that he could not afford them. So instead he surrounded himself with the next best thing: objects that had once been proud and which—in great enough numbers—could compound into something still fine, still grand. Perhaps this lapse in judgment could be more readily forgiven if George had not been the one to find himself alone standing in the midst of this cenotaph to discontent. Alone, save for the dubious assistance of Mr. John Curtis, a gentleman much more generous in commentary than assistance.

"Fascinating!" Mr. Curtis said yet again, this time as he watched George open a trunk of ladies shoes, most broken, many probably lacking a mate.

George snorted in response, letting the lid fall shut. "Hardly. One more thing to be hauled away." He heaved the trunk aside, ready to move on to the next. But Mr. Curtis opened the trunk once more, considering the contents in silence while George opened another, this one filled with broken tableware.

"Had your uncle a wife?"

George almost laughed at the question. "No, certainly not. Though I daresay a touch of domesticity would have gone a long way towards balancing the man." He moved this trunk aside and began to struggle with the next, whose latch had rusted shut.

"Fascinating," Mr. Curtis repeated, but softer this time, almost to himself. "Fascinating, fascinating."

George was inclined to ignore him, fighting instead to open the current latch, but something in Mr. Curtis's voice compelled him to ask, "What is it you find so fascinating?"

"Don't you think it the least bit curious," he replied thoughtfully, "that your uncle would bother to keep women's shoes among his collection if he hadn't a woman in his life?"

"What I find curious," George said, abandoning the trunk entirely, "is that you would assume there to be any reason at all to this madness. Do you really think that there would be anything he wouldn't keep for the sake of having it?"

"Perhaps. But you must admit, this has been the first collection not in keeping with the interests of a dedicated bachelor. And look," he said, pointing to a spot inside the open lid, "there is a name. *Elizabeth*. Fascinating."

"Probably the name of the trunk's previous owner. It had to come from somewhere."

"But look—the writing is too fresh. Don't you think it would have faded by now?"

This time, George did look. Mr. Curtis was right, of course. The trunk had been set with a careful label, no doubt at some point within the recent months. Even so, George found himself lacking his cohort's enthusiasm.

"Whatever his reasons, they died with him. No doubt for the better. Shall we begin in the attic, then?"

But Mr. Curtis was now digging through the trunk's contents. He gave a small exclamation of surprise. George leaned closer and saw as the man pulled out a simple journal. Across its cover the name had again been written: *Elizabeth*.

"Fascinating," Mr Curtis said, almost reverently. But for whatever reason, this discovery troubled George, even as he struggled to remain aloof.

"Yes, yes," he answered, all too dismissive, "very fascinating. Shall we move along, then?"

Mr. Curtis followed, but not without the journal. The trunk had been one of the few by the corridor leading towards the attic. George climbed the ladder and opened the door, pulling back almost immediately as a stench of decay came heavily through the doorway. Bile rose in his throat while Mr. Curtis, still standing in the corridor, was reading from the journal.

"What do you suppose this means? When you wake, my love, know that you have been fearfully and wonderfully made. I have taken only the best from those who did not deserve them."

George could not answer, but all at once, he knew he did not want to know what was in the attic.

"They were flawed in themselves, but in great numbers I will find perfection, find you."

He would leave. He would find police, priests, soldiers—anyone who would come. But what would he tell them? "From these pieces you will rise: a beautiful, wonderful being."

He needed to see, needed to know. He took a deep breath, rose the last few steps into the attic. Its dusty window lit the room in dulled sunlight.

"You will be my greatest treasure, for you will understand."

It was tidier than any other room in the house, furnished with a four-poster bed, a wardrobe, a vanity. And in the center of the room was a trunk, larger than any of the others had been.

"You will understand collected beauty, true beauty."

The smell was unbearable, but still he crept closer. There, across the top of the trunk was the name—*Elizabeth*. George almost wept in fear, his hands shaking as he opened the latch, lifted the lid. A horrid stench assaulted his nose, his throat. But he willed himself to look. And there, worse even than the smell, was Elizabeth.

"My beautifully assembled bride—"

The pieces that would have been Elizabeth.

"—my most prized collection."

Mr. Curtis stopped reading at the sound of George's scream.

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. She is a member of the Horror Writers Association, and her writings can be found dismembered and scattered in various dark corners of the publishing world.

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Corpse of the Tundra | Maggie D Brace

As the snowy owlets regurgitate nasty bits of their suppers, so I come to be. A bit of bone here, a snaggle tooth there, my field vole skull atop ptarmigan spine does my bidding, with mice claws to scratch my way around this world. Who knows what magic laid buried in that hollowed mound, but slowly, inch by miraculous inch, I surged forth in all my gloriousness. I might not be a pleasant sight, with mismatched limbs akimbo, but I survive. Both feather and fur, mismatched and patchy, robe my piebald flesh. My unique being surges, beneath the arctic tundra.

About the Author:

Maggie D Brace, a life-long denizen of Maryland, teacher, gardener, basketball player and author attended St. Mary's College, where she met her soulmate, and Loyola University, Maryland. She has written 'Tis Himself: The Tale of Finn MacCool and Grammy's Glasses, and has multiple short works and poems in various anthologies. She remains a humble scrivener and avid reader.

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The Parking Place | O. D. Hegre

Carter and Elaine LaChance lurched forward against the seat belts, the tires of their car protesting with an abrupt *screech*.

The June sun glinted off the golden finish of the half-ton Chevy Silverado that had just pulled in front of them. "Oh my," Elaine said, settling back in her seat.

Carter looked over at the little lady he'd been in love with for over forty years. Then he stared out, with knitted eyebrows, at the large truck now sitting in his parking place—the same remote parking place he had used for the last six visits to the Southwest Oncology Clinic.

For the previous seven years, on each biweekly visit to the clinic, the LaChances had parked randomly, taking any open place. Still relatively young among the population of retirees that called the small community of Arroyo Verdure their home, they had intentionally passed up the spots near the entrance. Let the older folks have those, Carter reasoned. He just took what was available, usually in the back. And for those seven long and arduous years, things had just gotten worse and worse. Every three to four months, a diagnostic scan—while not devastating—showed progression of Elaine's cancer. Something was growing in Carter as well ... his profound sense of helplessness. He was going to lose his Elaine.

Carter sat back in his seat. He had always relied on his intellect. If a brute lay within, it had yet to reveal itself. With a doctorate in physiology; an academic career spanning five decades; and an international reputation that engendered pangs of envy among his onetime peers, Carter's belief system had centered on the rational, the provable–science. A philosopher colleague had once argued that a belief, whatever it may be, places a limit on how one permits them self to view the world and if your belief becomes strong enough, you no longer need facts. Carter had countered that belief in science was warranted because the human intellect reigned supreme, operating from a rational basis. Belief in science only limits speculation and superstition, Carter would argue. Science keeps the human race from regressing to those primitive creatures that stared up into the night sky by ancient campfires, trying to make sense of their lives and the world around them. In truth, despite his eloquence and perceived logic, Carter had come to realize—even before Elaine's cancer rocked his world—that while scientific inquiry might provide answers, it would never reveal the truth. Man remained only a heartbeat from those campfires of old.

The fingers of Carter's right hand drummed the dashboard as he watched the man exit the truck that was blocking the LaChance's path to success. "Don't worry, my love." The fingers of Carter's left hand stroked the tips of his mustache. "I'll take care of everything."

"But Carter, my dear, do you think this is really necessary?"

"I do, indeed, my sweet," and Carter opened his door.

Under the stress of those past seven years, Carter had come to accept, as fact, that circumstances totally out of his control dictated his life and how the emotions they engendered—like hate or love—could cloud the intellect, dramatically changing one's view of reality. Carter knew medical science had nearly exhausted its armamentarium for Elaine. For Carter all hope in rational science had floated away on the balloon of constant disappointment. In the face of his tribulations, even an inveterate man of science like Carter had begun to look to the edges.

First came the vitamin and herbal therapies: potent antioxidants and exotic powders derived from plants of Malaysia and the slopes of the Himalayas. Then the couple added juicing along with dietary modifications including rare fruits from little known Pacific isles. Next they incorporated acupuncture, directing the *qi* and balancing the *yin* and *yang*, and meditation, aligning the *chakras* and engaging the third eye. Massage therapy followed, then colonic cleansing and crystals and magnets and reflexology—on and on and on. Carter even dragged Elaine to Sedona for a couple of sweat lodge sessions with a native shaman. They drank a viscous peyote concoction: drenched in perspiration, Carter saw visions of God and the hereafter. Elaine just vomited the slime.

"Pardon me. Excuse me." Carter made his way over to the young man, now at the passenger side of the LaChance car.

"I'm really sorry, my friend," Carter looked up into the driver eyes ... eyes as dark as his long hair, "but would you mind moving your vehicle? I know it sounds a bit crazy, but I just have to park in this place. You see—"

"Hey." The young man took a step closer to Carter; there was the distinct odor of stale beer. "Are you, nuts, pal? You snooze, you lose, old man. Look around," the young man waved his hand toward the near-empty lot, "there are plenty of spots."

"No. No, you don't understand. It's this way," and Carter went on for about two minutes explaining his reason for needing *that* parking place ... *that very specific parking place*.

It was in March when the universe had smiled on him. Carter remembered because fourth-seed Arizona had just won the NCAA championship.

"Well, what do you know?" the doctor had said, eyes scanning the computer screen displaying Elaine's latest scan results, "the tumors seem to be shrinking."

Carter had hugged his wife ... even hugged the doctor. The LaChances went out to dinner that night and all the while, what remained of the scientist in Carter kept analyzing the variables. What had they done to achieve this amazing result? Was it the latest chemo? Maybe, though Elaine had only been on the regimen for three months. Was it the acupuncture or the newest herbal mixture? On and on he went, trying to sort things out. But the conundrum seemed insolvable from an analytical approach given the multitude of variables. By the end of that evening Carter felt sure of only one thing: they had grabbed the brass ring and he wasn't going to change one thing ... not one goddamn thing in their lives till the next scan.

So, for the next six months, they had used the same herbal concoctions (she took them three times a day); the same needle positioning (he had insisted on it with her acupuncturist); the same diet (a second scan in mid May showed further regression of Elaine's cancer); the same colonics, the same massage therapy ... and the same *parking place*. Today they would get the results of the third scan. Third time's a charm, Carter was sure.

The man looked over at Elaine, then back to Carter. The dirt-caked nails of his fingers scratched at his chin as he stared at Carter.

"Get the hell out of my way you old coot. I'm late already. I've got me a three- hour infusion and your bullshit is the last thing I need to hear." The guy gently but firmly shoved Carter out of his way.

"What's wrong, darling?" Elaine had rolled down her window.

Carter reached in, popped the glove compartment and took out the 9mm Beretta Nano. He wasn't a man of violence, Carter told himself. His eyes met Elaine's—the woman at the center of his universe—but he was desperate.

With their proximity to the border the LaChances had decided that, at their age, they needed to know how to protect themselves. The couple found the lessons surprisingly enjoyable. It intrigued Carter that life and death could weigh a mere twenty-three ounces (fully loaded) and rest so comfortably in his hand. Despite their training, neither one of them had really gotten the hang of handling a firearm. But it was Arizona, after all; everyone carried a gun.

"Look, fella," Carter barked; the tone of his voice surprising even him. *Conviction leads to confidence*, he thought.

The man had just passed by, and he turned to face Carter.

"What the hell—" The man's mouth fell open.

"Just give me the keys. You go ahead get your treatment. I'll move your truck and bring them back in to you." The pistol shook a bit in Carter's hands. "Please be reasonable."

Carter watched the man's eyes blaze.

"You son of a bitch."

Carter had moved away from his car and the two men now slowly circled each other. A scene from one of the old Westerns of Carter's youth flashed into his consciousness: the confrontation when the hero always manages to position himself, so the villain's eyes look into the sun. Squinting at the young man, Carter realized he'd messed that part up. Then Carter heard Elaine's calm voice.

"He has a gun, dear."

Despite the glare, Carter could see movement as the man reached behind his back. Carter closed his eyes, took in a deep breath, held it and pulled the trigger. The recoil caused his hands to buck, and the pistol fired for a second time. The slight popping sounds reverberated in the morning air. Carter paused ... eyes still shut. He repositioned the gun and squeezed the trigger a third time.

For a moment, Carter stood quietly letting the air drain from his lungs. The sun warmed his face. Then, again squinting, Carter opened his eyes. The man lay at the passenger side of the LaChance car ... unmoving. Carter walked over, bent down, slipped the key chain off the guy's belt. "I'll just be a moment, Elaine, darling," he said.

With some effort, Carter managed to start the big truck and get it into reverse. He felt the substantial bump as he backed the vehicle out, narrowly avoiding his own car. Carter parked the truck some distance away, then moved his car into the parking place.

He sat for a moment, resting his chin in one hand, rubbing his eyes with the other. *Everything's the same now*, Carter thought. *No deviations*.

"Okay. We are ready," he said.

There was no answer.

Carter looked over. A rivulet of bright red fluid oozed from the small dark hole in the center of Elaine's forehead.

"I didn't hear anything, Yolanda," the receptionist said.

Carter didn't bother to look up as he managed to sign in at the waiting room desk.

"They was shots. I know shots when I hear 'em." The elderly woman fidgeted in her wheelchair.

Another patient stood at the window looking out. "I heard somethin' ... probably backfiring."

"Well I think we should be call'n 911," Yolanda said.

Carter sat motionless in the exam room, listening to the distant wail of sirens. A gentle knock on the door preceded Elaine's doctor.

"Hello Carter." A hand reached out. "Elaine not with you today?"

"She's still ... still out in the car." The words caught in Carter's throat. He could feel his heart starting to beat a little faster; he realized he was holding his breath, again.

"Well, I think you should call her in here. This report is fantastic ... better than the last."

An audible sigh escaped Carter.

"Yes sir. I like 'em short. No evidence of malignancy anywhere. How about that?" The doctor was smiling.

"I knew it. I just knew it," and for a moment, Carter smiled, as well.

"Thank God that latest chemo regimen kicked in and did the job. Bet you were beginning to wonder, eh Carter?" The doctor reached over and poked Carter on the arm.

Carter froze, the doctor's words burrowing deeply into his psyche. *Of course,* Carter thought. The smile slowly faded from his face and tears began to run down his cheeks. He looked up into the doctor's eyes—the chemo regimen. "Of course." The words slipped out, and Carter managed a nod of agreement.

Carter continued to sit quietly: and if your belief becomes strong enough, you no longer need facts. Carter shook his head, the reality of it all crashing down on his shoulders as Elaine's prophetic words echoed in his brain: But Carter, my dear, do you think this is really necessary?

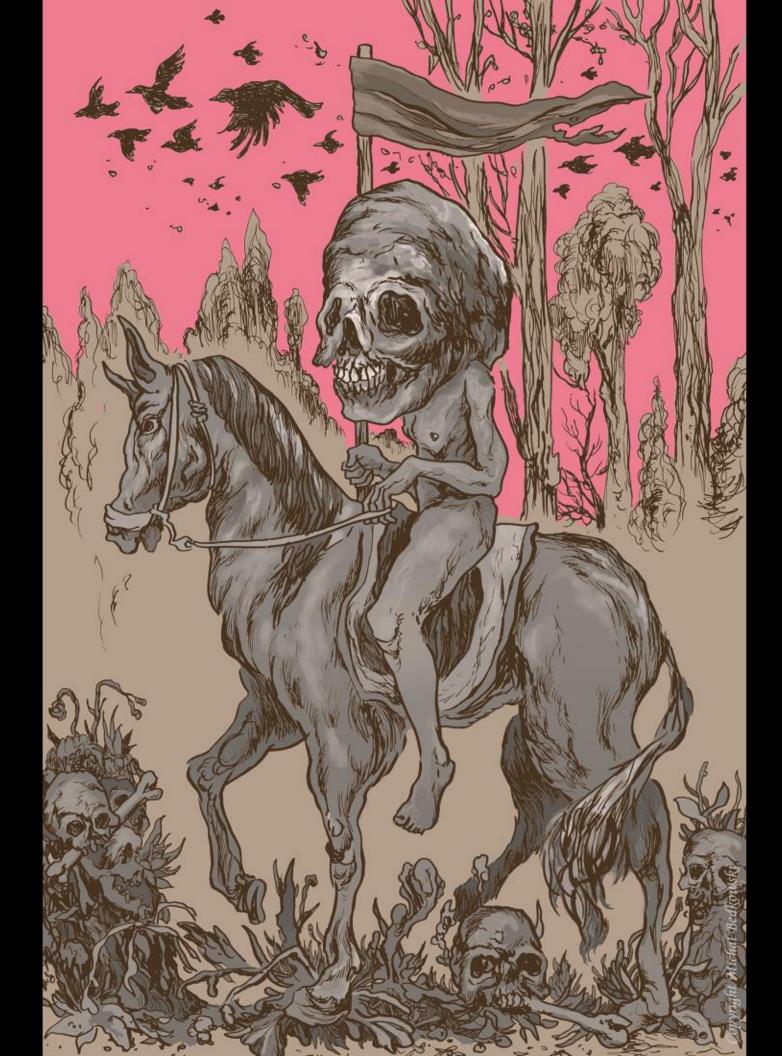
Then Carter LaChance wiped away the tears, raised the pistol to his temple and pulled the trigger for the last time that morning.

About the Author:

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

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Grave Adventure | *Nicole Henning*

The smell of old dirt and decay rose up as they walked through the graveyard. They had stopped trying to avoid stepping on the graves a while ago, not being able to see well enough in the dark. Their cell phone flashlights couldn't seem to cut through the thick fog that caused them to become lost in the first place. The cemetery was one of the largest in the state and exploring it had seemed like a good idea in the day light. It had been an unseasonably warm November day and the light had made some beautiful shadows on the headstones. Rich and Tonya had roamed around for hours and even picnicked for lunch by a dilapidated mausoleum that sat in the exact center of the multi acre land. After they packed their picnic up into their backpacks they had went back to wandering and hadn't paid attention to the suns fast decent.

They noticed the drop in temperature first as they were moving through a particularly old part of the grounds. Rich rubbed his arms and cursed while aggressively tapping his smart watch, "Damn thing isn't working. It's getting cold, the sun must be setting or something."

Tonya looked up from her grave rubbing and rolled her eyes, "I told you to bring a hoodie princess. And we are in a cell dead zone, so I don't know what you were trying to get your watch to do." Standing up she strained to look up through the cross-hatching trees and frowned, "I think you're right. We need to head back to the car. I don't want to get locked in here at night."

Grinning Rich walked towards her dragging one of his feet and moaning, "They're coming to get you Tooonnnyyyyaaa!!!"

Groaning she shoved him away and slung on her backpack. Two hours later the night swallowed the cemetery, and the creeping mist became a thick fog. They stumbled as they roamed the rows of graves slipping farther and farther into panic. Tonya grunted in frustration and reached out to touch something cold and stone. She moved her phones faint flashlight beam onto it and stomped her food, "God Damn it! It's the mausoleum from before. We're back at the center of the cemetery."

Rich squinted in the weak light of their phones shivering, "We aren't getting out of here Tonya. Not tonight. We need to try to get inside and at least be out of this damn fog."

Together they worked to get the rotting wooden door open and went inside. After shoving the door shut to keep any animals out while they rested, they looked around. To say that the structure had seen better days was an understatement. The only part of it that was still intact was the part housing the vault where the bodies had been resting for roughly 100 years. Tonya sat down against that wall and began to hum to herself. Rich sat next to her and licked his dry lips nervously. "What are the odds that we will make it through the night without being attacked by animals or freezing?"

Tonya rolled her eyes and handed him a flask from her bag, "Here drink some of this. It will warm you up and make you not think about the what ifs."

He drank deeply from the flask and handed it back to her. She slipped it back into her bag and sat with her head resting against the stone behind them. "You know. This is the oldest tomb in the cemetery, and really well constructed for being so old. My relatives have been in here for over a hundred years without a single grave robbery."

Rich looked at her blurrily, "Your relatives?"

Tonya smiled and stood up nodding, "Yep. Why do you think I was so keen on touring this specific cemetery? We have tons that were closer to home you know."

His head began to lull to one side and she leaned over and snapped her fingers in front of his face. He blinked slowly in response. Shaking her head she tsked and gathered their things. "My relations get hungry from time to time, about every five years to be exact. So I bring them someone to munch on. In return I get their riches without contest."

Rich whimpered as the drawers holding the deceased began to slowly slide out from the wall behind him. Tonya grinned at him and backed out of the wooden door. "I'll be back in the morning to make sure none of your cloths or anything need to be disposed of. I could stay and watch but I just don't have the stomach for it. You know how I can't stand scary things."

As she walked back to their car without issue, she heard him scream. Pulling out her phone and putting in her ear buds she listened to music to drown out the sounds of chewing.

About the Author:

Nicole Henning is a book-a-holic who lives in a big-little town in Wisconsin. She surrounds herself with all things scary and bizarre and enjoys creating unique art. When she isn't writing she enjoys playing video games and spends a lot of time snuggling with her dog Allie aka Princess Prissy Pants. Reading, writing and horror are her biggest passions in life.

Hansel and the Witch | David Whippman

"In the middle of the forest..." Hansel began.

"—was a house made of gingerbread, and in it lived a witch," Gretel laughed. "We learned *that* silly story when we were children." And even before then, the two of them had been inseparable friends, so much so that people in their village almost thought of them as brother and sister.

But they were in fact not related. And now, in his late teens, Hansel had grown into a tall muscular handsome youth, and Gretel was seeing him in a new light.

As they walked, she asked pointedly, "Did you bring me to these woods just to tell me fairy tales? I heard some of the village lads and lasses come here to..."

He ignored the hint. "I brought you here because they're *not* fairy tales! Gretel, I've never told anyone this: once when I was 13, I was exploring here, alone. You were away visiting some relatives. I came upon a cottage in a clearing."

She giggled. "Was it made of gingerbread?"

"No, silly! I crept up and peeped through a window. There were shelves lined with dusty old books. Strange symbols on the covers. I learned later they were books of witchcraft.

"And through another window..." He shuddered. "I saw a kitchen. Meat was hanging from hooks. I thought at first it was from a pig. But pigs don't have arms and fingers."

She laughed nervously. "Hansel, you're scaring me! Witches aren't real."

"Gretel, you don't know what it *is* to be scared! As I looked, I saw a reflection in the glass. Someone had walked up behind me. A hand—it was more like a claw—gripped my shoulder. The witch had caught me."

He stopped walking. Gretel saw before them a clearing, with a small stone house.

"Is this...?" she asked. He nodded. "But how did you escape?"

"I didn't," he answered. "The witch let me go. But there were conditions. I had to bring food to her."

He caught hold of Gretel's hands. "You can come out," he called.

The door opened. A figure in a tattered sack dress stepped out and walked towards them. When she saw its face, Gretel screamed and struggled frenziedly, but Hansel's grip was like iron.

"You don't like what you see?" The witch's voice, oddly, was no cackle, but a husky seductive purr.

"Hansel!" Gretel pleaded. "Let me go!"

He shrugged. "Don't think badly of me, Gretel. I hoped it would never be you that I brought here. But food is scarce. At least, the food that my sweetheart prefers."

"Your sweetheart?" For a moment, Gretel was more astonished than frightened. The witch laughed.

"You don't understand. I will place a glamour on you, so you see me as Hansel does."

For a few seconds, it was as if Gretel looked through rippling water. Then she saw clearly again—but in place of the hag was the most beautiful woman she had ever seen: flawless pale skin contrasting with long, jet black hair; impossibly blue eyes and full sensuous lips. All too clearly, the curves under the dress complemented that face.

"Food is not my *only* need," the witch explained. "When I captured Hansel, I saw in that inquisitive boy the virile youth he would become. He prefers me like this."

Gretel gasped. "Hansel, you can't! You and her...ugh! You know what she really looks like! What you're seeing now is only an illusion."

He nodded. "But I also know what you village girls look like when you've had a few kids and worked in the fields for a few years. Illusion will do nicely, thanks."

"Kill her now," the witch said. "I'm ravenous."

"What?" Hansel sounded outraged. "You think I would kill my dearest friend to please a foul sorceress?"

With a sudden movement, he grasped Gretel's head in both his hands and gave a sharp twist. There was a cracking sound.

"Damn right I would," he grinned.

Picking bits of food from her teeth, the witch rose from the dining table. "I'm so full, I can't even walk as far as the bed," she said contentedly.

"Then I'll carry you," Hansel replied, lifting her into his arms. "Just think. When we first met, I was afraid you were going to eat me."

The witch ran a fingernail down his chest.

"If you're a very good boy," she whispered, "I still might."

Silence | Gregory L. Steighner

"We haven't closed a bar since, when... the mid two thousands?" Jenny asked twirling herself out onto East Carson Street. "I miss those days."

Michael watched as she stomped towards the curb, taking her by the arm before falling over. "We don't need a repeat."

"Was this the place I threw up near the homeless guy?" Dave asked as he wrapped his scarf tight.

"That was Metropol, in the Strip." Michael corrected, remembering that night despite twenty years of distance. "You turned thirty."

Jenny and Dave laughed so hard that they had to hold each other up. They would be the perfect couple if things went another way. It was difficult not to imagine what might have been.

"I'm happy this place is still here." Jenny looked up at the neon sign, the odd tint of purple lighting her face. "Everything else is gone."

The trio beheld the sight of wide windows into a darkened nightclub, music soaking the streets, while people clumped close desperate for intimacy. One of the large screen televisions drew Michael's attention, as it showed the classic MASH movie. He remembered their friends.

"Frank and Mel loved coming here." Michael said aloud, bringing home some of the more painful changes in their lives. It brought the moment to a dead silence.

Slowly they started towards the parking lot, Michael taking the lead. Jenny looked up at him, "Some things haven't changed. That girl eyed you all night."

"She is barely older than my daughter." Michael protested.

Dave bumped his shoulder, "Please, twenty years ago you would have been making out in the bathroom." Michael rolled his eyes as Jenny added, "I certainty would have."

"How are you doing?" He avoided asking all night despite Jenny giving hints all night.

"I'm good. Carol and I agreed to make it painless. We're over." She answered, he felt her pain.

Dave placed his arm around her, "Thing get better."

"Yeah," Michael withheld his revelations.

As they reached their cars, Michael received a parting kiss from Jenny. "Mike, thanks for a good night. You always know how to make people feel better."

"Well..." He began to disagree, but changed his mind. Why ruin their evening now? "You guys are great."

For an instant he thought they noticed, their expressions catching a hint of the coming changes. Dave gave his trademark bear-hug. "Call you later."

Michael forced a smile, "Yeah, later."

Jenny and Dave came into the city together, Michael held no illusion that they would begin their morning together. Although they had been friends for over twenty-five years, was it too soon for them?

He waited in the car until well past three when the lot had only a scattering of other vehicles. A fog rolled off the Monongahela, seeping into the South Side streets. Michael gripped the steering wheel. He put everything in order that he could.

Pittsburgh became a quiet city in the early hours of Sunday. A good time to be alone, walking on the sidewalk of the Tenth Street Bridge. The fog thickened towards the center. Michael found fog soothing, it eased his visions of pain. Soon, he would ease into a gentle white.

The dizzy laughter crashed his resolve. It came down the direction he walked. The golden bridge lights cast a snowy light blending into the foggy haze. A black figure emerged walking on the steel dividers between the street and the walkway. Each step brought that person closer until maybe ten feet away the girl fully appeared.

Michael didn't say anything. It was the girl from the nightclub, decked out in layered shades of black, and long dark hair that fanned over her left shoulder that balanced out a massive ink black handbag on her right. Her arms stretched out to complete the balancing art.

As she closed in, she spoke joyfully, "The secret is not allowing yourself to fall down."

Michael stepped closer, raising his arms up instinctively as she turned towards the river side. He read her dramatic face, realizing what she was going to do, but he wasn't close enough to stop her jumping.

"Yes!" She yelled, posed on the golden railing facing downriver towards the unseen Point.

Sweating, Michael stood shocked at the sight of the girl perched using the boot heels.

"I did it!" She said spinning around, but her foot bumped the railing and she began to fall.

This time Michael seized her blouse at the chest, pulling her back over, and against his body. Her scarlet eyes locked with his own.

"I guess I should thank you." Her whisper thundered through him.

Jenny was wrong about this girl, she was barely older than Ariel. He quickly broke off their embrace. "What the hell where you thinking?"

"Duh, walking across the bridge like you."

"I was using the walkway."

"Not really." She took another step backward, "the name is Sara Cain."

"Michael Fairbanks," he answered while analyzing her. "You should go home."

Shaking her head, "No."

"I'll call the police," Michael bluffed. "As a minor they can take you home." Michael bluffed.

Sarah crossed her arms, "Please, Michael, you locked your phone and keys in the car."

"You have been stalking me all night. I'm not interested." He began to sweat against the cold air.

"Wow, you're sure of yourself." The snark dipped off her voice. "I had my fill tonight."

Perhaps he should end this now and leave her behind, but that wouldn't change anything.

She walked around, looking at the hidden skyline, "It's natural for me to be attracted to someone like you."

That freaked him out, he didn't want a demented affair being the last thing in his life. Leaning forward against the railing she continued. "Oh, I know your type. You like making people happy. Always striving to bring out best in someone. You find a way to relate everyone's joys together. Ready to listen to a person's problems whether or not you know them."

Michael turned away from as she added, "Everyone but you."

"Go away."

"It's too late. As I said, you drew me in, and I can't walk away. The game has rules."

He faced her with anger, "Really? A game?"

"Yes, the one and only, the big one that everyone plays with such vigor," Sarah dared to approach him, "without knowing all the rules or the stakes."

"Well, Sarah, I was dealt a losing hand. I've played my last card." He was running on fumes, so why wouldn't she let him burn out?

She kept get closer, the air seemed to get colder, "Michael, that's a matter of perspective."

"Don't give me that bullshit." He growled at her, hoping she back off. "You're too damn young to understand."

Less than an arm's length away, Sarah paused. Her fingers crept up to the blouse's collar, and one by one loosened the buttons. Michael panicked as her right hand guided his hand between her breasts. The wrongness of the touch creeped him out. It took a moment for him to realize it wasn't her age. Her chest was cold without a hint of warmth. The silence of a heartbeat sent his mind in a whirlwind of terror and disgust.

He pulled away allowing her to button up. She spoke up, "I'm at least twenty years older than..."

"Impossible..."

"I'm a wanderer in the outer darkness." Sarah stared at him, grinning to display a pair of long fanged teeth. "I became undead at sixteen by an act of violence."

Silence stood between them, until the wail of a train passing along the river front sliced the moment allowing Sarah to take advantage, "I hunt using a hyper-sense of empathy to find the right people to feed on."

"So that it? You're hunting me? Feast upon my blood and kill me?" "No. I've dined earlier on clubbers without harming them, unduly. I avoid killing, it damages my humanity, the last broken bits of my soul. I feed off emotions as much as blood. Tonight I felt happiness, excitement, and unfortunately you."

Michael wondered if she was for real. Could she feel his hard emptiness?

"Michael, when I kill, I feel the dying person's last emotions, it's a horrible cocktail to experience. Over time, I may become a deranged and unthinking beast. Those are my cards, Michael. This is our turn to play, I don't want to play a losing card while you have me trapped."

He pointed towards the end of the bridge, "Then walk away."

"If I did..." She stopped, looked away from him for a second, and continued. "I can't."

The fog deepened, the water washed over the bridge pillars, and in the distance there was a siren. Michael doubted it was the police. "Let me play out my last hand."

"If you play that card, we both lose." This girl claiming to be a vampire glared at him like sword slicing though their moment.

Michael walked to the railing, his hands gripping tight, "One of us has to play their last card. There is no other way out."

"Cheat." She said just above a whisper. It felt like Sarah shared a terrible secret. "We aren't beaten yet. Take a new card, see how it plays out."

"You make it so easy. Just take from the deck a new card. It might be good, but I can't see it that way anymore. Someone can do better with the card without me in the game."

Sarah stepped up beside him. "I watched afar my family, a blend of Polish-Czech with a just enough Italian to spice it up. They mourned me without a body. One by one, they died off. My grandparents, parents, my brothers and sisters, and now I wait to watch their children pass on. The worst part is that I never left them, they kept me alive in their hearts. The burning card they couldn't give up. That poisoned their decks."

"You never went back?" Michael glanced down at the girl.

"Once," Pain darkened her voice, "it was a horrible mistake."

Silently, they watched the fog for a while. Pittsburgh's cascade of lights along the riverfront and by the skyline immersed into shadows of Van Gogh.

"Michael, I don't feel emotions. What I have are the memories of feelings. It's a terrible disconnection from my soul."

Like a fever breaking Michael felt a snap within him, "Now I find someone that understands. You aren't leaving me alone are you?"

"I wish I could. This won't be painless. The pain will have a grin for us all. That grimace that tears at our souls. I don't want to see it tonight." A slight wind rose from the river, catching Sarah's hair, blowing it back like a sail. "I don't want to remember it."

Michael recalled a verse from the MASH theme song, "Oh why ask me, is it to be or not to be?"

"What is your answer?" She turned those scarlet eyes at him.

He had none, or too many. Instead of certainty, he fell into a whirlwind of changes. Could he reach out and pick a way out? The evening started with clarity, but now he was lost in this damn fog.

"I don't know."

Sarah gave him a hint of a smile. "Well, that's something."

About the Author:

Gregory L. Steighner is a passionate writer and photographer drawing inspiration from the world and people of Western PA for stories. He resides with his wife Nikki, mother-in-law, and three energetic cats.

Facebook: <u>Gregory L. Steighner</u> Instagram: @dino1954godzilla2020

Mimic Mountain Valley | John H. Dromey

At first, I knew not what I was doing in this spooky place—lost, lonely, and totally disoriented. Even my thoughts were absorbed by the foggy darkness.

Formerly, I was a successful con man, exceptionally good at mimicry. I remember my latest victim was a powerful wizard. He resented my impersonation of him and threatened revenge.

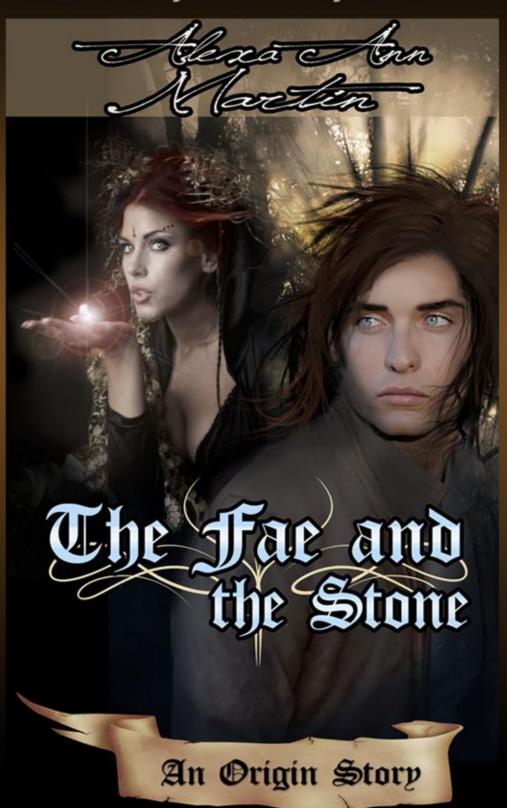
Now, I'm speechless without a sonic prompt. Even then, I can only imitate what I just heard—over and over again, with diminishing volume, until my voice is finally exhausted.

There's a simple explanation for my plight. The wizard turned me into an echo.

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 *Sirens Call Publications eZine*, and elsewhere.

A young warrior learns there are threats to humanity, the battle rages daily, and he must always be ready to defend it.



Available in print and ebook at Amazon

No Need for Mokosh | B. T. Petro

Darina stared at the ceremonial dress laid out on her bed. The fine hand-stitched embroidery of butterflies and bees in the deep yellows, greens, and browns of her native Jacubany seemed to come alive in the Imolc's February late afternoon sun. She ran her fingers delicately over the cross-hatched symbol for the goddess Mokosh, the centerpiece on the front part of the bodice, and could feel an unnatural warmth.

"I'm not going," she spat in a whisper through gritted teeth. Then, with more force and conviction so that her grandmother would hear her in the common room, she added, "Did you hear me, Babka? I'm not going to become a priestess."

When there was no response, she stomped out of her room and found her grandmother on a stool, hunched over a weaving of willow shoots. "And don't waste your time on the wand, old woman. I'll not be lighting the sacred flame either tonight."

Her Babka Yanchik looked up with sad, rheumy eyes. "The dress was good enough for your mother, as were the duties."

Darina snatched the wand from her grandmother and threw it into the hearth. The greenery caught fire and smoke tendrils snaked their way to the ceiling.

"You dare mention my mother," she screamed, great tears running down her cheeks. "Where was Mokosh when my mother needed her? What goddess of fertility allows a mother to die while giving birth?"

"Oh, child," her grandam began, "there were many complications while your mother carried you. With her dying breath, she told me that the goddess gave her a choice: her life or yours. Your mother made her choice, but asked Mokosh to protect you and see that you were happy."

With the help of her cane, the babka rose to face her grandchild. "You bear the mark of the goddess and even your name means 'gift', which you were."

Darina glanced at the back of her right hand. The blemish indeed resembled the winged symbol of the goddess' protection. Yet she was unmoved.

"And where was Mokosh when soldiers from the south came and took my father to fight in their goddamn war? Or my brother and six other boys when they were taken by gangs from the north to work in the Sotak Mines, never to be seen again? Darin was only nine years old! I want no part of a god or goddess who is so choosy."

Her words staggered the old woman as if she had been slapped. Clutching at her necklace, two rounded stones like breasts, she wailed, "Mokosh, forgive her. Remember the bargain with her mother."

Standing before the small altar to the goddess in the room's alcove, Darina continued her denunciation. "Let Mokosh save her weirding ways for L'Uba. She moons like a calf over every male in the village and longs to be bedded. She'll not be happy until she has a brood of her own. I do not plan to marry nor to have a child."

The old woman grabbed at the stucco wall for support, lest she collapse. While her granddaughter paused, she ventured, "There is so much that you do not understand, that I do not understand. Yet the women of our village have managed to survive for centuries under the watchful eye of Mokosh. This I believe with all my heart."

In response, Darina plucked a handful of wool from the carding basket. "Is this how the goddess helps us to survive, by spinning and weaving and sewing our entire lives? She will have enough challenges with Alena. The poor girl is so addled that many times she can't find her way back home from the barn. If Mokosh can grant her skill at the spinning wheel, she would be happy. I will be happy if I never hold a bobbin or put my foot to the treadle."

As if to sever her ties to everything and everyone, Darina unclasped her own necklace of breast-shaped stones and let it fall to the earthen floor. She ignored her grandmother's desperate pleas to stay and went out the cottage door, not into twilight, but into darkness.

Darina blinked several times, but the blackness was absolute. There was only the damp smell of stone and the sweat from bodies close by. From somewhere to her left, a gruff voice boomed.

"Darren, you big oaf. You've kicked over the lamp, again. If we don't meet our quota, things will be bad for the lot of us."

Grunts of agreement came from several directions and seemed to echo. The sound and tang of flint on steel was followed by a spark and a tatter of cloth was bathed in flame. The oil lamp was rekindled, Flickering flames providing just enough light to make out the shapes of six men staring at her.

The haggard man next to her looked straight at her and boomed, "Darren, can ya hear me, man? Pick up your shovel and put your back into it."

Darina looked down at her hands, big and beefy, calloused from work, and blackened like the walls surrounding her. Hands without a birthmark.

As the realization of what she had become and where she was took hold, Darina wondered how her brother would find his new life as a woman. That made her laugh.

It began as a lilt, but quickly turned to staccato peals.

The others glared in bewilderment. Laughter of any kind was rare in the depths of the Sotak Mines.

Responses from an Insane Woman | B. T. Petro

They ask me if I'm insane. I tell them I am unsure. After all, if I'm truly insane, they should not trust me to know. They ask me if I can identify the witch who cursed me. I tell them that any good curse would prevent me from revealing that. My judgment should not be trusted.

They ask me if I know that I am now damned to suffer everlasting agony in Hell. I tell them that I see the darkness of their souls and should that indeed be my fate, that I look forward to greeting them. Trust me.

The Prophecy of Modok | B. T. Petro

Few know of the prophecy of Modok's return. Sadly, the sole copy of the Book of Veles has been lost. And after fourteen centuries, the scars and aftermath of death and destruction caused by the demon have eroded from the memory of man as a mountain is leveled by time.

Very few know that one by one, the omens have been fulfilled, save the last. And the conjunction of the planets and stars that will open the portal is nigh.

After I have feasted on flesh and souls, fewer still will remain to write the prophecy of my next return.

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.

The New Girlfriend | Rowan Hill

The dark portal to the surface opened, stone scraping stone, moonlight flooding the pit. Many girls flinched from the brightness. All bar one who knew time with him was precious. His silhouette filled the doorway and they all groaned with hunger, bodies clamoring where food would land.

A limp shadow joined him. The latest girlfriend fell and the others lunged.

Tearing. Biting. Viciously ripping her flesh.

He watched his harem eat and moonlight hit his handsome face. She sighed. As beautiful as the day he lured her. The door closed and she jumped on the new meat for her portion.

About the Author:

Rowan Hill is an author living on a volcano in Italy. She enjoys writing flawed female protagonists in her stories and extreme environments. She currently has credits with Cemetary Gates, Kandisha Press, Curious Blue Press, and more in the near future. She can be found on twitter and her website.

Website: writerrowanhill.com
Twitter: @WriterRowanHill

The Skeleton Crew | Joshua Skye

We'd been told not to leave, to remain calm, to stay in one room while we waited for the police. Our director, Franklyn Cox, had the illustrious idea to keep us all in the room with the bodies so that we could not only keep our eyes on each other but the entire crime scene itself to make sure no one disturbed or erased any evidence. We all huddled together in one corner, as far away from the bloody dead as we could get.

And that they were, bloody.

Beyond belief so.

There was only ten of us to begin with, seven left, bare-bones to say the least.

To maintain some semblance of decorum, Cox liked his skeleton crews. It didn't hurt that they were also budget friendly. Furthermore, it meant that we all wore multiple hats, even the actors. Cox was also writer, producer, and editor. The star of our artistic venture, Killian Blu, was the script supervisor and his co-stars were the grips and gaffers. I was make-up, a thankless job, but also the token fluffer.

Part of my job was sucking dick.

Fluffers were a rare sight on the set of porn flick these days, a dinosaur role from a bygone era when Viagra, implants, and prosthetics weren't available. Some of the more sketchy studios injected steroids directly into performers' penises, but Cox refused to resort to such unscrupulous methods. He practically worshiped tradition, especially the ways of the old days in the industry, and stuck to them. Historically speaking, for the adult industry, a fluffer was a member of the make-up team. As I was the team, I was also the fluffer. Considering the absolutely gorgeous men Cox was known to hire for his projects, I did not mind.

Men didn't require as much make-up as women, especially on the sets of gay flicks, and some flat-out refused the tune-up, not that most of them even needed it. My job consisted mostly of obfuscating blemishes on otherwise beautiful backsides, reducing the appearance of razor burn, and doing my best to make cold sores less obvious. On a couple of occasions, I'd been asked to cover particularly jagged circumcision scars and smooth out the coloration of oddly multihued joints. So fascinating they were, the genitalia of men.

Long, short, thick, thin, no two dicks were ever the same.

Some guys seemed utterly oblivious to the fact that their manhoods required their own particular brand of hygiene beyond the trimming of the bush and shaving of the balls. If I was down there and accosted by any unsavory smell or taste, I wasn't shy in letting it be known. Look, I'm queer and I love dick, that's all there is to it, but a man needs to be at least a little considerate of the person wallowing around down there. I digress, but not as far as you may think. The three dead performers on the set had all been castrated while in the throes of rehearsing their show stopping threesome.

As envisioned by our illustrious director, the finale would push the boundaries of penetration and redefine threesomes, but alas it would never come to be.

Our stars were dead.

They were covered in blood, and the vividly drawn gypsy fortune teller set was doused in it. The crimson pool on the floor continued to expand as my fellow crew members gossiped and expressed their mounting fears. Fascinated by the carnage, I couldn't take my eyes off the three handsome men slowly going gray while entwined amidst gaudy fabrics. Their eyes were half-open, mouths slightly agape, and expressions contorted in what could easily be thought of as terror or ecstasy. What bothered me was that it didn't seem they had fought back. Their deaths had been dealt so swiftly they hadn't had time to react to it. With all those major arteries down there, they'd bled out fast.

Killian Blu was one of them. I'd sucked him to the brink of bursting a few times throughout the shoot. He was a really nice guy, and immaculately clean, which, of course, I appreciated. Tall, dark, an utter Adonis, he was a much sought-after model in the gay world. Guys loved working with him, everyone else wanted to. He'd appeared in nearly fifty projects across the spectrum, feature-length movies and individual scenes for various sites online. When my eyes fell upon the area where once his magnificent ten-inch dick had swung, I couldn't help but flinch. The impossibly deep wound looked like a bite.

One great, big bite!

None of my co-workers had blood on them, not even a speck. I'd tried to be as inconspicuous as possible as I examined them, but I'm sure more than one had noticed my curiosity and were too dumbfounded to do anything but feign ignorance. There was time enough, I'm sure they thought, to argue about who might the killer be once the authorities arrived to begin their investigation. Desperately pointing fingers wasn't an inevitable aspect I looked forward to. Not that it would matter, no one had an oral cavity big enough to take that kind of bite. I would certainly know all about that. I'd

practically dislocated my jaw performing my duties on our mortally emasculated star, and only a fraction of what was missing from him had been in my mouth.

The cops would do their jobs, questioning, intimidating, lying, and berating their way through the seven of us in an attempt to weed out the murderer. That is until the coroner's report came in. But that wouldn't be tonight. Tonight we all had a lot of supposition, scheming, and abuse to look forward to. Dallas cops weren't exactly known for professional pleasantries. I'm sure it was a necessity in most scenarios, but they didn't have to treat everyone like shit in every situation. When they got here, we were in for a world of shit. Of that, there was no doubt. Justifiably so, in this case.

Three men were dead, I get it, but even I could tell they looked like bulls that had been hollowed out from the crotch up by wolves. Whatever had killed them, hadn't been one of us. Hell, it obviously hadn't been human at all. Dallas, however, wasn't known for wild beasts roaming the urban landscape slaughtering and eating gay porn stars. So what had done this? Some exotic cat being kept as a pet, a particularly massive pit bull on the loose, or a chimpanzee someone thought was their 'fur baby'?

There was actually no shortage of possibilities. Common sense and consideration for others weren't exactly the general rule these days. And with the rise of homophobia and hate crime, it was entirely possible this was intentional. I felt sick thinking about it and pondering the likelihood the bigoted culprit wasn't just out there, but perhaps still here, and readying to kill again, hiding and listening to us, getting off on the idly mounting bedlam.

The low conversations among my coworkers had become heated while I wasn't paying attention to them, and though they remained slightly reserved, the pinprick beginnings of all their inner bitchy queens were emerging. I might not have to wait for the authorities to arrive before the predictable blame game began.

The odd shift in the room wasn't noticeable at first, though once I realized it, it was easy to pinpoint its commencement. When someone had announced he needed to use the restroom and the others either objected or concurred they needed to do the same, the feel of the very air had changed. It was akin to going from an air conditioned hotel room into the sultry afternoon of a summertime seaside town. Spring breaks past came briefly to mind, but were ushered away just as quickly when the weight of the atmosphere enveloped me in a tight embrace. Wondering if the others felt it too, I turned my attention to them.

I watched in mute, curious shock as my coworkers stopped, just stopped, as if antique mechanical toys winding down, their heated arguing warped and warbled as though a record slowly coming to an end. All was unnervingly still and silent and I wondered if whatever was transpiring in the room around me was being mirrored in the world beyond those four walls. Had time paused or merely my perception of it?

I inched over to the others and peered closely at their faces. There was no movement at all, not a twitch or a tick, not even a glinting in their eyes. The realization I was completely alone sent icy waves throughout my body. Goosebumps rose, the hair on the back of my neck stood on end, my balls tightened and nipples stiffened. Oddly, I couldn't help but grimly speculate. If the living had become frozen, would the opposite manifest in the dead?

Shaking, I turned my attention to the mutilated corpses across the room.

At first there was nothing to see, they were as still and silent as the other members of the crew, but then I noticed a curious twinkling along the edges of the blood pooling on the floor. However slowed by coagulation, the crimson puddle was still expanding. I crept as close to the bodies as I could, not daring to step in the thick red sap. Brow furrowing, I leaned toward them, scrutinizing their hoary flesh, limbs, fingers, facial expressions. Their sleepily cracked eyes and slightly parted lips now disturbed me. I was looking at the far end of corporeal transience, at state of being I would one day be ushered into as much against my will as they had been.

The arctic current inside me surged, bigger goosebumps, every hair stood at attention, erogenous zones eerily responding as if being pleasured and teased. I was as bewildered as I was troubled, not only by everything happening around me, but also by my own body's reaction to it all. It seemed there was a blurring of lines taking place and it was terrifying me. When Killian Blu's belly suddenly undulated, that terror erupted. I squealed and threw myself backwards. Pain was welcomed by the other sensations I was experiencing, exploding upwards from my lower back that hit first and the angled hands that had urgently tried to cushion my fall. I squealed again, this time a guttural vocalization of agony.

The pain up and down my spine did not abate, a sure sign I'd caused some amount of damage. I've known many who've had back problems, it was nothing to be flippant about. I could easily be more seriously injured than I realized. Care needed to be taken. When the police arrived I would have to ask for the paramedics. If it was bad, dealing with them would be the least of my worries. That is, if they came. My fall hasn't released me from whatever spell I was under. The skeleton crew remained frozen in the presence of three bloody bodies, one of which was moving.

Instinctively, I held my hands up, knowing that my wrists were severely sprained. Both were swelling and the yellowish early stages of bruising were appearing. I tried to make fists, but the throbbing wouldn't allow it. Greater

movement behind my fingers demanded my focus. I dropped my arms and gasped at the shocking new sight. Something mucilaginous and boneless was ballooning from inside our star's fatal gash.

The foreign agglomeration seeped out and then hooked over the inflamed edges of the bite, undulating like a serpent's body as it strained to pull itself from its hiding spot. The sound of it was even more nauseating than the spectacle, a revolting amalgamation of slurping, spitting, and flatulence. But there was something more frightening too, a cavernous yawning that deepened, growing louder and louder the more it pulled itself free. Wanting to be as far away from it as I could, I kicked myself backwards along the floor until I hit the wall. As terrified as I was, I couldn't take my eyes off it.

It was hard to comprehend what it was I was looking at, whatever it was had no definitive shape as it wriggled out of the gaping wound in Killian Blu's groin like some perverse mockery of birth. It was an elongated gelatinous mass, black, lustrous, rippling. Its oil-slick tissue repelled the dead man's blood, but the crimson still streaked across it. A multitude of orbs akin to eyes rolled freely over the viscous flesh scanning the space around it until falling upon me, the lone other unfrozen thing in the room, and to my eyes the octopoidal irises firmly focused. It was gazing into my soul.

When the bulk of the monster had emerged, an enormous and outlandish lophophore collapsed upon itself, a writhing spray of frond-like tentaculum spilled out of the dead man's body in its wake. Dripping blood and gore, it rose into the air, its yawning turning into a thunderous, deep breath. With the inhalation, the beast inflated, a billowing mucoidal exumbrella stretching out in an impressive and dreadful otherworldly preening. The weight of its countless eyes was overwhelming, there was absolute malevolence in them, an ageless demonic abhorrence, and even more disconcerting, a profound carnal desire.

I opened my mouth to scream, but nothing came out. My throat was dry and my mouth felt filled with cotton. I couldn't move, as frozen as my fellow members of the skeleton crew. When the monster started my way, undulating sluggishly as it swam trough the air, all the lights dimmed, the fluorescent overheads and the ambient LEDs used to light the set. It seemed intentional, a deliberate scare tactic by the entity. It really needn't bother with the theatrics, its very presence was enough to terrify me, and so terrified I was that I trembled, stammered, and wet myself as I cowered there on the floor.

Looming over me, it was even more petrifying, dis-proportionally larger than it had been before, as if it had distended as it moved slickly across the room. The inflated glans-like hood rippled and palpitated while the spill of tentaculum wriggled below it oozing with a chalky milt and dripping a foul-smelling spume. Tucked up under its subumbrella, wreathed by its lappets and other squirming appendages was the mouth, the orifice that had taken those grotesque bites out of our actors. Doubtlessly, it was drooling for a taste of me. Instead of lunging at me fangs first, one of its limbs reached out and touched me gently under the chin, a parent comforting a despondent child.

There was a loud internal bang, an unseen door slamming shut. Lightning bolts of pain snaked through my head, blinding me. No longer did I see that which loomed above me and caressed my jowl with a slimy feeler. In place of that attribute, a second kind of vision plagued me with sights as equally horrendous as the monster itself. It was an alien world, but as inexplicably knowledgeable as in a dream state, I knew it actually wasn't. It was Earth in a primordial phase, covered in a grotesque cesspool seething with wriggling, skirmishing creatures. Out of it emerged this thing, the same thing touching me, showing me this dreadful past, its own origin. From its birth, it was the apex predator, a fiendish leviathan.

Sentient, but void of guilt and shame, it gluttonously devoured the lowers for generations upon generations, eventually discovering a particular pleasure in hunting the more evolved. When those lesser beings became aware of their own mortality and learned to be afraid, the leviathan discovered its own vicious amusement. The hunt became play, pleasure became joy, and all that squirmed around it became toys, trifles to tease and manipulate. Over the slow, tedious eons, from the prehistoric ooze to wasteland deserts, from mindless slugs to the descendants of hairless apes, the beast domesticated, farmed, and cultivated, not altruistically, but to play, terrorize, rape, and murder...to become what it rightfully believed it was. It was the omniscient, fear mongering father, the cognizant Alpha and the eventual Omega.

It was God.

"And you will help spread my gospel," it said in a language that wasn't spoken, in a non-descript dialect that wasn't English or any less-universal tongue. It was more a sensation that tickled along my flesh and infected my mind, a disease, a molestation.

It said sweet things to me then, curious encouragements, devilish pillow talk, sickening rationalizations for perversely caressing me with a swarm of its other strange tendrils. Of all its sins, adulterine carnality had become its favorite and none could defend themselves against God. I didn't even try. As sticky, wet things enveloped my crotch, milking me slowly toward bewildering pleasure, and stiffening appendages pushed their way inside me, I saw the same filthy endeavor done to innumerable others, beast and man and back again.

I was as reluctant as I was enthusiastic, both cycling. And I was utterly afraid, so very afraid. Afraid to fight, afraid to like it, afraid it wouldn't stop, afraid that it would. Afraid of what it meant to be so intimate with something so diabolical. All of it was confusing.

After God made me ejaculate, it pulled away from me, the vision was instantly gone, and the declaration faded into a chorus of echoes. I watched in horror and awe as it did to the rest of the skeleton crew what it had done to Killian Blu and his two scene partners. It tore the clothes from their frozen bodies, gorged upon their gorgeous and varied groins, and sucked out their insides before slithering into the hollowed shell of Franklyn Cox. I was left trembling and essentially alone in a room with a cache of mutilated men, the floor nothing but an inches-deep pool of blood.

The weight in the air lifted.

The world was unpaused.

In the distance I heard the approaching sirens. The authorities would arrive soon and I would have to tell them something, something so extraordinary it would fascinate the world and land me in the Emergency Psychiatric Center at Parkland Hospital. From there I would begin to spread the testament, slowly, surely, infecting the other patients and even the more open members of the staff. Someone would write a book, contaminating all the world with the gospel of the primordial leviathan.

Praise God, your kingdom come, your will be done.

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 Publications' *Childhood Nightmares: Under the Bed* and *Monster Brawl*. He lives in Texas with his husband Ray and their son Syrian.

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Goddamned Heathen | Merl Fluin

At first he was more stealth than horror, a whispered outrage, a slick of keratin and the formula dead in my mouth, a catastrophe I had summoned from someone else's future. The tongue in his beak was my own tongue black and shredded, the cere shone gold, his feathers glinted tawny, his chest and belly skin bare above his skirt. He stared into the ruins of the mosaic floor. Warped by the patina of two thousand years, it showed a door with white steps that led down, down, down to where beasts hulked one atop the other, quadrupeds with long black bodies and snaking tails and golden wings. At the top of the steps leered a figure in red, its human arms splayed from its torso, its cockerel head flaunting a wattle and comb. What is this, he asked, one of your new gods? I watched his third eyelid sweep and my mouth went dry. From beneath his stink pulsed another smell, corrosive, familiar, beyond memory's reach, and the sack on the floor began to twitch.

About the Author:

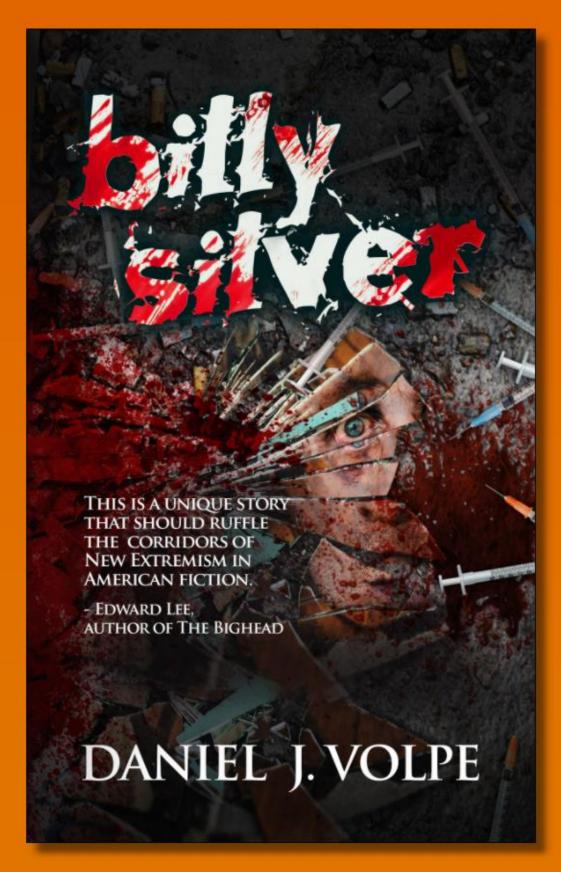
Merl Fluin lives on a small, weird and occasionally horrifying island off England's south coast. Her short fiction has appeared in Peculiar Mormyrid and Dark Lane Anthology Volume 10.

Blog: Gorgon in Furs



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AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Airport | RJ Meldrum

I wake to find the aircraft is already sitting on the tarmac. I'm surprised, I must have slept through the entire flight. I must have been more tired than I realized. The engines shut down with the familiar scream and the seat-belt sign pings off. As usual there is a push to rise and rush for the door, even before it is opened. I'm sitting about halfway down the aisle, in no particular hurry to get off; I can wait here just as easily as I can wait in the terminal. I stand, feeling my cramped tendons complain. Two members of the cabin crew stand at the door of the plane, saying goodbye and giving perfunctory smiles to the passengers as they exit the plane. Smiles that never reach their eyes. I wait my turn, trying not to bump anyone with my hand luggage, a small attaché case.

I step off the plane onto the jet bridge that allows me to head from the plane into the airport without experiencing the outdoors. I feel gritty and tired. It had been a long journey, even if I had slept for the majority of it. Now, I have a two hour wait before my next connecting flight. I have a headache.

There are no security or immigration checks and I find myself in the main departure concourse of the airport. It's a scruffy and old-fashioned, typical of small, rural airports. There are the usual shops, restaurants and bars, populated by the normal type of people you see in airports. It isn't very busy and I make eye contact with a middle-aged guy sitting by himself in one of the uncomfortable airport lounge chairs. He nods at me and I nod back; I don't know him, but there's nothing wrong with being courteous. I walk to the huge glass windows that are typical of all North American airports. It's evening and I can see nothing outside the circle of lights used to illuminate the loading and unloading of the various planes next to the terminal. I can see the runway lights in the distance, but beyond that, nothing. Must be one of these airports stuck out in the middle of the countryside. A thought occurs to me. Where am I? That's weird, I should know where I am. I fumble for my ticket. Nothing. Boarding pass. Nothing. A moment of panic strikes me; in this modern world you can't go anywhere without a boarding pass. I start to check all my pockets. Nothing. There is a slight cough from behind me. I turn to see the middle aged guy that I just nodded to standing just behind me.

"Don't tell me. No boarding pass?"

I nod

"And you're on the 22.10 flight out of here?"

That rings a bell.

"Yes, I think so."

"Can you tell me where you are headed?"

I start to answer, then stop dead.

"I don't know."

He nods again, as if he had expected that answer. He asks again.

"Where are we, right now?"

I look at him, befuddled, my head hurting even more now.

"I don't know that either. Some stop-over airport in the boondocks, I guess."

"Where did you come from?"

Same answer from me.

"Do you remember much about that flight?"

"No, I pretty much slept the whole time."

He nods.

"What's your name?"

I think about it briefly and then reach for my wallet, which isn't in my top pocket. I can't actually remember my name. A slightly wobbly feeling comes over me. I try not to think too hard about what's happening. Could be stress or something; that would certainly explain my thumping headache. I decide to deal with one problem at a time; the easiest one first.

"Well, I'm going to the service desk to sort out my boarding pass, that's one place to start."

He smiles, nodding, as if my response was exactly what he expected.

"I've done this before. There will be no one there."

"Done this before? What, at this airport?"

He gives me a strange look.

"You don't remember?"

He shrugs.

"You must be new. Okay, we might as well waste time at the service desk rather than here. Makes no difference to me."

We walk over to the service desk, the solitary information point in the concourse. A hand-written sign reading 'Back in five minutes' sits on the desk. I check my watch. 8.20 pm. I glance around; other than bored looking passengers and bored looking staff working in the shops and restaurants, there is no one around.

"I guess we have to wait."

My companion nods. We stand in awkward silence until my watch crawls round to 8.25 pm. No one appears. I shrug and continue to wait. What else is there to do? 8.30 arrives soon enough, then 8.35 and 8.40. My companion nods.

"It's the same every time. No one here to help."

Every time?

"No matter, they'll be calling the flight soon," I say. "I'm sure I'll be able to board."

He laughs.

"Oh, you will. Don't worry about that."

I give him a look.

"Do you know something I don't?"

He's serious for a moment.

"Just wait and see."

Fed up with the idiot, I walk away, leaving him smiling at me. I always seem to attract the nuts. I'm too tired and my head hurts too much to talk to him anymore. I sit in one of the restaurants and signal the server. She comes over, there are very few customers. She has sallow skin and dead eyes. I order coffee. She nods and heads back to the kitchen.

When it arrives it is weak and cold. I can see that without even tasting it. Before she leaves I decide to ask her something.

"Excuse me, can you please tell me the name of this airport?"

She just looks at me.

"You don't know?"

"No, I guess not. I just disembarked, connecting to the 22.10 flight. "

She just smiles.

"Everyone here is waiting for the 22.10 flight. Except us. We have to stay here forever."

I immediately peg her as a disgruntled small town girl; probably from one of the nearby villages that provide staff for this boondock airport. Not my problem.

"So, where is this place?"

She just laughs and turns away.

"If you don't know now, you'll know soon enough. Enjoy your flight, they'll be calling it soon."

I check my watch. 9.20 pm. She's right, they should be boarding soon. I wonder what gate. Surprisingly, I'm no longer that worried about not having a boarding pass. I'm sure, without knowing how or why, that I will be able to board my flight. I finish my insipid coffee and scatter a few coins on the table, enough to give the sallow server a decent tip. Maybe she can save up enough and get out of here. There is a sudden crackle from above me and a disembodied voice speaks.

"Boarding call for the 22.10 flight. Please proceed to boarding gate 1. Passengers with surnames A to M to board first. Priority passengers to the gate please."

I stand. I'm bored of this place and want to get going. Wherever I'm going.

The gate is busy with passengers. It looks as of all the people in the airport are heading out on this flight. No surprise really. A bored looking member of the airport staff sits at the desk. I notice that my weird little buddy from earlier is standing close-by. He nods at me and heads over.

"Any further revelations?" he asks.

Revelations?

"No, I guess not," I answer.

He nods.

"You must be new. Think, think hard. Do you remember anything?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you don't remember who you are, where you came from and where you are going. Same as the rest of us. But you might retain some memories. Think."

Something stirs in my mind. A flash of something. Pain, noise. Some of that memory must show on my face, because my new friend suddenly smiles.

"Ah, I see something has occurred to you. You may get more, you may not."

He motions round the departure area.

"Look at these people. None of them remember. I do, as do a few others. I think the stewardess does. The one with the beautiful smile."

I know the one he means. There is another call from the gate.

"All other passengers can now board."

I wait until the other passengers have gone through, including my new friend who gives me a jaunty wave as he heads down the jet bridge. I walk up to the boarding gate, ready to argue my way onto the aircraft. The lady sitting at the gate has the same dead eyes as the girl who served me the coffee. She waves me through.

"Straight ahead sir. Departure in five minutes."

I walk through. Security at these rural airports is pretty bad. I walk down the jet bridge towards the entrance to the plane, happy to get the hell out of here. A flash of pain and noise penetrates my mind. My name is John. Something to do with a car, ice on the road, skidding. Nothing else. I keep walking. Another flash. A crunch of metal, the smell of gasoline. A spark, then nothing until I woke on board the aircraft.

I enter the plane. The same stewardess is there. She smiles at me and gestures for me to enter. She does not speak, but her eyes are sad. It strikes me as I enter that this is the same plane that I disembarked from. Same plane, same crew. Refueling? Or maybe not, something is occurring to me, something I would rather not think about.

I sit in my assigned seat and glance around the cabin. It's a normal plane interior, dark blue seats, overhead storage. People are getting settled, the normal pre-flight fuss. I glance out the window. Figures are moving on the tarmac below, loading luggage. I look further, towards the edge of the runway, but can see nothing but darkness. Where are we? Where am I going? The fasten seat-belt light comes on and I click the two metal parts together. The engines start to whine. The plane starts to taxi towards the runway. As the jet engines power up for take-off I fall immediately, deeply asleep.

I wake to find that the aircraft is already sitting on the tarmac. I'm surprised, I must have slept through the entire flight and the noise of the landing. Must have been more tired than I realized. The engines shut down with that all too familiar scream and the seat-belt sign pings off. As usual there is a push to rise and rush for the door, even before it is opened. I'm sitting about halfway down the aisle, in no particular hurry to get off; I have to catch a connecting flight and I can wait here just as easily as I can wait in the terminal. I stand, feeling my cramped tendons complain. Two members of the cabin crew stand at the door of the plane, saying goodbye and giving perfunctory smiles to the passengers as they exit the plane. Smiles that never reach their eyes.

I wait my turn to leave the aircraft and head back into the airport. Always the same airport.

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 Sirens Call Publications eZine, the Horror Zine and Drabblez Magazine. His novella *The Plaque* was published by Demain Press.

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Lucy | Naching T. Kassa

Faint moonlight worked a patchwork of light and shadow as it streamed between the trees. I moved over the forest floor, my feet silenced by pine needles. Mina was not as soundless as I. Leaves rustled and sighed in her wake.

I didn't need sound to track her. The cool, night breeze carried the mingled scents of lavender, the lover we shared, and her blood.

As she led me through the maze of forest, my teeth grew long and sharp. The darkness grew brighter as instinct brought my nocturnal vision to bear. Soon my pale limbs and diaphanous gown transformed into mist. I floated after Mina, stopping only when she reached a small clearing.

Though corrupted by the blood of our lover, life still dwelled within Mina's thin form. Why my lover had not yet turned her, I did not know. He was Master of the Night, right hand to the Prince of Darkness—not a slave to the softer passions. No chamber of his heart could contain an ounce of love for her.

Or me

He had warned me away from her. Said she belonged to him. What was it that made her special? Was it the blood?

I had to taste it.

My quarry had reached a clearing and here, she stopped. I secreted myself behind the trunk of an elm and from this vantage point, observed her. She stood with her back toward me.

Something screamed in the night air above us. I glanced up, my eyes catching a glint of silver among the treetops. Then, it vanished.

Assuming a corporeal form, I broke from the forest. My footsteps were those of a ghost as I crossed the clearing. No human, not even a half-bred one, could've sensed my presence. Her warmth radiated, her blood surged. Another step and I would savor the sweet rush of it.

Before I could take the step, she bent backward. Her upturned eyes gazed into mine as she twisted.

I paused.

Her lips parted at the sight of me. My mouth watered when I detected fear in her eyes.

She screamed, a strange high-pitched sound.

I looked up too late.

The falcon burst out of the trees and swept over Mina's body. Silver-tipped talons gleamed. They slashed at my face. Flesh tore and cold blood dripped. The scream became my own.

I fell to the ground.

Footsteps receded.

I've been on my hands and knees for hours now. The damned bird ripped out my nose and my eyes. They're healing though. Mina's scent is on the wind.

And, there's a yellow glow in the sky.

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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I Am Noorish | Alexa Ann Martin

I started writing the letter thinking I should choose my words very carefully. Given what I was about to say, I would undoubtedly become one of the many threats my father hunted when he was alive. I began:

Dear Eskarians,

My great-grandfather was Michael Aldous Anderson, and he was one of you, an Eskarian. He was converted, as you like to say, in 1903. He left his family after that, and I lost sight of him sometime in the 70s.

I know you're not human. Neither am I, so if you come after me, know that I won't be an easy kill. It was about 1984 that I became something else. Noorish. You've never heard of it, I'm sure. Michael didn't know.

I killed Michael tonight, not because he deserved to die. He needed a cure for a dimension shifter, someone he loved, and the price for her cure was his life. That's how my magik works, like an eye-for-an-eye thing.

I'm hoping you'll stay away, but you probably won't.

So, I'll be waiting.

Regards,

Savanna Alder Jameson

That done, I folded the letter, slipped it into an envelope, addressed to one Griffin McCallum, who Michael said ran the operation, if that was what it should be called, in the Pacific Northwest. Stamp applied, I tucked it into my bag and would drop it in the mail box later this morning.

The gravity of what I'd done wasn't lost on me. I'd killed my own great-grandfather, who was an immortal, and part of an army that hunted the terrible things that threatened humans and this planet. He was a good man. A hunter. I wondered how long it would take for them to find me, just as I wondered if I'd be smarter to just toss the envelope and forget all about my great-grandfather. It wasn't like I actually knew him. And I didn't set out to find him. He found me, so how long before those Slayers find me as well? I should leave.

People say that, and then they decide to just stick it out, for God-knows-what reason. At least they do that on TV. I knew the Slayers were fast and dangerous. I'd said I wouldn't be an easy kill, but what did I really know about all that?

I lived in Portland, about three hours from Seattle. I'd been here for years and it was definitely home, but in the face of probable death, I supposed I could find another place.

I should just toss that envelope. Then I could stay, live in peace, and never have to worry about who or what was behind me.

"Knock, knock."

I jumped at the sound. Nobody knew I was in Seattle, let alone what hotel I'd chosen.

"What do you want," I said. Not really a question.

"I'm looking for Michael Anderson. I'm a colleague of his."

Shit.

I opened the door and looked up into the coldest blue eyes I'd ever seen. They weren't so much blue as they were nearly white, and combined with the dark brows and lashes, warm complexion, and cinnamon-colored hair, he was beyond striking. "So?"

"So, have you seen him?" the man asked.

I shrugged. No point in lying. If he'd gotten this far, he probably knew I'd seen Michael. "I had drinks with him yesterday. Haven't seen him since."

The man was all muscle and tall as fuck. Was he one of those immortals? Eskarians, like Michael.

"He's not answering his phone. Did he indicate where he might be or what he had planned for the day?"

"No, I'm sorry. We didn't talk all that long." I wondered if Michael had said anything about the dimension shifter. "He said he was looking for a cure for a friend of his."

"Yes, Natalia," the man said. "Did he find one?"

"He hadn't when I saw him. Maybe he has by now, and that's why you can't reach him," I offered. I could lie with the best of them, when necessary.

"Maybe." The man smiled. "I'm Griffin McCallum. If you see him again, please tell him I'm looking for him." I nodded. "Will do, Griffin McCallum."

He turned to leave and I closed the door. My hands were shaking. I made it to the bed and sat. If the other immortals looked like Griffin McCallum, there would be no way I could kill one of them. The guy was at least ten inches taller than me.

It was then I had a thought. Closing my eyes, I gathered the energy needed for my magik. Whispering soft words as I extended my hand in Griffin's general direction, I set a spell on him to make him forget he ever saw me. If anyone even mentioned my name, he'd instantly feel so much pain, it'd knock him on his ass. If he tried to persist, so would the pain.

Typically, that's enough to discourage the best of them.

Even better, once he was down and writhing in pain, then I could cut his throat and even hang around to watch him bleed to death. That would allow me to ensure he was really dead, given his status as an immortal. But that plan made assumptions I wasn't willing to rely on.

I packed my bag and left. I'd parked close to the office, so it was easy to drop off the key card and leave. My next task was to figure out where to go. Portland wasn't an option. What if one of those immortals was there waiting for me? Walmart was the next logical choice, as I'd need provisions if I was to stay off the grid for a bit. I hadn't planned on running, but the arrival of Griffin McCallum changed all that. And he'd found me so quickly, only one day after I killed my great-grandfather. Did I actually think I stood a fucking chance of outrunning these people?

I needed to destroy a certain envelope currently resting in my bag. Once I got to the Walmart parking lot, that was the next order of business.

Minutes later, I sat in my van, at once too scared to move. There was no reason to believe I was being hunted, but it didn't seem inconceivable. Griffin had found me, and that made me feel vulnerable. Like they could swoop in at any moment and cut my throat, just as I'd thought about cutting Griffin's.

I needed to tamp down my fear and leave the parking lot. After I started the car, I dropped it into gear and left, wondering if anyone would be following me. It's so easy to become paranoid, to think they're all after you, when you might not be on their radar at all. That kind of thinking can cause you to make really bad decisions. But if the alternative involves death, who's to say that thinking is wrong? I took the scenic route to Walmart, driving in circles, visiting neighborhoods, and, in general, meandering my way toward my goal. If anyone was following, hopefully they'd get bored and give up.

Once I got there, I parked away from everyone, hoping to have some private space to conduct my business. I got the envelope from my bag, tossed it onto the asphalt, and said a quick fire spell. The envelope quietly disintegrated into ash and was no more. Evidence now gone.

My paranoia was already getting to me. I didn't have to sit and wait for those immortals to find me. I could just disappear.

Almost literally.

After all, I am Noorish, not some weak human. I have magikal power at my disposal. It would still mean I'd be on the run, but at least I'd stand a chance of surviving. It was enough to give me some hope.

There are herbs I always carry in my bag, ones not known by humans. They were cultivated by the Noorish, only for the Noorish. Humans didn't need to know anything about them.

I took out my stash of herbs, tore them into little bits into what used to be my car's ashtray, and lit them on fire. While they burned, my van was infused with the most delectable fragrance, and I inhaled deeply. I spoke the words to invoke invisibility, and let the spell wash over me, which felt like a warm, heavy blanket. Warm comfort.

I got out of my car and headed for the store. Invisibility doesn't work like you might think. I can still be seen, but I seem so irrelevant that people dismiss me almost immediately. I am forgotten the moment I leave someone's sight.

So, I can go to Walmart, buy what I need, and once I leave, no one will remember I was there. It's a handy, little spell. As I got closer to the entrance, I noticed a guy standing against the wall, looking totally casual and deadly at the same time. What made me think he was deadly?

He was tall, over six feet, dressed in jeans, boots, a t-shirt, and a denim jacket. His dark brown hair was collar length, and all that was quite normal. It was his golden complexion that raised the hairs on the back of my neck, resembling Griffin's skin tone too much for my comfort. He stood, one foot against the wall, silently engrossed in whatever was going on with his phone.

I kept going. After all, I was invisible.

His gaze lifted to mine. He had amazing blue eyes, as brilliant as a summer day. Shit.

"Hi, Savanna," he said. "My name's Christopher."

I kept walking. My spell was powerful and I'd never had any problems with it before.

In less than a heartbeat, he stood in front of me. I stopped, startled to my very core, and lifted my gaze to his.

"Savanna," he said softly, almost like a lover might. "We know you killed Michael. You'll be coming with me now."

As if my spell never existed, he saw me, and when he reached out to grasp my arm, terror wrapped its icy claws around my throat. Christopher wasn't as tall as Griffin, but he looked every bit as strong, and he'd seen through my spell. I had sorely underestimated what these people were capable of, not that it mattered. They'd found me, despite my efforts.

He pulled me forward, past what felt like hundreds of people, and no one seemed to notice me being dragged against my will by this towering immortal to God-knew-where, which meant my invisibility spell was working perfectly. As I struggled to escape, his grip on me only grew stronger, and if I survived this, I was sure there would be bruises.

A moment later, Christopher shoved me into a huge limo, like a Hummer limo or something. Griffin sat on one side, and I took the opposite. How was it my spell hadn't affected him? He should've been in severe pain at the mere mention of my name. In my presence, he should've been catatonic. Looking at him, he appeared to be neither.

Christopher came in and sat beside me, which made me *very* uncomfortable.

Griffin took out a dagger, one with a forked blade, and set it on his lap. Christopher did the same.

I could barely breathe. My heart thundered in my ears, and I imagined my lifeless body in some alley where no one would find it for weeks. Why had my spell failed me so miserably?

"Christopher has unusual skills," Griffin said, as if to answer my question. "He sees magik where we do not. He saw the pain spell you set on me the minute he saw me. I do feel it, but choose not to let it stop me." He paused, looking out the side window. "Natalia isn't from this world, and learned too late it was toxic to her. We expected her to die. When she came to us, healthy and alive, we knew we needed more information."

Natalia. I should've known, but typically, recipients of a magikal healing don't snitch on their healers. Yet again, I was mistaken.

"Did you get it?" I asked.

Griffin's icy gaze came back to me. "That's why you're here. Did Michael know you were about to kill him to save Natalia?"

"No," I admitted. I wasn't entirely sure I even needed to be present for this. It seemed as if they'd already convicted me of murder. "But neither did I. Her healing took more magik than I'd anticipated."

"Why didn't you tell him?" Christopher asked. "He was your great-grandfather. Is it that easy for you to kill?"

"I didn't really know him. And to be clear, it's not about taking a life. It's a transfer of lifeforce, and perfectly acceptable in our world. We do not live in yours. Over many years, I've learned that love is very powerful and people, in love, become willing to sacrifice what they ordinarily would not in the name of it."

"Pretty words," Griffin said. "But it's still murder."

"Then you require that I live by your rules, even as I live outside your world?"

Griffin leaned forward, those icy eyes glittering with menace. "You do not live outside our world."

"And yet, until now, you've known nothing about me or my people."

"It doesn't matter," Christopher said. "People, human or something else, are not to be killed. You took a respected member of our ranks from us. We hold you accountable."

In less than a heartbeat, the tip of his dagger was poised at my throat.

My pulse thundered in my ears. It had taken them no time at all to find and judge me guilty of a crime. Burning that envelope hadn't changed anything. The moment I'd been fearing since I took Michael's life was upon me. Another second and I'd be dead.

Christopher hesitated. And that gave me just what I needed.

As his blade pierced my throat, I closed my eyes and silently invoked a smoke spell, the kind where I just disappeared into a dark-blue smokey cloud.

I was and am Noorish, not a witch, and not human. And I'd be damned if I was going to be condemned by those two.

I reappeared inside my car, grabbed my bag, invoked the smoke spell again, and was gone in less than a second.

I'd likely be running for the rest of my life. If all had gone as expected, I'd be returning to my tribe in Portland, Since

I'd likely be running for the rest of my life. If all had gone as expected, I'd be returning to my tribe in Portland. Since it hadn't, I couldn't risk those Eskarians finding my people. Ever. So, I accepted that I'd now lost everything that mattered to me. Yet, I was alive. I could rebuild my life somewhere else, maybe here, or in an underworld, or even in another dimension.

About the Author:

Alexa Ann Martin started writing as a teenager but gave it up to become a responsible adult, working in the IT industry. She was first published in 2003 and to date has written five novels, two novellas, and one anthology. She resides in Seattle. Alexa prefers to be inside her own slightly warped head, writing or maybe on the beach, if the sun happens to be out.



The Cyber God's Throne | Maxwell I. Gold

Trembling with craven, perilous eyes, I gazed in awe at a towering block of ivory and bone, cradled in a deep trench of toxic starlight and death. Lost in some world within the cracks of depraved imaginations and empty sanity, the stars themselves would pass glances in the shadows, gawking at the bizarre masonry. The piece of stone, soaked in black mythologies, cut from a dead mountain as an homage to a hideous deity from beyond my treasonous dreams.

The hieroglyphs were awesomely dreadful in their artful depiction of the thing and its incredulously disgusting form; with a scaly carapace, crustacean-like claws, and tentacles that slithered along the sides of the dark cube. I was hypnotized by the membranous depiction of the things' cavernous eye socket which looked as if it were hording a trove of priceless yellow sapphires as sparkling as the stars themselves.

Seeing the gruesome images plastered so large were bewildering, wondering as to how any civilization prospered with the facade of that gigantic monstrosity casting its shadow over reason and sensible logic. Upon further inspection, I noticed it was not merely a block carved, but some malignant throne. When I had finally understood the greater intent of the white marble block, a chill shot down my spine as if the primordia of the universe, gurgling in the belly of old stars, fourteen billion years in the past had been realized through my thoughts and nightmares. Pleadingly, I fell to my knees at the foot of the stone, for I had seen the throne of Ad'Naigon merely in dreams but couldn't help myself. The wild bodily music wailing, cried from my lips as I danced in rave celebration at the feet of the Cyber Gods.

I was grateful to devote myself to the mad wanton glory of that which birthed the Void, with one thousand amber eyes that saw nothing and swallowed everything. All at once, I threw myself at the throne, until I could no longer feel the reasonable bemusements of touch or sight; the simple thrashing of my body bearing down on the white marble throne in a rage of psychotic madness until I was nothing but a shelled corpse. The winds bent along the old stone and my body simply rested, fulfilled and sated with the lust that I had seen the Cyber God's throne.

About the Author:

Maxwell I. Gold is a Rhysling Award nominated author, who writes prose poetry and short stories in weird and cosmic fiction. He is a regular contributor to *Spectral Realms*, edited by Lovecraft scholar S.T. Joshi and his work has also appeared in *Weirdbook Magazine*, *Space and Time Magazine*, *Startling Stories*, *Baffling Magazine* and many others.

Website: The Wells of the Weird Instagram: @cybergodwrites

Snowflake | Lee Andrew Forman

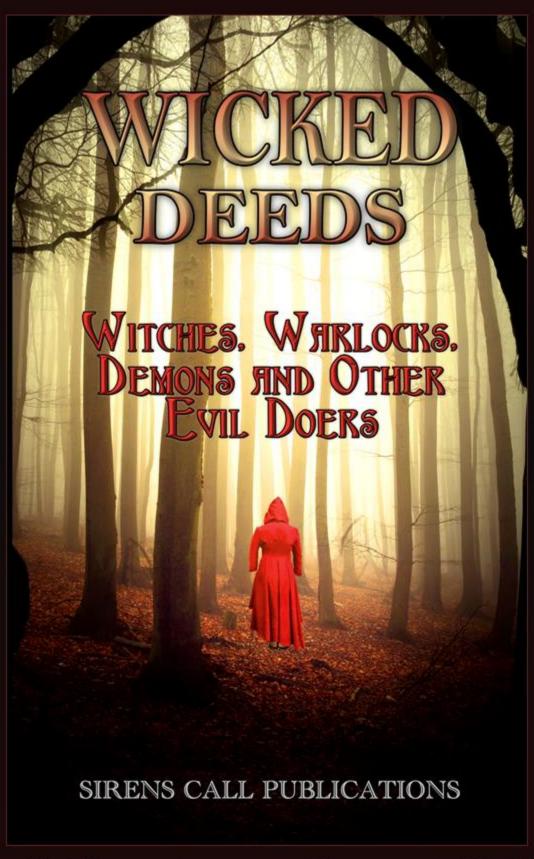
Infinite snowflakes fall. Their pearl quilt builds upon pavement, tires tread, nerves tense. Sweaty palms grip the wheel. The picturesque wonderland glows in the headlights. Slow and steady, the destination of holiday cheer, of most special kin. The journey swerves upon beautiful danger. She tries to match the pitch and right the car. But nature draws her to its hold without release. As she watches the trees flip upside-down, the rose-colored box travels before her eyes, ejected from its place on the empty passenger seat. As metal crunches and glass shatters, she hopes that gift will reach her little Snowflake.

About the Author:

Lee Andrew Forman is a writer, editor, and publisher from the Hudson Valley region in New York. His fascination with the macabre began in childhood, watching old movies and reading everything he could get his hands on. His love of horror spans three generations, starting with his grandfather who was a fan of the classic Hollywood Monsters.

Blog: <u>Lee Andrew Forman</u>
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Sometimes wicked people do wicked things...



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Pumpkin | Benson Phillip Lott

Raymond stands dazedly in the kitchen. His right hand, clutching a butcher's knife. His stomach churns, a petrifying fear taking hold. Sheer terror, unlike any he's ever known. Had it really just spoken? Did it really know his name?

The pumpkin rests motionless on the counter. Raymond gawks at it, fixated. There's a vague sense the damn thing is watching him.

"I know everything, Raymond," the pumpkin says, pausing for dramatic effect. "I know about the argument you had last night with your wife. Jeanette. Admittedly, an attractive woman. But you know what they say, Raymond, if you want true happiness, never marry a pretty lady. Even now, it's obvious you're *deep* with regret. There's a forlorn longing, a great and terrible sadness, swarming all around you. Like a dense weight, pulling you down. The dark abyss consuming your essence, ingesting your soul."

"What are you *talking* about?" Raymond snaps, pacing the kitchen. "Just what the hell *are* you, anyway? And how the *fuck* do you know my name?

"Raymond, you're missing the issue. You're distracting yourself with inane questions. I'm talking about your accusations, those *whiffs* of suspicion. Your *insistence* Jeanette is sleeping around. And with who? The fucking *football* coach."

"Mark Keplin." Raymond mutters.

"Mark Keplin," the pumpkin echoes, enunciating his name. "He coaches your son, Jesse. Doesn't he? Well, isn't that just perfect? Coaching your son and banging your wife. I'm telling you, Raymond. If ever a man was ready to take your place, it's him."

"Hey, fuck you!" Raymond shouts, hitting the refrigerator. "How do you know all this? Who have you been talking to? Dammit, who *are* you?"

The pumpkin sighs, almost menacing. "Raymond, I told you before. I know everything. And 'who I am' is inconsequential. Knowing me will not magically erase your problems. And believe me, Raymond, you do have problems. Especially with Jesse."

"Hev..."

"Jesse, Jesse. What an interesting young man. Not the most masculine boy, now is he?"

"Hey, shut up!" Raymond snaps, raising the knife. "Don't talk about my son! You hear me, you *fuck*? I'll chop you in a thousand *pieces*."

"Oh please," says the pumpkin, calmly ignoring him. "You know as well as I do. That kid is a goddamn *chickenhead*." Raymond lunges, beet-red, virtually explosive. "Fucking *fuck*. That's your *last* fucking warning. Say another word and you're *dead*."

Silence.

"Raymond, Raymond," the pumpkin says, soothingly. "It's time you accept the facts. Your wife. Your son. And especially, about me."

"This can't be happening," Raymond whispers, shaking his head in denial. "This shit can't be happening! You don't exist, you're not real. This has gotta be some kind of dream! Some vivid hallucination! For Christ's sake, you can't be talking. You're nothing but a piece of fruit!"

"As opposed to a middle-age burn-out?" The pumpkin asks. "And a clueless one, at that. No blindfold is necessary for you, is it, Raymond? You're already in darkness. You can't see a goddamn thing!"

"This is ridiculous!" Raymond hollers. "Where's the phone? I'm calling the hospital. My head —I feel dizzy. Something—something's not right. This isn't happening. I feel like I'm losing my *mind*."

"More like freeing it," the pumpkin quips.

Shutting his eyes, Raymond attempts to mentally reconstruct his day, hoping to figure out what might've happened to bring about such hysteria. But really his movements were simple, same as he did almost *every* day. He went to work, he sat in his office, worked on his computer, talked on his phone, went to meetings, studied his charts. And that's it. Nothing more. After work we drove straight back here, making a couple stops, one at Safeway, the other at the pumpkin patch. And that's when he picked-up this *thing*.

So why is this happening? Is he losing his mind?

"Stop thinking so hard, Raymond" the pumpkin snaps, breaking his concentration. "There's nothing to figure out. Nothing you *did* which brought this about. And no, *nothing* is *wrong* with you. Please understand, I'm only trying to help. To wake you from this ridiculous delusion you've created. It started to crack last night with your suspicions. You were on the right track, asking the right questions. Don't go backwards, Raymond. This self-deception *needs* to be broken. The barricade *needs* to be crossed. You're stronger than this, Raymond. You're not the *mark* your family is making you. Not anymore."

Raymond shivers, shrouded with growing confusion. On a gut level, the pumpkin's words ring true. And admittedly, he was suspicious of Jeanette. Plus, this whole thing with Jesse —as hard as he tries—Raymond can't deny his shattered expectations. Since his son was born he had dreams of watching him run the field, scoring touchdowns. Maybe even throwing them, as quarterback. He's pictured Jesse marrying a beautiful young girl, together, giving him a grandchild. But if what he thinks is true is true. If Jesse really is—the way he is—then perhaps, the pumpkin is right. Maybe there is animosity. Maybe Jesse is mad at him for pushing him so hard, making him try-out for the team. But who says gays can't play football? Perhaps he's being a bit too stereotypical. And maybe that prejudice has backed Jesse into a corner, to the point his resentment is fueling him.

"That's right," says the pumpkin, reading Raymond's thoughts. "I see you're finally coming around. And believe me, Raymond, it's high time you *face* these concerns. That you come to terms with all that's happening"

Raymond steps back, moving out the kitchen. Glancing down the hall, Raymond stares at the front door. Any minute now, his family could come home. And just think what they'd say if Raymond tried explaining this.

"Hey guys, just sittin' here talkin' with the pumpkin. Oh, by the way, sweetie, it says you're a no good whore. And Jesse? It called you a chickenhead."

First, they'd slap him.

Then, they'd have him committed.

The microwave clock reads 7:33 p.m. Jesse's practice ended over half an hour ago. There's no reason Raymond can think that they shouldn't be here. Except of course, Keplin. Afterall, it's Jeanette's day, picking up Jesse and she probably got distracted, talking with that *fuck* (Coach Keplin). *Or who knows? Maybe not*. Maybe, Jesse just wanted to stop somewhere and get something. Afterall, he's been drinking a lot of protein powder, so maybe they just went to the GNC. Or maybe, they stopped at McDonald's, or In & Out Burger. Or maybe --

"Enough!" the pumpkin snaps. "Stop wasting your time with 'maybes'. I thought we were getting *past* this. But no, I can see you're still holding on to your denial. It creeps like some kind of desert beetle, offering desperate alternatives to the truth, so you cling to your hope like a child with their favorite blanket. Last night, your intuition that something was wrong was *valid*. Don't dismiss it, by giving yourself vague possibilities. You *know* the truth and you have every right to *burn* with unrepentant fury. She's made a *chump* of you, Raymond. And your Jesse? Well, hey. Same deal. No one can blame you for despondency. After all, isn't he *also* making a fool of you? I mean, c'mon. You wanted a spouse, not a *slut*. You wanted a son, not a *sissy*. Admit it, you are homophobic and despite political correctness. You are affected by what you've heard. All you ask is loyalty and conservative decency. Is that *really* so much?"

"Go fuck yourself," Raymond mutters, returning to the kitchen. "Jeanette's a good woman and you're wrong, I'm not homophobic. I'm just—from a different era. I can love and accept Jesse no matter what."

"But you are angry, Raymond. I can feel it. And all I'm wondering is why direct that rage at *me*? I've done nothing but try to help you. But you should be upset, Raymond, for your family's betrayal goes way *beyond* a little secrecy and indiscretion. I tell you, Raymond, they're plotting against you. They want to be *rid* of you. And they've already investigated your life insurance policy—calculating your exact worth. Which we both know, is far more *dead* than alive."

Raymond smiles, lightly chuckling. "Hey, give me a break, will you? No one wants me friggin' dead. This ain't the goddamn Lifetime Channel. And besides, that's like the most obvious motive people have for murder. Killing someone to collect their life insurance? Are you kidding? That's the first thing the cops would look at. Especially, like a spouse or a family member. And the insurance investigators, too. They'd pick the case apart. And there's even a hint of impropriety, you can bet your ass, those fucks would never pay a dime. No way, forget it, man!"

A brief pause as the pumpkin retreats to its thoughts

"Regardless of cliches," it says, suddenly. "The fact remains, Jesse and Jeanette want you out of the picture. Not just gone—but *gone*. The possibility of money does twisted things to people. And despite the surmounting odds, 'unfortunate accidents' *do* occur. But who knows? Maybe *that's* why you're still alive. They haven't found the perfect way

of *disposing* you. But when they do, Raymond, you'll be history. Jeanette and Jesse will be paid handsomely and *finally* they'll be free to live as they choose and see whom they wish."

"What a crock!" Raymond insists, pounding the counter. "My family loves me, goddammit. There's no fucking resentment. And if there were, I'm confident they'd tell me. The only reason I'm even listening to you is your remarks about last night. You were right that I had some suspicions, but nothing about murder. And this thing with Jesse, okay, maybe I did push him too hard, trying-out for football. That was my mistake. But aside from a few minor issues, we're a perfectly happy family—about to throw a Halloween party. Now does that sound like disgruntled people secretly plotting to kill me?"

The pumpkin scoffs, utterly dissuade. "Oh, please, Raymond. Open your eyes. That's just for show. *Of course*, they're gonna *pretend* to love you. They don't want you making any changes to that insurance policy, now do they? No one lowers their mask before it's necessary. And I promise you, Raymond—resentment *stirs* within this house. Combine that with greed and lust, you've got yourself the *perfect* recipe for murder."

Raymond pauses, succumbing to an invasive dizziness. His head feels split in two. As though an unseen force has overpowered his consciousness, controlling his every thought, his every action. And the more the pumpkin speaks, the more powerful it gets; draining him of all his will.

"I love my son," he whispers. "I love my wife."

"No time for sentiments," the pumpkin says. "The bitterness is in you and the black is all around you. You're becoming a stain. Remember, Raymond. The ones you love can become your greatest enemy. And that time has come for you. Your only choice is self-defense. To strike *them* before they strike *you*. Hear my words Raymond. It must be done. It *must* be done."

"It must be done," Raymond agrees, shedding the remainder of his skin. "I am a stain. A pitch black stain. And I feed on the agony within me."

"That's correct," the pumpkin says. "The change *is* happening. You *are* becoming the stain. Now I order you to firmly grip that knife. Because I'm giving you the power. Do yourself a favor. Put that blade where it belongs."

Raymond nods, obediently clutching the knife. "I am a stain... I am a stain... made of blackness...I need pain... I need pain."

The dizziness increases. Raymond's eyes shine a pure, glowing light. His world spins out of control, faltering a bit and moving to the center of the room. dimming the lights, waiting for his family to come home.

"Weaving spiders come not near..."

The pumpkin hears Raymond whisper, talking to himself and instantly cries out from the kitchen (voice echoing). "It must be done, Raymond. It must be done."

Raymond nods, twirling the gleaming blade.

"It is not all a dream."

The night air is chill. Jeanette's blue Honda turns into the driveway, the engine shutting off as the passenger door opens. Jesse steps out of the vehicle, arguing with his mother about last Saturday's stats from the game.

Jeanette slides out of the driver's side, popping the back and grabbing a brown paper bag of groceries. Jesse does the same. Over the past few weeks, his resentment about joining the team has faded. Football's turning out better than he'd thought it would.

Originally, Jesse wanted to enroll in the high school play. But that was mainly because Jenny Crawford was cast in the lead and ever since grade school, he's had a fat crush. The rumors regarding his sexuality were nothing but a senior prank. That jackass Dawson and his kid brother, Mathew.

A few months back, them and those asshole-jocks stuffed his locker with gay porn, a couple dildos and bottle of KY. Just a lame joke, stemming from Jesse's build. There was no doubt he was frail with a slightly flamboyant demeanor. But things are changing. Coach Keplin put him on a strict weight training program (three times a week). And that, plus the protein powder and testosterone tablets, he's already gained almost seven pounds.

By next semester, Jesse plans to be *solid*. Then no one will mess with him. And as far as the "friends sneaking over" issue, that was just Fredrick Conway and Creep (a nickname for David Wes), just a couple dealers, selling him anabolic steroids and pot.

Staring through the living room window, Raymond watches his wife and son, gradually approach the house, laughing to themselves (*probably about him*). And as they reach the front door, Jeanette slides her grocery bag to one side, reaching in her pocket for the key.

As the lock turns and they step inside, Raymond shuts his eyes, allowing the stain to do all the work.

And in the kitchen, as the screams of terror begin, the pumpkin suppresses a laugh, once again, having worked its magic. Twisting Raymond's thoughts, creating fear and paranoia. The truth is, Raymond's family never *once* plotted against him. Nor did Jeanette cheat on him with the football coach.

The only conversations she ever had with Keplin involved concerns over Jesse's safety. So while she may be guilty of being a bit too overprotective, she's *anything* but unfaithful to her husband.

Thankfully though, Raymond *did* have his doubts; typical male insecurities. Otherwise, the pumpkin would've had more difficulty, drawing out the stain. But in the end, *everyone* doubts. And the stain is easily freed.

Deluding the truth is like casting a spell. A man's vision can be blurred, provided there's a healthy foundation. Reality can easily be tampered. And consequently, the pumpkin is safe; uncarved.

It's a wicked game.

It never loses.

About the Author:

Born in Fairbanks, Alaska, but living in northern California, Benson Phillip Lott always had a taste for horror. He also enjoys writing children's stories. Previous publications are through Untreed Reads, Dancing with Bear, and several other emagazines. Not a fan of social media and he doesn't use Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. Were it not completely necessary, he wouldn't have email.

Slate | Sonora Taylor

All around Matilda, the carnival was slate. She remembered the merry-go-round as a world full of color and light. Now though, she walked through the abandoned fairgrounds and only saw steel and shadow. A forgotten wooden horse stared at her with beady eyes of black. What had happened?

She only remembered walking through a tent with faded red and yellow stripes. The one with the clown that beckoned her from the entrance. Matilda had never been afraid of clowns. She had no reason to fear this colorful figure's invitation, no reason to anticipate the sharp blade that pierced her shoulders the minute the tent flap closed behind her.

When the pain receded, Matilda wandered back outside and saw the carnival abandoned. She looked for her mother, and then for anyone. No one was there. When she reached the merry-go-round, its horses still and grey, she stood on the platform and began to cry.

A whirring noise stopped her tears. She opened her eyes and saw bright lights surround her. The platform beneath her feet began to turn. The horse began to move up and down.

Matilda reached for its saddle of slate and hoisted herself up. She held the pole and felt its chill beneath her fingers. The carnival stayed awash in grey, and no music sounded from the merry-go-round. Even so, she felt a wave of calm roll upon her as the horse with its eyes of black moved up and down, up and down, lulling her into a sleep filled with shadowed dreams.

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.



Beak Like A Dagger | Neil Willcox

They say he's the best swordsmith alive. Well I don't know about that. Neither does anyone I would guess. No way to know unless the Lord of the World returns and takes it into his mind to gather up every smith on the face of the earth so he can judge.

Still, I'll say this. I've been up on the roof of this smithy for a century more or less and the swords that come out are better than any I've seen elsewhere or elsewhen.

So this big I Am comes down the road, gleaming armour, flowing silks, one of those metal crowns on his head that means he's got the grace of the gods, or at least that he's got enough big men with axes that people will say he has. And he looks at the smithy and I can see he's not impressed. I can't make out the words—my eyesight's better at a distance than my hearing—but I've heard these kinds of guys before. The conversation goes something like this.

King Of The Western Pigtrough: Are you certes this is in truth the goal of our hallowed quest? To mine eyes it appears a mere peasant's hovel.

Nervous Lackey: I assure your graciousness that we have travelled down the right path. For look, this is a wealthy house built strong of stone and tile, and the chimneys of the forge belch forth soot and smoke day and night. And lo, the sign foretold, a noble raptor high upon the ridge of the roof!

So I give the signal to the people below to let them know someone's coming. It's just common courtesy. The smith abandons the work he's doing, a bit of decorative welding for a hilt, pretty-work really, though he's careful to keep the grip firm and the balance correct. He sluices himself down with well water from the bucket by the cooling trough, changes his shirt and has the apprentices arm themselves and take up defensive positions. They say that it's not the sword that kills, it's the swordsman, but if they also say you're the best swordsmith in the world then it stands to reason your swords have something to do with it. Some people get sore when their best-beloved has been cut down by a highborn thug with a blade named Fangrazor, and decide to take it out of the craftsman whose matchless steel cuts through flesh like it was paper.

"Your highness," calls out the smith. "You are most welcome here!"

The Pigtrough King (I'm not making this up, he's got a boar on his banner, and a wavy band of blue that's running water) he gets off his horse, nods and then gestures one of his men forward. That guy unwraps an oilcloth bundle and tosses some shards of metal on the ground where they bounce and tinkle on the cobbles. "What do you make of this goodman smith?" says the king.

He takes a look, pokes at it with his boot. He doesn't bother to bend down. "A broken sword your highness. Not one of mine."

"The sword of my uncle. It broke and cost him his life, and also his crown, which now falls to me. I would not suffer the same fate."

The smith shakes his head, hiding a wry grin. "The rumours of my prowess have been much exaggerated. I am a worker of metal, aye, perhaps an alchemist too, but the secrets of eternal life are beyond me."

The king doesn't listen which is just as well as that sort don't have much of a sense of humour at the best of times. "What I require from you is an unbreakable sword."

The smith shakes his head again, his face solemn this time. He turns to look up at me and asks "Shall I tell him or will you?"

I like an audience so I lift my head and open my beak, my voice creaking out. "Iron comes from the corpses of dead stars, the last desperate attempt at a cure for entropy. In a final betrayal the final process that time and pressure unleash turns the strangling poison of fusion to disastrous explosion. It is born in grief and rage and despair and so shall always break and fail. That is its nature."

They're taken aback, and not by my eloquence I'm sad to say. "That ragged vulture is alive!" says one, though I'm leaving out their profanity. "It is flesh and not a gargoyle!" Everyone's a critic, and this one doesn't even have his facts straight. "The lizard-raven talks!" cries another, as though such obvious observations added anything to the conversation.

"You tell me you cannot do this thing?" The king is incredulous. He's not used to people saying no. And he's even less used to being spoken to by such a magnificent creature as I.

The smith whistles and out comes the girl apprentice, bearing a straight sword. "The sword Ash, made by my master to demonstrate his finest and most subtle techniques. Would you care to test it your highness?"

The king steps forward and takes the blade. He holds it in a duelling stance and moves it about. Then he slips the point between two cobblestones and leans. The sword bends under his weight, then springs back. He smiles, satisfies. The smith takes it from him, then taps it against the corner of the building with a precise movement.

The blade breaks with a sickening groan of steel.

"There are no unbreakable blades your highness," says the smith.

"Then what good are you?" he snaps and for a moment I think that he's going to do something foolish. Then he and his entourage are up on their horses and riding away, off to find the second-best swordsmith in the land, or maybe to go back to his castle and rule there until he dies or the Lord of the World returns, whichever happens first.

You're probably wondering why I'm telling you all this. Well friends, take a look. Eyes that were born in the last days of a burned-over world, made to see across the vast gulfs of space when the long red death of the sun turned to fury, they can see much even in the murky atmosphere of this world. And it seems that not everyone is reconciled to the new King of the Pigtrough. Some of them have taken him killing his uncle the wrong way. There's an ambush been set where the smithy road meets the river trail.

What I'm saying is, blood contains iron too, and us carrion birds are going to drink well tonight.

About the Author:

Neil Willcox was born within a stone's throw of one of the largest steelworks in Europe (assuming you can throw a stone a mile and a half) and later studied fusion process and stellar evolution at university. Iron is quite literally in his blood. He lives in South East England.

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The Sleeping Problems | Christopher T. Dabrowski

"What brings you to me?" the psychologist asked.

"Sleeping problems." replied Marek.

"Well, nowadays most people suffer from insomnia."

"The problem is that I don't wake up."

"Well... you have a sense of humour," he laughed.

"I give you my word. I can't wake up."

"Are you mocking me?"

"No. We're in my dream."

"Prove it."

"I can make your legs disappear."

"OK." The psychologist looked at him as if he were crazy.

Marek concentrated and the psychologist now had stumps instead of legs.

"God! Please take it back!" he shouted.

"Sorry," Marek was embarrassed, "can't do that yet."

About the Author:

Christopher T. Dąbrowski is a writer and screenwriter from Poland. Author of several books published in countries such as Poland, USA, Germany and Spain.



Hotel Strega | K.A. Johnson

Madison looked up at the Hotel Strega. The hotel was nothing like she had expected it to look based on the website. The exterior of the 20-story square white building rose straight up and was drab and crumbling with stains marring the concrete surface. The sign that ran down the building's side, starting below the roof, said Hotel Strega. The building looked like an artifact from a bygone era.

Hotel Strega's website had shown a warm and inviting lobby. Madison stepped inside dragging her suitcase and was shocked to see it looked completely different. The lobby more resembled the entrance to a jail than a hotel. Cut into the wall, a side sliding glass panel covered a check-in window. She walked up. An old man with a white mustache with nicotine stains below his nostrils was seated behind the window. Madison was sure that Los Angeles had a no-smoking law, but he had a burning cigarette perched between his lips. He didn't appear to in be uniform but did have a name tag that said, Cecil.

Cecil slid the glass sideways, opening the window. The rank smell of his cigarette smoke curled out of the window. He didn't say a word to Madison.

"I'm checking in."

"Name?" Cecil said without removing the cigarette from his lips.

"Madison McMaster."

"Yes, you'll be in room 2011."

Cecil shoved an old key ring through the window, and the plastic tab said Strega, 2011 on two different lines. Madison was surprised; she had always received a key card for her hotel stays.

"Twentieth-floor, room eleven," Cecil said. "The elevator is over there."

Cecil pointed to the lobby's end, where there was a single elevator door with a push button. He then slammed the window shut. Madison was taken aback by his rude behavior. She had never been treated like this in a hotel before. She went to the elevator and pushed the button. A ring around the button lit up. Madison heard machinery, and the door opened, revealing the small elevator inside. Madison stepped in and pushed the button marked twenty. The ring around the button lit up, and the door slowly closed.

The elevator made horrific noises as it slowly rose, shaking as it went up. Madison was glad when the door opened on the twentieth floor. The hallway had a deep maroon carpet with large gold-colored squares on it. The rug was threadbare in spots, and despite its dark color, years of stains were evident. The walls were a dark ivory color, and there were places where the plaster had been repaired.

Madison stepped into the hallway and looked down the corridor. There were giant convex mirrors at the ends of the hallway allowing the person to see around the corner and who might be there. Geez, Madison thought, what have I gotten myself into? Madison found that her room was on this main hallway, and she didn't have to worry about any of the corners and what might be beyond them, although the need for the convex mirrors slightly concerned her.

Madison fit the key into the lock and opened the door. Madison wasn't shocked to find the room was in the same state as the rest of the hotel. There was a bed with a design on the coverlet that might have been popular two decades prior. There was a lowboy chest of drawers with a dingy walnut brown exterior that was peeling off. On top was a CRT television, with rabbit-ears sticking out of the top of it, smashing any hopes Madison had that there would at least be cable. An old VCR sat next to the television. For all the people lugging around old VHS tapes when they vacation, Madison thought to herself.

There was one other door in the room, which was slightly ajar. She pushed open the door and found the bathroom. There was a claw foot tub with a mildewed olive shower curtain that ran on a metal pole, a high-tank toilet with a pull chain, and a small pedestal sink in the room. The small hexagonal floor tiles were cracked and broken. From the design, it was apparent that at one time the bathroom had looked very nice; however, that time was long gone.

Madison thought about checking out and finding another hotel, but the Hotel Strega was nicely located in downtown Los Angeles and was relatively cheap. She decided that she would stay but try to limit her time in the hotel as much as possible.

Madison unpacked her belongings into the chest of drawers and then set out to see Los Angeles.

**

Returning to Hotel Strega that night after her first day of sightseeing, Madison found the lobby poorly lit. When she walked by the reception booth, she didn't see anyone there. She took the elevator up to her floor and went to her room. As she prepared for bed, she noticed how quiet the floor was. She could hear the sounds of Skid Row coming through the window, but nothing from any of the nearby rooms or the hallway. Madison put on her pajamas and got into bed, shutting off the light.

Madison was startled awake by a pounding on her door. She looked over at the digital clock that read 12:30 am. She then heard screams from in the hallway. Then a pounding on her door again. She turned on the lamp and found the phone. A

notice next to the phone said it only rang the front desk and that you couldn't call out. To call out, payphones were available on the street. No one has updated this notice in a long time, Madison thought to herself.

Madison picked up the phone, expecting it to ring. However, all she heard was a busy signal. The pounding on her door had stopped, but she heard screaming still from somewhere further away on the floor. She hoped that the line was busy because someone else had called in the disturbance. Madison picked up the phone again but still got the busy signal.

I'm not going to deal with this all night, Madison thought. I'll go down to the desk, and tomorrow I'm checking out and finding a better hotel.

Madison changed into her clothes and went to the door. She listened but didn't hear anything, so cautiously, she opened the door and looked out into the hallway. She didn't see anything in either direction and couldn't hear a sound. Madison silently exited her room, locking the door. She went to the elevator and found the door wide open. That's odd, Madison thought. Madison stepped inside and hit the button for the lobby. The ring around the button didn't light up. Madison hit the button again, and again, and again. The ring still didn't light up.

Screw this, Madison thought, I'm going back to my room and getting the hell out of here tomorrow.

Madison stepped out of the elevator and turned in the direction of her room. Standing across the hallway by the door to her room, she saw several figures wearing black hooded cloaks that hung so you couldn't see their faces.

"Fuck this," Madison said.

She remembered seeing a sign for a stairway in the other direction. She turned and saw a group of cloaked figures in the convex mirror coming down that hallway toward her. Madison ran to the small sign that stuck out above the door that said stairs. She got to the door as the cloaked figures were rounding the corner.

"Yes," Madison yelled as she pushed on the door.

The door didn't open. Madison pushed harder, figuring the door was stuck. It didn't budge.

"How can the fucking door to the stairs not open?" Madison screamed. "What if there is a fire?"

Madison felt hands grab her from behind, and as she tried to struggle out of their grasp, a hood was placed over her head. Someone roughly pulled her arms behind her, and she felt and heard a zip tie tighten around her wrists. Forcefully, the hands turned her in the direction of her room and pushed her forward.

Madison thought about trying to get away but realized even if she broke free from their grasp, there was nowhere for her to go.

"Alright, alright," Madison groaned with dejection in her voice.

Madison walked forward until the hands roughly turned her to the left and pushed her forward. After a couple of steps, she felt the floor slightly sink when she stepped on it. After a few more steps, the hands grabbed her, forcing her to stop. She felt bodies push into her. Then she heard a sound like an elevator door closing, then the mechanical sound of the elevator. The motion of the elevator was incredibly disorienting. Madison assumed it had to be going down because she was staying on the top floor.

Suddenly, she felt the elevator come to a halt. Then she felt the elevator move around as the press of the bodies pushing into her was dissipating. Madison felt some hands grab her again and turn her around. She was then pulled forward, and Madison went along compliantly. The feel of the floor changed. Madison suddenly realized it felt like she was walking outside, which she knew to be impossible since the elevator didn't go outside.

"Where am I?" Madison called out.

No answer was returned. The air coming through the hood had changed, too; there was now a chilly and damp feeling to it. The hands continued to push her forward. Suddenly, they pulled back, bringing her to a stop. She was roughly turned to the right and then moved forward again. She wasn't pushed very far before the hands guiding her let go, leaving her standing there. She heard the sound of a heavy door closing and then silence.

"Hello?" Madison called out.

She heard a shuffle of feet; then, someone lifted the hood off of her head. In front of her stood an old lady with white hair. She was also wearing a cloak and hood, except hers was made out of sheer white material. Madison saw she was in a room lit by two torches. The walls, ceiling, and floor appeared to be dirt. There was an old wooden table that looked hand-crafted with a black wooden bowl upon it. Next to the bowl was a brush that looked like it was made out of plant matter.

"Don't be frightened," the old lady said. "This will go far easier if you cooperate. There is nowhere for you to go anyway, so running would be futile."

Madison said nothing back. The old lady produced a small knife, cut off the zip tie, and then stripped Madison. Madison put up no resistance. She didn't see the point. Even if she got out of the room, she had no idea where to go. After the old lady had finished removing Madison's clothes, she dunked the plant brush into the bowl and used it to wipe down Madison's body. As she was finishing, the door opened, and a black-cloaked and hooded figure walked in.

"It's time to go," the old lady said.

"Do I get my clothes back?"

"No, not at this time. Please come with me."

Madison let the old lady lead her out of the room. Madison found herself in a tunnel made of dirt with torches attached to the walls for lighting. Across from her was a closed wooden door. Looking to her left, two black-hooded figures stood behind another older lady dressed the same as the one who had been attending to Madison. Behind them down the tunnel, she could see the elevator door, looking very out of place. The door was open, and the light from inside the elevator was spilling out into the tunnel.

Madison looked to her right and saw another black hooded figure there and that the tunnel went to another opening. Madison had no idea how deep under Los Angeles she was, but she figured she had to be way under the ground since there was absolutely no sound of the city above. Madison stepped out into the hallway, and the old lady stepped in beside the lady in the tunnel.

"Follow him. He will guide you to your seat."

"My seat?"

"All will be revealed."

The black-hooded figure in front of Madison started walking forward slowly. They went down the tunnel, further and further away from the open elevator door. At the end of the tunnel, they entered a hexagonal chamber, also constructed out of dirt. The figure kept walking forward through the room. After the hexagonal chamber, Madison entered a gigantic domeshaped chamber.

Inside wooden benches were set up facing the side in front of Madison. The benches were filled with black hooded figures and females dressed like the old lady. The way to walk through the chamber was either the left or right side as the benches filled the center. The figure led her to the left side. She saw a table with a black wooden platter on it with crescent moon shaped cakes on it.

The figure led her to the front of the chamber. There was a wooden altar with a wooden chair beside it. There was a closed wooden half-sized door in the dirt that served as a wall behind the altar. On either side of the half-sized door were large stones; each had a hole in the center. Behind the altar stood Cecil, wearing a maroon cloak. The figure motioned to the chair, and Madison sat down, facing all of the figures on the benches. From her vantage point, she could see that all the figures in the black cloaks were men. The man who had brought her to the chair returned with a black wooden bowl.

The man set the bowl down on her lap, then stepped away, taking a spot standing to the side of her opposite of the altar.

Cecil walked behind Madison and placed his robed arms over her shoulders.

"Madison, we are happy to welcome you to our ceremony," Cecil said. "You are our guest of honor this evening." Cecil moved his right arm across Madison's chest.

"Il tuo sacrificio porterà Aradia, figlia di Diana e Lucifero, un buon favore verso di noi."

Cecil slid a boline from inside his robe's arm and drew the blade across Madison's neck. Madison felt herself choking on the blood that started filling her windpipe. She tried to breathe in but felt a burning in her chest. She kept trying to gulp in some air but only felt her chest tighten as the room faded to black.

About the Author:

K.A. Johnson has a BA in English/Journalism with a minor in Classics from The University of New Hampshire. He covered the news in the small New Hampshire college town of Durham for The New Hampshire before ditching the snow and moving south to Richmond, Virginia, where he lives with his wife Jennifer and his two furry writing partners Sparta Jesus Vernal-Johnson and Kolby Catmatix Domitian Johnson.

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Daddy's Little Girl | Radar DeBoard

Mark stopped making out with Natalie for a second when he thought he felt something brush up against his leg. He whirled his head around to check as Natalie laughed. The laughter upset Mark and he got up off of her.

"Oh come on," she giggled, "What's wrong?"

"Oh...I don't know," he angrily whispered, "Maybe the fact that you took me to a cemetery to have sex?" Natalie shrugged, "I don't see what the problem is."

"It's creepy!" Mark shouted. He immediately realized that he was being far too loud and lowered his voice to a whisper, "Way too creepy."

"Oh babe," Natalie chuckled as she stood up, "Is it because of the dead bodies?"

"Yes!" Mark snapped. He shook his head, "I don't want to fool around on top of dead people."

Natalie grabbed Mark's hand and smiled. "There's something I want to show you," she said as she started to move through the tombstones.

Mark sighed as he let her drag him through several rows of various graves. There was a slight chill in the air, and though he would never admit it, Mark felt a little cold. The sensation of someone watching him had Mark looking over his shoulder every few seconds as they moved forward. Eventually Natalie came to a stop and waited for Mark to step up beside her.

She gestured to a large tombstone that had a stone cross carved into the top of it. "Here we are!" she exclaimed.

"And what exactly are we looking at?" Mark inquired.

"Why it's a grave," Natalie responded in the ditzy way Mark had grown accustomed to.

He sighed heavily before asking, "Whose grave is it?"

"Well that's easy," she smiled, "It's my father's."

"Your dad is dead?" Mark said in shock. He looked intently at the inscribing on the tombstone before asking, "Why didn't you tell me your dad was dead?"

Natalie shrugged, "It never came up."

"Well of course it didn't," Mark shook his head in astonishment, "Asking someone if their dad is dead isn't normally a socially acceptable thing to do." He paused before solemnly saying, "I'm sorry for your loss."

"It's okay," Natalie replied, "He's been dead ever since I was a little girl." She looked at the grave longingly as she said, "Whenever there was anything wrong in the world I could always go to him. He had a way of making all the pain, all the bad things just go away." She shook her head, "My mom was fine, but she didn't understand me like my father did. Guess I was always just daddy's little girl."

Natalie's unloading of her past left Mark feeling a little awkward. He didn't know what to say so he just stared at the ground for a second.

Natalie broke the silence by saying, "Are you ready for me big boy!"

"Uh what?" Mark responded as he was taken off guard.

"Come on," Natalie said giving him a gentle push, "Lie down for me. I've got a big surprise for you."

Mark didn't know what else to do, so he just laid down to avoid making the situation any stranger. Natalie straddled him and slowly lowered herself to where she was sitting on him. She smiled as she sensually licked her lips.

"Here comes the surprise," she whispered.

A rotting hand suddenly burst from the ground and grabbed ahold of Mark's side. The fingers of the hand dug into Mark and drew blood as it broke through his skin. Mark screamed out in pain and terror. Before he could recover from the shock of the first hand, a second one broke through on the opposite side. Now he was held from both sides and wasn't able to get away. Natalie laughed as she slowly stood up.

"I've always missed my daddy," she started to explain, "I felt so lonely without him, so I spent years trying to find out if there was a way I could see him again." Natalie pointed at Mark, "That's where you come in, you dirty boy. I managed to bring my dad back one night, and it only took one thing." She paused before whispering, "Blood."

"Let me go!" Mark screamed, "This is insane."

"Daddy has you now," Natalie giggled, "And once he grabs you, he never lets go."

Mark felt the ground shake underneath him as something besides the arms started to surface. A decaying head began to appear from between his legs and Mark found himself screaming in terror.

"I brought you another one Daddy!" Natalie cackled with delight.

Leaf Piles | Radar DeBoard

Adam finished raking the last of the leaves onto the enormous pile he had created in the back corner of his yard. The only thing that could piss him off right now was someone ruining the work he had done. Suddenly, a soccer ball came over his fence and landed in the pile and sent leaves flying up in the air. The ball rolled off the pile and came to a stop along the fence. Adam took a quick glance to see how much damage had been done and gasped when he noticed that a pale hand was slightly visible. He quickly raked a couple of leaves to cover it just as Peter poked his head over the fence.

"Sorry about that Mr. Stinson," Peter said shyly.

"That's okay kiddo," Adam said with a fake laugh, "It's bound to happen when you're having fun." Adam retrieved the ball and held it in his hand. He took in a deep breath and said, "You know...if you want...I have another soccer ball you can have too."

"Really!" Peter exclaimed.

"Of course," Adam nodded, "It's in my garage somewhere. If you wanna come over, we can go find it for ya."

"Okay," Peter smiled as he hopped down on his side of the fence.

The fake kindness on Adam's face quickly turned into a look of annoyance. "I guess Peter will make four now," he muttered to himself, "This damn pile keeps growing thanks to these stupid kids." He sighed, "I'm never gonna finish raking these leaves."

Dinner and a Show | Radar DeBoard

Richard watched as his guests eagerly devoured the three course meal he had prepared for them. He couldn't help but smile as they ate, none of them realizing that he hadn't taken a single bite. His guests were so taken with the food that they didn't notice the minuscule, white balls that he had placed in each course.

Richard checked his watch and ushered everyone into the living room. According to his

calculations the eggs would hatch in a few minutes, He was very eager to watch the messy experience as his creations dug their way out from their hosts.

Hound Hidden in the Fog | Radar DeBoard

Kearny stumbled along near the edge of the Suffolk cliffs overlooking the sea down below. He was content with the warm feeling overtaking him thanks to the five shots of whiskey he had consumed.

A sudden howl seeming to come from thin air cut through the pleasant feeling, making Kearny's blood run icy cold. He began to frantically turn his head, finding himself trapped in a sudden and thick fog.

He didn't notice the red eyes, or hear the ghostly presence of the gigantic, black dog until it was already on top of him, sinking its teeth into his neck.

Another Family | Radar DeBoard

The residence lay still and quiet. None outside its walls had yet to discover the fresh corpses that were trapped inside. A decimated arm hung over a banister, while grey matter peppered the floral wallpaper. Several pools of crimson liquid stained the hardwood, and shattered limbs were scattered throughout the rooms.

There were four in total. Another unsuspecting family that the house had claimed. Except, for a lone babe that lay sleeping in its crib. The house would leave the child. It would be a warning to some, and an invitation to others. An invitation that would be quickly accepted.

About the Author:

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

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The Truth Within the Lie | Rie Sheridan Rose

I first met Lavinia Carlton signing books at an indie bookstore in Nashville. This was her thirteenth romance novel, and she was getting a real following. As a fledgling reporter, I thought she might make a good special interest story—you know, the woman behind the words...

I set up an interview the next day in her renovated Victorian, one of the true Painted Ladies. *Book money must be really good to cover payments on something like this,* I thought as I parked my car at the curb.

I'd always wanted to be a writer, but I didn't think I had it in me to string a hundred thousand words together, so I majored in journalism. Two fifty, I could do.

That Painted Lady was awe-inspiring as I craned my neck to take in the gingerbread trimmings on the wrap-around porch. It was mustard yellow and Kelly green, with details picked out in scarlet—a romance writer's house for sure. I tapped the dragon's head knocker, and the door opened almost immediately.

Lavinia Carlton stood in the doorway in a long, flowing caftan. "Come in, come in!" she warbled, waving extravagantly as she turned away from the door and glided toward a room I could see over her shoulder. The space was a sitting room with sparkling bay windows and a lot of Victorian furniture.

I followed her to the room and sat on the red velvet settee indicated. I set my recorder on the crowded coffee table. In this case, I suppose it was a *tea* table, since it bore a full silver service complete with three-tiered stand loaded with little sandwiches and cakes.

"Have some tea?"

"Yes, thank you."

She poured the tea into a delicate bone-china cup I could almost see through. Expensive as well, I was sure. I mentally revised the first question I would ask.

"Cream or sugar?"

"No, thank you."

"I'm sure you're chomping at the bit to get to your questions. What would you like to know?"

"First of all, I have to ask...you hear all the time about writing being a profession more for love than lucre, if you know what I mean, but this house must've cost a fortune. How have you managed what so many others can't?"

She laughed, the sound an incongruous girlish giggle. "My dear, I inherited this place. Writing pays the bills, I'm happy to say, but it takes money to make money and, luckily, my family left me quite a lot of it."

I was slightly disappointed by the answer. I had been contemplating revising my career plans.

"The book that just came out was your thirteenth. And you've only been writing for five years. How do you manage that output and not skimp on quality?"

"It's easy if you set your mind to it, dear. Normally, I'm at my computer from 7 AM to 6 PM at least five days a week. Of course, there are occasional deviations, like this one, but that's a normal day's routine."

"What led you to write Victorian romance novels?"

"Well, you can see the atmosphere I grew up around. Victorian was always in my blood. The romance—well, everyone loves a good love story, don't they?"

"I suppose. But the realism you manage to imbue your stories with—"

"A great deal of research, my dear. Would you like to see my study?"

"Yes, I would."

She led the way upstairs to an attic transformed floor to ceiling with bookcases filled with volumes on every minutia of Victorian life. A state-of-the-art laptop set front and center on a huge roll-top desk. Otherwise, the room was empty. No television or radio, no bric-a-brac, nothing.

"I don't even bring my phone into this room," she said. "This is my *sanctum sanctorum*. Here I write, and nothing else."

"And you sit here from 7-6 without a break?"

"The occasional trip to the WC, or to grab a bite to eat, but otherwise, yes."

"What about groceries? Bills? How do you take care of those?"

"Online orders and automatic billing, mostly. You'd be surprised how little contact with the outside world is really necessary."

"But your fans—don't you spend a lot of time with them?"

"Events like last night's are rare. I only did the signing to get my agent off my back. And, frankly, I think it was the last straw. I've been fed up with him for some time. Need a change, I think."

"So...no one sees much of you; you're a virtual recluse; and—I bet—you've got everything laid out for the next few volumes."

"Heavens, for dozens! Let me show you." She clicked a button and a desktop with lots of neatly organized file icons popped up. "Everything you'd need to write the next twenty volumes is in these files. Character lists, details for lifestyles, basic plots—a veritable gold mine." She looked me up and down. "We're about the same size. Similar features. You might get away with it."

I blinked. How could she know what I'd been thinking to myself?

"Oh, don't look so surprised." She pulled a pistol from the desk. "How do you think I got started?" She gestured toward the nearest set of bookcases. "Pull out *The Picture of Dorian Gray*."

I did as I was told. She had the gun after all.

The bookcase creaked open to reveal a small room.

"Step inside."

The room was empty except for a pile of clothes in the corner.

"Don't mind Lavinia. She's a quiet companion."

Upon closer inspection, I realized the pile of clothing was a huddled corpse.

"You asked how I wrote so many books so quickly. To be honest, only the last one was mine. She'd already written the rest. But I'm a quick study—and she did leave a lot of outlines. May drag out publication times a bit going forward, though.

"I did inherit the place—when I shot her. She'd made a mint by then, and we were related, so it was easy enough to take her place. Fired her agent, and got a new one, but—as I said—I'm about to get rid of him too. Asking too many questions. Maybe I'll just relocate somewhere new. Like New York City. Always wanted to go there. Besides, it's going to be...odor intensive for awhile."

The bookcase began to close. I dove for the opening, and she shot me.

So, here I sit...getting hard to focus now, but someday, someone might find this recording and know the truth. If only these walls could talk.

About the Author:

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

Twitter: @RieSheridanRose

When Red Meets Blue | Scott McGregor

In summer's midst, the Martians arrived on the blue world. The land was blanketed by water and vegetation, perfect for a fresh beginning after centuries on the red waste.

Once they departed their spacecraft, they stumbled upon bizarre beasts. They were creatures who thrived on the summer heat; who rode strange two-wheeled machines; who ate ice off of sticks; and who tossed balls back and forth in amusement.

They, the beings who threatened their new civilization.

"Targets acquired," the Martians said.

Then, they activated their cloaks and mimicked the creature's appearance, thus marking the first day of the Martian conquest.

About the Author:

Scott McGregor is a Canadian author based in Calgary, whose fiction has appeared in Hellbound Books, Oddity Prodigy Productions, DBND Publishing, Eerie River Publishing, and many others. He recently completed his honors project, which explored Marxism in Orwell's 1984, Gibson's Neuromancer, and the HBO series Westworld, as well and the future of historical materialism.

Website: <u>Scott McGregor Writes</u>
Twitter: <u>@ScottMSay</u>

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



Available for Purchase or Borrow Exclusively on Amazon

The Drive-In Movie | Michael S. Walker

They started the feature and—as usual—it was still not dark enough to quite make out the images on the massive drive-in screen. Charlie sat in the back seat of his family's Ford sedan, with his sister Sally, and stared past his father's head at the amorphous figures on the screen. From a silver speaker hooked precariously to the driver-side window, lines of dialogue from the feature sputtered and crackled, sounding like they were coming from the bottom of a coffee can or something.

His sister Sally sat far far away from him, not staring at the screen at all. She was fiddling with the arms of some plastic baby doll she had cradled in her own arms. The doll was wrapped up tight in a pink wool blanket. Sally was also singing along with their mother, who sat in the front seat, her eyes (ostensibly) focused on the blurry feature. The song was an old, old favorite. Charlie had not heard that song since...

Wait a minute...what day was it? What year was it now...?

Charlie only knew that it was summer and the whole family was at the drive-in movies once again. Seeing a new double-feature. The fact filled Charlie with warmth. And something else. A feeling as amorphous as the moving blobs on the giant tiled screen. Not a very good feeling, perhaps...

"I know an old lady who swallowed a fly/ But I don't know why she swallowed that fly...perhaps she'll die..." his mother and sister sang together in identical, almost tuneless, voices.

"Hey...I paid to see a movie," his father murmured, good naturedly, from behind the wheel. "Not listen to a concert. Stow it, please."

But they, as if to tease him, went on singing.

"I know an old lady who swallowed a spider/that wriggled and jiggled and tickled inside her..."

Charlie stared at the back of his father's skull in growing fascination. Shouldn't there be...something? A bald spot perhaps, like some pink pancake, stretching down almost to the nape of his neck? Why was that singular image fixed in Charlie's mind? But no. It wasn't so. His father's hair covered all of his head in massive, dark, greasy curls.

It was the hair of a young man in his thirties.

Why was that... strange?

As Charlie struggled with this, lines of dialogue from the movie leached through to his ears. His mother and his sister gave up the old lady ditty somewhere around "I know an old lady who swallowed a dog..." to concentrate on the feature as well.

On the screen, a thin, nervous-looking man in a silver space suit? and helmet was talking into a long microphone attached to some elaborate control panel or computer. To the left of this ungainly figure, a small crowd of school-aged children looked on in rapt fascination.

"We are starting our retro-rocket countdown; five, four, three, two, one, firing retro-rockets!" the thin, skittish man in the suit chirruped into the microphone. He then pressed hard at a button on the bulky control panel. "We will be touching down in twenty minutes."

One of the children—a little girl with cute brown pigtails—now broke free from the group and sidled up to the man. "I have to go to the bathroom," she whispered.

"We have just touched down," the man replied, matter-of-factly.

In the front seat, his parents laughed heartily. His sister joined in a split-second later as to not be left out.

"That Don Knotts..." his father said, munching popcorn out of a greasy bag between his legs.

Don Knotts? Wait a minute. What was this movie? Hadn't Charlie just seen it a couple of months ago on TV. Passing the time at the...hospital?

Why the hospital? He couldn't remember. Again, it was part of that amorphous feeling that he still could not define.

"Mom? How old is this movie?" Charlie asked. He was surprised/not surprised at the sound of his own voice. It seemed a couple of octaves higher than expected.

Curiouser and curiouser...

His mother turned to stare at him from the front. For a second, only for the briefest of seconds, her face seemed gray and emaciated. Like some antiquated death mask. And then that image dissipated. And there was his *young* mother, her hazel eyes twinkling in the growing darkness.

"Whatcha mean, Charlie?" his mother said, smiling. "You know this movie. *The Reluctant Astronaut*. You begged and begged me to take you to see it when it first came out. When it was at the Midland Theatre a few months ago."

The Midland Theatre? The Midland Theatre? Hadn't that old barn burnt down. Like in...

Again, Charlie could not remember. And it was maddening.

His mother returned to enjoying the movie. She slid across the front seat, close to Charlie's father, and rested her small head cozily on his shoulder. His father, in turn, pulled her in even closer. With one strong, hirsute arm.

That can't be...right Charlie thought, automatically. But still it was nice. Very nice to see that. Despite all these pieces in his head that did NOT fit together. Despite all uncertainty. His inability to remember.

Nice to see his parents together. Again.

Charlie looked out the windshield now, past his cuddling parents. It was growing darker and darker by the minute. The colossal characters on the drive-in screen stood out in sharp relief. As if they now were being projected in the dark of some regular theatre. The Midland, perhaps.

But the Midland had burnt down in...

Charlie thought it might come to him. As it grew even darker.

He now glanced out his side window. At the vast, gravel lot/house of the drive-in theatre. There were other cars out there of course, on this starless night. All pointed toward the screen wall. Like chrome and metal worshippers in some outdoor church. By the moving, flickering light issuing from the screen, Charlie could see these other vehicles fairly well. But there was something *off* about the cars out there too. Something incongruous to his thinking. They all seemed too bulky to be real. Or tapered and flattened out, like race cars. Some of them had tail fins...

And then, Charlie noticed an even stranger particular. All of the cars that he noticed, seemed to be sporting tiny little flags. Without exception. Tiny purple flags hung from the hood antennas of every car he looked at.

And all of the flags were emblazoned with white crosses...

Something was comin' to him now. Becoming clearer in his mind. As the feature ran on and on in hilarity. And the darkness settled around them. As his parents spooned in the front seat.

That amorphous something was...

Charlie stared over at his sister. She apparently had lost interest in the movie and had gone back to attending to her baby doll. She was singing to it now, as she fussed and tightened the pink blanket around its small body. More of that old song.

"I know an old lady who swallowed a horse...she's dead, of course."

"Of course," Charlie echoed numbly in his mind. "Of course..."

How old was his sister? *Very* young. Three? Four? He wasn't sure. And that doll. It seemed to stir up now unpleasant associations for Charlie. Pain out of nowhere. A black cloud of grief.

A strange word now bubbled up in his mind.

Preclampsia...his sister...

But there was his sister. Three or four. Looking down on her child with untempered devotion and love. She caught Charlie looking at her. She leaned over and punched him hard in the arm.

And that was alright. It was all part of that lovely warmth...

"Daddy, Charlie is staring at me!" his sister brayed.

This time, his father turned around to look at him. And, for a second, just as it had been with his mother, there was some kind of ghostly image. Some quick superimposition.

It looked, as if for a brief second, as if half of his father's face were...gone.

But there he was again. Smiling. Loving. Only mock scolding.

"Charlie, do I need to turn this car around now and drive us all home..."

Everyone laughed at the joke. Charlie included. That warm feeling was there despite the darkness. Despite the ghosts. The ghosts that were coming more and more into focus as the reels of *The Reluctant Astronaut* played out on the vast screen. A screen that Charlie knew should be full of gaps and holes now. A screen that *should* exist as a rusty artifact in a lot overcome by weeds. A screen where no double-feature had played for years and years.

If this was eternity, it would be...alright.

The dialogue of the movie now seemed to cut out. As Charlie thought this one thought. And from the tiny silver speaker on the driver-side window a sound like machines, a mechanical hissing breathing began, over and over, as his parents and sister laughed.

And then, that sound stopped too...

About the Author:

Michael S. Walker is a writer living in Newark, Ohio. He is the author of two novels: 7- 22 and *The Vampire Henry*. He has also seen his work published in The Adelaide Review, PIF, and Weirdbook among others. In his spare time Mike likes to play his guitar and pet cats.

Author Blog: Michael S. Walker
Facebook: Michael S. Walker

Featured Artist | Michal Bedkowski

I was born in Warsaw / Poland in 1981.

At the age of seven, I moved to the countryside where I spent my childhood.

Living close to nature made me interested in mythology and folklore. I was just a five-minute walk from the big forest where I used to go for long hikes with my dogs. My head was always bursting with ideas and I ended up sitting till early morning hours at my desk trying to capture them on the piece of paper. My world was full of good and evil creatures, forces out of this world and animalistic creatures.

At a very young age I spent most of the summer holiday at my grandparent's house on their very rural and old land. My grandfather used to be a professional hunter - he allowed me to shoot his rifle at the barn doors, but the most inspiring was their house itself. Full of strange noises, insects living in wooden walls, decorated with hunting trophies and surrounded by the forest on one side and a lake on the other was a great place to be as a kid. Also my aunt was a fan of gothic music as well as pop music so at the age of ten I was already a big fan of *Sisters of Mercy* and *The Cure*.

Back in the mid 90's I studied fine art at the High School of Art and then at the Academy of Fine Arts in Lodz where I met a group of people involved with The International Festival of Comics and Games. Suddenly, I became a contributor to various exhibitions and publications in Poland and abroad.

I got my degree and soon after moved abroad. London has been my home since 2011 where I live with my wife and son. And even here, in a 10 million size metropolis the voice of nature has been following and haunting me everyday - I live in the 5th zone and that's pretty much the middle of nowhere, so most of the time off I spend in local parks and forests.

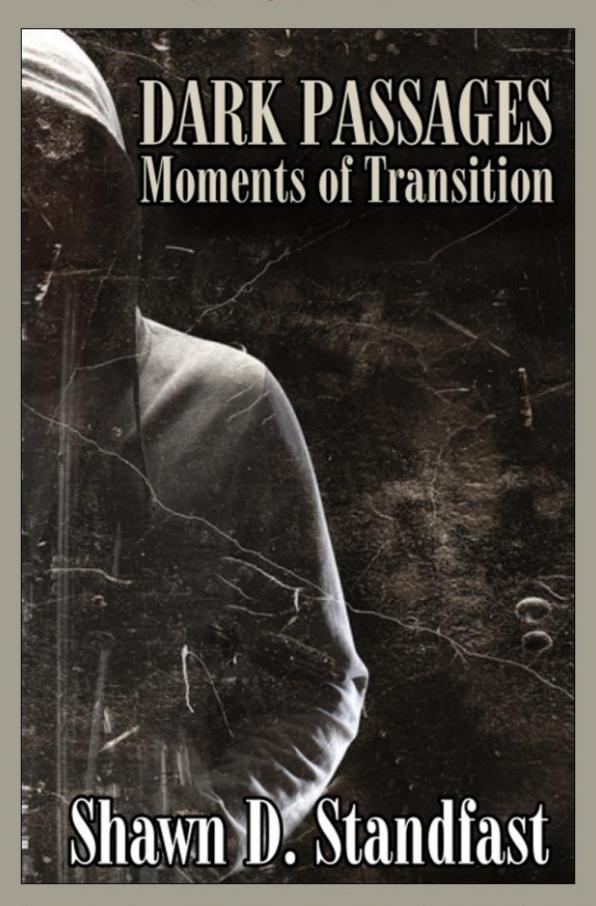
Books have always been a big source of inspiration as well - Lovecraft and King are at the very top of my list. Also living a ten minute drive from the studio where they shot *The Shining* makes me very happy. Currently, I'm work on a small comic book series with very talented Finnish writer, Hannu Kesola. It's a twist of horror, emigrant crime story and...flu pandemic. Hopefully, we'll find a publisher soon.

I enjoy working with ink and paper everyday and I really hope it will never stop. I ended up completing one sketchbook after another and my cupboard is running out of space. Making art has always been a great adventure and a challenge for me. When I look at a piece of paper I can see endless possibilities. One picture leads to another. It's like a never ending circle.

If you'd like to view more of Michal's artwork, please visit his online gallery at <u>ArtStation</u>, and follow him on Instagram at <u>@michalbedkowski</u>



A collection of poetry caught in shadow, interweaving the remnants of memory, thought, dream, and desire.



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POETRY

an endless dark | linda m. crate

they hide in plain sight,

they look like you and me;

but they are not human—

they are monsters full of threats and teeth

and malice that will tear apart innocence,

and they will have no remorse because they feel no empathy;

there is no compassion behind their smiles

and there is no warmth in their eyes there is only an endless dark.

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: <u>Linda M. Crate</u>
Twitter: <u>@thysilverdoe</u>

Horrors from Ambrosia Mansion

Exterior | Mathias Jansson

Through the rusty gates the misty silhouettes of an abandoned mansion deer eating rotten apples fallen from the crow's nest in the garden of delight

A glimpse in a distant window a shadow or a ghost a bone white finger writing on a frosty pane the ancient sign of the Seven Goats

Behind a pair of wings the shadow disappears was it an angel from heaven or a demon from hell? I cannot really tell in this misty morning light

The black Pandoras box I hold in my frozen hands is filled with yellowed letters telling the perverted horrors of Ambrosia mansion about jealousy, murder and forbidden love

The Attic | Mathias Jansson

From the old oak beam my dried guts hang around my shameful life

Burnt onto my retina the pictures of desire my deceptive sister burning with fire under my body

A scene repeating in slow-motion in my head my wife falling blood from a broken skull spreading over the floor

In a desperate attempt to kill the pain in my soul I tore out the eels of excrements from the bloody bowl of life wrapped them around my neck dangling from the beam I finally found my peace

The Basement | Mathias Jansson

Angels and demons lurking in the shadows above waiting for the Judgment Day

In the moist earth hidden by the basement's smell rests my unborn soul

A bloody rag a formless blob a furious scream a perverted evidence of nature's lust and greed

Unloved and expelled from my mother's womb cursed I threw myself in my cradle filled with fear and pain my only consolation a broken ballerina playing a sad lullaby

Until my father on the seventh day extinguished my agony drowned me in the fur of my beloved Teddy Bear

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



Dusk Predator | Lena Donnarumma

Pounding heart

Garbled sounds

The water surrounds me

There is no light

Only darkness

I can't see

But I can sense

It's after me

Must escape

Devoured

Somnolent Sonata | Lena Donnarumma

The mysterious music hypnotizes

It holds a sinister secret.

One must stay away

But to its calling

She walks forth.

A familiar song

Is her unsaving grace,

Unknown to her are the dangers.

Deceit and delirium converge

Its victim meets her doom.

About the Author:

Lena Donnarumma is a marine biologist who developed a passion for writing during her studies and research of ocean life, particularly the strange creatures which dwell there. She has been involved with writing the fiction community and enjoys writing poetry inspired by her interests.

Author Blog: Abyssal Dreams

The Sounds in our Head | Stephen Johnson

The thumping outside growing louder in my head
Was it simply madness or something of much more dread
Shooting through space for months I suspect my fellow crew
Hears the same sounds outside but ignores them too
Is it the asteroids ripping by as they collide
Or is the strange creature I noticed hanging to our side
I know it wants to breach the ship hungry for its prey
I must convince the others each moment could be our last day
I hear the creature call begging to get in
I grab my head screaming for this nightmare to end

About the Author:

Stephen Johnson is a retired Naval Officer serving 22 years on four different ships over his career. He is married to Angelia and has two children, Logan and Isabelle. He will complete his first novel, *The Fizz Prophecy,* in April 2021. He has published *The Hollow* in Eleanor Merry's Dark Halloween Holiday Flash Fiction Anthology and *The Other Side of the Mirror* in Scare Street's Night Terrors Volume 8.

Taxidermia | Alina Măciucă

I've been looking in All the wrong places

Turning my innards

Upside down.

Eating emptiness on a stick Reading philocrap and

Nihilistic, pessimistic musings. Dopamine, serotonin, adrenaline.

It's not there, either.

Not in the smell of autumn leaves,

Not in the smell of sex. The meaning of life Was in that dead cat Lying on the sidewalk

With the wind gently caressing Its striped fur which was losing

Its shine,

With its eyes wide open. I wonder if someone took it,

Emptied it of its guts

And of the meaning of life,

Stuffed it and put it In their living room To keep an eye

On their porcelain puppies.

A Lot of Us | Alina Măciucă

There's no more room for the dead

In our City.

We haven't thought of that When we built those big blocks

And that beautiful park Where old women Walk their dogs

Right next to the city graveyard.

We don't want our dead

Buried

Somewhere on the outskirts

Of the City,

Tumbleweed rolling down

Their graves.

I saw them pulling out

A pair of shoes

Out of an open grave, today. They put the bones in a sack And they also put some numbers

On my bill.

They had to make room,

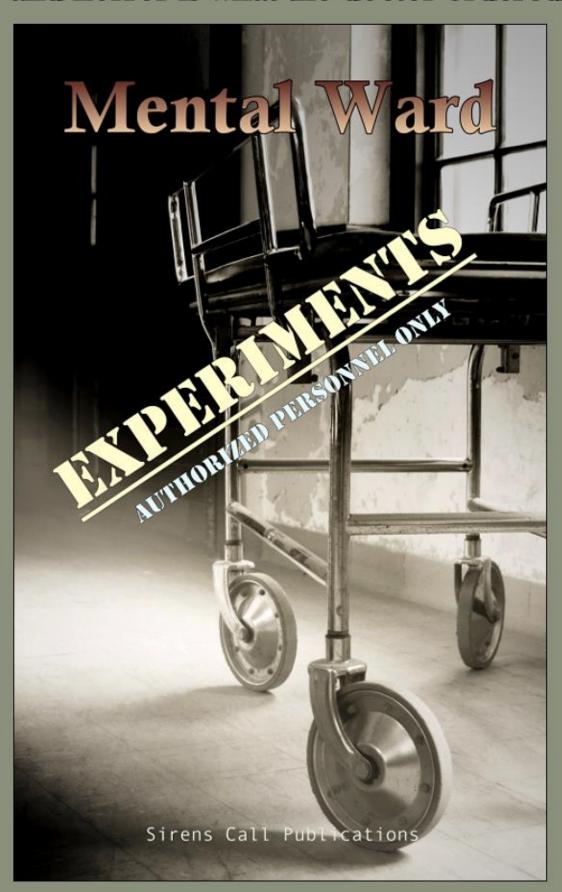
There's a lot of us, down there.

About the Author:

Alina Măciucă loves buying odd trinkets, and taking photos of beautifully decaying buildings. She has published her first short story *And I Have Served* in Space and Time Magazine, issue #140 and also participates in the Ladies of Horror Flash Project. She lives in Bucharest, Romania with her very supportive boyfriend, their two cats, and an ever-expanding vinyl and book collection.

Facebook: Alina Măciucă
Instagram: @avezuha

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



<u>AVAILABLE ON AMAZON</u>

Scrapbook | Brian Rosenberger

Our family's most treasured possession.

A souvenir of souvenirs.

Our history in print, for all the public to see. And fear.

Clippings of murder scenes, rapes and robberies, obituaries,

Sometimes a page or two torn from a personal diary,

Or a letter from the murderer to the victim's family

Or a letter from the victim's family, filled with sentiments of forgiveness

Or vows of revenge.

An heirloom filled with personal insight and juicy details.

The Hows and Whys and the all-consuming Need.

The photographs are my favorites.

Sometimes, you can see the resemblance

Either in the flesh or the act.

A father prefers a hacksaw, a tradition passed on to his offspring,

The same hacksaw, the same method.

Or a screwdriver, or an axe, or a family recipe for poison.

Sometimes the victims are also relatives.

When the keeper of the scrapbook passes,

Regardless of the cause,

The new caretaker has two duties:

Keep the family memorial safe

And add to it.

I can't wait to get started.

A Servant of the Moon | Brian Rosenberger

She said, "I'm not the Moon. Just a humble servant."

My response, "We have that in common. I'm a humble servant as well

And tonight I'm your humble servant. Today's special is..."

She smiled, fangs barely veiled by crimson lips.

It was like the night embraced her.

She embraced the night.

Black was her color. Black and red.

That night she ordered steak, rare, skipped the salad and dessert.

Great tipper.

I proved to be her dessert.

A blessing and a curse.

I still wait tables.

Being a vampire doesn't mean you don't have to still pay rent.

Now when I say,

"I'm not the Moon. Just a humble servant."

I fully understand what she meant.

To the Cemetery | Brian Rosenberger

Thunderstorms. Lightening lacerates the sky.

Clouds unleash their torment,

A downpour to match the sadness

Of the funeral procession,

A rain of tears, a rage of despair.

Four horses pull a black carriage.

A parade of mourners in cars,

Slowly trail behind.

All arrive at their destination, not the final destination.

The Sinner is pulled from his home.

His family in tears, protesting, in denial.

They were told. They were warned. They knew.

The door of the hearse opens,

Welcoming the Sinner.

The casket fits all.

The procession continues. The storm continues.

The ceremony at the cemetery is quick, to the point.

A landscape of black umbrellas.

The townspeople are used to the Town's demands.

An annual Sacrifice. Sometimes more frequent.

The Town's Elders interpret and spread the message.

For the greater good. The good of the Town.

Shovels of dirt mixed with tears from the attending.

The priest says what is needed to be said.

The casket descends.

Then the Sun.

The Pumpkin King | Brian Rosenberger

His reign, just one day, one night.

He makes the most of it.

Rising from the fields,

A corrupted, mutated Gourd/Melon/Man hybrid,

A garden-grown Nightmare,

Tendrils like tentacles,

His shadow a flock of crows,

A burning desire, bright as the full moon.

Serves as His heart, candle lit.

Vines embrace, entangle, and snare

Potential followers.

For those faster than his caress,

The King spits black seeds, implanting the runners.

The King never misses. His seeds take root.

New followers, new slaves to the vine,

Followers planting their own seeds, His seed.

Seeds that will be fully grown by the time

The Pumpkin King rises again

Next October.

And this is how his garden grows.

Dragon Fire | Brian Rosenberger

Mother lies to me. With good reason.

It's what a parent does, dispels their children's fears.

The lights engulfing our City. Not stars nor falling stars.

"Dragon fire," Mother says and points to the night.

"See the outline of their wings?"

I squint with a child's eyes and can almost see, almost believe.

When it's safe which is never but sometimes need conquers reason,

We venture into the City. Once a glorious city, still glorious in places,

Where the buildings aren't broken, burned, or reduced to towers of ash.

We see other citizens and their charred skeletons.

The living avoid them as they avoid us.

I'm older now, with children of my own.

I tell them about dragons as my Mother told me.

I know others will tell my children the truth

Just as others told me the truth in my youth.

Not dragons. Never dragons.

Bombs. Made by human hands.

I still wish for dragons.

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>Brain Who Suffers</u> Instagram: @brianwhosuffers

Red | Nina D'Arcangela

Red taint of the broken;
stain of the brazen.
To sip of such delicately tinted nectar
would bruise it eternal
leaving a residue
of rouged pain
in its quickening wake.

About the Author:

Nina D'Arcangela is a quirky horror writer who likes to spin soul rending snippets of despair. She reads anything from splatter matter to dark matter, and is an UrbEx adventurer who loves to photograph abandoned places, bits of decay, and old grave yards. Nina is a co-owner of *Sirens Call Publications*, a co-founding member of the horror writer's group *Pen of the Damned*, and the owner and resident anarchist of *Dark Angel Photography*.

Author Blog: <u>Sotet Angyal</u> Intagram: <u>@DarcNina</u>



Chambered Whispers | Alexis Child

Eyes of the World | Alexis Child

Coal-black eyes burn like an inner volcano as they come alive. From their crumbling depths are the murky waters of madness, caught in a relentless tide. An echoing voice of unpleasantness lingers in the air, laced with tragedy, and all things the gods despise.

Dark orbs open to immortal worlds, holding the grief of ages; entire civilizations that fell and rose again, the misery of mortality, bloody battlefields, charnel houses, the wrath of forgotten deities, secrets unlocked, collapsing stars, visions of a dying world—all live within those eyes, urns that contain the ashes of innumerable woes.

Corpse Grinder | Alexis Child

Memories chase after him like a murderer's glove, bruised and bloodied. Fugitive thoughts are night-time shadows springing from an abnormal mind, the wrong shade of red. Scarcely remembered are the others, like a child standing with its face pressed, distorted against glass.

Darkness closes in as a ravenous crow, sadistic urges a devouring flesh. Emotionless eyes laugh coldly, "Either way they die." Driving down the long highway, he hunts for prey like the hawks he holds in high esteem, bleeding offerings to the broken moonlight, nothing less than the blatant face of death embracing itself.

Bad dreams he chased away; ghost stories singing midnight lullabies—words lulled raindrops into a trance beyond the wall of sleep. Spirit-whispered warnings, madness shadows spawned, through veins of mortal flesh.

"Death descends dark shadows on those worthy," whispered the blade slicing through the cold autumn night. Bright red screams showered the quivering body; liquid tears from a lacerated sky when darkness falls.

He reigns in blood, the devil in his eye. Up the stairs he leads the children in the pale soft moonlight, singing of his crimes.

Dead Silence | Alexis Child

Since you said
"Get a tougher skin!"
I no longer feel anything
Guaranteed pain killer

These skin clothes Stitched and stretched From head to toe Lady's flesh suit

Fits snug as a glove
Ed Gein-like
I beat my flesh drum
Howling in the moonlight

As newlydeads
We lay entwined
Spiralling in darkness
Your voice trapped inside

Where you can't tear me apart Holding your tongue There are 'things' You cannot say

About the Author:

Alexis Child lives in Toronto, Canada where horror is in its purest form and is haunted by the memory of her cat. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in numerous publications. Her first collection of poetry, a dark and sinister slice of the macabre gothic, horror, surreal, and supernatural—*DEVIL IN THE CLOCK*—available on Amazon.

Author Website: Alexis Child's Poetry Empyrean

Facebook: Alexis Child

Summer of 1989 | Miracle Austin

Chopping Mall
A Nightmare on Elm Street
Wolfen
Friday the 13th
Basket Case
Re-Animator
Howling
Vamp
Sleepaway Camp
Night of the Creeps
Halloween...

Triggered my night terrors each night I drifted off to sleep. I tried to stop watching them and others, but I couldn't.

My addiction to horror was my reality.

Each night, I would do the same thing—pollute my mind with horrific images.

In my dreams, the monsters always seemed to find me... no matter how hard I tried to hide.

When I woke up soaking wet from my sweat, I continued saturating my mind with those dark visions.

I should've locked them inside an impenetrable box, a long time ago and buried it a thousand feet, deep down in the Mediterranean Ocean.

Instead, my transformation began... Chains nor cages couldn't hold me.

I became pieces of those creatures I watched.

My passion to hunt cancelled my redemption.

I tried to leave clues for the police to find me, but it never worked.

An untouchable armor meshed into my once human flesh.

My internal destructions grew and grew into a voracious appetite.

I could never satiate it—I wanted and craved more.

So, I waited for my new victim to exit her dorm room.

Darkness gifted me the perfect opportunity to snatch her.

Loose papers flew from her satchel and shredded pages from her books carouseled into the wind as her blood shimmered, on the pavement from the bronze moonlight.

About the Author:

Miracle Austin works in the social work arena by day and in the writer's world at night and on weekends. She's a YA/NA author, and she's been writing since junior high. *Doll* is her debut YA Supernatural novel; it won 2nd place in the YA category in the 2016 Purple Dragonfly Awards. She's a Marvel/DC/Horror/Stanger Things Fangirl and lives in Texas with her family.

Instagram: <u>@MiracleAustin7</u>
Twitter: <u>@MiracleAustin7</u>

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Zombie Ms. Muffet | O. D. Hegre

Zombie Ms. Muffet Sat poised on her tuffet Examining the hand She'd gnawed on all day.

Only bare bones did dangle From the sinewy tangle Where skin and muscle Once lay.

In a moment of introspection She re-found her direction, All was not lost If she didn't delay.

And with Hunger still raging Eyeing the foot so engaging Once in her grasp, She resumed chewing away.

Pray Diddle Diddle | O. D. Hegre

Pray Diddle Diddle, Kate's chewing your middle. She'll be slurping the liver Quite soon.

The spleen will follow What Liz tries to swallow, While Ralph samples your brains With a spoon.

The living just cringe As the Zombies still binge. Half gone, now only 'Diddle' And it's not even noon.

In the end, what's left of Diddle? Only a spot and a piddle. Just a faint maroon glistening Under the moon.

About the Author:

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

Facebook: Orion Hegre
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Change Management | Alex Grehy

Step 1: Awareness

Did you know I was a human once? a member of society, part of the clan, the team, the gang.

But the co-dependence sickened me. I was a loner, never lonely Watching, wanting more.

Step 2: Desire

I yearned a complete transformation. craved a soul of stone invulnerable, vindictive, cold.

Step 3: Knowledge

I looked for ways to achieve my aim. best option? hurt with cruel, brutal, words.

Step 4: Ability

I lurked on the web, seeking victims. attacked them, anonymous, unseen.

But small cruelties were not enough. I needed a better target for a character assassination.

Step 5: Reinforcement

I lured a woman, befriended her, studied how to wreck her identity.

It was simple to wound her psyche. eroding her self-confidence was piquant, gratifying.

I left comments on her Instagram, she cried, I was aroused.

Her friends begged me to apologise. but I'm not that sort of 'sorry' guy.

I belittled her homely hobbies. scorned her interests, stole her pride.

I sneered when she baked a birthday cake, salted it with spite.

I scoffed at her posts of mindful flowers. blemished them with blight.

She blocked, but I easily broke through. she reported me to her ISPs they said, "Nothing we can do."

She says she will take her own life soon. I drove her into misery the final pulsing of her veins, when cut, my ultimate supremacy.

My heart is completely calcified. I have my granite soul, my domination is obscene, sublime

The web is mine.
Unstoppable. Untouchable. I am The Troll.

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!

Author Blog: <u>Ideal Reader Blog</u>
Twitter: @Indigodreamers



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Blind God | Robert Beveridge

Out there.

You think you can feel something reach for you.

But in this black expanse all you can see are your head and your hands.

Sometimes you wish you knew the shape of the cell you're in

but in this absence of light there are no corners, no walls to see

just black.

A sound

maybe muscles that stretch, creak beyond the walls of your room

but you don't know, can't see.

Guilt | *Robert Beveridge*

I could smile the rats gnaw through the thinnest parts of my cheeks

play your instruments, women of Babylon, play your instruments and sing sing of the destruction that rained down on your gardens until your song is stopped by falling masonry

my grin complete the rats now gnaw at my eyes

make your one last stand, wretch, on the steps of some forgotten Gothic church as the hypocrites berate you and the monks stone you

one last dark laugh the rats take me

About the Author:

Robert Beveridge (he/him) makes noise and writes poetry in Akron, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in Page and Spine, The Pointed Circle, and Failed Haiku, among others.

Instagram: @ebolaisthesavior

Delving into the Darkness | Ann Christine Tabaka

He was lost. Trapped inside a world of his own making.

I sit observing him battle his nightmares. Trying to grasp the containment of a tormented mind.

Illusions and dreams ruled his day, as anguish ruled his night.

Looking through thinly veiled truth, grasping at frayed hope.
He limps along a well-worn path searching for righteousness.

Many have trod this way before, delving into the darkness that resides within. Few have found the key to open the cast iron door.

Prayers Fall from Tortured Lips | Ann Christine Tabaka

Prayers fall from tortured lips, dripping into endless wails, summoning salvation.

The mid-point has been cast in stone.

Walls of desire crumble into dust.

Permanence is an illusion—evaporates within defeat. Derelict pleasures set aside, contemplating their demise, while asking "Do you want to play with me?"

Turbulence of wayward souls, clinging to decay. Sheltered hope, no longer sings, but echoes in the great abyss. Pleas avalanche into darkness.

Destruction is at hand. Ashes falling like snow, upon a blackened earth. Crawling out from under, in the end, truth decides our fate.

About the Author:

Ann Christine Tabaka was nominated for the 2017 Pushcart Prize in Poetry, is the winner of Spillwords Press 2020 Publication of the Year, her bio is in the *Who's Who of Emerging Writers 2020*. She is the author of 13 poetry books. Christine lives in Delaware. loves gardening and cooking, lives with her husband and four cats. Recent credits: The American Writers Review, The Phoenix.

Author Website: Ann Christine Tabaka
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That Sweetest Urge | Miriam H. Harrison

why is living such a fearful thing?

I have freed my empty bones from my oaken box, my six feet of heavy, earthen prison, yet that weight is nothing to the weight of my regret

never did I live—never did I think to give my happiness breath

no, mine was a life half-lived—a body to fill the modest dresses, serve the social teas, warm the bed of a caring husband with all my heart's affection, but without that deepest, sweetest urge

I think he knew, but forgave for that, I am grateful; for that, I carry no regret

no, I do not regret my actions, but my inactions—not Robert, but Madeleine Madeleine—whose untested rejection I feared more than the grave

now I have been to the grave and back, and one fear remains, one desire

though I have no heart, I will lay it bare—in her arms I will live and die anew: these hollow eyes will fill with her beauty; this empty chest will flutter and race

oh, I know she may yet scream—I may yet go on cold, alone

but at least she will fear only these empty bones—better that than her fearing my love, better than her fearing that sweetest urge, that unspeakable passion, of one woman pressed to another

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. She is a member of the Horror Writers Association, and her writings can be found dismembered and scattered in various dark corners of the publishing world.

Facebook: Miriam H. Harrison
Website: Miriam H. Harrison

Afraid of the Dark | DJ Tyrer

Shadows slowly creeping
Up the stairs, along the hall
Whilst you are sleeping
Shadows creep up the wall
Fitfully your eyes open wide
Something disturbed your sleep
From the dark nowhere to hide
Pray God your soul to keep
Admit the truth if you will:
Do you fear the darkling night
When the very air is still
And there is no comforting light?
If you are afraid of the dark, my son
Then quake, for the night has just begun...

Atlantean Secrets | DJ Tyrer

Once grand temples, palaces Now hidden in deep ooze, mud Remnants of a civilization From the dawn of human time Built upon the ruins Of a civilization older still As old as time Identity obscured, forgotten Perhaps never truly known Mankind no longer dwells here No longer walks streets millennia drowned But the things that came before Remain, waiting Twisting and curling Hidden in secret chambers Sleeping, dead yet not dead Awaiting the day they shall awake And rule the world once more

Down Below | DJ Tyrer

Rattle of devil feet upon the stair
What the hell do you keep down there?
Down in the dark deep below
Down in the cellar where none may go?
What lurks in corners out of sight?
What is it you hear that shuns the light?
Bar the door to keep it in
That bestial offspring of sin
Lacking properly-defined shape
Do not allow it escape
For it knows but a single thrill
The taste of blood and urge to kill.

Gobi Sands | DJ Tyrer

Great Khan on camelback Has no fear of thirst Dares all enemies to strike Knowing none shall survive Protected as he is By the Great Blue Heaven Taunts even Erlik But, sands shift Strange patterns Great Khan on camelback Stares in wonder Marvelling till Death Worms strike Leaving nothing but bones Bleached by the sun, acid And, fading memories Obscured by successors Who shun desert sands For the limitless horizon

The Lady of Every Day | DJ Tyrer

He names her

The Lady of Every Day For she is there every day Always at the corner of his eye A face in the crowd or empty street Wherever he goes Wherever he is Whatever he does Whoever he's with Always, always there Every day Dressed in old-fashioned clothing Invisible to others Silent Just there Always there Every day Until he ends it Joins her in death

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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The Rolling Die | Brian Jerrold Koester

Deep secrets permeate the dust that clings In subtle lurid patterns to the wings Of moths, the wings with glistening eyes that stare, The eyes that stare from their concentric rings

And see diaphanous free souls in air Dark as abysmal shadows, shadows where These souls fluoresce in moonlight. They fluoresce In yellow, green and orange, and they dare

To pass between the worlds. They don't guess That hidden in the shadows spiders press Themselves into the crannies, spiders spin Their subtle webs to trap the souls. Distress

Has only started when the fangs sink in And long sharp hairy legs rush up to pin And wind them with strong silk. Exquisitely The venom stings; it works its way to win

Control; it stings excruciatingly
To wreck the writhing soul, increasingly
To paralyze. What mind looks through the eyes
Of moth wings? Looks while everlastingly

The living blood drains from the spider's prize, The soul becomes a drying husk that cries And jibbers without hope, a sentient crust That wills itself extinct but never dies.

What mind looks on serene as if it must Be right for beings in its image, trussed In Hell, to stay there? Stay there even though They're made from its own breath and from the dust

Of its eye-studded wings, though these souls go To torment through no fault of theirs; they blow Into the web by chance; one meager gust Of hapless luck will let the venom flow.

Between the blessed and the damned is just The rolling die that gives the final thrust.

About the Author:

Brian Jerrold Koester is a Pushcart Prize nominee and a *Best of the Net Anthology* nominee. His collection is titled *What Keeps Me Awake* (Silver Bow Publishing) and his chapbook is called *Bossa Nova* (River Glass Books). His work has appeared in Agni, Streetlight Magazine, Delmarva Review, Right Hand Pointing, Louisiana Literature, and elsewhere. He lives in Lexington, Massachusetts and has been a freelance cellist.

Inhalations | Avra Margariti

I'm sure my killer didn't mean to inhale my ashes When she burned and buried me in the backyard But I voyaged up her nostrils anyway.

Now we spend all day together; all night, too.
Each breath she takes I echo deep inside her Particles of death rattling within shriveled lungs. When she eats I am the acids of her stomach Dissolving her nutrients, stealing them away Before she can absorb them in her system.

When her eyelids close in tortured slumber I scratch words into their undersides
With broken nails like shards of glass.

I'm sure my girlfriend didn't mean to kill me
When she pushed me down the stairs during a fight
But I snapped my neck and died anyway.
My untimely demise has not yet sundered us.
I could dislodge myself like a dandelion fluff,
Could find a different host to haunt,
But I always did enjoy marrow-deep closeness.
How many times had she told me
She wished I could crawl inside her,
And we could live like nesting dolls do?
In sickness and in health,
Life and death,
I am nothing if not a giving lover.

Jam-Making in the Age of the Zombies | Avra Margariti

We will make apricot jam from the fruit of the tree that grows over our lover's unmarked grave

where she buried her milk teeth as a child of twelve. We have dug them up years later, a post-mortem offering

to inlay rings and belts with yellow, beetle-bitten pearls of pretty. The apricots' skin fuzzy, the flesh reminiscent

of sunsets before the putrescence of apocalypse set in. Our lover's juice runs down our faces in rivulets of pink

like the remorseful tears we've been unable to coax from our sandpaper eyes no matter how we blame and beat

ourselves. The jam, an evanescently sweet memory of what she tasted like before the ghoulish rot.

We will be buried with her teeth, an innocence the gods cannot disregard, even in those

who have shot their lover dead, those who will load the gun again, and again.

Fine China Façade | Avra Margariti

She wears a feline mask of porcelain to hide the way she's plucked out every last eyelash and stuck them to her bedroom mirror like moribund wishes.

She keeps a mason jar of moths on her vanity (the jar her mother once used to hide her vomit after every lunch and dinner) hoping they turn into fireflies, watching their light fade. She walks through life a shadow eddies and spirals contained under her fine china facade.

Fore shopfront mirrors and car windows she pauses: a crack runs lightning down her mask whiskers drooping, eyes wells of viscous dark. Moth wings flutter in her shadow striving to break free of this famished flesh.

Gloria in Excelsis | Avra Margariti

An attar of rotten roses, emperor butterflies Cannibalizing themselves into metamorphosis In my own painful image.
The caterpillar goo added to my leaf compost-An ecdysis of (in)stars.
And I, the empyrean un-maker.
Between flowerbed and blooming bush I bury The smashed shards of shooting stellar bodies. I breed my garden celestial,
Carnivorous gloria in excelsis.

Devil Put Aside for Me | Avra Margariti

Beelzebub, the lord of the flies

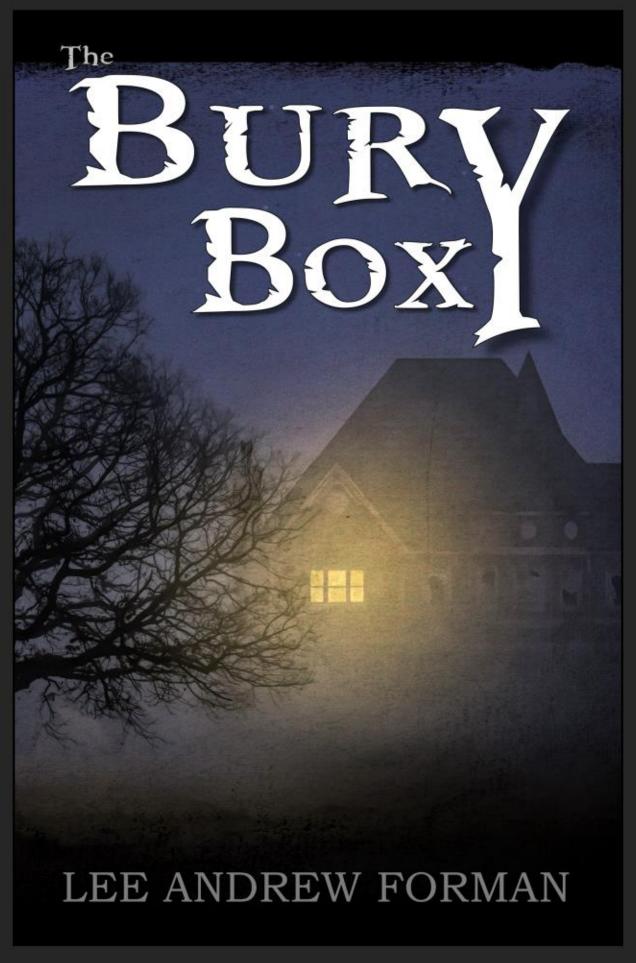
Where parents once burned little children. The other Princes of Hell await To wash me in hellfire, dress me in robes of brimstone. My diminutive body bared, the demons gasp At the scars and cigarette burns (Are you a boy or girl, vitriolic voices echo, Phantom hands probing, undressing). They've hurt me, I say. Humans hurt me. Not anymore, my entourage of demons say, Never again, as they kneel before me In the loam and ash, as they lay down entangled Like a puppy litter, all snug and hellfire-warm. Little orphan, the demon princes say When I join their fold, their found family of fiends. Antichrist children aren't born. They're made.

Leads me by the hand across the valley of Gehenna

About the Author:

Avra Margariti is a queer Social Work undergrad from Greece. She enjoys storytelling in all its forms and writes about diverse identities and experiences. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Vastarien, Asimov's, Liminality, Arsenika*, and other venues.

Twitter: @avramargariti



Available on Amazon

The Smoker | Christopher Hivner

Ten minutes late and two donuts short the reaper arrives for our appointment, sweating and out of breath. I point out the pact is broken because he's late which enrages him. He stomps his feet, waving his scythe around for show. I point to my watch and shake my head. He wants to continue his tantrum, but can't. He can barely breathe, bent over at the waist, chest heaving, and yet he lights up a Pall Mall. Two deep drags and he feels better. He shoots me the finger, mumbles "fuck you,"

and shuffles away.

Schmitty | Christopher Hivner

My neighbor across the street is an idiot.
His back-porch light is still on; I can see every hack of his axe into the body of the kid who knocked down his mailbox.
For Christ's sake, Schmitty turn off your light before the whole neighborhood knows you're a lunatic.
I'll never tell because Schmitty always

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.

Facebook: Christopher Hivner - Author
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She Who Stalks Behind My Steps | Lori R. Lopez

I hear her. Sliding along, dragging A trail of ragged cloth in her wake as she Follows in mine. Like a hound from Hades I cannot escape the close pursuit. Furtive Hunched, ever vigilant. Abysmal gaze vapid Keen and empty. Glares like Black Holes Her reeking rotten breath singes nostrils

She wears fog draped about her
A vapor shawl, fumes bleak and umbral
The cape of one who is eternal. Darkness
Her medium, a dim canvas and palette. Strokes
Intense, equally banal. Morbid as Victorian
Still-Life. Painting herself Midnight. Dabbing
A poet's withered heart, an artist's lost ear

Dismal and dusky-blue the mantle
Veiling a bowed head. Mistic the aura emitted
In cemetery shades of grimstone and brume
Leaked by a gaunt spirit; evanescent wisps
I sense those chilling orbs. I've seen them
Turned my way, reflected on a shop window
I cannot deny Misfortune's attention

The wilted woebegone stare of tragedy I know she's there. I have glimpsed stark Proof, witnessed the drab wraith-like figure — She who stalks behind my steps! She is not The same as me and makes no attempt To match my walk, my pace The length or beat of strides I take

Long skirts sweep the ground, the dirt
Feet glide or hasten out of sight. Eerie, she is
Weightless, preternatural. No rhyme or reason
For this dance of two partners faced in a row
Detached, disconnected yet together
Phantom or ne'er-do-well
I fear what will happen should I halt

What does she seek? I am terrified to Find out! Could she be an omen, shadowing Warning to watch my back? If she is some Disparate harbinger plotting mischief, treachery Awaiting the moment I pause to look — Then what? The answer may be my last Her presence fraught with anticipation

Near enough that we are joined as a pair This suspenseful agony's impossible to quell Dangling in choreographed synchronicity A locked scheme. A journey without finale I dare not break this bond, her proximity Trapped in a role of spellbound dread! A position I fulfill to the dire end

Haunted by the remnants of Lady Luck.

within the cracks | Lori R. Lopez

Under this wall's veneer lie secrets — inky mildewed stains so deep, so shocking, they would cause a body's heart to fail should the paint or paper chip off, peel and split apart. The plaster break, flake, crumble dead away ...

The walls are whispering. Nobody hears. None will listen or heed their quiet murmurs. Too busy brooding, weeping over wasted moments. I could Fill a suitcase with those, my regrets. Phone a Taxi to haul them far.

Load them on the next departing Flight, only to be out the cost for the ticket when they return to Sender. It wouldn't relieve my mental knots, the wrinkles and furrows carved in the middle of the night by fears.

That's when the walls speak loudest, spelling out woes in fine lines, telling tales by creases. On murals of fanciful figures and visages, examined during mindless reveries, the stuff of vacant speculation. I leave a light on ...

Too afraid the walls might close in.
Or any number of revelations occur.
Thuds and creaks. Spectral taps, groans.
Fissures are the worst for what they reveal like windows. Houses have souls too.
Spirits abiding within the cracks.

Behind walls hiding more than mold, cobwebs, dusty pipes. Concealing corpses of rats and flies, cast-aside moltings from spiders, an occasional unburied skeleton. None can see the truth, unless with tools, a hammer, they widen those crevices.

Prying, damaging, the dwelling's guts laid bare, painfully exposed. More than wood beams, wiring, clumps of insulation. Mysteries solved. Histories uncovered. Residue stirred like leaves in October wind. Even a new house is built on the past.

And sometimes the walls have eyes. Sometimes we are not alone in an empty room. Or discern a voice, a giggle, a noise that cannot be dismissed. If we ignore them—ghosts, bugbears, the ones who came before—who will listen to us?

The Fog Has Teeth | Lori R. Lopez

Best you not risk being out after dark when a fey brume cascades from coast or hills, for the vapors may harbor countless cusps that rend and devour to cast bloodspills.

A body could lose one's way in such drink, when air grows as thick as the whitecapped Sea. A step'll turn foul unaccustomed to depths of a swirling embrace from that heartless fury.

Encountering these words carved into stone at the entrance of the village I chose for a night, my steps rang out briskly I will kid you not, gazing mouse-eyed with a tremor of fright.

Chilled by its warning, the lack of a welcome, I hoped to move on from the place a few winks after renting a room just to stretch on a bed — chasing the road once I shook off the kinks.

Overtaken at once, an oppressive black layer, dense and rolling, obscured my route. I found myself groping, confused in the murk, unable to see, arms thrashing about.

Rich as the smog, the smoke and ash spewing from fire, yet muggy as a storm . . . Writhing with rippers that danced and stung like humid flames without any form.

Astir in the haze a myriad of gnashers, teeming, tearing at cloth and skin!
Unprotected I flailed; the nippers prevailed.
Screams were swallowed, a muffled din.

The swarm of slashers crafted my tissue, sculpting mayhem, a free-for-all fest.
The biters fed — microscopic hunger.
I was nearly dead by a thronging pest.

And then it passed, no corpses remaining. The street merely damp in the wake of rain. I crawled to the Inn, slapped at the door. They whispered I didn't need to explain.

"Fog in these parts can gobble your soul. You're lucky to survive," a doctor reported. I learned a rough lesson on traveling afar. Listen to warnings, however distorted.

And even the most serene of Weather may harbor dangers. It cannot be trusted. I believe the clouds above are alive, floating, observing, swimming or gusted.

Balloon-like organisms feeding on air, absorbing moisture from water or vein. Hovering, thirsting, waiting to pounce. The Fog has teeth. I am not insane.

The Darkout | Lori R. Lopez

On this hilltop I wait and wince at the sight Of that beacon on a cliff disturbing night, Constructed as if protecting a coast; Admonishing sailors, guard well your ghost. Its sweeping signal a blatant ruse — A brazen lie, and the baldest excuse! Those flashes are aimed at a Gothic Villa: My mountain Château named Casa Camilla.

Behind lead-glass, I pace while brooding

For years my kin were confined herein,
A battle of wills no warmblood could win.
Now I am the last, still unable to kill.
I wait for a chance when brightness goes nil.
The silver-edged beam has held me at bay
Past the gilded hours of sun-drenched day.
A prisoner of Fate, from my tower of stones
I vow to escape and shall lick their bones!

I release a shout, agitation exuding ...
The Lighthouse matches my dungeon spire,
Yet strobes each maddening burst of fire
To coat the surroundings with lethal rays
That boil the marrow a million ways.
This Eve, however, the Keeper missed.
An hour since Dusk, I cannot resist!
Down the trail I slip, cold flesh atremble.
The quivering halts as I un-dissemble.

From the Darkout sprung shall I taste a feast!

You can cage a brute but never its heart. Mine throbs triple beats, a glorious restart. I revel at the thrill of a chilling hunt As a creature descends with howl and grunt To immerse in bloodbath of visceral need. It's about to get messy, this act of greed. Look away the virulent spree ahead; In a Monster Minute you will all be dead!

Long live the return of an ancient beast.

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 Publications eZine, 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.

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V.H.V. Group | Miracle Austin

Dear Diary,

It's been five years, seven months, three days, and thirteen minutes since he stole my twin sister, Destiny, from me on our eighteenth birthday. I had no idea that *Karma Chameleon* by Culture Club would be the last song we would dance to together.

The moonlight beamed down on him. I saw him watching us from the patio, leaned up against the deck railing. I couldn't make him out. He wore a black cowboy hat pulled way down to shield his face. His fingernails tapped to the beat of the music.

I wondered why he chose you and not me. Maybe it was the red leather off the shoulders dress, black lace stockings, and purple, Dorothy glittered-up pumps you wore that night.

Your thick, feathered bangs would make Tootie from *Facts of Life* do a double take. I'm sure you sprayed on two bottles of *Electric Youth*, which probably grabbed his attention and everyone else's at the party.

None of that really mattered, because he had no right to take you from me or our family. Why did you get in the car with him? I tried my best to convince you not to go.

While retracting your hand from mine, you said, 'We're just going around the block to *talk* for a few minutes, and then to the store to get more snacks'.

Talking for you was always code for making out with a guy. In this case, with a real undercover, douchebag. "Promise?" I begged with a crack in my voice as I glared at him clenching my fists.

You nodded your head and said, 'Stop being a worrywart. We have the whole night together'. You adjusted the ruby, rhinestone key earring in your right ear—my gift to you earlier.

He kept his head down with a half smirk painted on his face. His crimson convertible zoomed away as your arms flew up and danced in the crisp air.

One hour past and then three. You were still gone—I felt something was wrong. After all the guests left, Mom and Dad exited their bedroom and asked where you were. It was after midnight.

I tried to pretend I didn't know anything, but you always knew I wasn't the best liar out of the two of us. What were you thinking, Destiny? That was just it, you weren't.

I coughed up my confession, and Dad called the police station to make a missing person's report. Mom organized a search party with her bingo and Avon friends within hours. After two months, the volunteers drifted away, until it was just Mom, Dad, and me.

A heavy knock on our front door echoed throughout the house, a few days before Halloween. I knew what that meant and by looking at Mom and Dad's defeated faces, they knew too.

An hour after the policemen told us that the DNA matched yours, we traveled down to the morgue to identify you. I was told to wait in the lobby. Mom handed me her purse and butterfly scarf that smelled like you, a faint fragrance of *Electric Youth*. After thirty minutes, Mom ran out sobbing, and Dad followed her. He told me to gather up Mom's things and meet them at the car.

Standing up, I froze for a moment. I couldn't leave that place without knowing. I needed to know. I also wanted to see what he'd done to you. So, I stormed through the swinging doors.

The police officer stood about twenty feet from you.

"Little lady, you don't want to see her like this," he squealed, holding his hands up.

Tears rolled down my puffy cheeks. I shook my head, and he stepped aside.

Before I reached the table, sour flower water that had been boiling all day in the sun penetrated my nostrils. I double wrapped the scarf around my nose and mouth while tying it firmly behind my head. I peeled the sheet back.

Your face and body were sunken in, as if you had been deflated. Only a few strands of your black and bronze hair were left. Your fingernails were all split apart and coffee-stained. I saw the key earring still in your ear. Most of the rhinestones had fallen out.

Then, I noticed two black markings that looked like mini craters—a few inches apart under your earlobe. I rubbed my finger across them. I jerked it back and wiped off some crusty stuff that spurted out, onto my pants leg. I slipped your earring off and stuffed it inside my pocket.

Bending down I whispered, "Destiny, I miss you every day, and I love you so much. I'll never forget you. Why did you..." I stopped and covered you up.

The officer handed me a handkerchief. I wiped my face. He escorted me out.

A lady wearing black jeans, a T-shirt with **V.H.V.** initials pasted in large letters on her chest, and golden cowboy boots with glistening silver tips was sitting on a bench a few feet from the door. She looked up at me.

As I walked past her, she said in a raspy tone, "I know where he is."

I stopped and didn't turn around.

"Yes, you heard me right the first time." She came up behind me.

Turning around, I asked, "You know where who is?"

"The guy who killed your sister, but first you have to meet me here, and I'll explain everything to you, tonight." She extended her hand towards me with a card—her contact information and address were written on it.

It read in bold print: V.H.V. Group, 1317 Rabbit Hill Road...

"What makes you think I'll consider your offer?"

"I believe you want to know the truth. By the way, there will be a few others there, too."

She pulled out a cigarette pack and Storm-shaped lighter from her back pocket, popped one in her mouth, and lit it up. She blew out three puffs and ambulated away from me. She looked back at me before reaching the door, and whispered, "You won't be disappointed."

Wiping my wet face with the back of my hand, I shoved the stranger's card in my back pocket.

That night came fast, and I told my parents I had to get out for a while. Mom told me to make sure I had my whistle and pepper spray on me. I drove over forty miles from my house to Rabbit Hill. It was hidden in the country.

When I drove up to the house with the wraparound porch, I noticed three more cars in the driveway. I parked and followed the sidewalk to the front door. The door was cracked open.

Before I even knocked, someone yelled out, "Come on in. We don't bite. Have a seat."

I sat down in a cushy wicker chair. Bags of chips, fruit cups, juices, and sodas littered the table. The others were a little older than me.

"Hi. My name is Terri. This is Vera and Rubee."

They all greeted me.

"What's your name?" Terri asked widening her Bambi eyes.

"Dustin."

"You don't meet to many females named Dustin."

"Nope. My mom named me after her older brother who passed during his second Vietnam tour."

"A beautiful way to honor him, and his courageous sacrifice to his country," Rubee said, tearing up a bit.

The strange lady from earlier poured herself a drink. She made her way to the front of the room.

"Thank y'all for coming out tonight and introducing yourselves to Dustin. Now, let me not be the rude one in the room. My name is Maleene, and Dustin, welcome to your first, I hope not your last, **V.H.V.** Group meeting."

"What does that stand for exactly?" I questioned, opening up a juice.

"It stands for..." Terri began.

"Hold on now, let's not go putting the cart before the horse. Dustin is new to our group, ladies. We need to make sure we don't run her off. She may not ever return." Maleene laughed under her breath and downed her drink before setting it on the table next to her.

"Well, Dustin, we're a small outfit and growing. We only allow those in who've lost love ones to the animals like the ones who took Rubee's teen daughter five years ago, Vera's son two years ago, and Terri's sister last year," Maleene said.

"All of you have lost your loved ones from the same creep who took and killed my sister?" I asked.

"Oh, not by him, but others like him," Maleene hissed.

"Wait, I don't understand. What do you mean others like him?" I asked as my voice trembled.

Maleene stooped down and pulled out a poster-sized Texas state map and clipped it on an easel. It was saturated with blue dots in several cities.

"What do all those dots mean?" I asked squinting my eyes and pointing at the map.

"Sightings!" Terri shouted, shooting up her hand.

"Of what?" I took a few sips from my juice bottle.

"Creatures of the night, blood suckers, vamps... vampires." Terri added with a crooked grin and a wink.

"What? No way! There's no such thing," I said, almost spitting my drink out.

"So, how do you explain the way your late sister looked on that cold slab?" Maleene asked. "There's no way her body would've decomposed that fast. Only if something supernatural and evil nearly drained all of her blood. That leaves just one unnatural thing that could've done that."

"No...no... Listen, I'm sure this is a nice group, way weird though... Thanks for the snacks. I need to get going," I said. I yanked up my purse from the chair and sprinted towards the door.

"Don't you want to stake him? After all, he did murder your only sister... And the best part is—he's in my basement, right now!" Maleene said as she stomped her boot down into the floorboard hard, wood flakes flickered up.

I stopped. It's not that I believed in their vampire crazy crap, but if he was truly there I needed to ask him two questions.

Terri looked back at me and asked, "Don't you want to see if it's true?" She stood in the hallway twirling on the back of her heels.

My hand ran across Destiny's earring in my pocket. I followed her. The other ladies and Maleene were waiting on us down the end of the hallway. Everyone had a flashlight in their hands.

"Ready, Dustin?" she asked with her eyebrows arched up high. "After you see what's down there, your life will be changed forever."

"Before I go down there, I have a question for y'all," I said.

"What?" Maleene asked as she leaned in towards me, bracing herself against the closed door.

"Why did my sister go with him so easily?"

"Oh, honey, he *glamoured* her," Terri snapped back, swinging the corded flashlight back and forth.

"Glamoured...what's that?" I asked with a frown.

"There's so much that you're gonna learn from us," Terri said. "Glamouring is a form of mind control a nasty vamp can place on his or her victim. Makes you fall head over heels in seconds without understanding why. Pretty much makes you do whatever they want."

"So, you're saying my sister got in that creep's car, because he commanded her to with his mind?"

"Yep!" Terri yelled out, "You're a quick study." She patted me on my shoulder. "Let's go."

Maleene opened the door with one hand, and whispered, "Ready?"

"I guess, but I'm really not buying into all of this nonsense, ladies, I'm sorry," I said.

"What do you have to lose?" Rubee asked.

I thought about it, and it didn't seem like I had anything to lose.

Everyone had their flashlights on, as Maleene led us down the creaky, wooden stairs.

In the middle of the ceiling, a body was hanging down, hog-tied with silver chains. His face looked like patches of skin had been ripped off and sunburned. Some bone was visible near his cheeks. He was blindfolded with a burlap-like ribbon. His body twitched and danced in circles.

I gasped and cupped my mouth with my hand.

"You crazy b***...!" he screamed out.

Poking him in the back with her flashlight, Maleene pulled out a small spray bottle from her back pocket and spritzed his face, which started to smoke and bubble up. Patches of his skin melted off and flopped onto the cement floor.

He yelled out, "Okay... okay, please stop!"

She purred, "Play nice, we have a very special guest with us..." She untied his blindfold, and it floated down to the ground.

"Ask him?" Terri demanded.

"Did you kill my sister?" I asked as my body quivered all over, removing my hand from my mouth.

He sniffed the air for over a minute before replying.

"I remember you... the other sister I didn't choose. She smelled and tasted so good that night. I drunk all I could from her before her little heart stopped beating," he said licking his lips.

I noticed two, sharp fangs slide down almost touching his bottom lips.

"Hmm, I still get turned on just thinking about her voluptuous, hot body—dead now of course. She had the perkiest..."

"Shut up!" I shouted at him. Stumbling back, I couldn't take my eyes off what was dangling in front of me and how disrespectful he was.

Taking in a deep breath with tears flowing, I asked, "Why did you kill her?"

"Because I could. Once I get out of this, I'm going to devour all of you in minutes, starting with you. I'm starving! You won't taste as good as your dead sister, but you and the others will do. She had that it factor, unlike you."

Maleene stooped down and pulled out a wooden stake from the inside of her boot. She threw it towards me and yelled out, "Catch!"

I caught it in my shaky hand.

She pointed on herself where to stab him.

"Look at pathetic you. You don't have what it takes to kill me," he roared in deep laughter.

Maleene jerked up a pair of pliers from a table and extracted his fangs. He screamed so loud that I could feel the ground move under my feet.

Blood gushed out and sprayed the floor.

Without knowing what I'd done, I planted the stake inside his charcoaled heart. A waterfall of blood followed.

Everyone stared at me, speechless.

"I didn't think you had it in you," Maleene said.

"Me either," Terri said clapping. "You're a natural V.H.V. girl!"

"By the way, I've been wondering what those initials mean, since you handed me that card, Maleene," I said.

"Vampire Hunter Vixens... that's who we are. There are more vamps out there sucking the life out of our sisters and brothers. We have a lot to teach you, if you want to become one of us, Dustin," Maleene said.

"I'm totally down!"

Dustin's Entry #001

About the Author:

Miracle Austin works in the social work arena by day and in the writer's world at night and on weekends. She's a YA/NA author, and she's been writing since junior high. *Doll* is her debut YA Supernatural novel; it won 2nd place in the YA category in the 2016 Purple Dragonfly Awards. She's a Marvel/DC/Horror/Stanger Things Fangirl and lives in Texas with her family.

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Sewer Shadows | Scott McGregor

Summer brought out the worst in Jackson. This year, he dragged his little brother down by the river to the entrance of the sewers. There, the brothers trekked through the sludge of their hometown.

"We shouldn't be here," Timmy urged.

"Quit being a baby," Jackson snapped.

As they progressed inward, a splash of water echoed throughout the pipelines. The brothers froze, paralyzed by something that sounded like laughter. Within the sewer shadows, Jackson spotted glowing, emerald eyes, followed by fangs.

Summer brought out the worst in Jackson, and this year, it brought out the worst in the sewers as well.

About the Author:

Scott McGregor is a Canadian author based in Calgary, whose fiction has appeared in Hellbound Books, Oddity Prodigy Productions, DBND Publishing, Eerie River Publishing, and many others. He recently completed his honors project, which explored Marxism in Orwell's 1984, Gibson's Neuromancer, and the HBO series Westworld, as well and the future of historical materialism.

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By L. Stephenson



AVAILABLE on Amazon.com from C.A.A.B Publishing

They are what's left behind...

Don't Rock the Boat | Natasha Sinclair

It had been two weeks since Grandma's service. Now, two small boats bobbed gently on Loch Maree, where she had honeymooned with Grandpa. The six of us each had a little eggshell-blue painted ceramic pot of sweet Nana Glenn. Sweet to them, she was a stone-cold, bitter bitch to me, but family none-the-less.

My grandmother never liked me. She wasn't keen on my mother—that disdain was carried on. I knew it, she knew it, everyone knew it. I assumed it was something to do with my mother not being *good enough* for the only son in her clutch of girls—her little prince. Mom came from the wrong side of town, from a family of ruffians.

. Though young when she met my father—her name and where she was from was enough for my grandma to swiftly turn up her nose—she never had a chance of acceptance from his lot—my lot too, I guess.

Now I was point on the old bat's final journey. The eldest grandchild, the natural organiser of the chaotic Glenn family tree, it was just expected that I'd do it, and I did. Even if she did regard me as illegitimate, I was still her blood and the eldest whether she liked it or not.

Drifting on the water, sombre words were spoken, a final story shared and family prayer. My cousins had so much warmth for this woman; I had never been privy to that side of her. She was someone else entirely to them. I didn't speak anything heartfelt; there were plenty overused sentiments to be lent upon—nothing like the grief-stricken to coin a cliche.

The time had come as silence befell the mourning, raising my pot of ashes, "To Nana, may she rest in peace in Grandpa's arms again."

Everyone followed—a toast of toasted ashes.

"Hey Simon! Don't rock the boat," my cousin, Tracy, hissed as she stumbled.

Though, as their boat rocked, as had ours. Peculiar as the air was perfectly still.

"It wasn't me!" Barked Simon.

"What was that?" Said Jay.

"Must've been the wind?" Simon said unconvincingly.

"What wind?"

Tracy was right. Eerily there was none—not a leaf shifted among the trees lining the Loch. The hairs on the back on my neck stood electrified, a prickle rippled through each of us, a sinister, ghostly chill.

I turned to Sally, who started choking, her cerulean eyes stretched wide in some unseen terror. Jack, who sat next to her, had the same horrified look in his eyes.

"What the fuck?!" Jay shouted.

My eyes fell to Sally's belly; her shirt began to swell with blood, as did Jack's, the blood rose up as though a blade had punctured through the back of each of them and was being simultaneously dragged up to their throats. They both began spluttering blood, and I noticed their bellies bulge as their organs poured out. Tracy screamed, which reverberated around us like we were in a bowl, ricocheting off the edges right back to us, as the twins collapsed to the side, dead. My head rang with the screaming like I had been hit over the head with a mallet. Right then, the other boat began rocking violently from side to side as if it was being shaken from beneath, the three of them screamed — "Fuck! Michelle, help!" Simon was freaking out; they all were. What could I do? I was frozen.

Their boat capsized, Jay made it to the surface splashing and gargling in inaudible, desperate splutter before being pulled down by some invisible force—all the way down. Don't ask me how I knew, I just did.

I sat there, alone in the silence, the twin's blood now pooling at my boot. I watched a few stray bubbles rise to the surface until the water was as still as the air, their capsized boat and mine, gently bobbing on the surface again.

A shot of ice bulleted through the top of my skull right through the centre of me, my back arched back as my soul shot from my body and spun around above to see my body convulse before slamming back home again.

Hello Michelle...

Grandma? I thought.

I needed to be young again—blood of my blood—a small price to pay for another chance at youth.

"What's going on? Why do I feel like this?" I managed to say this aloud, slurring and limply mopping drool from my chin and lips. My body ached, though I didn't feel entirely part of it.

Just relax Michelle dear, you won't be here for long. This body is mine now...

What the hell was that supposed to mean? As I thought this, hysterical laughter echoed through my mind, it was hers I knew that—though I couldn't recall ever hearing her truly laugh in life. Certainly, never with such intense glee as this.

Secretly, you always were my favourite—that sass—so much like me when I was young.

My body leaned down and picked up the pot of ashes I had been clutching earlier, taking the stopper off, I watched my hand pour the ashes into the puddle of my cousin's blood. My hand then scooped up the ashen-blood and smeared it across my forehead then down over my lips. More of the blood mixture was scooped up and thrust down my top and smeared generously over my breasts. I thought I was going to be sick, though my physical body didn't have the same reaction. It was out of my control, I wasn't even co-pilot, more of a semi-sedate passenger.

I began to drift away like I was being pulled back into a fog. The world started to spin out. "Goodbye, blood of mine," her voice from my body—smiling and waving up at me through the incoming mist, I watched it strip and dive naked into the Loch and swim towards the shore, a deranged smile plastered across my (her) face. The boat gently rocked.

About the Author:

Natasha Sinclair is from Scotland, UK. Her first published piece was released in 2018. This was followed by the release of short story fiction and poetry. Her writing spans genres including; speculative, fantasy, horror, psychological and erotica. Out with her own publications she is a contributor to several anthologies. When not writing she's teaching, raising and adventuring with her daughters and looking after their adopted animals.

Author Blog: Clan Witch Instagram: @clan witch

The Girl from the Darkly Mere | M. Cid D'Angelo

It seemed simple enough at the outset: Ezra wants Amilee to find some samples of mushrooms and herbs in the En-Marsh. What's more, the old crone hasn't wanted that many samples; just enough to fill the small cloth bag that Amilee has under her arm. Yet, now, it seems impossible.

The girl stands there in the early morning light, red ponytail askew, with a suspicious face twisted so thoughtfully it's almost like a freckle-speckled prune.

Did Ezra make her do this ... to just get her out of the way? A goose chase?

Wait a second. There's one right there! She tromps over to the tall red and yellow flower and puts a light finger on the long stem. Red Williwort. With her bottom lip snagged in her teeth, she studies the large blossom.

What part of the flower is she supposed to get?

Oh dear.

Amilee races her mind over the obstacle course of the old crone's instructions. It won't be the first time the girl has forgotten the details of any one of her duties.

"Oh dear," she moans.

A faint flicker catches her eye. A will o' the wisp is dancing far off and away. The sight she finds both eerie and beautiful, and seeing the furtive swamp spirit conjures a verse to her mind:

Here and there
Follow me follow me!
I dance a sheen
and prance and preen
oh but where will I lead
down down down
the cattail and marshy reed

That doesn't frighten her, to chase a will o' the wisp. Amilee knows where the nasty and deadly bogs are, and the quicksand that lies in wait. She's chased after them before, just to see where the wisp would lead, but they, seemingly tired of the game, would vanish and she would find herself standing in the dark depths of the slough alone.

"No, not today, little ghost eyes," she whispers.

There have been times Amilee has seen them congregated in the depths of the lonely dark swamp, far from the safety of her window. Yet, her friend Dorien has said once or twice before that they are not anything more than tricks of the swamp. He's so practical, Amilee thinks. Oh, and he's not a boy who will be interested in a girl who's flighty-fancy!

Don't follow them! They are full of mischief. And it was by the old crone's lips Amilee had first heard that verse about cattail and marshy reed.

The Red Williwort stands there unmolested. The petals of the large flower are spread open close to the ground, a splash of fiery crimson much brighter than Amilee's hair, connected to a large flat-green bush by a tether. The petals possess a silky shininess to them in a gaudy beauty that defies the drab dreariness of its surroundings. From the center of the blossom, a fleshy white-gold style rises to a stigma crown almost as tall as she is.

Amilee takes out her small knife and holds it tight, wondering where to cut. Ezra forbids her to mutilate or kill things if she can get away with it, which is curious because everyone in the slough—even Amilee—thinks the old bog witch is frightening and dangerous. She's a healer, yes, and the people of Bluewater Town appreciate her many skills as a midwife. Amilee wonders as she studies the flower, what would her mistress want from the plant without killing it?

It occurs to her: the anthers. They'll grow back. They're bright yellow and lying spread out on the ground. Amilee gets on her knees and makes a few slashes.

"Sorry Mister Williwort," she says, "but these will grow back before you even know they were gone."

She stuffs them into the little cloth bag and checks her inventory. The marsh beacon she has is a little puny. It'll probably do, but if Amilee knows Ezra well, the witch will most likely want a better one. She should find another just in case.

The will o' the wisp is still flickering yards away.

Oh, but even though the sun is rising now, the swamp is still gloomy and scary. An eerie, misty blanket still covers the far pools and the distant, vine-covered trees.

She closes her eyes for a moment.

The stir of the waking creatures of the swamp are all but silent now, as if the world has been smothered.

Amilee.

She opens her eyes wide, a chill running through her.

Did she just hear her name?

She gazes around, startled. But, no, that couldn't be right. There's no one within half a league or so.

Amilee.

"Wh-Who's there?" She stammers, clutching her bag tight to her chest.

There's nothing but silence again. Dead silence. Like the dark swamp at midnight. Has she heard someone whispering her name? Has she really heard ...?

The mist in the far pools stirs, spreading back and moving toward her. She backs up, her green eyes wide.

The mist moves closer.

Now, she thinks, I'm just being silly. She isn't afraid of the Darkly Mere, whether night or day, light or shadow.

Help me, Amilee.

Oh! She'd heard that!

Amilee whirls around, but the mere remains as still in the cloaking mist as it usually is. She takes a deep breath and heads on, dispelling ghosts of the swamp as if they are conjured from her head.

There sits a towering tree, a moorilla, known by the people of the marsh as the Grandfather Tree, weeping over the gloomy knee-deep water.

Amilee, it seems to cry.

A sickly fear reaches her bones, and for a moment she's unable to pass the tree on her side when she sees a young man under the exposed roots—reaching out for her desperately in wide-eyed horror.

Amilee!

And for the moment she stands there, transfixed, her knuckles anxiously in her trembling lips.

Amilee!

He cannot escape the prison of the roots.

Amile runs away, despite the pursuing calls of the frantic and horrified young man.

Amilee! Amilee!

And the shadows and the mists eat the daylight behind her.

She doesn't know who or where to run to. Amilee hasn't much of a home, staying at Ezra Bitebones' shack deep in the En-Marsh. Yet, above the old dilapidated attic where she owns a rough and ragged pile meant for a bed, Amilee hides in the boughs of a willow and draws up her knees.

She shakes and wheezes in fright.

Was he a ghost?

Was. He. A. Ghost?

Amilee.

Amilee!

He knows her name!

But, for the life of her, the girl can't ever recall seeing his face and she knows everyone in Bluewater Town.

The shack is quiet. Ezra, as the town midwife and healer, is off to her duties beyond the En-Marsh, and now the shadows cling tight to the young girl's bower.

He knows her name.

Yet, who is he?

Even now she can fancy she hears him calling her from so far away, across the swamp, in a hoarse and urgent whisper, *Amilee!* Help me, *Amilee!*

The Grandfather Tree that traps him, now, she can't remember coming across such a horrid and frightening tree. There are thousand trees there, deep in the Darkly Mere, and each one has a spirit all its own; and these spirits may be good and bad, pure and rotten, but not once did Amilee recall coming across that particular dark and ghastly thing.

A ghost?

Maybe.

Maybe.

Maybe ...,

... she should help him!

The gentle breeze pushes into the attic.

Amilee, it seems to say within its touch. Help me, Amilee!

She places her hands over her ears, but it does little to silence what's deep in her heart. He cannot be real. He cannot be real!

There are will o' the wisps dancing out in the gloaming, and she slips out of her bedroom window and picks up some rocks. She chucks a rock at one and can't tell if she's hit it because it still dances there unfazed. It's a little far away to get a better shot, so Amilee finds another—and they are all sort of far away—and she throws with all her might. She hears the rock thud into the underbrush in the distance, but can't see anything beyond the lamp glow of the dock lantern.

The will o' the wisp teases her by wandering closer.

Follow me! Follow me!

"No, not today, little ghost eyes," Amilee says. She hurls a rock at it.

It moves to the side.

It moves to the side?

Now that's just plain weird, because Amilee has heard that they're nothing but swamp gases, even though the elders in the village say how will o' the wisps are the spirits of those people who've died in the slough, how they lure the foolish to their own doom, but they've never been known to be smart. At least not smart enough to dodge things being thrown at them. Even Ezra Bitebones, the wise old bog witch, has said on occasion how they're supposed to be swamp faeries, but that didn't mean they're smart either.

Amilee casts a barrage of rocks, one after another, at the obstinate will o' the wisp. The dancing whitish-orange globe moves further back and vanishes into the depths of the benighted fen altogether.

Tired of the game, the girl goes from the dock to the town warehouse stores. The lock there is made of steel; it's from the capital city far away.

Bored—she would really like to sneak inside, yet, the lock is only for show anyhow. The top window is open. Amilee can see it from down below.

The trick is to climb up to it, and that's no mean feat because it's three stories up and there's no ledge. One must climb the ancient and crooked marsh tree next to it, so high to gain the weak upper branches and risk a fall—a rather nasty fall—to the warehouse dock. From there one has to swing over to the window and hope to fly as true as a nightingale or hit the wall.

It's great fun to try, Amilee thinks, because it's different every time she enters. There're lots of goodies inside the warehouse. There are sweet apples and sugar beets and griddle syrup, but that's just the reward; the fun is the attempt, and no one has caught her in all the times she's done it.

She wrings her hands and the jumps up for the first bough of the tree, makes it, and clambers up to the second. This isn't the hard part. After a few minutes, she's up the third and fourth and now she's level with the window.

She gazes below at the rotting boards of the warehouse dock and the dark swirl of swamp water. Yes—a nasty fall, all right. There's not enough light from the lantern below to illuminate the drop. Amilee reaches out and jumps for the first light branch.

The tree groans.

She pauses there, dangling, her feet yards above her doom. The branch holds.

She begins to slowly swing back and forth, gathering momentum. The branch groans and cracks, but holds.

There.

Wait.

One more.

And.

Something grabs her left foot and yanks her down.

Amilee shrieks, losing her hold and falling. The youth tumbles onto the rotting boards which snap and crash and the next moment—before she has the wits to realize she's broken through them—she's in the water.

Submerged in a black abyss, the fingers of reeds and bony claws of roots raking her face, Amilee thrashes for the surface, but something clutches her foot and drags her deeper.

She thrashes, gulps fetid cold water, utters an underwater scream.

Something holds her tight and forever... the foot... drawing her down into the dark green murk and the writhing grasses. In her shrieking mind, Amilee thinks she can see *something* in her wild flailing panic as she gulps water and sinks. A glimmering pale face empty and sad—a boy's face—far away beyond the reach of the lantern light above and the frightened, shimmering minnows ...

She crashes through the surface, coughing and sputtering. She pulls herself up the muddy bank next to the broken dock and lies on her back to see the cold uncaring stars through the shadows of the forlorn marsh trees.

A will o' the wisp is dancing on the far bank of the channel. When she looks over at it, the wisp falls back into the night and fades away.

She sits up and looks around. The warehouse and the dock are silent now that the crash landing is over. There's no prankster smirking and snickering at the joke in the shadows. Amilee strains her ears to listen, but all she can make out are the far away calls of the loons.

She shivers, not from the cold, but from abject *fear*. Some...thing had grabbed her foot while she'd dangled from the tree limb above; had dragged and nearly drowned her in dark water.

Yet, the dawn remains calm as any other. She gets to her feet and runs away.

Long ago there had been farmers, once, who had tilled the high dry ground above the marsh. There are only skeletal ribs of the homes they'd once lived in, towering above the rock foundations.

She can hear their pipe music now and again when it's quiet and the breeze comes lightly out of the east after feathery-misty dusk. A stone circle towers there, on the moor, lining itself with the curious lanterns of the night.

Along the Darkly Mere she treads, every day. Gathering Willowort, and Hag's Hair, and Red Imogess. Red Imogess! Those brilliant crimson leaves supposedly cure the poor man of lassitude and the rich man of gout! Where to find it? She wonders.

And now in the deepest part of the En-marsh, the place where the whispers haunt the growing shadows, Amilee can find the broken stone teeth of ruined towers of long ago and the forgotten track of paths that no one remembers.

Amilee

She can hear him now.

Amilee!

And though she fears the echoing and hollow voice lingering in the stillness of the En-marsh and the shadowy twilight of the Darkly Mere, Amilee follows it just to see ... just to see ...

And he is there, among the roots of the Grandfather Tree, his face not of desperate horror but of just desperation, his hands reaching to her from beyond his prison.

Amilee!

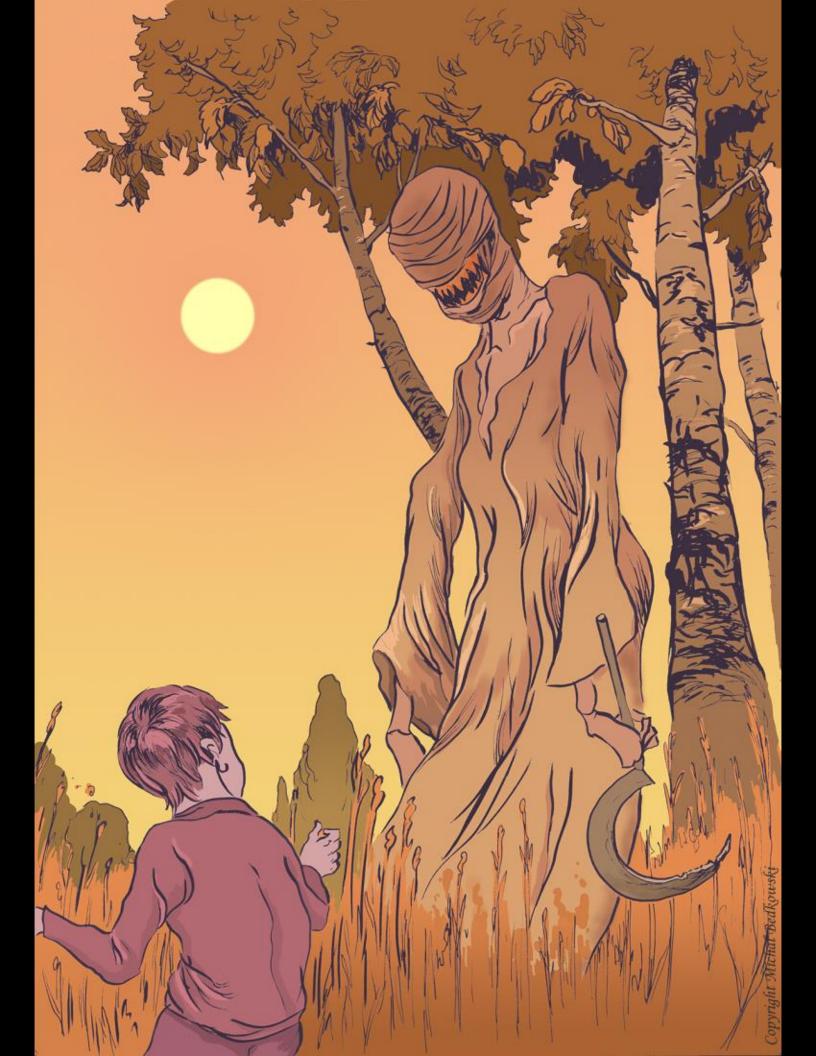
She clings to the far shore of the slough.

Come to me, Amilee!

And at once the light begins to dim and there within the noisome waters of a thousand years, she joins and together down down into the Darkly Mere where the whispers of all the shadows grow now silent.

About the Author:

M. Cid D'Angelo possesses a degree in business and has studied archaeology at the University of Tennessee; he has also studied oceanography and marine archaeology. Once a technical writer for Microsoft, the author has had shorter works published in *Aiofe's Kiss, Cadaverous, and Silk Road*. M. Cid D'Angelo lives in Nevada.



Hunted by the Past | William Presley

There's something so sinister about a predawn forest. The way that a prowling Wendigo can take form from nothing but a swaying tree trunk and falling twig makes it easy to forget whether one is the hunter or the hunted. Granted, the nature of my prey puts me somewhere in-between. I can hear it coming, too—footsteps accompanied by the sound of something heavy being dragged through the leaves. My whole body stiffens, and I clamp down on the railing of the tree stand. It isn't long before the figure of a man with his own trophy comes into view, a zipper echoing through the darkness as the amorphous bundle he's been lugging seems to give birth to a fully grown woman. He binds her by the feet before stringing her upside down in a nearby oak.

At this point, day is just beginning to break, and I can see the outline of his wire-rimmed glasses and perfectly groomed mustache. Both helped him cultivate his reputation as a regular pillar of the community... but I wasn't fooled. I knew his type. I had often guessed at the disgusting things he did behind closed doors, things made even more nightmarish by their incompatibility with his public persona. The truth finally hit me when letters started showing up in the newspaper about the handful of local women who were missing. The writing style—right down to the misuse of 'except'—was a perfect match to his church bulletin. That's when I started following him, and learned that, for all of his arrogance, he was dumb enough to hide his victims around his own deer camp.

A loud grunt interrupts my thoughts. He buries his hunting knife just below the corpse's navel, dragging it up her body with a visceral smile. I flinch as a torrent of guts comes spilling out onto the ground. If only that were the worst of it. The killer then brandishes a pocket axe and starts hacking away at his victim's breastbone, stopping every few moments to wince in pain.

Carpal tunnel syndrome – the Achilles' heel for desk jockeys. It should be no surprise that this guy is stuck in a menial job somewhere, getting shit on by everyone above him and pelted with it by everyone below. That alone probably drives him to beat his kids when he gets home. It's the one time he has the control—the power—that he craves. I wonder if he appreciates how long he'll have that power. Those demons that he pounds into them, those feelings of worthlessness and hostility... they'll linger far longer than childhood.

Resentment bubbles up in my chest as I claw at the railing with my nails. He's staring into this empty cavity of a woman, carving a cross into the side of her rib cage. I'll never understand how religion can be anything more than a mask for people like him. Perhaps it's their way of deflecting responsibility onto the god who made them monsters, just as they deflect their unfelt Christian guilt onto their already-vulnerable offspring. It somehow kills their children's faith while still making it impossible for them to pursue that final solution to their mental anguish.

"No more!" I hiss, clambering down the ladder as slowly and deliberately as possible. There's already a handgun aimed at my head by the time my feet hit the dirt. I pull out my own weapon, but he simply looks at me with raised eyebrows. It's obviously a toy.

"You didn't really come here to kill your old Sunday School teacher, did you?" he smirks. "Go home... wherever that is, now. I don't put people *out* of their misery."

About the Author:

William Presley is a graduate student in human genetics who spends all of his free time outside of the lab desperately hocking his fiction at anyone who will have it. He is also an avid hoarder of Victorian furniture and country vinyl that few others would consider 'music.' His debut novella, *Aniela*, is being released on July 6th by Little Demon Books.

Wattpad: William Presley



Midnight | Damon Sweeney

As he opened the rusty iron gate of Stonebridge Cemetery, a bitter gust of wind chilled Jeffrey Brown to the bone. He stepped onto the pathway lined with a ghostly glow and found it darkly enchanting, looking up at the pearly lustre of the moon. To his right was a derelict, time-eaten church, stained-glass shadows falling on the grass below. Walking along the pathway, he was amongst rows of ancient grayish-white tombstones—marble, concrete and granite—most covered with moss. The graveyard was flanked by bushes that were somber shapes. An eerie silence pervaded.

He came to a stretch of grass, standing deep within the realms of the cemetery. Dead flowers lay all around. Trees swayed at the edge of the grass, their branches twisted like distorted limbs, joints creaking. In the distance he could see hills mantled in long dry grass, a glimmer with lambent lunar light. Above the silver hills were a myriad of stars. Jeffrey gazed at them, drawn by their cold light as he had been since childhood, fascinated by the thought of faraway worlds.

The silence was suddenly pierced by the deathly shriek of a raven. Again, it shrieks. Then a sound came from behind...the crunch of leaves. He whirled around and stared at the cemetery with wide, startled eyes. He heard footsteps thudding down the pavement. "Hello?" he called. "Who's there?"

No answer. But the footsteps were nearing.

A puff of wind swirled around him. Overhead a reef of clouds that had rolled out of the northwest shrouded the moon. A chilled finger pressed tenderly against the base of his spine. *The Brookville Specter*, he thought morbidly, *The Brookville Specter walks among the tombstones*. Five years ago, walking home from town at midnight, George Underwood was brutally murdered. He was buried in the cemetery. Townsfolk, many of them older and respectable, claimed to have seen his ghost. They talk of burly George dressed in black, his face a ghastly corpse white, the head bashed in behind the right temple—a dead man out for vengeance.

But he didn't believe in such things. There were no ghosts, but there were crazies. They prowled the streets at night and followed you into secluded areas...like a graveyard...

And then...

And then they struck.

His heart hammered. Staring into the blackness, he saw someone approaching, marching between the gravestones like a spectral sentinel who stood against those who trespassed this hallowed ground.

When Jeffrey saw the gleaming red eyes, he knew he was doomed.

At the police station, Sheriff Graham Hogan shambled from his office desk to the door. His pale, haggard face was haunted by the things that were happening in town—things that hadn't ceased for two weeks. A blood-curdling scream had emanated from outside. It wasn't the first scream he'd heard tonight, having investigated several. He threw open the door and stepped out into the night.

The wind howled.

He proceeded along Mansers Road, moving through dark shadows, orange glow from the streetlights, darkness and moonlight. To his left was a row of houses, all of them in darkness. At this hour, everyone stayed in their dwellings and didn't look out their windows, no matter what sounds, no matter how terrible the unknown, for all the night knew was wickedness.

Opposite the houses, he saw the shops were all dark, too. His heart began to slam against his ribcage, eyes bulging. At the entrance to the Branston Inn, a bloody handprint marking the glass door, laid the crippled body of Timothy Roland. His bone-white face spattered with blood. The eyes glazed. Lips pressed together in a grimace of pain.

Graham stood frozen, his head thudding, his tongue a swelling lump in his mouth. Breaking the paralysis of fear, he stepped warily towards the corpse and was stricken by the uncanny feeling that he was being watched. Then he became aware of something moving behind him. He turned around, drawing the holstered revolver on his right hip. But he felt too slow, too *late*.

In the dead of night, Graham Hogan screamed.

About the Author:

Damon Sweeney is a writer living in West Yorkshire, England. His first short story, *Nightmare*, was published by The Horror Zine. Damon can be reached via email at djs64@rocketmail.com

Parts of the Soul | DJ Tyrer

"The Egyptians divided the soul into five parts," he said as we sat in the office just off his workshop.

George was an all-rounder: he prepared bodies for burial, he dug the graves and he deposited the coffins he made in them and filled them in afterward. In a sense, he was the graveyard and the entire funeral process embodied. If he didn't know it about the body or the soul, it wasn't worth knowing.

"And, they were right," he finished.

"Really?" To say I was sceptical would be an understatement. Oh, I had no doubt he was right about the Egyptians believing that about the soul—he was full of post-mortem trivia and speculation; he could discourse on the difference between the hun and po in Chinese philosophy, or their nebulosity in folk belief, at length, or describe the various stages of bodily decay in sometimes-nauseating detail—but it was that statement of certainty that raised my doubt. George was getting on a bit, beginning to find the physical side of his work difficult, and I had to wonder if he was becoming senile.

"Really," he said, certain, his bristly chin jutted out as if to challenge my scepticism.

"Really?" I repeated, eyebrow raised. "How do you know?"

"I've been experimenting."

"Experimenting?"

George laughed, tapped my chin and said, "You got a parrot in there, mate?"

"Don't stall, tell me what you mean."

"What do you think I mean? Does the word 'experimenting' mean something different to you? I mean: I did experiments."

"Okay, I get that, but what sort of experiments can you do on the soul? I mean, if the soul exists, it's incorporeal: it's not as if you can distil it."

"Ah, but there you're wrong," said George. "You can. More tea?" he interrupted himself. I shook my head and he continued: "There's a good reason why the ancients described the soul as 'breath' and that's because, while not quite physical in the usual sense of things, it's, I don't know, quasi-corporeal. If you know what you're doing, you can, indeed, distil it."

He must have seen the look on my face, for he continued, "Oh, it's not as if I just know how to do it, nor did I discover it in some mouldy old book. Well," he chuckled, "I did find a few pointers in a book of some vintage that was, I confess, mildew stained, but that was merely my starting point: my proof was arrived at scientifically via trial and error.

"You still look doubtful." He pushed back his chair and stood. "Come on, let me show you. I promise I haven't got a body laid out on the slab; they're all safely packed away in the chiller."

A little reluctantly, I followed him into his workshop. It was a long room with double doors at its midpoint which led out into a garage and which divided the room into two parts: the far end was where he worked on his coffins, while this end was where he worked on the bodies. I was grateful to see, as promised, that there was no body laid out upon the marble preparation slab; I'd walked in three or four times to see a body on it, and even the nicest weren't exactly pleasant.

"Over there." George gestured to a shelf above a worktop on which various tools were laid out with surgical precision. I didn't like to speculate on their purpose. On the shelf were a few-dozen small glass bottles about the size of those used for scent, but stoppered with corks and sealed with red wax, spots of which had dribbled down the sides of some.

"These ...?"

"Contain the different parts of, ah, five different souls. You see," he picked one up and held it out to me," this one contains the metaphysical heart: the emotional part of the soul; you see the pinky-red colouration?"

I took the bottle from him and held it up to catch the light. He was right about the colour: there was a pale-reddish... mist was the only word I could think of for it.

I handed it back.

"This," he handed me another bottle, "is the shadow-soul: in life, I believe, it can be found in the literal shadow, hence the name."

I looked at the dark-grey mist. "But, the shadow is just the absence of light."

"Ah, but what if this soul-stuff requires darkness to exist? It suffuses and surrounds the body, but can only spread out where the darkness of the shadow allows it to. Some cultures speak of the soul going AWOL at night; perhaps that's the shadow-soul spreading out through the darkness of the night. Just a theory," he added.

Then, he said, "Hold it up close to the light."

"Sorry?"

"Hold it up close to the light for a few seconds, then take another look."

I stepped over to where a bare bulb hung down from the ceiling and held the bottle close to it. Then, I looked at its contents once more: the dark mist seemed thinner.

"See? It dissipates in light."

"I guess."

"This one," he held up a bottle with a vibrant blue mist in it, "is the life-force itself, what the Egyptians called the Ka."

"I'm still not convinced," I said. I didn't like to think of him as a loony, but nothing I'd seen couldn't have been faked; yet he seemed to truly to believe all he was saying. Was he delusional?

"Well, maybe this will convince you: I've got one more experiment to perform. I believe I've perfect the method of extracting the parts of the soul so that I can, then, return them to the body, restoring it to life..."

"You're not about to get a body out?" I asked, starting to turn. As I did so, I stumbled. I suddenly felt woozy.

"Not exactly," he said and I realised why he had been so keen to ply me with tea.

I would've sworn at him, but was too busy falling to the floor and blacking out.

I don't remember much after that, just a sense of floating in the darkness and drifting away from my body, until I woke up to find myself lying on the marble preparation slab. I heard a loud gasp and realised that was me sucking in a lungful of air.

"What did you do to me?" I gasped, trying and failing to sit up, my head feeling as if it were spinning.

"I killed you," George said; "poisoned you, to be exact; and, then, I brought you back to life. You're living proof of what I've been saying: I took your soul and divided it into its constituent parts and, then, I put it back into your body. You're as good as new."

"I don't feel it," I said with a groan.

"There may be some physical side effects," he said a little sheepishly. "After all, dying has to be a shock to the system."

"No, it's not that," I said. "Well, not just that. I know, logically, that I ought to feel angry at you. I should probably feel scared. But, I don't: I feel nothing."

"Ah, well, I might have had a little accident," George said with a nervous chuckle.

"What did you do?" It would be wrong to say I felt surprise at just how calm my voice sounded then: I still felt nothing, despite the fact I knew I ought to be feeling worried.

"Well, I may have dropped the bottle into which I decanted your heart-stuff."

"Oh."

"Sorry."

I didn't respond; I still felt nothing.

"Still, I got the rest back into you and brought you back, regardless. Had I dropped your life-force, well, we would've been in trouble, then!" He forced a laugh. "Well, say something."

"I don't know what to say. I don't feel a thing."

He ran his hand through his thinning hair. "Well..."

"It's quite a discovery," I said.

He nodded, a little uncertainly. "Yes."

"One you'll no doubt want to replicate?"

He nodded again.

"I can't let you do it to anyone else..." I said. I wasn't driven by anger, just the dispassionate understanding that, unchecked, he would bring this suffering upon others in his quest to understand and command the human soul. Was there some lingering emotional residue, a sense of compassion, or was it purely a logical inference that what he had done was wrong? I couldn't say; I merely knew I had to act, so I did. The irony was, had he restored me correctly, I would doubtless have been too scared to kill him, but, without emotions, it was easy. Without emotion to cloud my mind, it was simple, efficient.

I made sure I'd left no trace to implicate me in his murder and laid him out on the slab where he'd placed so many bodies over the years, before exiting the building and heading for home through the misty graveyard.

It's strange feeling nothing. In one sense, freed of emotional encumbrance, all things seem possible, but without their drive, I've no motivation to do anything, save the most practical and banal of needs, and those are tempered by no pressing desire to thrive or even survive.

Perhaps, if I could feel despair at my state, I might end it all, but, instead, I merely continue to exist in this twilight state between life and death, drifting along without meaning.

Existing only.

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

The Living Body | Lee Andrew Forman

His abdomen split down the middle and opened wide. But still, he held my eyes without expression. No pain, no surprise, no suffering could be read. I stared back, waiting to see what would happen next.

His sweaty frame shuddered and limbs bent at unnatural angles. I could hear bones snap. Organs began to leave his abdominal cavity of their own volition. They spread around the body, stretching, morphing, becoming more than they were intended by nature. My eyes strained to witness the full detail of the event. Strange to watch a man turn inside-out, even stranger to see him alive and unflinching.

His body stopped seizing and he continued to stare. Something in his eyes I couldn't explain... I only hoped the restraints would hold against his growing mass.

I began to step back. Tendrils of meaty innards began to emerge from the mess that used to be his healthy insides. They extended, wavered in the air as if reaching for me. His neck bent at an odd angle, but his hard eyes kept a fix on me, followed me if I moved.

Regret began to form in the pit of my bowels. Not due to mercy or guilt, but because I might be its first victim. That wasn't what I had intended.

One of the grotesque appendages evolved a mouth at its end. It opened and sprayed me with a bodily fluid I could not identify. My gut heaved until its contents expelled—it was the most vile smelling thing I'd ever experienced.

The pain in my stomach grew, at first I thought from vomiting, but muscles contracted so hard it felt as though they'd rip apart. Heat spread through me. as though I'd caught fire from the inside. The final pull on my tender muscles tore them free of each other, spreading the outer flesh open with them.

A moment of vicious agony, then one of the most serene nature. No pain, no fear, just content.

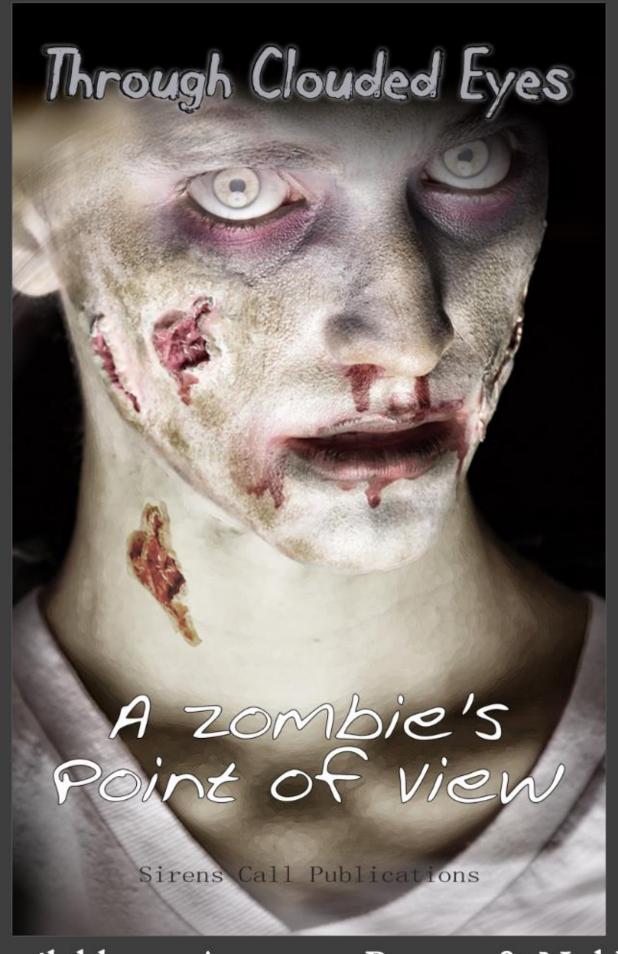
I watched with calm as my innards transformed, given life of their own, expanding and changing and becoming more than just parts a biological machine. They had life, as if I gave birth to them. They were with me, and I them. I had to care for them, bring them what they needed.

I left the man who gave me this gift strapped down, his children screaming, as I ventured to do what all life is meant to do—procreate.

About the Author:

Lee Andrew Forman is a writer, editor, and publisher from the Hudson Valley region in New York. His fascination with the macabre began in childhood, watching old movies and reading everything he could get his hands on. His love of horror spans three generations, starting with his grandfather who was a fan of the classic Hollywood Monsters.

Blog: <u>Lee Andrew Forman</u>
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Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and iTunes

The Butterfly | Robert L. Arend

This cellar has always made my flesh crawl, now so much more than ever. I shall surely perish from the cold, the damp and malnutrition. Or will death be served by that hideous creature which, at this very moment, causes the entire house to quake, decades of detritus to rain on me, and wary rats to abandon their hungry vigil by my dying self? More than hunger, the rats must be equally driven by their collective desire to avenge the murder of their own. Yes, I killed a few to stall my own starvation, the raw and warm meat tasty; so violent was my need of food. Each casualty made the survivors more cautious. They now huddle far from my quivering grasp. I quench my thirst with water from an earlier rainstorm that had streamed through gaps in the foundation where mortar had crumbled, extending my life a few minutes more; yet surely the impatient rodents will soon find courage, charge and, no longer hindered, tear the flesh from my bones.

O, Death, what keeps you? Did you stop to have a drink with your comrades? Three maddening weeks have I awaited you in this dark and spider-infested cellar. Take my soul and have done with it!

Death comes for me in the year 1888. I had hoped to live long enough to witness the birth of the new century. Have only ten months gone by since I received Mother's message? Mother had urged my speedy flight home. At long last, Father had returned to her, she claimed.

I flew from New York to Connecticut immediately—though I had witnessed Father's cruel death eleven summers before.

Mother's love for me had been smothered by the weight of blame she had placed on me for Father's demise. Indeed, I suppose my innocent insistence that father fulfill his promise to take me hunting may truly be why he lives not this day.

Always had Father been more wild than tame. He suffered when confined to indoors for too long. As part of their marriage vows, however, Mother had insisted Father relinquish his uncivilized life in the wilds of Connecticut in favor of domestication within the walls of her house. The morning of Father's decision to keep his promise to me was at the very moment he had reached the limit of his patience with Mother's domineering; then did Father return to the wilderness forever.

I can still hear Mother's protests fading while Father and I made distance from home.

Of the week of hunting planned, Father and I shared a bond of but two days before the wild brought our rare union to a brutal conclusion.

Mad was the morning of the third day. Wretched was I, who awoke in eager anticipation of an innocent dawn, sprinkled with sweet songs of unseen birds, when crimson rain fell and streamed down my face and body. Shrieks of agony forced me to stare up at the gruesome battle in the sky.

High over the treetops, Father struggled to free himself from the claws of a giant predator hawk. Before my senses could grasp the peril of that moment, yet another monolithic fowl sped past the startled hawk and vanished into the clouds with Father's head.

"You did it! You killed him!" Mother had accused me. "You murdered my husband!"

"I didn't, Mother," I had pleaded. "It was the hawks! The hawks did it!"

Mother's eyes flared. "You did it. I wanted my husband safe from the wild, but you forced him back into it. Now he is dead and you are responsible. I should kill you with all the hate I feel now."

By my neck, Mother lifted me off my knees. She threw me against the wall in spite of my pleas for mercy. Yet, when she raised her hand to slap me, my terrified eyes met hers and she wilted, dropped to her knees and wept.

"I can't hurt you, Robin," Mother had confessed. "You look so much like your father. Just leave, go, I never want to look at you again."

"Mother!" I was stunned.

"I said get out, Robin," Mother shouted. "Don't ever come back to this house again."

So it was, at the age of only eleven, I did pack my possessions and depart from my mother. The part of me that was of my father aided my survival. I fathered my own children, but never remained long with their mothers. The early spring in Central Park, a new love, I was content until Mother's message of Father's return drew me back home.

Change is a paradox whenever new turns old and gives way to what was before. Time obliterates the artifices and restores everything to the wild. I was reunited with a village mysteriously evacuated. Abandoned and rotting

houses seemed to warn me to stay away. The forest had not only persevered, but had expanded outward and upward, tops silhouetted against the twilight blue of the Connecticut sky.

When I pounded the oak door, pieces of Mother's house fell and the smallest particles attacked my eyes. While I struggled with the pain and loss of vision, I heard a voice—a whisper—cold but familiar.

"Robin, I'm so glad you came. Now both my men have returned to me."

Was Mother such a product of Nature that she, also, possessed immortality? I had pondered her mystery then, for Mother appeared to have aged not a single day in the eleven years since I had been forced to flee home.

"You look so much like your father used to," Mother said when she ushered me inside. "Won't you greet your father, Robin?"

I peered into the bleakness of the parlor. Interior matched exterior in signs of serious neglect, yet Mother's rocking chair near the webbed-blanketed fireplace remained as I remembered. Father, however, refused to present himself.

"Robin," Mother said, her tone of speech urgent, "I asked you to greet your father."

"After I've seen him, Mother, I will," I replied warily. "Where is he?"

Mother giggled and pointed. "He's right here."

Then did I see the insect perched upon Mother's left shoulder. While I stared, truly dumbfounded, the butterfly flapped its bright orange and black wings as though in greeting.

"Why, what's the matter, Robin?" Mother asked, "Are you ill?"

"It's a b-b-butterfly," I stuttered.

"O, now I understand what troubles you." Mother clapped her hands gleefully. "How silly of me. I have grown so accustomed to your father's reincarnated state, I hadn't considered your—"

"Reincarnated?" I hastily whispered.

"Yes," Mother said. She nudged my shoulder. "Come sit and I will explain everything."

Mother took to her rocker while I nervously kneeled before her on the dusty floor. She gently raised the butterfly with her index finger and lovingly gazed upon it while she recited her incredible tale.

"After you left—"

At your request, I thought.

"Never again did I venture from within this house, except to tend to the small garden I preserved for my sustenance. The world outside had robbed me of my deepest love, and I could not bear to look at, smell it, breath in it no more. Years God witnessed my prayers for my husband's return until my knees swelled and bled."

Mother paused, drew the butterfly to her lips and whispered some secret before continuing her story.

"It was but a month ago," she recollected. "I wakened to discover your father resting on the side of our bed reserved to him throughout our marriage. To be sure, I was uncertain of his identity at first, but the butterfly's urgency, crawling up my arm and neck to nibble on my earlobe—precisely as your father so entertained me years before—well, then, what more proof could he provide of his spirit restored to me?"

O, Mother, how I do grieve for you. Damned shall be the most wicked of sons who brought madness to your soul. So savagely shall I be punished for my crime when the creature above penetrates the fragile floorboards and descends to devour me.

"Now you will excuse us, Robin," Mother had said, winking. "Your father and I wish to nap."

Mother and insect departed up the stairs, leaving me to struggle for my own sanity. How could I rescue Mother from her delusions? Should I violate Mother's sanctuary, explain to her as to a child the differences between husbands and imposture butterflies. "Butterflies are but winged annoyances," I would lecture her, before I should fling the devilish insect out the window.

I had mastered the staircase. Boldly, I approached the closed door to Mother's bedchamber. I heard her laugh, then cry out—not in pain—but joyously.

A twist of the brass knob and a push presented a vision most foul to my eyes. Upon her mattress, Mother's nakedness was spread before me. Eyes shut tight, she spewed moans of pleasure while that vulgar butterfly did disappear into the forbidden depths of her womanhood.

Nausea overwhelmed me so that I was forced to vacate Mother's bedchamber for an open window in my own. Emptied, I fell unto my bed and dreamed myself back in New York City. Above the rooftops I soared. In Central

Park, I courted. Indeed, I would have departed Connecticut at morning's first light had not Mother surprised me when I made to leave with news of new life in her womb.

O, Mother, you did need me, then. Yet, though I did not flee, I stayed distant from you and your butterfly companion as I would have from those unclean.

Months passed like fog prodded by more fog. Mother's maternity did, indeed, become quite obvious. I still feel my fear and debilitating adhorance over the outrageous implications of Mother's ripe womb.

A fortnight ago, opportunity dissolved my trance.

Evil butterfly, what protection had you with your mistress in her water closet and you alone on the arm of her rocking chair? You deserved your fate. Had only Mother not come upon me while I clawed your wretched wings and body to shreds; rather I had let you live than to have restored Mother's hatred of me.

She lashed my face with blade-like fingernails. Blood had streamed into my eyes, and I had to push Mother to escape her shrieking and to break her hold around my neck. I fled the house and hid in the garden.

I wondered how long before Mother ceased her crying. Hours passed and, when it seemed she would shed no more tears, a fresh episode of wailing she struck up. Not until the full moon was mid-sky did silence have brief reign.

Better for me had I not remained in the garden, but had immediately fled back to New York. I would have been spared more horrors. My life would have been assured.

Mother's sudden screams—of such unnatural pitch and volume—caused the house, the trees of the forest and moon above to tremble. From above, through the window of her bedchamber, terror had replaced her mournful cries.

O, Mother, what more could I have done? I hastened back into the house and up the staircase to your bedchamber. You were naked, your legs spread and feet braced against the rails. Your fingers gripped so fiercely the edges of your mattress that their nails penetrated the fabric and brought out the stuffing. Such skin-stretching pain and horror expressed in your eyes and gaping mouth, yet how could I have rescued you from what you had so tenaciously embraced?

From that black-forested cavity no moral son should ever gaze upon, a many hook-legged creature did squirm to escape; so enormous it was, Mother's flesh could expand no more, but burst. The eruption of blood drenched her, her bed and the hellish monster she gave birth to. Death became Mother's savior.

Freed, the newly born turned back and began feasting.

Enraged, I searched the chamber for means to stop further violation of the woman. I found an umbrella in a corner and used it to beat the creature. The grotesque thing roared and, with speed not reasonable for its bulk, clamped its powerful jaws to the stem of my weapon and wrenched the umbrella from my grasp. Then did the beast ignore Mother in favor of me.

Bold is the rat that bites into my leg. Is this what my life was lived for, to perish in a fetid dark basement and be devoured by vermin?

Odd, debris no longer rains down on me. All is still above. Do I dare hope the monster has escaped the house or be dead? Maybe it is not too late for me!

Never have I known such weakness, yet never have I felt such an intense desire to live. Standing is difficult. My knees want to buckle and send me crashing onto the multitude of frantic rats.

Light outlines the cellar door at the top of the steps. A steep and uncertain climb it will be. I cannot hope to predict what awaits me beyond the door, but my fate is certain should I not get away from the mounting desperation of the rats.

Good Lord! I am stumbling! My hands can find no support. The rats cheer the one of their own that dares jump onto my back and sink its teeth into my shoulder. I have fallen upon the steps. My body stretches over six, yet six more lead to the landing. The ghastly breath of the rat near makes me swoon.

Filthy rodent! Like an infant you gurgle as I twist your neck until your blood warms my claws. Back to your comrades with you. Fear of me restored, your comrades abandon desire of my flesh for your own.

Surprising how slippery wood mold can be, yet I gradually conquer the steps. Four more...now three...two. My hand finds the sticky surface of the doorknob. Into the parlor I fall.

Mother, do you still lie in eternal rest upon your bed, awaiting proper burial? Despair not, Mother. I am coming for you.

Again, I struggle with steps. The center of the staircase had been crushed when, a fortnight before, the angry creature had pursued me. The margins remain firm, however. I will persevere.

Mother's bedchamber door refuses to yield. A dirty-white substance saturates the lock and prevents the knob from turning.

Miserable door! See if the force of my body won't end your resistance!

The door's frame cracks on my third try. The door creaks open, but Mother is gone from her bed.

My instincts beg caution while I step into the bedchamber. Something is amiss. I sense death, yet life as well.

O, dear, dear Mother, a bedspread dyed with your dried blood is all that remains of you. The monster you so suffered to give birth to did surely devour you.

What be that which is suspended from the ceiling? Dirty white, it appears to be a giant cocoon. Sticky, fibrous to my touch, something fidgets within, trying to get out. Is it the creature? Yes, it must be so!

Mother, I have failed you, but you no longer need me. Little time remains. I must flee this house before I, too, fill the belly of the creature.

Must move! Must run from the bedchamber of horrors, down the dilapidated staircase to glorious safety.

Marvelous is the pale-blue sky. Enchanting are the fluffy flock of clouds. Radiant is the sun. The wild is my strength as it was my father's.

Up from the ground comes a familiar, hunger-stirring aroma. The soil sprays through the air when my sharp claws rake the earth to uncover, yes, the squirming worms. They try to tunnel back under, but I pluck them out to cure my hunger.

The earth quakes ominously. I hear glass shatter behind. I look back to see the very roof of the house rise into the firmament atop a gigantic orange and black pair of butterfly wings! While the roof plummets to its final destruction, the sun is eclipsed by the giant butterfly.

I must flee this new terror. I must take shelter among the trees of the forest where the butterfly cannot pursue me!

Mid-escape, I freeze in the shadows cast by two predator hawks. They soar into and dive out of the clouds before circling their prey. The butterfly tries to fly away, yet, though small compared to their victim, the hawks attack and tear at its wings. They claw open its body. In its final moments, the butterfly sounds much as did Father so long ago, chirping for help.

Too gruesome the battle in the sky, I look away. To New York City I hasten. Mating season has arrived. On a high branch of my favorite chestnut tree in Central Park, I will reoccupy my nest. There I will invite an available female, await the laying and hatching of eggs, hunt worms, insects and other foodstuff to feed my family and teach my offspring to fly.

I permit the gentle wind currents to carry me along. Up here, I embrace all the bliss of being alive. Away I quicken from the freaks of monstrous caterpillars morphed into gigantic butterflies.

So queer it is, a butterfly that chirps.

Chirp! Chirp!

About the Author:

Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Robert L. Arend contributed short stories to many published anthologies. In 2018, Robert compiled most of those stories into a single volume *Stories from a Fractured Mind: The Robert Collection*. Robert L. Arend resides in Central Pennsylvania with his wife, Joy, daughter, Jennifer, and cat, Willow.

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The Last Case of Leo Torma | Robb White

Thirty years doing this job. Leo was drained of all compassion. The truth was, he'd burned out years ago, and this was the last house he would ever have to visit in his official capacity, sit on a rump-sprung, ratty couch, paste a smile on his face, and listen to the woes of another twisted family dynamic while jotting down useless information. The last time ever he'd have to smell a strange house's pungent stench or the unwashed people occupying it.

The acne-faced boy who stared at him from the doorway flung the door open so fast he nearly tumbled backwards off the steps. *Great way to end my dismal career—in the hospital*.

"Whatever you're selling, we don't want it."

"I'm not a salesman, young man. Would you tell please your parents Mister Torma is here as per our scheduled appointment?"

"They're busy. Come back some other time."

Before he could swing the door closed, Leo thrust out a hand, scraping a knuckle on the brass door knocker.

"Look, Daniel—it's Daniel, isn't it? If I have to go back to the office to tell them you refused to let me in, I'll be back in twenty minutes with a sheriff's deputy."

The boy's sneer didn't enhance his blue-cheeked complexion.

Daniel, dressed like every slovenly 15-year-old in town, led the way into the living room, and without inviting Leo to sit, scooted over to the end of the L-shaped sofa.

Leo swung a leg over the arm rest and scooted his rump up it to sit there, his legs tucked beneath him like some ugly but fascinating gargoyle perched beneath a gothic window. The little creep. All he needs are bat wings, Leo thought.

Leo was about to place the file on the coffee table when he noticed the outline of a big stain that had been wiped recently but not thoroughly cleaned.

The boy's eyes watched him.

"Wine," he said. "My parents drink a lot. I could tell you a lot about them, things you don't have in that manila folder right there."

"I'll be happy to speak to you right after I talk to your parents, Daniel. Would you do me the favor now of telling them I'm here waiting?"

"I think they went outside."

"Outside?"

"Yeah, they like to walk around the property line in the mornings. Especially after they get shit-faced on red wine the night before. They should be back any second now."

"I see. I'll just wait here then."

Minutes passed. Leo checked his watch twice. The boy's unnerving stare and that weird expression on his face was beginning to rattle his nerves.

"You know what? I think I'll go outside myself, mosey around a bit, if you don't mind. Maybe I'll bump into them."

The trees were in full autumn color change and the air was redolent with decaying leaves. He felt a spring in his step now that he was removed from the obnoxious presence of that young thug back there. What the hell was it Betsy was so eager to tell me? Psychological problems... 'in the file'.

He should have looked at it before driving out here into the boonies, but he just didn't have the stomach for it anymore. Might as well take a peek while I'm walking—

He came abreast of an open door into the garage. More like an old horse barn. It was huge. The faint aroma of rotting hay lingered in the opening, although it was too dark to see beyond a few feet inside.

He flipped open the file. A phrase snatched his eye before he took another step... 'deeply disturbed.' He read on, rooted to the soft dirt outside the garage. '... psychotic episodes... parents keep bedroom doors locked at night... dead bolts... killed the family pet two weeks ago with a hammer... resides in private quarters outside house...'

What's he doing inside then?

The hair on Leo's neck tingled. Low buzzing noises, maybe a table saw. *The father*, Leo thought, *must find him and tell him the boy's inside—*

His eyes adjusted to the dimness.

"Hellooo, anyone home?"

Hanging upside down like beef on hooks were both parents. Throats opened in wide crescent gashes exposing buds of fatty yellow tissue like popcorn. Blood pails beneath each overflowed and pooled feet beyond dying the hay a muddy crimson. The buzzing of black flies reverberated like crinkling tinfoil.

Leo stood rooted like in a dream he couldn't wake from. His bowels evacuated and hot urine poured down his legs. Breaking the spell, Leo turned around to run.

His neocortex had a mere fraction of time to record the image of Daniel behind him swinging at his head like a batter going after a high inside fastball. Before the camera switched off, the scythe blade embedded in the seventh cervical vertebra, a fading image of a brown trout jumping for his jointed minnow lure flickered like a kitchen match and went out.

About the Author:

Born and raised in Northeastern Ohio, Robb White has published several crime, noir, and hard boiled novels as well as crime, horror, and mainstream stories in various magazines like Down & Out, Mystery Weekly, Tough, Mystery Tribune, Switchblade, Out of the Gutter, and Near to the Knuckle under the pseudonyms Robb T., Robb or Terry White.

Room 42 | Donna Cuttress

"How long has this room been closed?"

"Long enough. We forgot about it when we couldn't find the key after the takeover."

"Did no one think to open it?"

"Nope."

They forced the lock. Someone was sitting, hands tied behind them to the chair back.

"Are you ok sir?"

He touched the shoulder. The body had shrunk, exposed skin had leathered. The wrists gave way with a *snap!* A stained handkerchief slipped from a grimacing mouth. The guest toppled forward, exhaling dust and the key to room 42. The tattered curtain drifted in the breeze from the smashed bathroom window.

Birthday Cake | Donna Cuttress

Elsie hated baking. A candy striped candle flared, barely upright in the wet icing. The family circled.

"You've certainly come of age now Aunty! One Hundred! Such a long, long life."

She caught his smirk through clenched teeth to the parasites. Elsie hated him more than baking.

"Eat! I made this myself."

They grabbed for a slice.

"This is delicious Aunty!"

"I taste almonds. Mmm."

No! It's arsenic. Elsie thought.

In between retches someone screamed,

"Poison! Murder!"

Elsie smiled, and hid a slice of birthday cake in her apron pocket as the first siren approached.

"Better save this for later..."

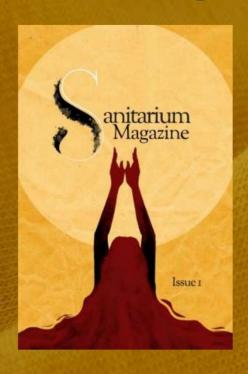
About the Author:

Donna Cuttress is from Liverpool, U.K. Her work has been published by Crooked Cat, Firbolg, Flame Tree Publishing, Suicide House and Black Hare Press. Her work for The Patchwork Raven's *Twelve Days* is available as an artbook. She has also been a speaker at the London Book Fair, and has previously been published by Sirens Call Publications as part of Women in Horror Month.

Blog: <u>Donna Cuttress</u>
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Wanting | KC Grifant

Maddie crouched in the grass, watching a speck of light grow in the distance, perfectly centered along two slivers of electrostatic railroad tracks that stretched into the darkness. Above her, stars glinted like metal against the blacktop night.

Her hair—long, synthetically enhanced for her 15th birthday, and dark as bloodied mud —slipped in front of her face and she scowled, brushing it back to squint at her watch.

Six minutes until the train.

The low whine of the smartmaglev train signaled its imminent approach. Elevated nearly a foot over the tracks, it raced along tremendously fast, up to three hundred miles an hour. The track-cleaning system on the front of the train sent out infrared beams in a wide pulse. If a beam bounced back from anything on the tracks, the system would activate a laser to decimate the debris and keep the train running smoothly. That made what she had planned doubly tricky.

She had seen videos of the system disintegrate a perched bird and obliterate low-hanging branches without otherwise disturbing the tree. Now she hoped it really worked that well.

Maddie rocked back on her haunches, picking up the tangled bungee cord resting next to a jug of rum. She snapped out the cord, pausing to flex her hand and study the pale skin, the slender, fleshy fingers that looked so weak.

The proz were so lucky, Maddie mused, as she rolled her left sleeve up above her bicep. No one ever messed with *them*, with their bionic limbs, ten times stronger than human flesh, sprouting from their stumps in dazzling crimson, emerald, gold. The proz went where they wanted, did what they wanted.

They had had the luck to be born with Nanex disease, the result of genetic hiccups caused by toxins in SmartPakk's temperature-regulating nano-plastic, which the FDA had approved too quickly. A whole generation of babies born with missing fingers, arms, or legs.

Of course, Maddie had the misfortune of an organic foods-obsessed mother who had borne a perfectly normal child with limbs all intact, dooming Maddie to a life of mediocrity.

Something rattled behind her and she froze, dropping the cord. Slowly, she turned to look at the fence meant to keep pets and pedestrians like her off the tracks. It was nothing, just a tree branch scraping against the tall chain links. Moonlight emerged from a passing cloud, illuminating the bone-white tracks.

Four minutes left. The faint *hum* of the nearing train whispered in her chest. She rested her bare left bicep against the outermost bar of the smartmaglev track and looped the cord around her elbow—once, twice—so tightly it hurt, before latching it to the track.

Last week, one of the proz—a boy named Taz—had flashed a smile at her across the crowded hall, his eyes blue as a Siamese cat's and so bright they seemed to cut through her like shards of glass. She had watched him join the rest of the proz as they moved through the hallway like some fantastic, self-assured Other Race.

She had seen Taz again just yesterday, in line at the coffee shop. His prosthetic arm was even more beautiful up close, a cobalt gemstone that flickered with flames of digital gray. She had been staring at the undulating flames when Taz turned his penetrating glance to her.

"Um, oh, hi," Maddie had stammered. "I think you're in my Social AP class? I mean, when you show up." A laugh had escaped her, one that sounded nothing like her real laugh.

Taz had only looked at her, his face unmoving. Had he forgotten he smiled at her only a week ago? Remembering it now made the blood rush to Maddie's face.

The microseconds ticked on in the too-warm coffee shop, before Taz turned back to the counter without a word. She had darted out of the cafe, a tightness wedging itself under her collarbone.

"I'll do it tomorrow," she had vowed in the dark parking lot.

And now here she was.

She gave her bound arm a sharp tug, but it stayed tightly in place. She had only gotten as far as this last time when, with shaking hands, she had undone the cord's latch as soon as she had fastened it and hurled it to the side. She had sobbed, cursing herself for being such a coward and watched, half in anger and half in relief, as the train whirled by in a flash of white and silver.

But she wasn't shaking this time.

Maddie picked up the rum with her free hand. She had had to bribe two seniors with fake IDs to get it for her, but it was worth it.

With its help, she should survive long enough to make it to the ER, the drunkenness muting her pain and masking her motive. Maddie took a tiny gulp, the holographic buxom pirate woman from the skull-and-crossbones logo winking in the moonlight.

59 seconds. She placed the jug in front of her feet and crouched, pulling herself as far from the tied arm as she could.

It was important not to psych herself out. Certain lasers — like the one on the train — created aseptic cuts ("cauterizing wounds") in flesh, cuts that tended to heal more quickly than other kinds of injuries. She had researched this extensively under the guise of a Bio paper on horse surgeries.

The CO2 laser removes the testicles while the horse is under general anesthesia, creating an aseptic wound that has minimal chance of hemorrhaging. There will be little swelling due to its cauterizing effect, resulting in a nearly 40% faster recovery time than other methods.

She glanced up. The outline of the train had differentiated itself from the darkness, a great silvery mass around a swelling light.

This was going to hurt. A lot. She heard her breath quicken, and tried to slow it. *Only for a little while*, she thought. She would only have to deal with the pain until the ambulance arrived, alerted by the emergency signals her watch would automatically broadcast.

Her watch—it blinked and vibrated rapidly on her wrist. It sensed the train's presence with its autoloc system, the same technology that buzzed loudly when she got too close to a passing car or bus.

She used her teeth to rip off the Velcro strap from her free wrist and chucked the watch a few feet away from her, in case autoloc alerted the train to make an emergency stop. She would have to grab her watch right after, she'd have to make sure not to pass out before then.

Her hair matted wetly along her cheeks and forehead. The bungee cord dug into her skin as she stretched herself as far from the tracks as she could.

Maddie thought of the poor horse, the laser narrowing in on its groin. *You do what you have to do*, she thought grimly.

It was coming, she couldn't watch, she knew she couldn't, she would be too scared, her shallow breaths would turn into screams. Instead she closed her eyes, her body shaking. *Think of your shiny new arm, your shiny new arm,* she chanted to herself and saw Taz's smile again, quick as a wink.

The sound — *HAA-HUUUM*, *HAA-HUUUM* — flooded her thoughts. Her body jerked away from the track as if it had a mind of its own, but the cord held tightly. The wind picked up, lifting her hair back from her shoulders.

Shiny new arm—

The thunder of the train's passing drowned out her screams. She opened her eyes but it was too bright—

Then a sound — not loud, but ugly — a *pop*, and she was flying backwards like she was in a rollercoaster without a seat. The ground hit her all at once, the back of her head thudding into the dirt.

Something went wrong, she thought, because she couldn't feel or see anything. Maybe the laser only cut the rope, she thought and sat up to see—

A nothingness. Where her arm should be, a stump waggled frantically at her right below her elbow. *It worked*. She stared at the meaty texture, dark against her moonlit skin—when the pain hit like a wrecking ball to the side of her body.

She gasped and gasped, but there was no air. She had been wrong; this wasn't worth it, nothing was worth it. And the *smell* — a burning, clogging in her throat made her cough and sent her stomach twisting. On the front of her shirt, a spot shone smaller than a coin. Blood? She used her other hand to pick it up. Hard and red and gleaming. A fingernail. She dropped it.

She realized that strange gasping sound was coming from her, and turned to look at her stump again. Her *stump*, her *cauterizing wound*. Abrupt, like someone had forgotten to finish drawing her in. Tatters of red fabric flapped against the stump, or was that blood?

Something blinked in the grass, like the front of a mini toy train.

She tried to stand and staggered, pitching forward onto her knees. Did she lose her feet too? She twisted on the ground to see the outlines of her sneakers, next to a round shadow.

Oh the *rum*, it had spilled everywhere. She tipped the jug to her mouth, the holographic woman on the label winking rapidly in the dim light. There was some left, dribbling down her shirt as she drank. It tasted like water, until she felt a hot tingling in her chest and her head cleared a fraction. *I did it*, she thought.

She turned the bottle over, shaking what was left into her stump (her *stump*) and a few drops seared down into her flesh and she screamed.

She threw the jug next to the glowing patch of grass. The glow...her watch.

Maddie reached out to pick it up but couldn't, though she felt the missing arm strain like it was still attached. She flexed the invisible fingers and a brick seemed to pummel them, again and again, as her nerve endings short-circuited. She let the ghost hand drop.

She forced her right hand up and fell on her face, spitting out metallic dirt and grass. She clawed across the ground, finally snatching up her watch. As her fingers grabbed it, it turned a deep, dark, quickly beating red.

Red.

She had only seen that color once before, about a minute before she fainted from a bad case of the flu when she was twelve. The skin sensors on the watch's casing had picked up her dangerously low blood pressure and sent out a signal to 911.

She clutched the watch in her hand and rolled on her back, waiting for the ambulance to come. She turned her head to look at the stump, making sure it was real.

Stay awake, she urged, until after seconds or minutes she heard the ambulance's siren in the distance. What if it's my imagination, she thought, what if I die out here? She started to think of her parents. Suddenly, a message from the local ER lit up her watch: 'HELP IS ON THE WAY'.

Maddie looked up. The stars wobbled and seemed to get larger, before splitting and growing again. Her whole body throbbed, drenched in pain signals, yearning for the part that was missing. But soon she would be complete, better than complete.

Images came to her, bright and sharp and sudden, like a dream. She saw herself as a toddler, crawling in fits with a wooden arm. Herself in grade school, smiling at a girl across the table who had a yellow plastic arm like hers. They tried, giggling, to link their arms during recess and quickly became friends. The first day of high school, worrying that her red arm was too gaudy and the rush of relief as the older proz immediately took her in. Maddie had quickly fallen for one of them, whose name she couldn't remember, with icy blue eyes. She saw blue and red fingers intertwined, the gray flame spreading up her elbow.

Did that really happen? she thought.

She saw herself older now, with a sophisticated and distinguished red arm, nodding as a stranger inquired about it. *Yes, born with Nanex*, Maddie said with a demure smile.

The life she had always wanted, had always been meant for, was coming into focus. The terrible feeling of being alone was slipping away, back into the recesses of dreams where it belonged.

She looked back to the sky and, through the splintering darkness, felt herself start to smile.

Turning Tides | *KC Grifant*

The quivering masses of jellyfish bobbed ahead, a plum-colored cloud in the middle of the Atlantic. Maggie tapped on her underwater camera. With the warming ocean temperatures, jellies were spawning never-before-seen species.

Tentacles wrenched off her snorkeling mask. She thrashed but electricity sizzled into every pore. Neurotoxins.

A declaration sprang to her mind, like someone speaking to her:

Ours.

Each flick of the buzzing tentacles onto her face imparted a new vision: massive jellies swallowed ships, clogged harbors, suffocated whole cities.

Maggie gasped for air before the last vision.

Ours.

The continents sparkled with purple dust, the seas liquid amethyst.

About the Author:

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

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The Wedding Eaters | Emma Munro

Sam and I queue for the Wedding Feast Competition. The forms waiving all responsibility for choking related injury and death are signed before we press through black curtains into a small alcove. My three-day hollow belly spasms under a spandex crinoline. Sam is the competitive eater, but her jaw is wired shut. She broke her face tire-flipping.

The cadaverous emcee squints at my name tag and shakes his head.

"Not happening Glorious Gorger. If you want in, you need some red."

My bony hands gripping tight enough to bruise, I struggle not to freak out when Sam stands behind me and wraps her arms around my empty midriff. She hugs, silently urging me to do what's necessary to win free meals for a year. I stand out like vanilla candy in this crowd of dressed-to-kill, as in bedlam and butchery, not slay the catwalk.

"Okay, do whatever," I say. The crinoline is silly anyway.

He squirts a bottle of red sauce until I look like Carrie after the pig's blood. The emcee grins at Sam's tux and bow tie before pushing a dental thingy between her lips, pressing the flesh up and away, exposing her gums and wired teeth.

Her eyes pop a bit, surprised or horrified, but she isn't grabbing my hand and making a run for the exit.

Sam is directed to join the audience while the competition nurse leads me to the caged stage. Perhaps this place is also a fighting venue. Through the wire Sam is jittery, sideways glancing, shoulders hunched, not fitting in, which, to be honest, is kind of usual.

Behind me a table displays a wedding smorgasbord, too glossy to be real. My belly moans. The nurse nudges me toward a gothic-cake, a tub of sugared skulls, a vat of black ice-cream, and a bucket of red macaroons. I have to eat it all in ten minutes and eat it faster than anyone else. Sam speed-trained me to gobble three kilos of boiled cabbage. We've got a chance.

Contrarily, I'm petrified of losing control after a lifetime of disciplined dieting. Sam, propped against the back wall, waves a placard 'I love you, Glorious Gorger.' In her tux, she looks good enough to eat.

On my left, I recognize Sugar Monster, famous for winning Toowong's Glutton Bowl. Panic erupts. I must win. Free food would take us so much closer to our dream of owning a tiny home.

Seven other competitors, decked out in their scariest finery, complete the lineup. Think knives and hammers, sharpened teeth and forked tongues, skulls and bones and, of course, lots of black, and you get a pretty good idea of the dress-code. I'd anticipated traditional white and pastels, but even the cakes are magenta through to aubergine. Did Sam keep quiet about the Goth Wedding theme, or had the bus driver dropped us at some kinky food contest? I hadn't expected this.

"Are you ready, eaters?" The emcee howls. He blows a horn. "Go, go, go!"

I upend the tub of miniature candied-skulls and crunch twice. The cracked edges scratch my cheeks. I flinch. No warning from Sam about bleeding while competing. Shed a tear for my concave belly, my honed thighs, my toned biceps. I sip water and squeeze Sam's bullshit down my throat with the bloodied muck.

On my right, Blenderella stretches her mouth from ear-to-ear with a hooked finger and slips in an entire frosted layer; tilts her sugared maw, saliva leaking a raspberry rivulet from lip to chin. She jolts, jaw muscles jerking. Swallows. Gasps. Swoops for more.

"Nine minutes to go."

Disgust slings along my nerves. Yank a breath. I'll run. Cycle. Shovel the rest.

Sugar Monster guzzles custard, breathing heavily every seventh mouthful.

"Eight," the emcee yells. "C'mon brides 'n grooms, you can do it, chew it, chew it."

Blenderella buries her head in ice-cream. In a rhinestone tuxedo, Sugar Monster drops his empty custard bowl and rams fistfuls of purple sponge into his mouth. One wasp-waisted bride squirts mucous. Snot and sweat curdle the syrupy musk surrounding us.

Head tilted back I push in clumps of fondant and ice-cream. Repeat. Chomp faster, breathe less. Trickle in water. My chafed cheeks throb.

"Seven minutes."

Blenderella vomits. A buttery, yeasty gloop splats into a pail. The nurse injects her with an anti-emetic and pain-killer. Blenderella's shaking hand reaches for a marzipan bat.

"No upchucking allowed. Blenderella, you are disqualified," the emcee said.

She slumps at my feet shrouded by her lace veil.

Stomach roiling, I cram in red velvet-cake. Food backfills. I clasp both hands to my distended mouth, whistling air in through my nostrils. I clench my teeth hard enough to splinter.

"Six. Now, Glorious, you are close to being disqualified. chipmunking rule: If you don't swallow, it don't get counted."

I gulp. The sweet and sour retreats. My windpipe spasms, tightening around a lump of fondant. My throat burns. I haul air, straining—it goes nowhere. I'm stoppered.

I can't breathe.

Flick a panicked glare towards Sam, vision blurring. She said this'd be cruisey. Me, a lust-addled fool, agreed.

No tiny home is worth dying for. A flood of rage butchers my love for her. Sam realizes I'm choking. She pushes to the front of the crowd, salutes to remind me of our anti-gagging strategy. Pinch nostrils. Engage core. Jump.

Thumping my chest, I stamp my feet, and the lump dislodges. Air whooshes inside.

I almost cry, but a humming starts in my head, cooing like a lover without words, an invitation that I accept. My tongue fondles the gateway inside my mouth, from which hunger howls.

Sam waves another placard, 'EAT your CAKE and ME too.'

"Five minutes and thirty seconds left. Whaddya say people? How about some pepping-up for your Eaters." The spouses-to-be in their Hannibal Lecter t-shirts, Vampira silks, fake daggers, and knuckledusters hoot and yowl.

Sugar Monster tips the uneaten cake into his ice cream.

"Four," the emcee bawls, "Remember, you can't dunk or mash up the edibles."

Fresh ice cream and a new layer of sponge is dumped before Sugar Monster. He mops syrupy sweat.

"Three."

Sam now stands in front of me clapping and stomping along with to the countdown.

A layer of red velvet gateau in each hand, I swivel my head from side-to-side. Buttercream and sugar-paste flowers tumble inside. Fields of wheat curtsy. Sugarcanes disco jive. Milking-cows yodel.

"Two minutes.".

A spouse faints. Someone shakes him awake.

Almost finished. I toss macaroons in, chew every sixth, inhale every tenth. Sam's eyes laugh; winning's her thing. There's nothing left in front of me. I've eaten it all. I have never felt this way. Unstoppable. Limitless. My mouth is a portal to infinity.

Time slows.

The empty macaroon bucket frizzles when I peck it, the waxed tablecloth is gooey, the silverware chewy, and candelabra crunchy. Twisting, I stretch till the resin wedding display is within reach. One by one, mock meringues, fake petits fours, and plastic éclairs melt on my tongue.

"One minute to go. C'mon eaters. Wolf it. Do it."

Ganache drizzles down Sugar Monster's chin and arms. He pants, head bowed.

"Five seconds." The emcee honks the horn.

Time slows even more, stretches taffy-like. I kneel to check Blenderella pulse. It's treacle-slow. Her skin is panna cotta pale—garnished with blueberry eyes, strawberry lips, plum tongue—glistening with saliva. Snared, I lean into the fruity notes of toasted butterscotch and sour earthiness. Reminding me of wilted roses, freshly laid manure, a sun shower, and pie fresh out of the oven.

I nip, chew, gnaw. She whimpers once but lies still. Truffle-soft, her meat separates into creamy chunks and coats the inside of my mouth. I lick out an eyeball. It squishes deliciously. Under cover of the tablecloth, blood sauces her chin and neck to seep between her breasts.

"Stop eating," demands the emcee.

I stand, gobbling the last of Blenderella's tongue. My belly purrs honeyed forgiveness for Sam. Before, I'd been a calorie-counting abstainer. Now, I tug apart the cage of my jaws and release my boundless hunger.

While the judges weigh leftovers the wire mesh slides away. The six surviving competitors heave in deep breaths sniffing their loved ones as if, like me, they are unimaginably hungry.

The emcee steps onto a little platform, says, "We have a winner. "Free eats for a whole year."

The room quietens to snuffling and sneaky munching.

"The winner is Glorious. A first-time competitive eater from an outback town so small you'll never have heard of it. Doesn't even have a pub. Can you believe that?"

The crowd whoops. Sam winks congratulations, looking dazed, the 'EAT... Me' placard under one arm. I raise my brow, she trots over.

The emcee says. "Ah, Glorious —"

Leaning close, Sam smells of black cherry, pepper, and leather igniting my curiosity about the texture of her gristle, organs, and marrow.

About the Author:

Emma Munro lives with one wife and one cat in the Blue Mountains of Australia. Her stories have appeared in Hashtag Queer LGBTQ+ Vol. 1, Hello Horror, Pure Slush, Cosmos and Jersey Devil Press and Sirens Publications eZine.

Author Website: Emma Munro

Victory | Brian Rosenberger

He survived the arena, defeating each and every challenger. Man or beast, it didn't matter. His quest for freedom drove him. Such a skilled killer, they forced him against two, three opponents at a time.

Finally an opportunity. With hands that could bend iron, he seized it.

He killed three more on his journey, finally reaching the dock. One man barred his way. Recognition then fear crossed the man's face. He fled.

Broad shoulders powered the small vessel. He was kilometers away, the stars his guide. Freedom.

From the night sky descended the one enemy he could not conqueror. Rain.

Dancing with Scars | *Brian Rosenberger*

His agent lobbied, "Frankie, look what it did for Eric. The first Phantom album in years. And now he's doing infomercials for skin care. That should be *you*."

Reluctantly, the Monster agreed.

His limbs, not being his own, made choreography difficult.

The boots were the biggest obstacle. Wardrobe produced surprisingly comfortable footwear, despite the sequins.

The audience screamed in delight. His dance partner just screamed.

The verdict—two broken toes.

He became a must-have guest on late night talk shows. But never any dancing.

"Did you do it on purpose?"

"Once a monster always a monster," his knowing reply.

Mistaken Identity | Brian Rosenberger

It's snowing outside. He watches as the snow falls. His captors dance, blaspheme and fornicate this snowy eve. Five candles burn. Little comfort to this unexpected situation, a conjuring gone awry. Blame dyslexia.

A bright light and his life suddenly changed. His Finland vacation interrupted. Quite the pickle, this confinement. He studies his hosts, knows their fragile dreams, foolish desires, and listens to flatulent threats of decapitation and dismemberment. As if mortal man could slay legend.

It's sill snowing outside. They should be at play in the snow, wrapping presents, caroling. Instead...

He knows how to deal with naughty children.

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>Brain Who Suffers</u> Instagram: <u>@brianwhosuffers</u>



Amore | Patrick Winters

Just outside the window of the hotel room, a gondolier started to sing a smooth, romantic song, his melodious voice filling the banks of the Bacchiglione.

Adam smiled at the tune; he couldn't have picked a better time to spring his surprise on Kelly.

He stepped up to the edge of their bed coyly, his hands held pointedly behind his back. Kelly grinned up at him from the mattress, flinging back their satin covers, inviting him in.

"What have you got there? Huh?" she giggled.

"Just a little something special for my former fiancée."

Adam leapt into the bed, revealing the pendant he had bought for her as the springs settled. A silver chain swished between his fingers, a glinting key-shaped charm laced through it.

Kelly set aside her glass of champagne and positively beamed at the gift, taking it from him and looking it over. "Honey, it's beautiful!" she said. "What is it?"

"It's called a Saint Valentine's Key. I got it off of an old gypsy-looking woman at the market this morning. Had to buy it all spy-like while you were looking at that stall of pottery." He wiggled his eyebrows and his voice dropped into a flirty tone as Kelly put the necklace on. "Gifting it to your lover's supposed to symbolize unlocking the heart of the giver."

Kelly held the key in her fingers, grinning at Adam in her cute, mischievous way. "Well, let's put that to the test! How much do you love me?"

Adam started to speak, getting ready to say something sappy, but no words came. His face went oddly slack and he just stared off into space for a good moment.

Eventually, he looked up at her and spoke in an even tone. "Not very much, actually."

Kelly gave a small chuckle, but his rather dour statement cut the laughter short. For a moment, she thought that he could have been dead-serious.

"Uh...not funny, babe."

"No, really," Adam continued in that grave manner. "I kinda just settled for you. You're hot enough to sleep with, and you don't talk too much, which I like. But, otherwise..."

Kelly glared at him, feeling her skin growing heated. "Okay, Adam—seriously not funny!"

"And I slept with your sister, during your business trip last month. She wanted to tell you about it before the wedding, but I think I convinced her not to."

Kelly clenched her fists and started breathing heavily, remembering when Anna had called her just a week ago, saying that she had something 'important' to tell her older sister; but Anna had changed her mind on the phone, telling her to 'just forget it'.

As Kelly began to silently fume, Adam kept on in that bland voice.'

"Also, I'm pretty sure that she gave me crabs. You probably have them too, by now..."

And that was all it took for Kelly to grab her champagne glass from the nightstand, break it across its top, and drive it into Adam's throat.

Elsewhere in the city, the old gypsy woman was selling another key to another passerby, and laughing cheerfully as she did so.

About the Author:

Patrick Winters is a graduate of Illinois College in Jacksonville, IL, where he earned a degree in English Literature and Creative Writing. His work has been featured throughout several magazines and anthologies. A full list of his previous publications may be found at his author's site.

Author Website: Patrick Winters



The Havertown House | Stephen Johnson

The group of kids stood outside hiding behind the ruined stonewalls that once majestically guarded the entrance to the cemetery. The two boys snickered as they tried to hide their fear while the sole girl sat motionless, watching and observing. She dismissed the boys with a wave of her hand, "Be quiet!"

The two boys ceased their nervous laughing and focused anxiously on the girl. Isabelle gave a disapproving frown as she turned her head from Logan and Scott back to the house.

"What did you see?" Logan whispered with a slight crack in his voice. He hung his head a bit in embarrassment as he heard the crack in his voice and the fear creeping into his words. A stern look was the only response she gave in return. Both boys looked at each other as the sun began to set off to their right with the last rays of the day shining onto Valley Brook Street.

The Havertown House stood in front of them overseeing the Old McKenzie Cemetery just as it had for as long as the town had been around. Named after the town in the late 1800's, the Havertown House had its share of history, albeit a very dark past. Every kid in the town had grown up on the stories of the House and it's sordid past. The old tales had been passed down from generation to generation detailing the strange occurrences that took place in the house. One of the scariest stories Isabelle had ever heard about Havertown House centered on the young man who could be seen at night banging and crying out from inside the walls. People still said you could hear him at night crying out from inside the house.

"Bet's a bet," cracked Logan, "You have to go inside to win." Logan covered his mouth to stifle the laugh and Scott smiled as he nodded in agreement.

"Fine, I told you I would do it. Now shut up." Isabelle jumped over the crumbling wall and ran as stealthily as she could up to the house.

A dim light post situated next to the entrance to Old McKenzie Cemetery provided the only source of visibility across the street. Shadows faded with the sunlight as she arrived at the living room windows on the front of the house. No sounds penetrated outside and the night wind provided only a soft whistle of the gentle October breeze. Even with the cool wind, sweat trickled down Isabelle's brow as she peered inside the cracked glass of the windowpane rotten from decades of neglect. She noticed a gap at the bottom of the window and slid it up easily before crawling into the space.

Isabelle fell with a loud thump on the hard wooden floor and crawled across the empty living room letting her eyes adjust. She stopped in front of a small entrance into the next room when she heard a loud bang and shuffling from the other side of the house. She turned instinctively and walked slowly to the wall where she heard the sound. Touching the wall curiously, she noticed nothing except a small crack running from the ceiling to the floor. She heard movement again from behind the wall and noticed the crack began to glow and vibrate as it expanded. Isabelle backed away and felt a pair of eyes looking at her as she stared into the gap in the wall in a hypnotic state.

The vibration mesmerized Isabelle, as she felt drawn closer as the crack surrounded and engulfed her. She turned and looked back through the gap and saw the back of another girl wearing her shirt. Isabelle tried to step back through and banged against an invisible barrier. The girl on the other side of the wall turned to face Isabelle exposing a mirror image of her face. The reflection grinned sadistically tilting her head and mocking Isabelle. Everything about the alter ego looked exactly like Isabelle with the exception of the devilish smile and the eyes. Isabelle's beautiful blue eyes changed into a black dense shade that pierced through her soul with an unforgiving stare.

Isabelle banged against the barrier and screamed, "Why, why can I not get out? Who are you?" The girl in the reflection only laughed and smiled exposing rows of sharp edged teeth. A call from outside diverted the reflection's attention. Isabelle could hear her brothers in the background. She panicked and screamed, "Logan, Scott, can you hear me?"

The alter ego turned to look toward her brothers and paused for a moment. It returned to face Isabelle again and for a moment its face vibrated and shifted in and out of focus. The vibration formed several different versions of the girl to appear simultaneously. Each one seemed to transition to a more evil and demented version. The last phase took the most ominous shape. The reflection's face turned sadistically up looking into nothingness with tears of blood rolling down its eyes leaving behind a wide smile across its face. The morbid smile bared jagged teeth with sharp crimson stained edges that dripped blood onto its clothes.

Isabelle could only watch in terror as her brothers entered the room through the window and the other girl's smile widened as she winked at Isabelle and turned to face the boys. Isabelle watched as the three of them exited the house and walked down the street toward the boy's house. Scott and Logan ran in front of Isabelle celebrating her

victory of breaking into the house. As they neared their house, they passed by a bulletin board on the side of the post office listing several young people with the description "Missing" across the top. The girl they believed to be Isabelle looked toward the pictures and smiled broadly calling out to the two young boys. "Hurry up boys, we need to get home quick. I need to collect on that bet!"

About the Author:

Stephen Johnson is a retired Naval Officer serving 22 years on four different ships over his career. He is married to Angelia and has two children, Logan and Isabelle. He will complete his first novel, *The Fizz Prophecy,* in April 2021. He has published *The Hollow* in Eleanor Merry's Dark Halloween Holiday Flash Fiction Anthology and *The Other Side of the Mirror* in Scare Street's Night Terrors Volume 8.

Caught | Patrick J. Wynn

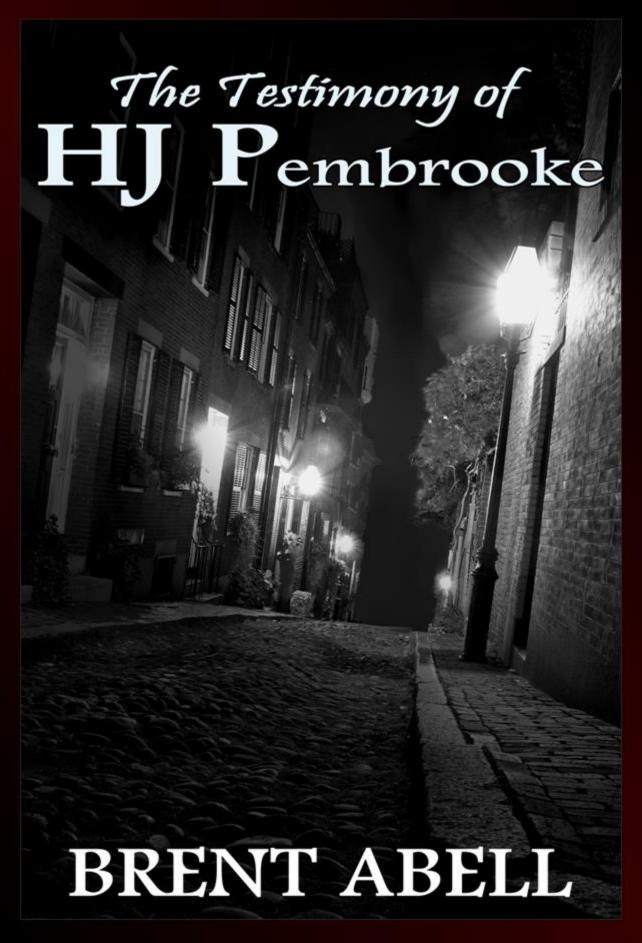
Ted stood outside the restaurant staring through the giant glass window the name of the restaurant BRIDGERS painted in bright red letters spread out above his head. He remembered bringing his wife Annie here for their first anniversary. It had been a surprise and Ted had done it up right. Flowers, candies and a special bottle of wine had been waiting for Annie. When the hostess had shown them to their table Annie had cried at the sight of the bright red, pink and white roses then giggled a little at the giant box of candy. The dinner had been wonderful, and they held hands while they whispered their sweet words. Ted tried his best to remember what they each had for dinner, but the memory stayed just out of reach. He did remember the wonderful smile that spread across Annie's face when he pulled the long grey velvet covered box out of his pocket and held it out to her. The necklace had cost him dearly as he sold his toy collection to raise the money, but the happy tears that streamed down her face had been one of the greatest joys of his life. For years they had spent their anniversaries at BRIDGERS, and it had become a special place. Now watching her through the window sitting across from some person Ted didn't know. A smile was spread across Annie's face and Ted gave a small whine as he knew that was a smile that at one time had only been meant for him. He'd suspected for some time but until now it had just been suspicion. Rage flared in his breast as he watched his wife hold hands and rub the arm of the man she was seeing. Tears flowed as he watched her giggle at some comment the man made. He knew from what he was seeing that Annie would take this man home and Ted screamed with that picture flowing through his mind. He screamed and wailed at the sky but people on the sidewalk behind him passed by without notice because the living rarely see the dead.

Monster | Patrick J. Wynn

The monster slides down the hallway, moving from shadow to shadow. The glow of moonlight brightens portions of the hall and he rushes by the light, but waves of energy and strength wash over him as he passes through the glow of the moon. Hunger rumbles deep in his belly as he nears his destination. He forces himself to slow as the maternity ward door comes into view. The monster pushes open the door and as he enters an elderly nurse rises from her chair. A small scream escapes her lips before her throat is torn open. The monster steps over the dying gagging nurse and enters the room filled with tiny beds. Each bed holds a small wiggling crying figure. Making his way down the rows of beds the monster eats. Warm salty innocent sweetness fills the monster's belly, and he groans in ecstasy. Finishing the last the monster wipes the gore from its lips and shakes pieces from his long fingers. The tiny cries now silenced the monster turns and sees his reflection in a mirror. He runs his fingers through his long black hair and smiles at the reflection. Jay never thought of himself as a monster, but it is what it is and he shrugs his shoulders and heads home to the wife and kids.

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 by Sirens Call Publications, Dark Dossier, Short Horror and Trembling with Fear. You can follow him on his Facebook page and look for his short story collections on Amazon.



AVAILABLE TO PURCHASE OR BORROW ON AMAZON

New Year's Resolution | KC Anderson

"Three... two... one! Happy New Year!"

As the patrons smile, kiss, hug, and jump with joy, it feels like the bar itself is doing the same.

The atmosphere is infectious.

Even I feel a slight sense of hope and glee... for a few minutes.

Reality quickly returns as everyone goes back to shouting obnoxiously, ordering drinks, and hitting on the opposite sex.

I descend back into my depressed (normal) state while I pour the two plump senoritas their Midori Sours.

"Bartender!" someone yells at me. "Two Coors Lights! Let's go!"

I look over to see five bros shoving their way into the crowded section of the bar counter. The one who shouted his order is looking right at me.

I yell back to him, "One minute!" as I hold up my middle finger.

He scowls at me.

This is my life as a bartender in a shithole town.

Assholes order drinks, act like fools, then drive home drunk. I clean up, split my tips with the bar-backs, get home at four a.m., sleep all day, then get back to it in the late afternoon.

I'm in a cycle I can't get out of.

Ever since I left the military, my life has no meaning. I'm not even sure why I got out.

I thought I could do better for myself. I was tired of people always telling me what to do.

But now, I miss that luxury of never having to think before subsequently failing.

My work used to have a purpose. Even though it wasn't necessarily being the boots on the ground and shooting bad guys, my role as a Loadmaster in the Air Force contributed to the overall objective of keeping the country safe.

God, how I miss it now.

I wondered if I should bite the bullet and try to get back in? Would they let me?

My brain continues to wander off (as it usually does after midnight) and the man who ordered the Coors Lights is now pissed.

"Hey, fuckhead!" he yells. "Two... no wait, three Coors Lights, asshole. Come on!"

"Hey!" I yell back. "Don't talk to me like that!"

The man takes a deep breath.

Oh God, here we go. Let me guess: some liquid bravado at its finest, coming right up.

"Look here, Bar-bitch." Yep, I called it. "I'll talk to you however the fuck I want. I could buy this joint right now and throw your ass to the curb. So pop open my Coors Lights right now!"

All it takes is for me to give 'the look' to the security guards, and all five assholes are out the door in thirty seconds flat.

"Don't let 'em back in," I tell them. The guards nod.

Before I know it, it's last call. Thank the freaking Lord!

People slowly file out. The lights are no longer dim. There's a couple of the usual arguments amongst the girls that came together. I see it every night. The drunkest one wants to go home with the tattooed douchebag; the others are trying to encourage her to not do it. The drunk one always wins, and no doubt regrets her decision the following morning.

Suddenly it's quiet. The place is a mess. Because it's New Year's, there's more than the typical bottles and glasses everywhere. Confetti is strewn upon every stool. Party hats lay smashed on the floor.

The bar-back, Liz, begins to clean up while I tend to sprucing up the bar counters.

Six idiots didn't take their credit cards with them. I close out their tabs. I wipe the counters. I put away the bottles in their rightful places.

I look up and see that the large room is now mostly presentable. Liz works fast.

"Hell of a night, huh?" she asks.

"Yeah," is all I reply.

"So, listen," she says as she walks towards me with dirty rags in hand. "What are you doing tonight?"

"Same shit I do every night. Go home and watch T.V. until I pass out."

"But it's New Year's," she reminds me. "Don't you want to start off the new year with something different?" "It's just another day," I proclaim.

She looks frustrated.

"Look, Brian. I'll just be blunt. I'm bored. I'm tired of the same ol' backwards-hat-wearing-tools hitting on me every night. But I'm also tired of going home alone. So, look, you're not my type, and I don't want to date you. But you're not a total jerk. So I would like you come over and have some fun, huh? What do you say?"

I used to get hit on all the time in the military. As long as I wore my uniform, chicks would come up to me and ask me questions like Liz just did.

Usually, I'd say yes and have a grand ol' time.

But since then, I just haven't been in the mood. I'm twenty-eight and I sound and feel like I'm sixty-five.

"No thanks," I blurt out. I didn't mean to. I honestly was actually going to give it some thought and (holy shit) I think I might've even said yes. But my mouth took the reins before my brain could, like it always does.

She sighs, disappointed.

"Fine," she says. "See you tomorrow night then."

She walks towards the door. "Happy New Year," she remarks irritably.

The door closes and I'm alone once again.

I continue to put the finishing touches before clocking out when suddenly I hear a lighter flick.

I turn back around to see a man sitting at the counter inhaling his first drag of a lit cigarette.

"Whoa, hey," I say. "You can't smoke in here. And we're closed."

The man looks to be about forty-five. He looks familiar, but so does everybody in this shithole town so I give it no further thought. His head is down. No eye contact. He's dressed not to impress.

He doesn't move a muscle.

"Hey," I say as I snap my finger in front of his face. "You got to go, man. Take that cigarette outside. We're closed."

He ignores me and takes another drag.

I contemplate what my options are. I've never had a straggler before. The front door locks after two a.m. I'm sure Liz shut it completely like she always does.

The guards are gone. Liz is gone. I'm all alone.

I don't have a weapon, except of course for the dozens of bottles behind me. I could smash one of them and make a shank if need be.

The man finally looks up and blows out a cloud of smoke.

He looks right at me, smiles, and says in a raspy voice, "So. A new year, eh?"

I don't know how to respond. He realizes this and says, "Got any new year's resolutions?"

I answer him. "Yeah, I do, actually. First one: Don't let trespassers get off with a warning."

I grab a bottle and show the man that I'm prepared to smash it. "Get out of here, dude," I say.

He looks at the bottle, looks at me, smiles, and takes another drag.

"You're not going to do anything," he huffs. "They won't let you back in the military if you hurt me."

My first reaction is to tell him that it would be self-defense so it wouldn't be a problem. But then my brain (as slow as it is at two-thirty in the morning) realizes what he just said.

"How?... How do you know I want back in? Who are you?" I ask.

"Just an observer. So come on. New year's resolution? What's it going to be, Airman?"

"It's Sergeant," I correct him.

"Okay, Sarge," he puts both his hands up as if he's surrendering. "So?..."

I don't know why I haven't yet just dragged this guy from the stool and tossed him outside. I'm not in the shape I once was, but judging by his stature, I'm pretty sure I could take him. But there's something about him that intrigues me. It's like a mystical pheromone in the air that's keeping me at ease.

I pour myself a shot. I pour him one too. I didn't even look at the bottle. It's something dark.

"Want one?" I ask.

He nods.

We clink shot glasses.

"Cheers," I say. He doesn't reciprocate. We down the shots. It was whiskey. No chaser necessary.

"Thanks," he says. "So, come on. I know you don't like to participate in cliché tasks, but who cares? If making a new year's resolution is what it's going to take to get you to the level you want to get to, then so be it; clichés be damned. So what's it going to be?"

Who is this guy? I think to myself. Why am I not scared? Why am I so comfortable?

"I don't know," I reply. "I guess my resolution is to be more out there, you know... like in the world. Do something I've never done before."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. My friends in the military were all from the South. They grew up hunting. Some of them got to shoot people on duty. I've never killed anything. Sorry, I know that's weird."

He shakes his head. "Not weird at all, Brian. It's an intriguing event, something or someone dying at your hands. It makes you feel... powerful."

Seconds of awkward silence ensue.

"Here," he says as he slides me over a Glock 17, the same kind I used to practice with at the base's shooting gallery. "Go ahead."

Now I'm no longer comfortable. A gun in the room will do that to you.

"Whoa!" I react. "What the fuck, dude? Take that back."

"Afraid of guns?" he asks.

"No, I'm afraid of the people who have guns."

"Well, then you're not afraid of me. I don't have this gun. You do. Take it. Shoot me."

I laugh.

"What?"

"Go ahead. I'm not real anyway. I'm just part of your hallucination."

I squint in confusion.

"You joined the military to see some action. You didn't get it. You weren't satisfied. You bailed too soon. Now you're unfulfilled. And you always will be until you accomplish this goal. So come on. Shoot me. In the head. Right here."

He points to the middle of his forehead with his ring finger. His cigarette is now gone. I don't know where it went. It never existed. Neither does he.

The gun feels real though.

I'm losing it.

I aim it at him. He stands up and leans over the counter so I can put it to his head pointblank.

I feel a sudden rush of anxious happiness. I'm finally going to do something I've always wanted. It may not be real, but fuck it, it feels real to me.

I smile and pull the trigger. The Glock makes a booming sound that echoes continuously throughout the room.

The man drops backwards to the ground, making a loud thud.

I stare now at the empty space where the man once was.

I look over the counter to see Liz laying there with a bullet in her head, blood slowly oozing out of her skull and onto the bar's floor.

"Oh my God!" I yell.

I hop over the counter. She hasn't disappeared. She's real! Real dead!

I start shaking.

What the hell just happened?

"Thank you," I hear the raspy voice again. I stand up. The man, who now looks twenty years younger and has the spitting image of my face, is now sitting on the other side of the counter, looking at me and the corpse on the ground.

"We both fulfilled our resolutions, and it's only three hours into the new year. How about that?"

He blows out another cloud of smoke and disappears along with it.

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



Slumber Party | Mike Lera

Stevie washed her hands at the bathroom sink, exhaling a gusty 1 a.m. yawn.

As she was about to turn the light off and head back to bed, she glanced at the tub, filled with sudsy water and bubbles from her earlier bath.

She sighed. Knelt down at the bathtub, reached for the drain lever.

Then she noticed something... in the tub.

It was dark, whatever it was, barely visible past the suds, and created swish sounds and bubbles as it moved underwater.

Slowly, she swiped bubbles out of the way to see into the water, her hand submerging for a brief moment. Just then, the 'something' in the water wrapped tightly around the teenager's petite wrist. It was cold, thick, strong, and it gave her wrist a powerful yank, her entire forearm plunging underwater.

It wouldn't let go, and it quickly wrapped itself around her entire forearm. It squeezed and squeezed, the way a nurse's blood pressure cuff tightens around an arm for a reading, blood permeating in Stevie's forearm with a cool, numb tingly feeling.

Her eyes bulged as the 'thing' began to pull the rest of her body toward the water.

Stevie pulled, her arm like a piece of tug-of-war rope. Pulled, until she finally got her arm out of the water—along with *something else*.

Coiled around Stevie's forearm like a mini-turban was the large upper body of an African rock python.

The snake's head remained underwater, unseen past the bubbles and suds. Stevie let out a shrill cry as she dug her nails deep into the snake's meaty dark skin, which had a well-textured brown-beigedesign throughout.

The python's tail end instantly wrapped itself around Stevie's neck, yanking her entire head into the water. Soap flailed through her nostrils, her throat choked by the serpent. Stevie opened her eyes to the underwater murkiness, and as they stung from the soap, she gurgled a wail when she found the python's oval shaped face inches from hers, facing her. Its black round eyes, its mouth opening wide to expose its giant dagger-like fangs.

With all her strength, she pulled her head out of the water, long enough to shout "Help!" before her head was jerked back in. She was again held down a while, and this time, she felt a cool piercing pain on her shoulder, blood flowing throughout the soapy water.

She reemerged, gasping for air. She grasped the snake, and pulled. Pulled. Pulled until her neck and arm broke free. She fell to the floor, coughing, gagging, her hand clutching her sore neck. She grasped her wet bloodied shoulder, imprinted with two deep fang marks.

The python's head popped out of the water like a submarine's telescope, its sudsy face aimed at Stevie, a mound of bubbles billowed atop its head. It again opened its mouth wide, as if for a ginormous yawn, bloodied fangs exposed, and unleashed a loud and frightening hiss. An icy chill ran down Stevie's back.

Then the python moved toward her, its head and upper body maneuvering over the tub's barrier.

Stevie grabbed a plunger from the floor and struck the snake's head again and again, like hammering a plastic monster head in a Whack-A-Mole game at a kid's pizza arcade. She whacked and whacked, until the python's head retracted into the tub water. Winner!

She bolted out of the bathroom, slammed the door shut.

Stevie's mind whirred as she stood mannequin still in the hallway, back against the wall, eyes fixed on the bathroom door with an expression of shock and disbelief knotted up on her face.

A short high-pitched squeal from the kitchen seized her attention.

"Chachi?" Stevie muttered.

She exited the hall, scurried to the kitchen, where she found *Chachi*, her family's Rottweiler, lying on his side in the middle of the floor. He was completely still, his mouth opened wide.

Stevie knelt at the brown and black furred animal's side. Noticed movement from Chachi's rib cage area—movement from within. Like multiple bubbles, bubbling. Something—or somethings—were struggling to get out of his stomach.

She gawked when a small portion of flesh exploded open at the Rottweiler's side, from *something* within, puss and blood flinging everywhere, sprinkling Stevie's face. A small hole was created, followed by two miniature gray 'daggers' with jagged edges protruding out, side by side. The 'daggers', which were the creature's mandibles, closed and opened like scissors, while its antennas followed out of the hole, flailing about wildly.

The small hole began to widen, the creature squirming itself out. Its round multi-colored face, which had no eyes, was the size of a baseball, and it was like looking at the head of a gigantic sausage after being cut in half—all mesh and interior. The creature slithered out some more, revealing a portion of its body. No limbs, just bristles, its yellowish-gold exterior patterned like a bumble bee's.

It was a Eunice aphroditois, commonly known as the Bobbit Worm, approximately the length of a person with the size

and diameter of a large thick vacuum hose, and though this particular Bobbit presently resided within the carcass of a canine, it normally existed underwater. Buried deep within ocean floors. Jutting out at fish, octopuses, eels and any other unsuspecting prey, taking them into the ground in seconds.

Tonight's menu: a Rottweiler's innards.

Stevie's stomach lurched as she slowly backed away, watching the brainless beast shift its head sporadically. Opening-closing its mandibles, its antennas moving aimlessly. Then it abruptly retracted into the dog's body.

"Whaa... how...?" Stevie murmured, grimacing at the internally gutted animal, her heart pounding in her ears.

Her only conclusion was that Chachi the family Rottweiler mistook the giant worm for either food, a toy or just another backyard game (racoons and possums being the pooch's favs), and like many of the worm's massive underwater prey, he could do absolutely nothing about it snaking down his yelping throat.

Thankfully, Stevie was well acquainted with the owner of this peculiar worm, who happened to be the same owner of the African rock python currently bubble bathing in her tub, and she was able to look no further than a bedroom down the hall to find this owner.

"Eric!" Stevie shouted, brows trenched.

She blitzed into the hallway, stormed into Eric's room.

Pictures and posters of sharks, sea snakes, salamanders and other aquatic and tropical creatures adorned the walls. Two aquariums and a vivarium sat on tables.

Stevie winced when looking upon Eric's empty bed, his blanket and bed sheet lying halfway along the floor. She searched his room, his closet, under his bed.

But her little brother Eric wasn't there.

She turned to the large vivarium by the window, an enclosure set up like a mini rain forest, complete with soil, plants, small tree branches, a water bowl and hollowed bark for an animal to hide in.

This vivarium's animal, however, was presently missing, its top covering lying along the table.

A silver name tag was fastened on the vivarium's glass—*Amelia*. Stevie massaged her neck and shoulder bite, let out a deep sigh.

To the right of the enclosure sat an aquarium, filled with water, with a few large fish and three feet of dirt and gravel at the bottom. A name tag on the outside glass read *Bobby*, and with a sneer, Stevie glanced toward the kitchen, where *Bobbit Worm Bobby* (as Eric liked to call it) was currently burrowed in its canine host.

Her eyes veered to a couple of framed pictures on Eric's dresser. Photos of Eric—with his pets.

One pic featured Eric holding what looked like a long thick brown, black and beige scarf around his neck and arm. Stevie shook her head and scowled when she saw that the 'scarf' had an oval head, facing its smiling human. She glared at an inscription along the bottom portion of the frame: *Amelia n' Me!*

A picture beside this showed Eric holding *Opus*, an emerald-black skinned baby *crocodile monitor*, a large lizard cousin to a Komodo dragon with rows of spike-like teeth and powerful jaws. Eric had gotten Opus just before Amelia, however, his mother made him return the reptile after watching a YouTube video of a monitor lizard keeper waving his bandaged hand to the camera, saying gregariously, 'If you don't want your nerves severed, kids, I recommend Geckos'.

Ever since a class field trip to an aquarium at age six, exotic animals were Eric's obsession, and being an astute and mature child for his age, he proved more than capable of handling these strange and unusual pets. So when Stevie received a Chevrolet Camaro for her sixteenth birthday last year, it wasn't long before Eric pressured their parents to give him *his* greatest wish— enclosures to his most favorite creatures.

'They're our friends' was always the 12-year-old's mantra, having a deep ambition to help others fully embrace wildlife.

'Friends... that need boundaries', was his dad's ongoing response and rebuttal, and like Stevie and the rest of the family, he would only come as far as Eric's doorway.

'Honestly, Eric, why can't you just be into normal things like other kids your age?' his mother would ask him. 'Like... Disney movies'.

Stevie gave one last look around the room, then she turned toward the door, about to head out to find Eric.

She froze when seeing her brother enter the room.

Eric sauntered to his bed—zombie-like, squinty eyed, completely oblivious to Stevie's presence.

"Eric!" Stevie yelled.

The boy did not respond, but only lay in bed and pulled a blanket over him. He closed his eyes, his hands and forearms still wet from aquarium water.

Stevie stared at him, brows furrowed, perplexed.

"Eric ... ?"

Eric's head suddenly sprang up, and with half opened eyes and a somber face, he said to Stevie in an almost robotic/hypnotic voice, "They're our friends" He stared at Stevie a moment more, then his head plummeted into his pillow,

going right back to sleep.

"The hell...?" murmured Stevie, about to step toward the boy and drag him out of bed.

Stevie suddenly felt a sharp sting on the bridge of her bare sandaled foot. She released a loud wail, her foot pulsating with pain.

Something with fangs just bit her.

She looked down at her foot, and shrieked when seeing a small creature crawling across it. She shook it off, a nice size bite left on her skin.

It was a type of arthropod, pinkish-brownish, having eight long 'spider-like' legs, with two large front claws, like a scorpion's or crab's. Its crustacean body resembled a scorpion's, with the same size and shape except without a tail and stinger. Its diamond shaped head had black doll-like eyes on far opposite sides, its fangs like a spider's moving up and down.

Goosebumps crept on Stevie's arms.

The arthropod turned its head to its gawking observer, its round eyes gazing upon her, likely re-targeting her.

Stevie took off a sandal and went to work smashing the encroacher, wielding and slapping her sandal on the floor like an enraged carpenter hammering nails into a stubborn piece of wood. When Stevie finished her execution, all that remained was a cluster of brown and green mush, plastered to the wood floor.

A scorpion spider-crab was what this creature was, as Stevie recalled Eric telling her once.

She turned to an aquarium in the corner, half filled with water, with mini mountains and embankments - the spider-crab's dwelling. Like the other two glass cases, this aquarium was also unoccupied.

Again, Stevie moved toward the sleeping Eric, anxious to get answers from him.

As she approached his bed, she spotted his pill bottle on his nightstand.

She paused. Picked up the bottle, read the prescription, the recollection of her kid brother's chronic condition lighting up in her head like a luminous bulb.

DR. AKASH, MD

PRESCRIPTION FOR: TARWATER, ERIC

CLONAZEPAM

TAKE 1 CAPSULE BY MOUTH BEFORE BEDTIME

FOR SOMNAMBULISM

On the nightstand beside the pill bottle was a drinking glass filled with water, usually empty at this time of night. His first time ever neglecting his pills.

Stevie heard a scream across the hall, from the room where her eighty-seven-year-old grandma stayed, and her heart stammered.

She gazed at the scorpion spider-crab's remains on the floor. Refaced its empty aquarium.

Fastened on a top corner of the outside glass were seven silver name tags: *Dopey, Grumpy, Happy, Sleepy, Sneezy, Bashful and Doc.*

Stevie was no math wiz, nor was she a Disney fan, but from what she remembered, there were *six* other spider-crabs within this aquarium (and she hoped to God she just smashed Grumpy).

Turning back toward the room across the hall, she covered her mouth to smother a deep bellow of terror.

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 three films based on his published stories. When not scaring people, Lera enjoys practicing martial arts and collecting Bronze Age Marvel comics. Visit Lera at www.MikeLera.com and LizarragasBogBlog.BlogSpot.com.

Instagram: MikeLera.Author.Screenwriter
Twitter: @LizarragasLair3



Cult of the Box



@CultoftheBox

Dreams of the Nightmare Eater | Melissa R. Mendelson

The dream was always the same. A dimly lit room. Little candles on clothed tables. Shadows sitting in chairs. A stage shining under the spotlight. Someone reading to the crowd, describing their nightmares to them, nightmares that she had devoured, and nightmares that she had hoped to never re-visit again.

Mara opened her eye. The other blinked on her left hand. She had been dreaming again, eating the same old nightmares. She needed some new material, but nightmares these days were so bland. It was the same thing over and over again. People were afraid to be seen for who they are and not what they wanted to be. There were no more real fears, and no one even feared death anymore. Maybe, they had all sold their soul along with their eyes. Her right eye returned to its socket.

Mara opened a small closet. She chose a flowing red, silk top and blue jeans. She pulled a pair of black shoes out from under the bed, followed by an orange suitcase. The suitcase had a number lock, and only she knew the code. She turned the dials until they read 3-3-3. The suitcase popped open, revealing stacks of cash. She pocketed one stack and closed and locked the suitcase. She pushed it back under the bed.

Minutes later, Mara stepped outside her apartment and walked down a spiral staircase, heading to the street. She lived over a bakery. She could always smell the sweet aroma coming from within the store, but each time, its sweetness was stung with the presence of people. They didn't like her. She didn't like them, but this was routine. This was her reminder of why she was who she was. She walked into the bakery, and faces lifted upward, glaring at her presence.

"Four eyes," one man muttered as his spectacles adjusted to the light and focused on the newspaper in front of him.

"Mar." Only the redhead behind the counter called her that. She knew what Mara was, and she was the only one, who had silver for eyes. "Same?"

"Same," Mara replied. "Orange juice and brownie."

"Some breakfast." The redhead walked away.

"Four eyes." A young man stood behind her with a box held up to his eye. He tried to scan her, absorb her data, but she was blank, a ghost.

"Aren't you a little too young for a box for an eye?"

"No, I'm thirteen. As soon as I hit that number, I gave up my eye. What's your excuse?"

"People like you." Mara dropped a handful of coins onto the counter for the redhead along with a hundred-dollar bill. "Keep the change, Red."

"Hey, how much are you worth," but the young man got no reply. "Four eyes," he yelled after her.

"She's a nightmare eater, you idiot," Red hissed at him.

The place went silent. Red had only done that twice before, and the place nearly cleared out both times. She was warned if it happened again, she would not be allowed back in the bakery. But lucky for Mara, the manager was on vacation this week.

"Those things aren't real," the young man yelled at Red. "Coffee. Milk and three sugars."

"She's very real." Red moved away from him.

"Enough, Red," Mara muttered under her breath. She tried to eat her brownie, but she could feel the stares, the lenses zeroing in on her. Stare all you want. She could not be read, but she could read them. All of them and their nightmares, and they were all bland.

Mara watched the young man sit at a table nearby. He intended on staring at her until he finished his coffee. Others with boxes over their eyes watched other people, recording their movements, their lips, their data. They did not look at her. A little boy sat in a high chair nearby. He wore black sunglasses. His mother was breaking him in early. She had a ruby for one eye, and she decorated the other side of her face with a crystal chain mask. She pulled her son's seat around when she realized that Mara was watching him. Now, his nightmares she could devour, but she wouldn't do that to a child.

Mara checked her swiss army watch. It was heavy and old. She found it in an antiques store. She liked it immediately. The owner wanted her out of the store, so he cut the price down. The deal was for her to never return, but he had other items that she liked. She would circle back, whether he wanted her to or not. The worse thing that would happen, if he tried to chase her away again, would be that she would threaten to eat his nightmares, and she was sure that he had plenty of them from the battle-scars on his face.

Mara was getting annoyed at the young man. He zeroed in the box over his face, trying to penetrate her body, steal her soul. She sighed, and her right eye moved out of its socket. She raised up her left hand at him. Her eye blinked on the back of her hand. The young man almost fell out of his chair. He made a move to leave, but a few people pushed past him to get out first.

Mara's right eye returned to its socket. She finished her orange juice and chucked the empty cup and brownie wrapper into the garbage. She knew someone would complain, but she didn't care. Her friend set her up with the apartment over the bakery, and nobody would want to mess with him. So, let them complain because until she was ready to go when she wanted to go, nobody could tell her to leave.

The street outside was always busy. Black cube vehicles hurried by. She tried to hail a blue cab. Sometimes, they would give her a ride. Most times like now, the driver would shout and scream until she left the car. She was able to touch his shoulder before she left, and he shook in terror. At least, he had one good nightmare in him. Well, not anymore, and she smiled as he sped away.

The trolley was mostly punctual. Today, it ran ten minutes late, and she could not stand under the bus stop with the others. Those people all stood together, looking at each other with boxes over their eyes, laughing at the images that they absorbed, memories that did not belong to them, but people wanted to share them. And now they were public property, but they would not be shared with her. And she wanted no part of them.

Once on the trolley, Mara would always try to sit towards the back, but not today. Today, there was a bunch of young men like the one in the coffee shop with boxes over their eyes. They were so excited to have them. Now, they could fit in. They could see beneath the surface, and they could hide who they really are by being like everyone else, absorbing data, stealing memories. But none of them could read her, and that frustrated them. It made her laugh, but she kept her laugh low. She did not need to deal with them.

Mara's stop was always the last one. The young men finally exited two stops earlier, but each one glared at her. One of them even hit her on the shoulder, thinking that would do it, that would break the surface. Her right eye disappeared the minute that he touched her, and she grabbed his hand. Oh, how he had nightmares, and she thanked him for them. He dropped the box, revealing the white of his eye, and he screamed. He ran off the trolley, and Mara rested her foot on top of the box. She knew the driver was watching her, but he wanted no part of it. So, he kept driving.

There were three people left on the trolley now along with Mara. One was a mother with a young child. Her eyes were emerald, and her face was covered with dark freckles. Her daughter was the mirror image of her. Another was a man that looked grungy, playing with drumsticks in his hands. He looked at her, and she liked the music notes that he had for eyes. But she really liked the last passenger. Bright blue eyes. Blue hair covered by a baseball cap. Purple nails perfectly crafted. Double glasses for reading and writing. Did she write Horror? Mara wanted to ask her, but she got off at the next stop, followed by the drummer.

Mara was surprised to find the mother and her daughter get off at her stop. They were outside of town, and another trolley would not be coming until later that night. Were they going to the Carnival? They seemed like everyone else, so why would they be going there?

"Are you a nightmare eater," the little girl asked.

"I am." Mara's right eye disappeared and re-appeared on the back of her left hand. "Are you afraid of me?"

"We are not," the mother replied. "Could you lead us to the Carnival?"

"What business do you have there?"

"Not me," the mother said. "My daughter."

"I can see the future," the little girl said. "Would you like to know yours? It's not what you think."

"No." Mara backed away from the little girl. "Keep it to yourself, please. The Carnival is this way. It's not open yet. It's still light outside."

"They're expecting us." The mother took her daughter by the hand. "Her. They're expecting her."

"How many nightmares have you eaten today?" The little girl watched Mara smile. "Any good ones?"

"One was about spiders." Mara smiled again. "Another was afraid of body odor," and the little girl giggled at that. "We're here," and they approached the Carnival, which looked like any other carnival. But that was until you walked into the tents. "Boss's tent is the red one toward the back." Mara watched the mother and little girl walk away. "Good luck."

"You too." The little girl waved at her, and Mara wondered what she meant by that.

The Twins would be practicing right now. They always practiced until the show. She wondered if they ever slept, but she never spoke to them. She only watched them perform their acrobatics, and they never used a net, even

when some of the high flying acts were a bit dangerous. They trusted each other, and she felt bad for them. The outside world took their parents away from them and wanted no part of the Twins because they were once Siamese twins joined at the face. The world refused to give them a chance, casting them aside like they did to her.

Mara was surprised that the male twin waved at her. His sister was too busy stretching, preparing for their next swing. Mara waved back and smiled. She sat where the audience would be later. They would ooh and aww and scream at their act, but that was as far as they would be willing to go. Just another reason to hate people.

"I have this reoccurring nightmare that spiders are crawling all over me. They won't bite me, but they're everywhere. One is even trying to climb into my mouth."

Mara was back in that room, and the young man from the bus was talking about his nightmare, his spiders. The shadows clapped. The candles flickered. The spotlight over the stage went out. A cold breeze settled over Mara. She opened one eye.

It was late. She had fallen asleep again, watching the Twins practice. The real show would be starting soon, and she needed to get ready. She slipped away as the Twins caught each other in mid-air. Maybe one day, she'll talk to them, but she promised herself that yesterday. Maybe tomorrow, she would try again.

Mara's tent was small. The walls were painted black, reminding her of that place that she always goes to in her sleep. There was only one table, and it was red. But sometimes, she covered it with a white cloth. The table had a single candle on top of it, and it was surrounded by two chairs. One for her, and one for her next victim.

Most nights, no one walked into Mara's tent. People were too afraid to face her, to expose their nightmares to her, and most of the nightmares were bland. Today, she had stumbled across a few real ones, and she was satisfied. So, if it was another quiet night, she was fine with that, but just as she closed one eye, ready to visit that room again, someone walked into her tent.

"You're a Nightmare Eater, right?"

Mara held up her left hand, and her eye blinked on the back of it. "Yes, I am. What nightmare plagues you?" The young man tried to scan her with the box over his eye, but he could not read her. "You're like a ghost," he said.

"I eat ghosts, so would you want me to eat yours?" She stared at the box, not hiding her disgust. "Twenty bucks."

"That's it?" He laughed, pulling a twenty from his pocket, but when he laid his hand on the table, she touched it, sending a cold shock through his body. "What was that?"

"Tell me. How do you see the world?"

"What do you mean? I see it like this." He looked around the room with the box pushed against his eye. "Why do you have both your eyes? Don't you want a box?"

"I don't need a box to see. I see your nightmares, and I eat them." Her eye on the left hand blinked. "You can go now."

"Wait. That's it?"

"Were you expecting Tarot Cards or crystals?" She lowered her hand, and her eye returned to its right socket.

"No. Whatever." He moved away from her. "If I have any nightmares tonight, then I want my money back."

"You won't have nightmares when you sleep," she said.

"What does that mean?"

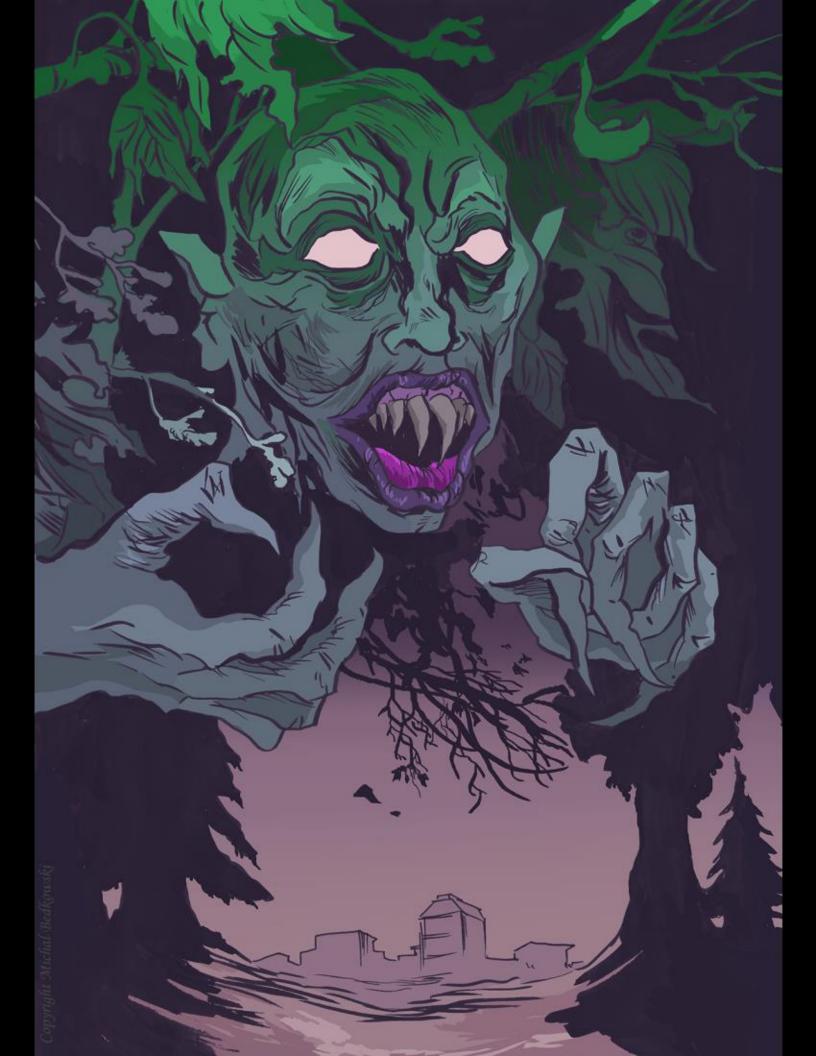
"Lower the box from your eye, and look outside."

"Whatever." He stormed out of the tent.

A moment later, she heard the young man scream. She smiled to herself as her eye returned to her left hand. Every time he lowered that box from his eye, he would see the haunted faces of those people that he feared. For the young man on the bus, every time he lifted a box up to his eye, he would see a spider. She picked and chose their punishment just like with the cab driver, who would fall asleep and then smell that hideous body odor that he was so afraid of. That's what they get when you mess with a Nightmare Eater, and Mara closed her eye, returning to that place, where another one of her victims read their nightmare aloud to a dark room.

About the Author:

Melissa R. Mendelson is a Horror and Science-Fiction author. Her short stories have been published by Sirens Call Publications, Dark Helix Press and Transmundane Press. Her short stories have also been featured in several publications on the website, Medium. She is currently working on finishing her Horror novel, *Ghost in the Porcelain*.



Chasing the Moon | Matt Scott

Victor stood there, at the tree line, though he ceased being Victor days ago, or maybe even longer than that. The days blurred together now, and all he was sure of was his thirst, his hunger. His basic, primal needs. He had nothing against the Gruber's. Nothing at all. Barely even knew them. They had only moved to town two summers ago when the mall was being built, and Mr. Gruber, a small, solid looking man in his fifties, was the architect in charge of the project. He relocated his family: his wife Marilyn and their two teenage sons, Peter and Christian, to be closer to the work. They were a decent, hardworking family. And, every one of them smelled delicious.

Victor skulked in the shadow of the tree line. The sun faded quickly in the west in December, and he was cloaked in the gloaming light as the family ate their evening meal in the dining room of their two-story colonial home. Winters on the East coast could be brutal, sometimes dumping a few feet of snow on the ground in a single day. Luckily, this winter had been mild. No snow covered the manicured lawns of Cape Bay, a suburb of Boston, about twenty minutes west by train. There would be no prints in the snow leading up to the sliding glass doors to the back patio of their home. There would be no finger prints on the brass hardware. His claws were razor sharp and strong as steel. It was almost too easy. Almost. What was left of his humanity was eating away at him like a cancer. Telling him that all life was precious. Do no harm. Leave these people be. But the animal side of him, the wolf side, was smelling the blood flow through their veins at twenty yards away, through the glass of the sliding back doors. The animal side could see their necks pulsate and surge with the pumping of their hearts, could smell their flesh over that of the roast duck and sweet potato mash that was on the table before them, laid out in celebratory fashion. It was a feast. And Victor was crashing the party.

He crept forward through the darkness, a dark brown shadow of his former self. Fangs the length of pencils, snarled from beneath his elongated snout. His form low to the ground, his massive haunches propelling him forward, three feet at a time with little effort. Spread out on the ground, he clawed his way ever closer, extending his body to its full horizontal, almost nine feet of him, lay outstretched at the bottom step of the wood deck. Ears perked to full attention. Long grey tufts of hair rose from the tip of each alert saucer sized ear. He mounted the steps in one surreptitious leap, like a ninja in the night, preparing to strike down its feudal enemies. Except, these people were not his enemies. They had done nothing to him nor meant him any ill-will. And yet, Victor burst through the glass of the sliding patio doors, exploding into the room as subtly as a neutron bomb. Mr. Gruber fell backwards out of his dining room chair as did Peter, who sat opposite the doors, facing them, and Marilyn, who occupied the far end of the table. Christian was the only member of the dinner party that remained in his chair. He sat with his back to the sliding glass doors, four long gashes appearing from behind his right ear down below his left shoulder blade. He screamed out in agony, but Victor quickly silenced him as he clamped his vicious jaws down upon his throat, crushing his larynx instantly. He pulled his head back, with Christian's trachea between his teeth, wrenched his mighty jowls back side to side, slinging the boys blood across the room. It splattered on the walls like a Jackson Pollack painting. Victor howled in delighted torment and plunged his claws into the young Gruber's tender back, lifting him up and out of his chair, sending flatware and food across the hardwood flooring of the room.

Mr. Gruber scrambled frantically to collect his fallen family members, pulling them to him on the floor beside the table. They all three huddled on the far side of the room, faces frozen in shock and fear, unable to form a coherent sound. Only muffled screams and sobbing noises came from the terrified family. Victor, with Christians' limp, lifeless body, run through by his merciless claws, stood triumphant and terrifying at the edge of the room. He arched his barbarous body and let out a horrible howl that made the Gruber's blood run cold. He scanned the room with his fierce, yellow eyes. He turned abruptly, Christian's body still clenched tightly within his claws, and leapt back out of the shattered patio doors. He cleared the deck without ever touching it and disappeared back into the safety of the tree line. One body would do. It would sustain him for a few days. It would be a week perhaps before he would need to feed again. Maybe ten days. Next time he would travel for his meal. This time the pain had been too great, and he was forced to hunt closer to home. Next time he will pick a stranger. Next time it wouldn't be a child. Next time. Always next time. Sorry old friend.

About the Author:

Matt Scott is the author of *Darkness Calling* and *Voices in My Head* as well as more than three dozen short stories appearing in anthologies across the country. He recently moved from the Midwest to the beautiful mountains of Colorado, where he lives with his wife, Heather, and their ever-growing gaggle of furry friends.

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Mr. Halloween | Brian J. Smith

When he heard the doorbell ring, Donald Jameson hurried out of the basement and took the stairs two at a time. He checked his watch and cursed under his breath; he knew that Beggar's Night always started around six thirty but he'd been so busy down here he'd lost track of time. He shed out of his dirty white shirt, slipped into a red and black striped sweater and snatched the bowl from the table beside the door.

The bright orange glow from the jack o' lanterns on the porch beamed against the front windows. He wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand, swept a strand of hair from his forehead and opened the door. A blast of cold air swirled into the house, caressing his cheeks and adding a bone-deep chill to his aching bones.

"Trick or treat!" said a trio of ninja turtles standing on the front porch.

They raised their bags at him with pleading eyes.

"Well, look at you guys." He beamed. "You look so cool."

"Hi, Dan."

"Hello, Stacy."

Stacy Forester was a single mother who lived with her three boys; she worked as a sales person at McCartney Motors. She'd sold him the green Ford Taurus still sitting in the driveway. She was tall with willowy blonde hair, prominent blue eyes and a pale oval face.

"Let me see what I've got here for these ninja turtles." He knelt down, reached into the bowl and then raised his finger. "Don't eat too much candy, kids. You'll get a belly ache."

"We won't." The boys chuckled.

They laughed as Don dropped handfuls of candy into their bags. When he got to the one with the purple waistband, the boy reenacted a series of karate demonstrations; his tiny pale hands whooshing through the air as he swung his feet left and right with barbaric voracity.

"Whoa, killer. Who are you supposed to be?"

"I'm Donatello." He said. "If anyone tries to hurt you. I'll fly in and kick their butts all over this street."

"You will, huh? I'll tell you what if I'm ever in danger you'll be the first to know."

Most people preferred Christmas but for Donald Jamison, Halloween was special. It was the only time of the year when he wasn't just dotty old Mister Jameson.

A chill tunneled through him, prickling his skin. He bit on his bottom lip to hold back the tears and dropped a handful of mini Kit-Kat bars into Donatello's bag; he raised his finger again to warn him about the dangers of eating too much candy and patted him on the shoulder. They beamed over their findings as Stacey approached the front door; her face had a deathly pale glow and the skin under her eyes sagged as if she hadn't slept.

"Is everything okay?"

"I'm good." She nodded. "There's this stomach flu going around. How have you been?"

"Good." He nodded. "I'm trying to stay busy so I don't think about it a lot."

"I can't imagine how you feel." She said.

"It's a pain I wouldn't wish on anyone." He said, then flashed a half smile. "There isn't a man in their right mind who wouldn't want you."

"I wish you could say that to all of the guys I meet. Maybe they'd actually stay for something more than sex." She said. "I'm sorry, Don. I didn't mean to—"

Her cheeks flushed.

"It's okay." He said. "If you and the boys ever want to come over for dinner sometime my door is always open."

"Thanks." She said. "Have a good night."

"You too."

He flashed a confused look at her and watched her lead her boys down the street. A second throng of beggars flooded the front porch, dragging pillow cases and neatly adorned bags of colorful characters printed along the front.

He didn't expect anything from Stacey other than pure friendship and nothing more. Gloria would always be his sweetheart no matter how she looked. He didn't mind it because it was good to see her waiting for him by the front door when he got home from his shift at Bugs-B-Gone.

The houses on Poplar Street were all neatly decorated in their own festive styles: bright-eyed pumpkins flashing red orange gazes at passersby, cardboard or paper cutouts of witches, ghosts, bats and Jack-o-Lanterns were

tacked to front doors or danced in the breeze from arm length tree branches. Other kids milled around in different costumes ranging from skeletons, comic book heroes, princesses and horror-movie slashers; their parents were dressed in street clothes under big heavy jackets while they guffawed at the decor.

A cuticle moon beamed through the thin shroud of dark clouds floating past. The wind sent crisp autumn leaves dancing down the street in a drunken tumble; the temperature always dropped around this time of the night as it'd done every year.

"Hey, Don."

He nodded. "How are you doing, Tim?"

"Okay I guess. My stomach hurts a little bit."

"Trick or treat."

He beamed at a little blonde girl in a spongy pink dress with a diamond tiara resting in her hair and, kneeling down before her, dropped a few pieces into her bag. Tim was a rawboned man with light brown hair and bright green eyes; he wore a red shirt and blue jeans with brown hiking boots. He leaned against the nearest front porch pillar, doubled over and puked into the dry brown flower bed running along the edge of the front porch.

When he set the bowl down to help him, Tim waved his hand and stopped Don in his tracks. Tim swiped his left sleeve across his mouth and stood, smiling through the thin coat of saliva on his lips.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm good." He nodded. "I can't help but hate my job."

"You're a welder, aren't you?"

"Yeah. It gives me the worse headache in the world." He said as Don dropped more candy into the other bags. "I shouldn't complain because I won't have this job for long."

"It reminds me of something Gloria used to say." He pondered, then said. " 'Be lucky to have what others never do'."

"Maybe if I'm lucky, this stomach thing will kill me."

He played Tim's last phrase in his head to make sure he'd heard him correctly.

"She was a good woman."

"Yes she was."

"I'll see you later, Don."

Tim and his daughter mingled into the herd of happy children heading down the street and off into the night; a third throng of children hurried onto the porch chanting and brandishing their bags. When he peered over into the flower bed, the puddle of vomit Tim had left behind was gone as if it hadn't even happened. He shook it off and went back to serving the children.

Seconds stretched into minutes and minutes stretched into hours before the tornado siren blared across the town to signal the end of another All Hollow's Eve. Donald stuck his fingers in his ears and winced (as other townspeople had done) and shut the front door; he flipped the light switch to the outside and bathed the house in darkness. He couldn't even assume how many people had come by tonight but that wasn't important; he enjoyed this night as much as the children before this night and the one before.

He pulled back the drapes and peered out the double-paned glass door. In the glare of the moonlight, he saw the shadows of children scurrying back home to inspect their taking; skeletal tree branches stretched across the pavement like cryptic gnarled fingers.

In the town of Brixton, Ohio he'd reclaimed his crown.

Another Halloween in the bag for—

"Mister Halloween." said a voice from the inside of the living room. "That's so sweet. You did a good job tonight."

"That's what you told me to do, remember."

"I really liked that look of shock on your face when Tim threw up in the garden." It said. "And let's not forget about what Stacey said to you before she walked away. Your days of getting a mercy fuck are long gone, old man. I thought the vomit thing gave a little pinch of flavor to the situation, don't you think?"

He glanced over at the picture of Gloria sitting on the narrow wooden shelf running along the right side wall. No matter how ugly she'd looked to everyone else, she was still an angel in his eyes and that was all that mattered. Her neck length brown hair fell across the tops of her shoulders, framing a broad-skulled face and a huge bulging temple; the light from the camera glinted in the deep pools of her deep-set dark eyes.

"I didn't want to hurt these people."

"Don't tell me you're feeling sorry about them. You didn't feel that way when you poisoned all that candy and passed it out that night. The very same crowd of kids who came to your front door an hour and a half ago. And all because—"

"It was so bad she was afraid to leave the house. They killed my Gloria because she wasn't pretty enough for them." A river of tears streamed down his face. "She didn't ask to be born that way, but I still love her and I always will. I came home after work and she'd went down to the basement with the rope and one of the kitchen chairs and—"

"So it was love that drove you to commit murder, wasn't it?"

Don gazed into the living room and saw the tall shadowy figure reflected in the front window. The porcelain white lamp spilled a carpet of light across half of a charcoal suit and exposed a sliver of a white tie; he couldn't see the figure's feet and probably never would but he could imagine it wearing slick black shoes. It had a smug little voice that he could do without.

"There's no sense to be a part of a world that has no right to judge a person based on their looks. We were born in this town and we've loved it ever since. I just never knew how people could be so nice one minute and then become so evil the next like there's a switch inside of them that they can flip off and on anytime they wanted to."

"And you thought this was a better idea. To send these people to their deaths because they were evil."

"Someone needed to teach them a lesson. They needed to learn that it doesn't pay to be mean." He said. "The Good Book says 'do not judge or you will be judged'. "

"Well, Don. This isn't Bible School. This is your fate." The voice said. "Your punishment is to hand out candy to the same family you killed that night until you've learned your lesson."

Another tear slid down his cheek.

"I've learned my lesson." He said, pleading. "I'll do anything but—"

"You'd rather burn in Hell than repeat this day over and over again." The faceless man said. "I know a lot of people who'd beg to differ. We'll let you know when it's time."

"I want to see my wife again."

"Don't worry about her. She's up there where she belongs and she's waiting for you." It said. "You'll see her someday."

"Someday but not today."

"Exactly."

A loud siren rose in the distance before closing in around the house; car doors chucked shut as the sound of hurried footsteps crunched upon the graveled drive. A swirl of red and blue lights kissed the edges of Gloria's picture frame as the lights swallowed him in its vast colorful brilliance. He blinked and found himself back inside the basement, standing next to his waist-high workbench running along the rough cement wall; he eyed the array of syringes lying on a piece of black cloth and the giant tub of pesticide sitting next to an open bag of candy.

He supposed that what he'd done was wrong in the eyes of God but he couldn't help himself; anger can override the kindness in us and drive us into a mad path of retribution. As a child, he was always the one apple in the metaphorical basket of all the bad ones; lend a stranger his last five dollars or the tee shirt off of his back.

There was no sense in being evil in an already evil world.

And now that he thought about it, there was no sense in making it wait for him either.

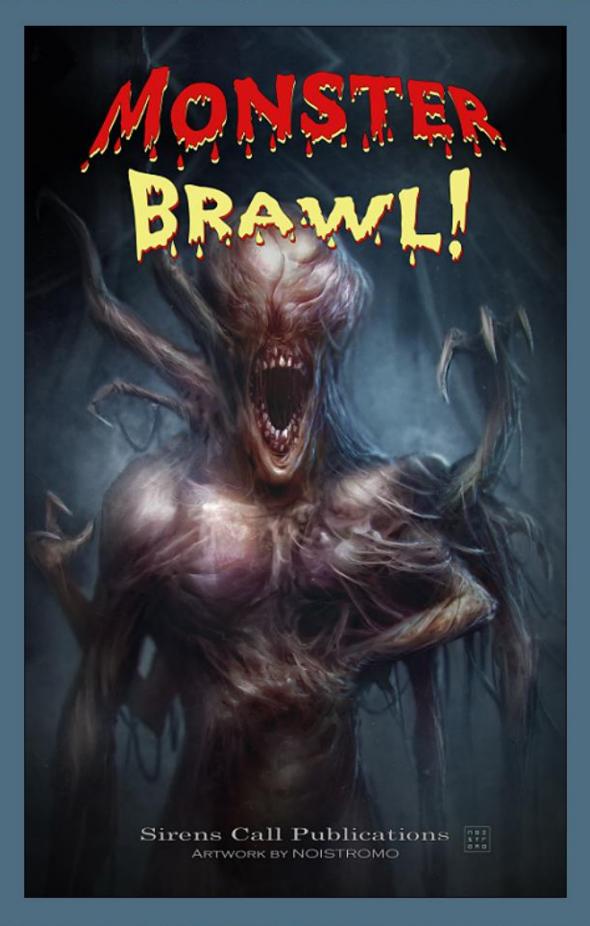
About the Author:

Brian J. Smith has been featured in numerous anthologies, ezines and magazines in both the mystery and horror genres. His short story collection, *Dark Avenues* and his novellas *The Tuckers*, and *Three O'Clock* are available on Amazon. He lives in Ohio, eats spicy food, has too many books and drinks too much coffee;

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It's time to let the monsters out!



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Scratch | Naching T. Kassa

They called him 'Scratch' and he moved through the world like a wolf among sheep. His eyes, shaded against the yellow glare of the sky, scanned the highway for prey.

The vintage Harley, a machine of pure heavy metal, hummed beneath him as he traversed the blacktop. It roared passed the rest stop, garnering a few nervous stares from the family inside the Winnebago. Scratch grinned. What would they say if he pulled up beside them? Would they admire the smear of crimson which marred the Harley's finish? What would they think of the faded swastika he'd hand-tattooed on his right hand? If he smiled, would they shit their pants?

He considered stopping, but the sight of the mother put him off. She wasn't his type at all. A woman of advancing years with lank blonde hair, jowls, and frightened eyes. It'd be easy to tempt her away from her mouse-like husband. Too easy. She might even enjoy what he did to her.

He traveled on.

The next car he saw appeared two hours later. It rippled out of the heated air like a ghost. A dark figure sat behind the wheel of the silver 'Vette.

The bumper bore signs of a feminine occupant. A sticker with the legend, ALWAYS A LADY and another with a pink dreamcatcher, piqued Scratch's interest. He followed.

Twenty miles passed beneath their wheels. Several times he tried to get a look at the driver, but every time he did, the car sped up. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get alongside. At one point, they'd been traveling at well over a hundred miles an hour when a semi had come along in the other lane. It'd forced him back behind the 'Vette and he'd almost collided with the car's bumper. He'd quickly regained control, and when he glanced up, glimpsed a feminine gaze in the rearview mirror. A blue eye winked at him and then the car had streaked ahead. It vanished over the next rise.

When Scratch reached the spot, he found the highway ahead empty. A plume of dust from a nearby dirt road, indicated the direction the car had taken. Scratch turned off the highway.

Several tall cacti stood sentinel along the road. Their dark shadows cooled the thick air.

He found the 'Vette parked off to the side a few minutes later. He brought the Harley to a halt behind the car. There was no sign of the driver. Scratch flipped the kickstand down and stepped off the bike. He hiked up his jeans. When he looked up, he found two beautiful legs hanging out the driver's side window. The driver wore white canvas shoes with broad laces.

The gravel crunched beneath his feet as he approached. When he reached the window, he found a young brunette reclining across the front seat. She wore a red blouse and black capris.

"You're new to the desert, aren't you?" she said.

Scratch didn't answer. He removed her left shoe.

No light of panic shone in her eyes as he removed the right. Her eyes didn't widen in shock or fear as he pulled the knife.

"Watch out," she whispered. "I sting."

He jerked the car door open. Her bare feet fell to the sand. When they touched the earth, something strange happened. Her feet fused together. Her legs followed.

Terror bloomed in Scratch's mind as her legs became a giant tail. A strange venomous spike grew from the end of it. Before he could move, she whipped the tail up between his legs. Agony pulsed through him as the spike pierced the spot between his shoulder blades. He wanted to scream but could only manage a small groan.

Fire flowed through his veins as the woman lifted him off his feet and into the air. His limbs, now paralyzed with venom, had undergone another change. To his horror, he watched them grow limp as though the bones had liquified beneath his skin.

The woman pulled the boots from his feet, then bit the toe off his right foot and spat it into the sand. Her eyes, once so enticing, had gone black and dead.

"Told you I sting," she whispered.

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 Ladies of Horror Picture-prompt Challenge

The Ladies of Horror Picture-prompt Challenge is a project that has been hosted monthly since February 2017 on Spreading the Writer's Word, a free fiction blog. The authors who participate sign up for a blind-write. What does that mean? It means that when they agree to write for the challenge, they have no idea what image will be assigned to them to inspire their ekphrastic prose.

Each month, twenty to thirty writers sign up to put their skill to the test on one of four new images. The Ladies of Horror Picture-prompt Challenge welcomes short stories, flash fiction, and poetry from women who write dark fiction, horror, and angst-ridden prose. Come visit us each month for new images and amazingly talented dark-prose on Spreading the Writer's Word.

The first piece in this issues' spotlight is by Asena Lourenco. Asena is fourteen years old and has been writing with the group since she was ten. The only youngling to write with the Ladies of Horror, Asena was looking over her mother's shoulder one day while Ela was working on a prompt. Not long after, Asena came back to her mother and showed her a poem she'd written that was inspired by the image Ela was working on herself. *How amazing is that*? Once Ela shared her daughter's work with us, we were overjoyed to not only recognize Asena's ability, but encourage the young lady to explore her writing talent!



The Housekeeper by Asena Lourenco

My vision is an ombré of dark browns as I dunk each cloth into a bucket of bubbles. The drilling of rainfall on roof tiles is a crescendo amongst the questioning silence. Fighting a pointless battle, the sun resigns, and all that can be seen is a faint whimper of light flirting with the one, lonely windowpane in an effort to enter. As if like clockwork, the pang of unpleasant deja-vu hits me as I glance at the growing pile of egg-white sheets stacked upon the dusty floor. A ringing scream comes from the upstairs floor, and before my brain has a minute to comprehend, I'm stood in front of a child brandishing a small dagger standing over a pool of warm blood.



The Silence Before by Ela Lourenco

Silence descends
Shroud of midnight blue
Not a leaf rustles
Not a creature moves
Twilight darkens
Time stands still
Blood moon is rising
Unlocking the gates of Hell
Earth groans as it vomits out
Ravenous fallen ones.
Flames flicker,
Drumbeat thrums
Silence is no more.
The scent of death lingers
Until the dawn is reborn.



Halfway to Heaven by Michelle Joy Gallagher

The master ordered the spires built during one of his episodes. He said he wanted to be as far away from hell as possible. "We can build a city halfway to heaven!" he'd exclaimed. Everyone feared him too much to contradict him. He brought in the finest architects and engineers, builders and learned men. The spires started going up only days later, with the poor men who'd just finished the aqueduct now working around the clock on them. All the while he laid in bed, suddenly afflicted by the "heat of hell coming through the floor tiles. It was all around him, he said. They had to work faster.

As they worked faster, more mistakes were made, and as the spires grew taller, reaching into the sky like bony fingers scrabbling for purchase, it meant that people died. The men would slip and fall and hit the ground with a dull thud, blood oozing from their eyes and ears and mouth, skulls crushed beyond oblivion, and the master refused blame, saying the men were so in love with a sinful life, they were drawn to it like a magnet. He laughed at them and cursed them, and forced older men, boys and women to take their place.

Still the master cried, and gnashed and screamed that the fires of hell were growing hotter. Old men carrying stones were whipped, young boys climbed and climbed and then fell and were impaled. The other workers were ordered to brick them up, even as they screamed and squirmed and tried in vain to lift themselves off of the impossibly tall rebar. They pled and begged as they were cemented in.

Finally, the platform was in place, and the spires that now carried so much misery held the base of the new city. The master ordered them at once to carry him to the top, that he was burning alive and wanted to be closer to the glory and grace of almighty God. Once at the top, he exclaimed that he could still feel hell chasing him, and in his anger, whipped them, beat them, and flung them from the platform to the ground below, "back into the fire that made their sinful hearts."

Soon it was only the master remaining, and he realized far too late he was too feeble to climb back down. He paced and screamed down to the people below to help him, to bring him food, that he was thirsty, that the sun baked him. They dragged their dead away and buried them and ignored the raving man, who's almighty god wasn't listening either.



The Powers of Belief by Marge Simon

In the tunnel under the Great River, Mikal runs for his life.

"There is no escape. Protestors will be shot. Repair to the nearest exit to be counted." The voice from the wall speakers is flat and impersonal. Twenty minutes ago, a shot hit him between his shoulders, knocking him to the ground. Only a moment to regain his senses, and he's up and running again, his violin case bumping against his back.

He is needed, only that fact drives him on. When he gets to the other shore, he will find his family and friends. With his music, he will bring their people together, to unite against the enemy. Even to heal the wounded, for his sister swore his talent had such power and he'd grown to believe it. Townsfolk laughingly called him Mikal the Magnificent. But they were always kind to him.

The tunnel proves much longer than he'd thought. When his legs refuse to move another step, he continues in a crawl. Suddenly, a waft of sweet fresh air, the opening at last! He rises and steps shakily out into a pile of rubble. Glancing upward, he sees the heavens, breathes in the crisp cool air. Distant flames glow along the horizon. Quickly he unbuckles the case and opens it, already thinking of the melody he will play first. It must be urgent, high and penetrating. Surely it will be heard for miles, such is the silence. But something is very wrong. He gasps, sitting back on his heels. Before him is a mass of splintered wood and strings. The shot had found a mark after all. There would be no heroics, no convoking notes.

Despite the fires, it's very still. No sign of a living soul; the eradication the enemy had threatened was complete. All this way he'd come, carrying a parcel of useless wood and believing he could make a difference. He slumped over the crushed remains in the case and wept. Finally, he slept. A soft wind stirred his hair. "You made a difference to us, Mikal. We believe in you." It was his sister's voice coming from a very long way off. When he woke, he felt much better. He told himself he was still needed, so he would survive. First, he must get a new violin somewhere. Surely if he walked far enough, he would find one. Yes, that's what he must do.

And the night wind rose to soothe him. And the distant fires burned on.



Safe House by Rie Sheridan Rose

Sarah looked around the huge empty room, her knapsack clutched tightly to her chest. The little canvas bag contained everything she possessed in the world.

"What is this place?" she whispered, afraid to disturb the silence that lay like a heavy blanket over the room.

"It's a safe place, and that's all that really matters. No one will find you here," her guide replied, thrusting a bag and a gallon jug at her. "Here's some food and water for the week. Make it count. I won't be back until next Friday."

With that, he turned on his heel and left. Sarah heard the key turn in the lock outside. They might say it was safe, but it seemed it was a prison to her.

She set her things on the floor and moved to explore the room. There was nothing much here—a stack of heavy sacks she could use to make a pallet, she supposed; another stack of thin sheeting; a basin that she would move as far away from the bed as possible and use for a toilet...she felt her face heat even though she was alone. Other than some miscellaneous equipment that she couldn't decipher, that was it. There was nothing to make her feel at home, or comfort her, or in any way make it less of a prison.

Moving things around the way she wanted to see them gave her a tiny sense of agency, but it wasn't enough to lift her spirits. She went to the only window in the room and hiked herself up on the windowsill to look out.

Outside, the world was green and beautiful. Inside, everything was brown and dreary. The window was barred. Safe house indeed!

She could feel the rage beginning to boil inside her, and this time she didn't fight to keep it down. She let it fill her, feeling the tingle in her fingertips that said the magic was rising.

All her life she had resisted its call. She had damped it down any time it started to manifest. Even so, she had been consigned to this cold, drear room because she had slipped and set the church on fire.

She had been locked away to save her from the angry townsfolk. Well, she didn't care what became of her anymore. This place was worse than anything they might do to her.

Sparks began to flash between her fingertips. Sarah laughed. For the first time, she rejoiced to see the magic. Flinging her arms wide, she let the fire free.

Withing moments, the room was ablaze. She scooped up her knapsack and walked to the door. It would burn away soon enough, and she would be free.

Maybe she'd look for her own safe house...



Venice is for Lovers by Naching T. Kassa

Venice is for lovers.

What could be more romantic than a gondola ride? The amber lanterns of the gondolas are reflected in the waters of the canal as we ride. The dark sky, awash with stars, above us. I smile at Rudy. He'd insisted on acting as my gondolier this time and he pushes our gondola on like a pro. My heart swells with love for him, just before it plops out of my chest.

Rudy and I have been together for three years, ever since I took that tumble off the top of the Empire State Building and landed at his feet. When I looked up from the pavement and into his handsome and terrified face, it was love at first sight. After they shoved me into that drawer at the morgue, I knew I had to see him again.

He screamed when I entered his apartment. I didn't look my best, of course, and a walking corpse doesn't tend to inspire romantic feelings. But I hung in there. I still am.

Rudy didn't appreciate me at first. When I followed him to work, he threw me under the subway train. Luckily, I came out no worse for wear. I went home and waited for him. We had a good long talk after that one and he agreed to take me on a picnic the next day.

We drove way out into the country, and he took me to the cemetery where his grandmother rested. It was a lovely grave, well-kept, and over-looking a beautiful little town. Rudy hit me in the head with a shovel and buried me next to his grandmother. It was the most romantic thing he'd ever done.

He was quite surprised when he found me in his apartment the next week. We had a lovely conversation after he quit screaming.

A few weeks later, Rudy suggested we go to Venice. He said it was a place for lovers. I immediately agreed.

And now, here we are. It's too bad my nose doesn't work anymore. I'd love to smell these canals.

Rudy has a surprise for me and just asked me to shut my eyes (This isn't an easy thing to do. I lost my left eyelid ages ago.) and he's tied something to my ankles. Oh! He just lifted me into his arms. Crap! My right arm fell off. Talk about embarrassing.

I can't take the suspense and I've opened my eyes. Huh! He's tied several weights to a chain around my ankles. That's kind of strange. I wonder if he knows the chain is tangled around his feet.

Oh! He just tossed me in the water! It's so warm against my cold skin. I didn't know we were going swimming. With only one arm, I can't swim very well. But neither can Rudy! Why, he's sinking with me! No matter how he claws at the water, he can't seem to surface.

I think I'm going to cry. He's given his life to be with me.

I guess Venice really is for lovers.



Residue by A.F. Stewart

In the twilight we hear them, the everlasting voices. The resonance breaks our harmony of being, disturbing small fragmented vestiges of what we were. We tried to ignore them at first, but their presence would pull at us.

We cannot remember why, though perhaps we should.

Sometimes, we can see them. Their silhouettes shift around the twisted spires, the relics of rusted metal we no longer understand. We instinctively know what they are: dead shadows caught between dimensions.

Possibly when the world shifted, they were left behind.

So we gather In the fading sunlight to listen to their forever screams. Some believe we knew their names once, but their identity has vanished with our irretrievable past. Were they part of that life before? We know some did not transition, some were a sacrifice to the machine. We do not remember why, or who, only that we live on. Not as we were, not with blood and bone, or memory long gone, but only thought.

Perhaps that is what they are. Our lost thoughts.

Yet we still watch them. Honour them, these shadows. Trapped in one moment we can no longer comprehend. They scream, but we do not know why. They cry, but we cannot fathom the tears. Once, we were like them. Once, I think, we may have loved them. Now we pity them.

These poor forgotten phantoms snared between our life and their death.



Magic Man by Elaine Pascale

Robby whisper-announced the pills as he crushed them. "Midol, courtesy of my sister's medicine cabinet...and some of this stuff she takes for palpitations...some of this other shit...and 'not for the faint of heart'." He held up a tinted bottle of cough syrup.

"Shit knocked me out for days when I took it," Justin muttered as if his heart was no longer in it.

Robby put the concoction in a glass and added soda, juice, and vodka as if he were a bartender at heart.

"Can't believe that doofus walked the tunnel to get here. With it strapped right on his back." Justin rolled his eyes. "As my southern grandma would say, 'bless his heart'."

Robby feigned incredulity. "He might have gotten robbed!

"Or nabbed by that killer that's been cracking people open."

"Yeah, the heartbreak kid..."

Changing the subject back, Justin asked wistfully, "Can you imagine how it sounds?

"You need to harden your heart. We got a buyer, I confirmed the money is there, that is all I care about." He thumped his chest for emphasis.

Robby, his heart knocking, walked into the other room, and handed the young man the drink.

"So, the gig you wanted to talk about—" the man said.

"We can discuss that in a moment. Sit back, I will play some beats for you."

Justin couldn't help himself. "Where did you get that 'burst' anyway?"

The man nodded to the guitar, still in its case and leaning against the wall. "My grandad. He was a musician, too...kind of famous but more for being a heartthrob."

"Cool," they said in unison.

"I was nervous about coming here, but you know, you gotta listen to your heart." The man lifted his glass and took a drink. This was followed with him wheezing and clutching at his chest and throat, which was followed by him falling to the floor.

"It was supposed to just knock him out." Justin's heart was in his mouth.

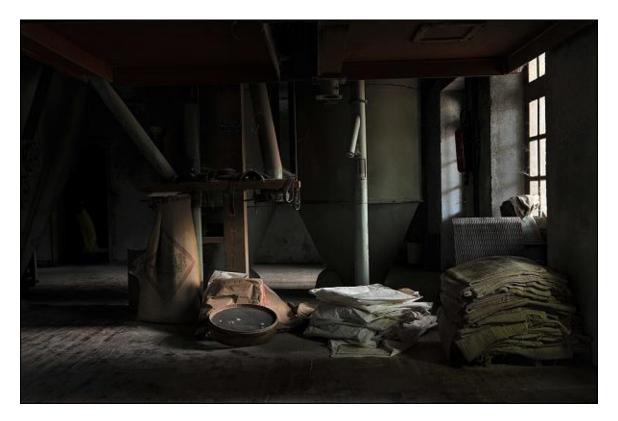
Robby felt for a pulse. "Jesus, he has one of those bracelets...heart condition."

"We are fucked," Justin gasped, sick at heart.

Robby, with a sinking heart, rushed to the guitar. "We gotta get this out along with him. No one can know he was here." Justin couldn't help himself. "Can we just look at it? It's my heart's desire to see one."

Robby sighed and unzipped the guitar case.

Their hearts stopped, metaphorically, at the sight of the classic guitar. It was nestled in its case, surrounded by literal human hearts.



Greater Grains of Atlanta by Kathleen McCluskey

Marie was jolted awake, she looked around and realized she was the only one left at Greater Grains of Atlanta. She dozed off doing the year end reports, and now the place was deserted. The constant hum of the grain machines had ceased for the day; she could distinctly hear the earth sound of the small river that ran through the mill. The security lights cast a smooth orange glow onto the equipment giving them an archaic ambience.

The catwalk she had to traverse to get to the stairs and her car creaked and moaned under her feet. Walking into the darkness she stopped as she thought she heard the crack of a whip. She leaned over the railing and squinted her eyes to see if anything was amiss. Not seeing anything she continued to walk, this time faster. She again stopped as she could feel somebody breathing down her neck. She spun around. Standing before her was a very angry apparition holding a whip. He reached out and grabbed her by the throat. She tried to scream but her voice would not come. "I am the task master and you are not where you belong, slave." He threw her off the cat walk and onto the hard concrete below. He landed beside her, whip raised above his head, "You will work until I tell you to stop. This plantation has no room for laziness. You will pay." He began to whip Marie.

In the morning when the foreman walked into the building he spotted Marie. She was curled in a bloody ball. He could see long gaping wounds on her back; the material of her dress was shredded. The gory, bloodstained gashes had dried the material onto her skin. He had to hold back tears as he shook his head. He remembered the legends of the old mill and the property it sat on. He recalled the stories his grandfather had told him about his ancestry and his great grandfather's role as a task master. Above him on the catwalk his forefather smiled.



Sanctuary by K.R. Morrison

Concetta ran along the moonlit canal, her blood pounding in her ears in time with her feet pounding the slippery ground. She didn't know where she was going or what she would do when she got there. She just knew that she had to get away. She cursed the dainty slippers that she was wearing—oh, if only to be wearing her sturdy workaday boots right now! She was sure that she would be able to get to St. Mark's and the lights of the piazza there without any problem at all.

But here she was, the picture of femininity – except for the running. Her best dress and the damned slippers — all dressed up for a disaster.

Her mother had come to her that afternoon so excited – a man had come to call on her youngest daughter! She was beside herself as she coaxed an uncooperative Concetta to leave her clay and potter's wheel in order to clean up for this suitor.

So there they had been – Signore and Signora Benedetti and a scowling Concetta – waiting for the knock at the door.

It finally came, but they were very confused when they opened the door.

It had been Monsignor Castenelli. At first, the family had thought that he was carrying bad news. After all, a minor plague was finding its way through Venice, and death was not unexpected.

But no – for the parents, it was worse than a death. Monsignor Castenelli wanted to take their Concetta away! Concetta backed toward the door to the rest of the house as her father asked – no, demanded – an explanation.

"Your daughter is very beautiful," Monsignor explained. "She would make a lovely addition to our convent."

Mr. Benedetti's brow was turning a fine crimson. "My daughter is not going to be stuck inside some abbey for the rest of her life!" he growled. "And why would you come for her yourself? Why not the Mother Superior?"

Monsignor had the gall to look Concetta up and down as if she was a piece of meat on offer. "She would also make a lovely – housekeeper – if she didn't make it as a nun." His grin reminded Concetta of woodblocks she had seen of wolves right before they ate the sheep.

"Papa!" she gasped. "No! This cannot happen!"

Her mother stood in front of her, a wall of comfort. "This certainly will not happen!" she shouted. "You may leave, Monsignor. Do so quickly, before we decide to summon help!"

Monsignor Castenelli plastered a soothing smile across his features. "It is an innocent request. Surely you must know that she won't be harmed." But there was a gleam in his eye that told otherwise.

Suddenly he pulled a dagger from beneath a fold in his clothes. Concetta's father could only stare in horror. "What — ?"

"If you do not give your permission to take her," snarled Castenelli, "I will have to take her by force."

At this, Concetta whirled around and bolted through the door behind her. She streaked through the house and out the back door. She could hear her parents shouting and the sounds of struggling, and could only hope that they would be spared that knife.

Now, out of breath, she turned down what she thought was a side street, and almost fell into a canal. She stopped in time and backed away – right into a door that led onto the alley. She took a close look at it, and almost cried in relief.

This door had a stained-glass window with a cross carved into the wood. She recognized it as the entry to a chapel that her mother used to go to – at least until death had claimed most of her children. Then she had lost interest in praying.

Concetta rapped hard on the door, and it was soon opened by a wizened old man in a brown cassock. She pushed past him, shouting "Sanctuary!"

The priest, or brother, stepped back, startled.

"Dear girl, whatever is wrong?" he asked.

Concetta could barely get her breath. "There's a man out there who is trying to harm me and my parents! He pulled a knife on us!"

"Dear Lord!" the man exclaimed. "Where is this happening?"

"The Benedetti villa. Do you know of it?"

The man smiled reassuringly. "Yes, I do. Signore Benedetti has been a patron of ours for many years. But please. Step into the kitchen, where it is warm. We'll be having dinner soon, and we would love for you to be a part of it."

She followed him gratefully through another door into a warm, inviting light. However, there was no food on the table. She was about to ask about this when a door in the opposite wall opened – and who should come in but Monsignor Castenelli!

Concetta screamed and pointed. "That's him!"

The man she had followed in had slipped behind her, and had closed the door firmly. He now stood in front of it, barring her escape.

"Monsignor?"

Castenelli grinned that wolfish grin again. "Send word to Signore Benedetti. Tell him that we are in receipt of his donation, and we are very grateful. But do hurry so that you can get back here for the feast!"

The old man grinned a nasty, almost toothless smile at Concetta, then he reached out and pinched her arm.

"I will certainly hurry. Mmm, but it's been so long since I've had a good serving of meat! This is going to be wonderful!"

Off he shuffled, as a terrified Concetta backed away from the knife that was coming ever nearer...



There are no Greater Heights by Melissa R. Mendelson

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"It's too late to turn back now." Jason looked down. Heights normally never bothered him, but they were too high. He could see the tip of the tower. He checked his belt, making sure that it was secure. He did not want to fall. "Are we crazy to be doing this," he asked his friend.

"No, because none of this is real. All we have to do is touch the sky. That's it." His friend clung to the tip of the tower. His fingers reached upward. "Almost there," he said.

"Wait." His friend looked at him. "What if we're wrong about this? What if nothing happens?"

"Well, if nothing happens, then we'll ask for the red pill."

"That red pill killed all our friends," Jason said. "Their insides imploded. It was horrible watching them die."

"Which is why this was our only other option." His friend sighed. "The sooner we interrupt the system, the sooner we could get out into the real world, which isn't here."

"And how do we do that exactly?"

"We fall." His friend was serious. "We cause the glitch. The system's interrupted, and we let go."

Jason looked down again. The world was so far away, and the idea of falling was worse than imploding. What if his friend was wrong? What if there was no waking up, and only the ground greeted him from below?

"Jason, it's now or never," his friend snapped at him.

"Do it," Jason whispered. "Do it," he repeated louder.

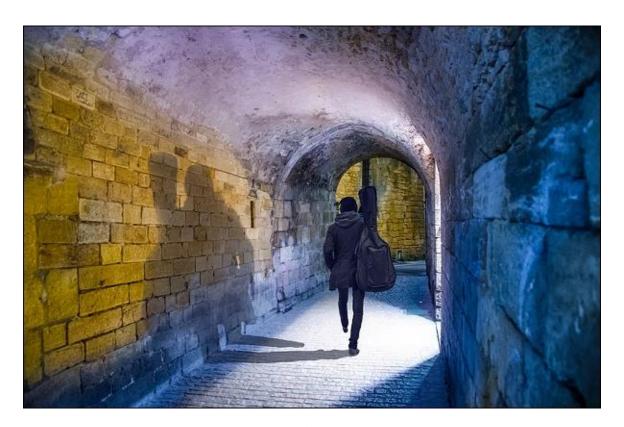
Jason clung to the tip of his tower as his friend reached upward. His friend's fingers touched the sky. Nothing happened. No system error or glitch. Nothing, and his friend reached into the sky again and again.

"I don't get it," his friend said.

A moment later, his friend disintegrated along with the tower. The sky darkened, and the wind picked up. Jason looked down, and all he saw was white. No buildings. No people. Nothing, but his tower.

"Hello?" Jason listened to his voice echo around him. "Hello?" The wind died down, and the sky returned to its blue color. But everything else except for him and his tower was gone. "Hello," Jason screamed.

"Hello," echoed back.



Soul Song by Alex Grehy

These tunnels are my home now The darkness is my new best friend. My guitar's soul is pacified If we stay underground, alone.

I'm all alone, alone, so alone I'm all alone, alone, so alone I'm all alone, alone, so alone Alone, alone, alone

Shadows sleep here, in the darkness, My guitar dreams, watchful silence, Light wakes shadows, soul devourers, Footsteps echo, like a drumbeat, Run to refuge, run to darkness.

It started when I was young, I bought this guitar from a friend, Who'd died in pain, suicide, I did not know his soul survived.

His soul plays on, plays on, plays on His soul plays on, plays on, plays on His soul plays on, plays on, plays on plays on, plays on, plays on Shadows sleep here, in the darkness, My guitar dreams, watchful silence, Light wakes shadows, soul devourers Footsteps echo, like a drumbeat, Run to refuge, run to darkness.

Woken by light, his ghost appears, Don't touch his shadow, it brings death. Your life force is within his grasp, His soul song calls, try to resist.

He wants you, run, run, run away He needs you, run, run, run away He craves you, run, run, run away Run, run, run, run away.

Shadows sleep here, in the darkness, My guitar dreams, watchful silence, Light wakes shadows, soul devourers Footsteps echo, like a drumbeat, Run to refuge, run to darkness. Run to refuge Run to darkness Run...



Holy Fire (Ergot Sclerotia) by Alina Măciucă

Ignis sacer,
Glorious butcher of dreams.
Not our sins, but our bread
In death and madness has united us,
Stormed our flesh and spirits.
Sorrow bringer, enclosed us into an
Arabesque of pain.
Colossal scourge, you have consumed us in
Ecstasy, and blackened our limbs with
Rot.



Lost Spirits by Angela Yuriko Smith

The ghosts glide with us at midnight, on the canal as we all float home.

Our mortality in different stages of life—some post, some present.

It's all a matter of where you now stash your soul... spirits in bottles

or spirits in pews or spewed in back alley darks... all are still lost souls.

I am in between. Too much liquor in my veins tangled in the veil

aimlessly floating... somewhere. Home, Hell or Heaven? It doesn't matter.

We are now just ghosts at midnight, on the canal as we all float home.



Love Like a Rebar Sunrise by Suzanne Madron

Your letters from the edge of the apocalypse still haunt me, lover.

Your clanging sighs echo still from the blackened spaces of dead structures to fill my empty soul with all the cruelty of love's exile.

Your machinery is rusted silent, grown still in half-finished nights. Your heart fire is cold, no longer even embers where once there were flames so hot that to view them was to burn in your passion.

Your rebar limbs stretch now in a rigored silhouette where once they stretched toward the sky in awakening against the sunrises and sunsets.

You reached for the fire of the gods and instead fell back to the earth, to my waiting arms, a wounded industrial lcarus.

And I left you to fend for yourself among the architects who sacrificed you.



Within the Shadows by Linda Lee Rice

The tunnel was a newfound shortcut that I liked to take on my way home from work. True, it was dark, dank, and unnerving in some spots, but most of the tunnel was lit.

I don't know why my co-workers looked aghast when I told them about my shortcut. One girl even turned white and shuddered. She muttered something about gruesome unsolved murders and women disappearing. I just shrugged it off as sensationalist news to sell the tabloids. The tunnel cut a half-hour from my walk home after a long day.

But now, I'm not so sure. At first, I thought it was my imagination, the faint footsteps. There was a soft scraping sound reminding me of a knife being dragged across rocks. Then there were the whispers, echoing just out of my hearing, not sure of what was being said, almost sing-song.

I turned, seeing nothing, the footsteps stopped if indeed they were footsteps. A faint fog drifted slowly across the opening in the tunnel, the light dimming but not quite dark. My footsteps quickened...

There was a spot up ahead that never bothered me before. It was the part of the tunnel that the light was faint, and dampness dripped from the ceiling. Mossy puddles formed, and I had to dance around them to avoid getting my feet wet. But not today, I sloshed through the pools of water as the hair rose on the back of my neck.

I felt a chill breeze brush across my face as a shadow loomed in behind me. "Lookie, what we have here," the voice crooned in a sing-song voice as the knife flashed before me...the puddles are now red...



The Lethal Line Between Art and Death by Alyson Faye

Lucas had been hiding out in the former mill's attic for two weeks – from the police, of course, but also from his ex-wife, his old life and from Julian, a man of few words, no argument paybacks and hired muscle a-plenty.

Lucas' former hobby of parkouring across Saltaire's rooftops had come in handy when his life imploded and hit the headlines. On that final hellish night when his life went into free-fall, he'd remembered the broken skylight on the roof of Hirst Mill. Dressed like the 'Milk Tray' man from the TV adverts Lucas had scaled the fire escape, then free climbed the jagged brickwork to the rooftop.

Up here he could gaze down upon all of Saltaire – its dolls house-sized homes, lit up with fairy lights, and handkerchief gardens. Here, up on the roof, plants sprouted from the concrete in febrile green patches and drowsy birds nested in the chimney stacks.

Lucas dropped down through the skylight into the attic. Inside he found piles of abandoned coffee sacks and blankets. He collapsed in a corner, nesting like a squirrel, exhausted, he toppled over into sleep.

He established a routine – nights he ventured out, to buy food, water and the vital newspapers, whilst daytimes he slept, read the books he'd brought and exercised – push-ups, jogging on the spot, pull-ups on the beam. He had to keep fit, he never knew when he'd have to literally run for his life.

Two weeks and a day into his self-enforced exile, Lucas heard noises below him – clattering footsteps and several voices.

'You just wait till you see the space up here, it's very Vermeer-like and the light is amazing,' a young woman's voice, shrill and gushing.

Lucas scooted to the farthest corner, pulled blankets and sacks over him and waited. The hatch in the wooden floorboards opened, with much wheezing and he heard three people climb up.

'Have you seen this view?' An older man, posh voice.

'Yeah, darling, ideal for your exhibition theme, *Saltaire Rooftops*,' an older woman's voice, louche, and tobaccoridden.

The young woman laughed nervously. 'The Mill hasn't opened up these attics in years. But now with lockdown relaxing it's a good time. Lots of space up here for social distancing.'

Lucas had cramp and his nose itched, he muffled a cough.

'Are there mice up here?' Posh man asked.

'Probably darling.'

'We'll have to get an exterminator in,' the young woman said. 'Health and safety is paramount.'

The trio clattered down the ladder. 'Hell on my heels,' the older woman objected. Then Lucas was alone again.

How long did he have before they were back and opened up the attics? He needed a plan, but he had none except hiding and staying alive.

Defrauding the IRS was one thing, ripping off Julian the Juicer, that had been a major fuck up on his part. Part of him didn't want to leave his rooftop eyrie, he was king of the world up here, it gave him the illusion of safety.

Still – he packed up his gear, debated whether to leave or take, Orwell's '1984', Kerouac's 'On the Road' and Maigret. Finally he left them in a pile by the window. Perhaps they could be part of the installation?

Lucas waited till dark, then climbed out of the window. He had a moment of unalloyed ease but then they came at him from both sides of the roof, two men, balaclavaed and in black, like him, knives glittering in the moonlight. They dragged him towards the bulky shadow of another man, whose smell of clean linen and peppermint Lucas recognised instantly.

'Evening, my dear fellow, how kind of you to make yourself available to see me.' Julian smiled down. Lucas' saliva had dried. He said nothing. 'Break his fingers, then his knees, then his ribs, in that order.' The men set to work, robotic and efficient.

In his dying breaths Lucas prayed to be back in the warm womb of the attic – in his last conscious moments he knew he'd got his wish, for the hired muscle dragged his broken weeping body back inside and laid him out on the floorboards. His blood made snail patterns on the wood.

'Make it look artistic, lads,' Julian instructed, 'There's going to be some arty-farty show up here soon. Lucas, here, can be the main attraction.'



Who the Light Hunts by Stephanie Ayers

The light spilled onto the dark water like a mixture of blood and fire. No screams that came from within the glowing depths were answered. The few gondolas in the canal never stopped moving, yet they steered clear of that doorway just as they always did whether the light filtered out or not.

That light—an invitation to enter with its soft glow.

That light—an illusion to the certain death one met upon entering.

Locals knew to avoid it. The police wouldn't step foot in it. Ghost hunters refused to investigate it. The only person who knew what happened inside that light never talked about it.

Until now.

All those who said that light overpowered darkness knew something no one else knew. Light didn't always mean good. Sometimes, what lurked within the light held more evil, contained more power than the darkest creature of any nightmare. And when it hungered, that was when its light shined brightest, eager to entice its unsuspecting prey into its grasp with illusions of edible treats in the front window.

Once entered, there was only one way out: darkness.

But only if you could find it.

Any shadows—and there were very few—were so small a toddler couldn't hide within them, but it was the only way out. A complete and total absence of light was the only way to hide from the monster intent on drinking your blood and gnawing on your bones. The light's magnanimous power found its way into even the darkest corners, the deepest shadows to feast. Sharp, needle teeth clamped into flesh, ripping, tearing, its mouth sucking in the blood from opened and gushing veins. A mouth without a face chewed and crunched, nibbling away until it met bone. And then, the teeth attacked again, finding fresh meat to feast upon until bones were all that remained.

Bones—they were what fueled the light. Marrow it craved more than the blood, more than the tender meat it devoured. The marrow sustained it, allowing it to grow and consume. Its hunger grew until it was no longer able to become satisfied. Greedy teeth stalked ripe prey like a vampire in search of blood.

I must warn you again. Beware the light. For what lurked within was more evil than the darkest creature of your worst nightmare. Trust me.

I was the lone survivor, living in permanent darkness. I watched from my window for when the light went out, because it was then and only then, I dared to leave the safety of my self-imposed prison. The light had tasted of my flesh, ripped my hip from my body, and quenched its thirst with my blood before I found safety within a shadow. The sacrifice of my leg enabled my escape. The sound of my wheelchair squeaking along the cobbled pavement was my only assurance I had survived.

I am who the light hunts, but it is you it will consume.



Gargoyle by Mary Ann Peden-Coviello

I clutch the vial containing the precious green liquid to my chest and run from the bio lab in the Weeks Scientific Center. My rubber-soled shoes thud against the floor, and the sound echoes down the empty hallway. I skid to a halt, my free hand extended to grab the door handle of the emergency exit. No time to wait for the elevator. I catapult myself into the stairwell.

From below, a roar splits the air. The crash of breaking masonry proclaims the arrival of the evil gargoyle that pursues me. The thing has already destroyed two of my associates, crushing the life from their bodies in hideous fashion, and has been tracking me all night, across the city from my home to the University, and across the campus to the Scientific Center. If the beast catches me now, the consequences will be unimaginable.

I turn and leap up the steps. Dawn is but moments away, and it's crucial I get to the roof before daybreak. Everything is at stake, All my work, my research, my struggles. The scientific community that rejected and mocked me will soon be forced to acknowledge my dominance.

I scramble up two more flights of stairs. My heart pounds in my chest, threatening to burst through my ribs. My breath rasps like razor blades in my throat. The muscles in my legs spasm from the unaccustomed activity. Who could have predicted a middle-aged bio-chemist would need to run for his life from a mythical living-stone monster?

Behind me, below me the gargoyle growls and snarls. It smashes its way up the stairs, demolishing everything in its path. Its unnatural, hellishly hot breath heats the air in the stairwell and taints it with the reek of sulfur. The foul creature is climbing the stairs faster than I'd thought possible.

Agony rips apart my lower back. The beast has struck at me with its talons. I scream but do not drop the vial containing my life's work. Only one flight of steps remains! I am within reach of my goal. I must not fail. I must not fall to the stinking beast raging behind me.

Weakened by loss of blood, I fling open the door and stumble onto the roof, the gargoyle only a few feet behind me, bellowing with fury. I hurry toward the radio tower.

The gargoyle bursts through the doorway, shattering the door, shouldering its way through the opening. It shrieks just as I reach the tower.

The first rays of dawn strike the snarling face of the gargoyle, instantly turning the creature to stone. I laugh in triumph, raising a fist high into the air.

I turn to the rising sun, open the glass vial I've protected from the gargoyle that has dogged my steps, seeking to prevent me from my victory, and release my virus — mine and mine alone! — into the dawn.

By the end of the month, my name will be on every tongue. And no one — not even nightmare creatures of living stone — will stop me from ruling the pitiable remnants of humanity.



No Coin Needed by Nina D'Arcangela

Sturdy and cold, these walls witness sorrows unimaginable. His life's companion slung carelessly upon one shoulder, his back bears the weight of a lifetime. Her long neck shrouded in canvas, body encased in the oh-so-familiar fabric. He cares for her endlessly, by choice or burden it does not matter. A child prodigy; a childhood lost if you ask his opinion. She sheds a tear, the same tear she's shed for years, one he rosins away each time they play. Her body as hollow as his heart, her dream of love as unrealistic as his aspiration for a quiet existance. Hope, it kills all. False hope makes the slaughter that much more unbearable. As always, he walks on, never glancing behind to witness her true form reflected in shadow. If only he would see... But this walk a final one. No auditorium awaits, no jeering fans, no racious crowd, just the unknown. Perhaps today she'll finally shed a second tear, two as payment for the passage as none may cross, above or below, without the fee, be it pain or pence.



Elizabeth by Christina Sng

Once, I could see in the dark. Not any more.

Not my papers stacked In neat piles like buildings Along a city grid.

Not the shrunken heads Of long-dead enemies Piked on my wall.

Not the pitchers of blood Lined up on the top shelf Of my study fridge.

Not my catspaws Disguised as family members To keep my identity safe.

Even vampires grow old Despite valiantly Holding on.

And I realize now It's been too long since I last bathed in blood.

All those centuries
Of being humane
Have truly dragged me down.

As I ponder this insight, An ally arrives and says, "We need you in this fight."

I nod and grit my teeth, Fill my heart with wrath, And fly into the fray.

My teeth tear flesh from bone, Bathing me inside and out With our enemy's blood.

When the war is done And the soldiers sent home, I retreat

To that dark, quiet place, Eyes bright again. I see everything now:

The shadows
I had long forgotten,
The secrets buried deep,

The true nature Of what I am, The reason I exist.

I remind myself I am legend. I am Elizabeth. Peaceful at last, I sleep.



Wet Kisses by Bailey Hunter

Sitting in my bed, the sound of the men trolling the waterways waft up to me. "Alley clear," they shout out to each other, their oars breaking water as they move on to the next one. They are searching for Mama. They've been searching for Mama for a long time.

When Mama first left, I cried a lot. Papa was sad too. He never cried in front of me, but I could hear him in his room when he thought I was asleep. Now he curses the waters and the Borda which he swears stole her from us.

The men below who search for her say Mama has become the Borda, stealing children, and their mothers, dragging them deep beneath the canal waters, but I don't believe them. Mama is still good.

She comes to me every night after the searchers move on, to tuck me in and give me wet kisses. She won't let me turn on the lights to see her, but I feel her love and I'm not sad any more.



What is a Monster? by Kendra Hale

When we were young I once asked my sister, "What is a monster?" I had expected a simplistic answer, the normal reply of the creatures who haunt the darkness and move through the shadows. The ones that they played on the late night black and white double feature showings at the Paramount Drive-In during the balmy Summer nights. The air would smell of oil, gasoline, burning wood from those who built a fire to keep warm while enjoying the films, and of course hotdogs and popcorn.

Looking back at her answer then, she was so wise beyond her eight years. The kind of wise that reminds you of how painful and bleak life really is though, the kind of wisdom that happens only to those whose path has had desperate despair. Even in the happiest of time, Viz had held onto her sharp mind that analyzed each situation, waiting for the floor to shift. That night Vizcacha had looked at me after pondering my question, her doe green eyes shimmering in the light of the screen and whispered softly.

"The Hollow Ones."

"What are the Hollow Ones Viz?"

"The ones who hide behind the normal but it never reaches their eyes. The ones in a position that should be based in love and trust, but it is a facade. They no longer feel and those who trust them... learn the truth in the end. Like we did Cadance."

I had hugged her to me and had tried to calm her mind, as best I could with my own 16 years of experience. Even though the way she had stated it was clinical and not from a place of emotion, even when our past had played a part in her narrative. She had always been a smart child, but her mind had gotten even sharper after the Zeno attacks began.

It has been almost 9 years since that moment at the Drive-In and the world had gone to absolute shit in that time. Any of the technology that people had clung so hard to had proved useless in this epidemic that plagued those who aged over 25 years. It was never a defined time that the great minds of our time could even come to a complete agreement on, with all the variables they clung to. No one person knew when their time for the disease to hit would happen...but it did and that was inevitable.

We had seen first hand how sporadic and devastating the disease was. It took all of what made a person and left them no more than an empty shell. The memories, the emotions, the very core...would just disappear. But not before the pain took its retribution. Our family had been untouched... until we weren't. There was no vaccine, not preventable measures that could have been taken. There was no avoiding what was coming but that brings no comfort.

The most clear memory from the night we lost our parents was this loud and sudden cracking noise. It was as if in the dead of the night the tree limbs broke free from the trees for fear of decay. But what was shown on television was so different then seeing it in the flesh, of it being tangible and someone you knew. What we saw as we raced through the house trying to escape was no longer the parents we had known for our lives. Their limbs distended and pulled from the socket, their jaws unhinged and open with this terrible wheezing scream emanating from their mouths. Their eyes sunken and brows covered in this viscous fluid. It was like one of those images from a horror show or comic... but so much worse.

In the end the only places that the survivors have found that are safe are those that are high up. My sister knows my wishes are to be killed when who I am is gone. When I become hollow. My 25th birthday is coming soon. I will become what is inevitable. I will become a monster.



The Audition by Terrie Leigh Relf

I preferred walking through the tunnels to reach the music department's practice studios. While it wasn't exactly a short cut, the tiled tunnels, which wound 'round the university campus, were quiet and peaceful, only interrupted by the occasional student.

Every twenty feet or so, there was an arched opening where light drifted in. Otherwise, the system of tunnels was dark and given to shadows. While I had a flashlight, I only used it at night when returning to my off-campus walk-up.

Just before the system veered off, which lead outside to one of the courtyards, there was a small anteroom. It contained more than enough space for me to set a stool and play my cello. There was something about this space, as if it had been designed for the sole purpose of playing a stringed, or perhaps a wind, instrument. Here, I could compose without anyone listening, without worrying if a passerby would inquire as to the piece's artist or pause to listen, their presence an interruption to my creative process.

There were times, however, when I did sense someone listening, but when I'd open my eyes after allowing the final stroke of my bow to resonate, I would still be alone. Until one night, when my solar lantern gave up its light and I was cocooned in darkness.

As my eyes adjusted to the encroaching darkness, shadows began to peel away from the moonlit walls, gathering before me. "Bravo!" they intoned.

While I was attempting to gather my wits about me, a rather dignified man wearing a tuxedo stepped forward. He gestured to the disembodied audience with the wave of a baton. "You have transported me, transported us all, young man."

A woman wearing an elegant green evening gown stepped forward to join him. "Congratulations! You have passed the audition! You will be an excellent First Chair for our chamber orchestra!"

Pointing to my still-beating heart, I managed to sputter out, "I'm clearly honored, but—" $^{\prime\prime}$

"A minor detail," the conductor said with a beatific smile as he pointed his baton at me.



for Saad Ali

Kitchen Witches are real. – Amateur Sage

Muni by Sheikha A.

She understands past lives – dark matter of time – sludge

of afterlife. She has travelled the ages of death in variants

but has returned with the skill of inseparation – the way to be

herself. She cooks them food brimming with enticing aromas

of promised finalities; they come famished of illusions, deprived

of the blissful kind of fiction that travels miles of suspension,

that webs thick strings of reality – the present tense of possibilities.

She feeds them flavours of calm flowing through their embossing

veins; their bodies slipping into paralytic pleasures of limp sleep

from potions of notions; she arrays buffets offering forbidden gateways.

Her house is an image of paradise, psychedelic trance-waves of euphoria

nobody escapes her food – nobody leaves once eaten.

They believe what they imagine walking into a groomed kitchen,

lured into what cannot be resisted; she cooks their essence on slow heat,

their souls reducing to congealing broth, and by their scents she vials their worth.

Nothing she makes ever goes to waste every part used, every breath infused;

every body served, every soul preserved. The room shivers in miasmic silence

as she stacks the new bottled flavours; her shelves tremble under their weight.

They come broken by manipulation; she tells them she is maker of miracles –

an alchemist of potions. She calls herself a fair trader.

She doesn't tell them she targets only soulmates.

She doesn't tell she has many; never tells she's never lonely.



Blackouts of Venice by K. Soriano

The lone gondolier smiles at passing gondolas filled with patrons. A chill fills the air—the kind of chill that runs down one's spine and whispers *turn back*. He ignores the feeling, continuing to glide across the water.

He must have been in a daze as it appears night has fallen. The sun was setting from what he recalls of his last memory.

The water relaxes me far too much, he thought.

Still rowing, he misses his stop. Solitude soothes the gondolier as he traverses the waterways again.

Such a beautiful evening.

He reaches the nighttime hotspots of Venice only to feel that chill run down his spine once again.

Slowing his gondola, he takes in the sight in front of him: red. Red everywhere.

Blood. Bodies artfully woven one on top of the other.

He looks for someone—anyone—for help. He frantically scans the area. Gondolas float nearby, but no one was in them.

How odd...

Cautiously rowing closer to the one nearest, he notices more blood.

What is going on?

Drifting further down the canal, he finds more of the same. Blood. Bodies. Death.

How can this be? How am I still alive?

He stops the gondola and sits down with his head in his hands. Feeling a warm, tacky liquid drip from his fingertips, he panics, dropping the oar. The lone gondolier stares at the blood staining his flesh. Feeling his heart pounding through his ears, his breath quickens.

Just when I was starting to really like it here, I've done it again...

A Pleasant Walk, a Pleasant Talk | Graham J. Darling

The day after contacting us of the press, from between the oddly shining Sun (odd for mid-March on the Wet Coast) and the sulky new moon, the aliens landed at Vancouver.

In the early morning light, their craft pulled up at Canada Place like any cruise ship. Except that it came from above (though it wouldn't have fit anyway under the Lions Gate bridge). And promptly sank, as if already full of water, which would explain how anything aboard could've survived its tremendous deceleration in the hours before.

Then, again like any cruise ship, thousands of passengers poured off its soggy gangplanks. Molluscoids on prosthetic legs each picked up a bundle of cash from the armoured trucks parked at the dock, as part of the deals they'd struck on the way in with governments and corporations for advanced ostreoidean know-how. Then they spread through the downtown core, shopping and chatting.

Their Ambassador installed himself on the top floor of the Fairmont Hotel. We spoke to him there.

"On behalf of all my people, here and elsewhere," he said, "may I say that we are greatly honoured to be with you today."

"Why have you come?" we asked from the scrum, a writhing, flashing mass covered in eyes both flesh and glass.

"Neighbours should get to know each other, don't you think? And pay their respects?" His shell was heavier and knobblier than most. From between its parted halves, round below and flat above, a row of stalked eyes peered out at us, one or two at a time, before retreating into the liquid in the bowl that held his body, carefully balanced to not spill a drop. "We started out as soon as we found out about you and your situation."

"How? How did you find us?"

"You called out to us, you news-folk, with your radio shows, your television shows. And there was the hum of your people's power lines, gamma bursts from some of your atomic weapons tests, neutrinos ..."

"Neutrinos?"

A particularly bright flash went off particularly close, and the one eye looking out darted back reflexively as his shell snapped shut, like a calcareous wink. But the smooth voice from his shoes did not falter. "I mean antineutrinos, of course, from your fission reactors... the heat-signatures of your oceans and vegetation. And the lights of your great cities, of this great city."

"Why Vancouver, out of all the rest?"

"Considering all the movies and TV shows shot here for its varied terrain, it has stood in for everywhere else on Earth, has it not? And many have settled here from all over your planet and still keep their cultures and customs. That makes it the natural choice for the one place to represent this whole world. Besides, you who live here are used to tourists." His stony lips parted again, and the tentacle of his arm snaked out, the two hands at its forked end shaping a smile.

The next voice shouted from the back. "Doctors who've been examining some of you say you've all been recently exposed to massive radiation, and will soon be very sick. Do you care to comment?"

The arm withdrew. "We came as fast as we dared," he said, "and faster than perhaps we should've. Life is so short, is it not? And there's so much to see."

In the city below and all around, the aliens were certainly trying to see, and buy, all that they could. And what they couldn't buy, they picked up and handled with thimble-tipped fingers that scanned all they touched through and through. Local museums turned over much of their collections, which could always be replaced. Busloads of aliens were ferried to the nearby aquarium and zoo, swung on the Capilano Suspension Bridge, hiked the Grouse Grind, rode boats and helicopters, and toured residential neighbourhoods where householders laid their heirlooms on blankets spread out on lawns and driveways. Many folk became rich, but many others pressed their treasures on Earth's guests as gifts, and would take nothing in return.

And the aliens seemed as hungry for human conversation as for human artefacts. They turned up in bars and bought drinks all around; wandered in and out of classrooms and seniors' residences. They heard family histories from sewing circles and personal tragedies from street people, attended weddings and funerals in churches, trials in courtrooms, meetings in boardrooms and Council Chambers. They asked experts about clothing, freight transport, chemical manufacture, food, government, global warming, the evolution of flight...

We stopped one of the smallest: a female, judging by the red lips she'd painted on her front shell edges for our convenience. (The males all wore black moustaches on their stiff upper ones. Those few individuals with black on top and red on bottom, or the reverse, or black on both top and bottom or on bottom only, or with only one red lip, or nothing at all, we never did figure out).

"So, what's your job on board, miss? Cabin Girl? Ensign astrogator, third class?"

"I'm a journalist, just like you," came her own synthetic voice, higher-pitched. "We're all journalists."

"What, no scientists?"

"Same thing, silly," she said. "Everyone's after the hot story."

"Do you really think we're hot, then?" we said, half of us adjusting our ties, the other half rolling our eyes at the first half.

"Very," she said, batting her shell flirtatiously. "So, what's your favourite ice cream?" And we were off in that direction.

From the ship itself—switched from its ersatz sat link to a jury-rigged hookup with the city's fibre-optic network—millions more aliens seemed to be simultaneously telephoning everywhere in the world (Undoubtedly it was really their ship's powerful AI, as good at imitating their speech and mannerisms as they themselves imitated ours). They seemed to be downloading the entire Internet, too, with all our books and music. Or acquiring it by chunks in the form of hard drives and back-up servers, along with all the other orders being flown in from all over the world, in an operation unrivalled since the Berlin or Biafran airlifts.

We spoke to a young sex worker after her private meeting with one of the males. Naturally, questions immediately turned to probing.

"It wasn't like that at all," she said. "He was very sweet, and tender, as if... I, I want to go home. My mom's in Ladner..." And she fled the interview.

As evening approached, the alien tide reversed, streaming back down through the waves into their ship, with their prizes shrink-wrapped and sealed. Their Ambassador stood with us on the dock. As the last stragglers passed, some of us asked if we could enter too, perhaps in diving suits.

"My people travel fast and far," he said. "Their equipment and medicines, specialized to their bodies, will be barely enough to keep them alive; and even then, some will die. None of you would survive. But even if you could, it wouldn't be right for the few of you they took, forever alone. You should be together ... people should be with their families, with their own kind, don't you think? Goodbye," he called out. "Goodbye, goodbye!" And he followed the others on board.

Their vaguely porcine craft rose out of the water and streaked eastward, away from the setting sun. We filed our stories and went to bed.

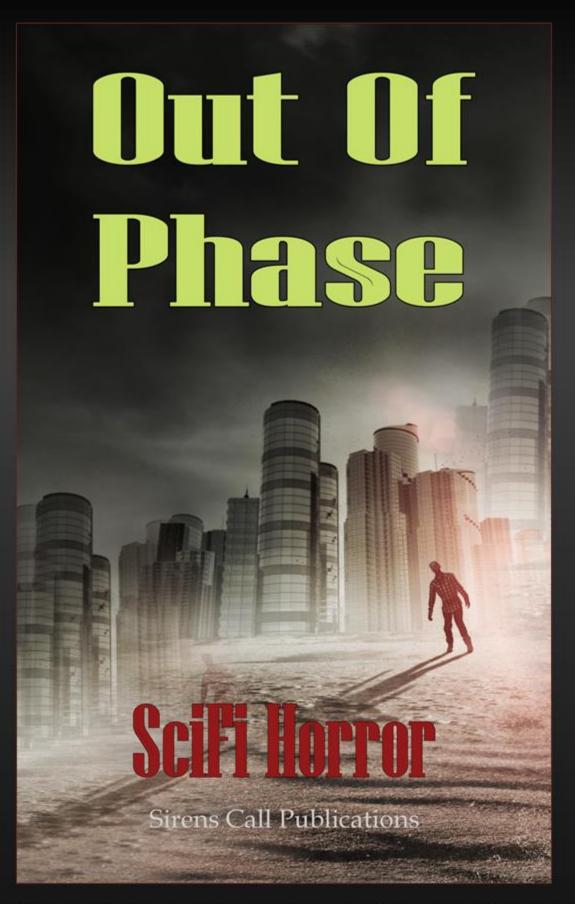
Though in the middle of the night, when the years-old eruption of the sun's core finally reached its surface, we briefly woke to the boiling of the sea.

About the Author:

Graham J. Darling of Vancouver Canada designs molecules such as the universe has never seen and demonstrates medieval science and technology to school kids and passers-by. His singular creations have escaped into *Sword & Mythos* (eds. Silvia Moreno-Garcia & Paula R. Stiles, Innsmouth Free Press), *Pulp Literature and Brain Games: Stories to Astonish* (ed. Juliana Rew, Third Flatiron Publishing)--lock your doors and windows!

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Sand | Christopher Hivner

I'm not like everyone else, I already knew that. To be an artist in my hometown was to invite ass kickings over for dinner, but I couldn't help myself. Everywhere I looked I saw shapes and patterns, whether congruous or surreal, and I felt compelled to bring them to life.

One night I had come through the rear yard of my house returning from eating with a friend. When I walked past my baby brother's sandbox I wondered if I could manipulate the grains like the man I had seen at the shore during vacation. He had taken a mound of sand six feet high and twenty feet long to recreate Davinci's Last Supper. I had stared at it for hours, mesmerized by the detail in the faces of the disciples.

Looking at the sand in the box I saw a tall ship in my mind, but could I carve out the right places? Using the hose I wetted down my building material and constructed a mound tall enough. I had formed the ship's hull when they showed up: Jason and Jackson, brothers from down the street who delighted in mocking me.

"He's playin' in the sand, dude," Jason had screeched to his brother who laughed with the mirth of a dullard.

"What a pussy. Yer in high school and yer playin' in the sand man."

"Get out of our yard," I had said forcefully.

"Or what? Yer gonna throw yer toys at us?" Another laugh from Jackson that sounded like a goose followed the insult.

"This is our property and you weren't invited," I said.

"What a loser you are dude," Jason continued, making no move to leave. "We were down at the Galleria scanning trim and yer actin' like a second grader."

"You don't have to act," I had mumbled under my breath, but as it turned out, not quietly enough. Jason's face had turned red, his hands balling into fists. I braced for a punch that never came. Instead, Jason jumped onto my nascent ship, destroying the work with one swing of his leg.

"There, that's what a baby would do, isn't it? How 'bout that?" Jackson joined his brother and they proceeded to tramp through the box kicking sand everywhere. Great clumps of the dark brown matter ended up in the grass.

While Jason and Jackson congratulated each other I went to get the shovel.

When I walked back toward them I must have had death in my eyes because the idiots ran, banging into our fence on their way off our property. I had stood there dumbly staring at my brother's box before dumping the sand back in it.

I know you were thinking when I got the shovel that I was going after the brothers with it. The thought crossed my mind. When my hand wrapped around the handle and I felt the heft of the spade, I wondered what it would feel like to clang it off Jason's skull. How much would it shake in my hands? Would I drop it and have to pick it back up to smash Jackson in the face?

I imagined Jason's brain disconnecting from its membranes, floating inside his big head in his polluted spinal juices. If I hit him a second time would I crack the skull? Maybe dig out a piece of brain for a souvenir?

I couldn't do it though. I was sick of being made fun of, getting beat up, having my shit stolen or destroyed, but I didn't have it in me to fight back.

The next night I took a walk down town to clear my head, to think about who I was, maybe who I wanted to be. Passing the bus station I met a man in a dirty denim jacket busking with a four-string guitar. He was thick. His eyes were brown and jumpy. We talked briefly, giving each other our life stories in two or three sentences. When I invited him to my home for a warm meal he accepted greedily.

Over several hours we spoke of art, politics, love; anything that came to mind. The really interesting thing about my new friend was he'd do anything for \$100.

Before he left for the night I gave him \$200 and my shovel.

Ain't No Criminal Blues | Christopher Hivner

The bluesman sang "Born under a Bad Sign" while Derek downed a shot. The barmaid was falling asleep so his wave for another drink went unnoticed. Derek pulled the Glock from his belt and fired a shot toward the mirror behind the bar, but the gun jammed. He fired again. Nothing. The bluesman sang "Standing Round Crying". The gun went back into his belt. Derek was begging for a drink when the Glock fired.

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.

Facebook: Christopher Hivner - Author

Anatomical Addition | Will H. Blackwell, Jr.

A friend asked, unexpectedly, "Do you think human anatomy is still evolving—I mean, in beneficial ways?"

Stumbling in my response: "Yes...but...the time-frame required...for witnessing such...would...probably...exceed a lifetime."

Pulling his shirt up, my friend explained, "Doc misdiagnosed this now-morphing protuberance as an umbilical-hernia!"

"Lord!"—exclaimed before censoring myself.

He continued, "You've seen pictures of nub-digits on fetus-hands? Look! These nubs are growing out—from this palm, connected proximally to an incipient wrist!"

"My God, I...."

"Could a third-hand, even if abdominal, be advantageous?"

Composing myself: "Well, I suppose I've mused—when doing multiple, mundane tasks—I wish I had one."

Shelf-life | Will H. Blackwell, Jr.

"My condolences on the death of your husband. I didn't hear of a burial service."

"Wasn't one. He didn't want to be trapped underground! He's there, on the shelf."

"The wooden urn...contains his remains? No offense, but isn't that urn rather large?"

"Yes, I suppose."

"And wood—not durable as pewter?"

"No, but I'm not expecting his remains to linger."

"Don't cremated remains last indefinitely? So, you'll spread the ashes then?"

"Oh, he forbade cremation!—'Too much like going to Hell,' he said. And I'll tell you! It was a shed-load of work trimming him to fit into the urn!"

The Last Garden | Will H. Blackwell, Jr.

My eccentric, crusty neighbor—who seldom spoke—proclaimed, "Ain't planting another garden after this'un—too old...tired...dun it too long! Have to be rebirthed a young'un to do another!"

I nodded patronizingly. His solitary life was that garden! I envisioned him eventually dying out there, doing what he loved.

This 'last' garden was especially beautiful! No way he'll quit, I figured.

Following year, garden-soil was again prepared. Aha, I thought, knew he'd be back at it!

But I never saw him. No plants appeared.

I waited...waited...watching...until...

One day, from a preformed mound, two grisly but childlike fists emerged—soon sprouting fingers.

About the Author:

Will H. Blackwell, Jr. is a retired professor (botany) living in Alabama where he continues research on freshwater fungi. He has stories in Brilliant Flash Fiction, Disturbed Digest, Outposts of Beyond, and Trembling with Fear; poems are in Aphelion, Illumen, Poem, and Scifaikuest.





The Reaping | Alex Grehy

Cassie did not love her daughters.

You were right, she silently admitted to Helios. The twins are evil.

She held the carved skull. Helios fitted perfectly into the palm of her hand, his amber crystal smooth and comforting. He had first reached out to her when she was a young girl, immersed in wonder as her soul magic awakened. Helios was her connection with the spirit world, essential to her existence as a white witch in the mundane world of suburbia. She grimaced. She had trusted his wisdom all her life, apart from that one time. Helios shimmered in her palm, sensing her distress and soothing her with his devotion.

Cassie had tried to love the twins, but they were aloof and self-assured, warding off her attempts at mothering. As babies, they had refused to latch on to her breasts; they vomited her milk as if it were bitter poison. They grew up quickly, seemingly desperate to distance themselves from her attentive care. When they started school, Cassie admitted defeat and let them be. The girls were unnaturally healthy and grew like rosebay on ruined ground. Nobody observing them could accuse her of neglect.

It was Saturday morning. Cassie was meditating in her study, a grand name for the tiny third bedroom in their family home. She pressed Helios to her forehead, trying to draw his calming energy as she mused on how she could get through the years until her daughters were old enough to leave home. Her thoughts were a maelstrom of contradiction. The compassion that had stopped her from giving the girls up for adoption swirled around her darkest desires—that they'd never been born; that they would just die.

As Cassie wrestled with her feelings, Helios became uncomfortably warm. Cassie opened her eyes.

The twins materialized in the doorway as if they'd been summoned by her thoughts. They smiled at her, a rare enough event, though their eyes were callous and calculating.

The eleven-year-olds were identical, tall and slender, with translucent copper hair, creamy skin and black-irised eyes. Their beauty had dazzled Cassie at first; it certainly charmed everyone that met them. Every human, that is. Animals fled from them, perceiving their cruel natures. Helios trembled in her palm. The twin's sinister aura was more intense today. In Cassie's eyes, the girls were surrounded by a sooty grey cloud, the colour of awakening, flecked with vivid red sparks. She wondered whether they had started menstruating. The transition to womanhood was a significant time in a witch's life. Cassie had always hoped to guide her daughters through it. She shook her head; they would never share such an intimate detail with her.

The girls stared at her, as if reading her thoughts. Cassie cleared her mind and forced a smile.

The twins started speaking in turn, sharing their words as though their brains were conjoined.

"There's a travelling funfair on the village green."

"We asked Daddy to take us today."

"We want you to come too."

"But we don't want Helios to come."

"Your skulls are weird."

"We want to be like a normal family."

"It will be super-fun!"

"Super-fun!"

Their strange monologue, dialogue, Cassie never knew what to call it, was interrupted by the doorbell.

"Daddy!" they chorused as they turned and ran downstairs to open the door.

The room seemed to spin as Cassie got up to greet her ex-husband. She felt unsettled, as she often did when her daughters cornered her. She knew that the twins blamed her for the divorce, believing that no man could abide her bizarre relationship with her crystal skull and her belief in soul magic. But the unspoken truth was that their daddy had left because of them.

Cassie and Tom had always wanted a family, but neither their longing nor her prayers to the goddess could overcome their infertility. Through the arduous journey of failure and crushing disappointment, Tom had encouraged her with his vision of their beautiful babies. They would have his luxurious sable eyelashes, her hazel eyes. Their smooth olive skin would tan to gold in the sunshine as they promenaded along the beachfront. Her body had yearned to create the child of his imagination, to cherish it in her womb.

When they turned to science to create a 'test-tube' baby, Helios became distressed, sensing a great menace surrounding the fertility clinic. Cassie struggled with the crystal skull's protectiveness. At times, his revulsion was so strong she could barely walk through the clinic door. At others, she sensed his complete alignment with her heart's

desire to bear the children of Tom's dreams. Cassie beguiled the skull with golden images of adorable babies, her craving overwhelming her caution.

The day she found out the procedure had been successful was the best of her life. A month later her joy was extinguished as the doctors explained that the embryos growing in her womb were not hers. She barely heard the explanation—a terrible cyber-attack, actually a national attack on every fertility clinic in the country. Their records were a mess. They couldn't tell whose babies she was carrying. Cassie recalled how the doctors had stuttered, 'we're afraid that your natural embryos were accidentally scheduled for destruction—they're no longer viable'.

They had been given the option to terminate, maybe try again. But Cassie knew in her heart that the embryos that she and Tom had laboured so hard to conceive had been their last chance. Consumed by pity for the babies in her belly, separated forever from their natural parents, she decided to carry them to term. When the babies were born, their skin as diaphanous as bone china, their eyes dark and knowing, Cassie's pity turned to fear. She watched Tom thrust his hands behind his back, refusing to take the babies from the midwife. He was trembling as he strode out of the maternity ward, repulsed by the girls' strangeness. Cassie tried to hold her family together, but by the time the twins were five years old, the marriage was over.

Helios was desolate. Thinking that Cassie's body and spirit were under attack he had woven charms around her to sustain her pregnancy. But the spirit world had no connection with modern technology. His ancient soul knew nothing of computer systems; of how they could be manipulated by the forces of evil to allow these *creatures to be spawned*.

Helios nudged Cassie from her brooding. Tom was standing at the front door. Cassie's breath caught for a moment. Tom was ageing well, his black hair gracefully flecked with silver, his long-lashed brown eyes as beautiful as ever. She stumbled on the bottom step. Tom leapt into the hallway to grab her elbow.

"Steady there." he said.

"Th-thank you." she replied, gazing at his face for a long moment. Helios reached out and found a connection to Tom's spirit, tapping the deep well of the man's love for her. A vision flashed across her mind—her and Tom walking hand along a beach. They were older, much older. The lifetime of sorrow that she saw etched into their wrinkled faces was overshadowed by the depth of devotion in their eyes.

As Cassie leaned into Tom's body, she spotted the twins waiting impatiently outside the door. They scowled at her, then clasped each other's hands, faces locked in concentration.

Cassie felt her spirit connection with Tom being torn apart. She looked into his face again. His eyes were glassy, and his face was sheened with sweat. He pushed her away.

"Are you ok?" she asked.

"I'm fine. Let's get this over with." he replied brusquely, his face stony as he turned away from her.

Cassie felt the sting of tears in her eyes. Although he had struggled to get on with the twins, Tom always had a smile for her. She knew they both yearned for the life and love that they might have shared without the children.

Tom stepped into the lane that led to the village green, the girls skipped along in front of him.

Cassie watched them go. Helios grew hot in her palm and glowed with energy as he warned her not to follow. The skull hadn't broadcast a caution this strong since she'd stepped into the fertility clinic. She hesitated. But that brief vision of her and Tom, together in old age, drew her to the door. As she stepped outside, she shivered. *Someone's walking on my grave*, she thought, *or on Tom's grave*. Cassie stuffed Helios into her handbag and ran down the lane to catch up with her family.

A gaudy travelling funfair littered the village green. Sparking dodgem rides vied for attention with traditional steam-driven carousels, their painted horses wild-eyed and garish. Music blared from each attraction, clashing, loud. The circling colours smeared messily as Cassie's senses were assaulted.

The twins ignored the carousels and dragged their parents to a fortune teller's tent. It stood apart, all purple velvet and silk, clichéd and insincere. Cassie was repelled. If the clairvoyant was a charlatan, as most were, then it was an abomination. If the mystic was real, then this carnival charade was a misuse of their sacred gift. She shied away, despite the hypnotic silence that seemed to shroud the tent. Tom grabbed her wrist and pulled her to his side. She looked up at his face. His lovely eyes stirred her passion again, but his expression was cold. She begged Helios to find the connection to Tom's love again, but it was blocked. She used her soul magic to pound at the barrier between them in the spirit world, but it was impervious as steel.

She squirmed, unable to break away from the impassive line of fortune seekers approaching the tent. "Let me go!" she whispered furiously.

"I cannot." he rasped, his voice twisted and distant. "We have to see our daughters ascend."

She breathed deeply, trying to calm the dread that was gripping her. Tom had never called them 'his' daughters. Helios, hidden in her handbag, cried at her to get away. As Helios' anguish intensified, Cassie saw the twins' sulphurous auras glowing with excitement and anticipation.

The people in front of her entered the tent one by one. As the heavy drapes were lifted to allow them to enter, Cassie caught glimpses of shadowy figures moving within. There must be an exit at the back, she thought, for none of the people came out.

As the queue dwindled, the fortune-teller emerged from the tent. He was a willowy man with translucent red hair, creamy skin and black-irised eyes. He opened his arms wide, and the twins ran into his welcoming embrace.

The fortune-teller sneered at Cassie, his malevolent satisfaction gushing as the twin's auras melded perfectly with his.

"I am here to reap what I sowed." The fortune-teller said, his voice soft and melodic. "I thank you for being a garden wherein these lovely roses could grow."

Cassie stared at him. Through her spirit-sight she saw that the fortune-teller's pale body clothed a dark spirit; a demon who radiated a wicked power beyond anything she'd ever encountered. Had she sacrificed her marriage for this? Had she tried to love these unholy daughters on behalf of this fiend? She felt her soul magic rise, powerful and instinctive. It flushed away the last vestige of her obligation to the children. Her second sight cleared her doubts—the man and his brood needed to be annihilated.

Helios realized her intention and manifested in Cassie's mind, risking his own destruction as he crossed the dimensions to shield her. She snatched a tiny ritual silver blade from her bag and ran towards the tent, her knife hand outstretched. But Tom's grip on her other wrist pulled her short. Helios released his energy through her, using the blade as a focus. The skull flared like a supernova as Cassie lunged forward—if she could touch just one, then the malign trinity might all be eliminated. The fortune-teller smiled indulgently then lifted his gaze to nod at someone behind her. The twins' faces were alight with malice.

Cassie felt Tom's grasp loosen.

"Run!" Tom rasped.

"What?" replied Cassie, glancing behind her. Tom's face was contorted as he tried to resist the demon's glamour.

"Run!"

Cassie tugged herself out of Tom's grasp, but she couldn't run away. She couldn't let this evil spread unchecked. Cassie struggled towards the tent. Her gaze was fixed on the fortune-teller, who sneered ruthlessly as he cast a warding spell on her leaden feet. She didn't see Tom's face smooth into a glassy stare. She didn't see him remove a bottle of methylated spirits from his pocket and hurl the liquid over her. She didn't see him flick a cheap cigarette lighter into life and throw in into her skirt. She did hear the whoosh of the spirits igniting. She felt the burning pain as flames flayed her back.

Helios strove to protect Cassie, cooling and healing her skin even as the heat taunted her. The fortune-teller grinned and linked hands with the twins. The surge of power overwhelmed Helios. In the physical realm, the skull exploded, shards of crystal piercing Cassie's body as the fierce incandescence of the uninhibited fire excoriated every nerve ending in her skin. The energy of Helios' destruction in the spirit world flared through her soul magic, scorching her spectral spirit. Cassie fell screaming in agony as her body and soul were seared, her destruction absolute.

Tom shook his head, trying to clear the fog in his mind. Cassie's body was just a shadow in the brightness of the fire that engulfed her. He looked around, people were running towards him, shouting, screaming. Tom tried to run, but a gang of men surrounded him, cudgels raised in the rough justice of the fairground.

Standing calmly in the tent's entrance, the twins looked down at their mother's charred remains.

"It's all her fault; we told her not to bring the skull."

"The skull was weird."

"Mama's better off without it."

"We're better off without it."

"Indeed we are." agreed the fortune-teller.

The fortune-teller put his arms around the girls' shoulders and gently led them into the tent. The interior was lined with richly woven carpets. Soft light from a dozen candle lanterns illuminated the upholstered chairs that lined the room.

The twins laughed delightedly as they saw a score of identical sisters skipping around the chairs, singing.

"We're playing a game." said one, gesturing to the fortune-seekers that had entered the tent earlier. Each was tightly bound and gagged, their eyes wide with disbelief and terror.

"We can tell their futures." said another, fingering a small knife whose edge gleamed in the dim lamplight.

"Would you like to play too?"

As the twins scampered to join in the torment, the man favoured the girls with an indulgent smile.

The twins glanced back from their sport.

"We're so glad you called us to the fair. It is super-fun, Papa!"

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

Admitted | KC Anderson

I set off to explore an abandoned asylum. You can already guess that it didn't go well. It's probably the most cliché horror plot ever constructed. I could become possessed, spooked by ghosts, or tormented by demons. But none of that happened. The horror that I experienced (and am still experiencing) is that I am still here years later. Ever since I entered this building, the 'doctors' here have repeatedly told me that this place was never abandoned and that I'm a patient. They won't let me leave. I've been here so long that I'm actually starting to believe them.

DUI | KC Anderson

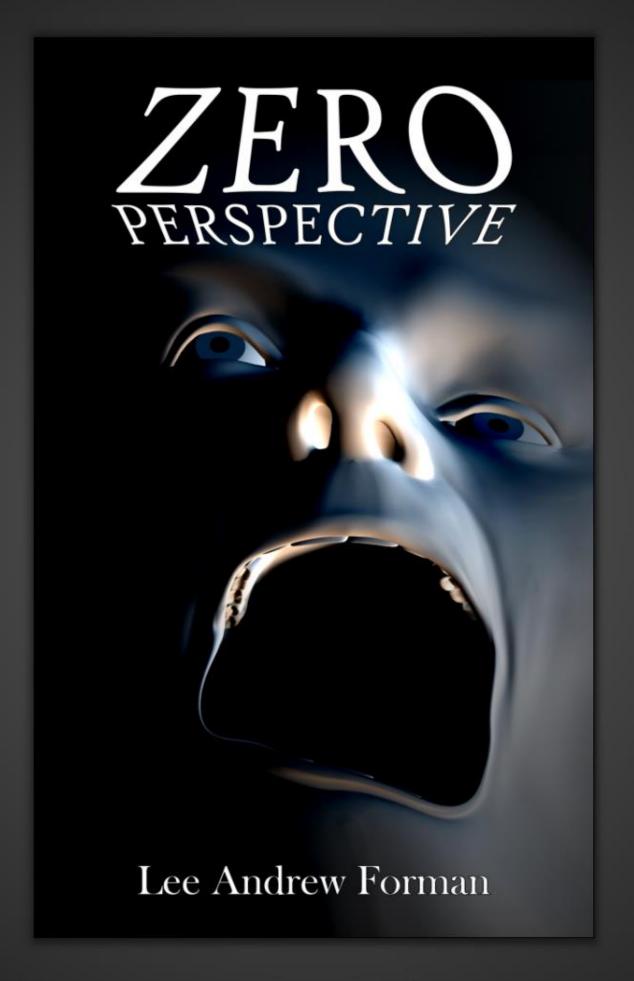
I wake up to a massive headache. I feel awful! I am never drinking again; and this time, I mean it; and this time, I'm serious. How did I even make it home last night? Well, I'm in bed, and not in jail or the hospital, so I obviously made it home safely. I look out my window and see that my car is in the driveway. A splash of red is painted on the hood and windshield. No... it can't be! I rush outside to see that there's not just red but also bits and pieces of human remains.

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





AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

A Weekend in Paradise | Robb White

What galled me most was that I'd convinced myself a getaway weekend was just the thing to save my marriage, long teetering on collapse like a house of cards under strobe lighting. She'd already made arrangements with a moving company. She'd skimmed half our savings and checking accounts down to the penny. If my old man were still around, he'd say, 'A day late and a dime short, as usual.'

I told her to go to hell, I was going to Belize anyway. I figured I was owed. Call it the consolation prize for coming in first in the Wronged Hubby contest.

After arriving on the beach, I learned the cabanas were all booked for an annual swingers' club Caribbean vacation. Apparently the Yucatan Peninsula was canceled because of increasing drug violence. Nothing like a narco decapitated head on a bar top to dampen the sexualized fervor of randy couples.

At a nearby tiki bar, my willpower to stay sober caved. I replaced sodas with Cuba libres.

"Why the long face, pal? You just arrived in Paradise."

My self-pitying reverie dissolved. The speaker was my age, a fellow Midwesterner, a doctor to boot who owned clinics between Cincinnati and Morgantown.

"All money-makers," he bragged.

I wasn't sure how medical clinics could sound like off-track betting sites. "How do you operate three clinics simultaneously?"

"I can write enough prescriptions with this hand to afford a multi-million-dollar estate in Mount Lookout and put a Lamborghini Diablo and a Porsche Carrera in the driveway."

Aside from curly black hairs extending to the second knuckle, it looked like an ordinary hand to me. I imagined it scribbling illegible doctor code for hillbilly heroin. Being surrounded by horny couples and a pill-pusher depressed me worse.

More couples entered from all directions—some right from the beach. The older the couple, the more risqué the swimwear. White-haired males in speedos and aging cougars tanned to leather in itsy-bitsy bikinis only accelerated my downer. I pounded down the highballs. The doctor kept up a steady stream of chatter about his holdings, his plan to ship 'a McLaren up from Jo'berg.'

I assumed a 12-inch wingspan meant some rare bird species.

"Is that legal?"

"You mean street legal? The P-One's got seven-twenty-seven hp. I can blow away any state trooper on my tail like shaking dust off my shoes. Check out these loafers."

He lifted a loafer into view. My vision strained to see something besides a shoe worth that much, gold doubloons for the front slot where Ivy Leaguers once put pennies for the pay phone.

"Cost a thousand online..."

I feared his watch was up next to be followed by socks, belt, pants, and shirt. I'd had enough of this oaf.

"I'm calling it a night."

"You kidding me, Jack? With the babes in here looking to hook up for a ménage à trois? It's a meat market on the hoof, man."

People mingled, hugged, exchanged greetings, laughed. A few solo males roamed among them like young lions booted from their prides.

"The name's Tom. Good luck with the... your medical career."

"Your loss, Jack."

My gift for spying out life's ironic moments degenerated into mere sarcasm.

I passed a couple entering. The young woman a drop-dead beauty—raven-haired, doe-eyed, fresh-faced in a blue silk kimono. The man with her didn't jibe. He looked like her kid brother rather than her swinging partner. Thinking of these two engaged in frolics with jaded, middle-aged couples aggravated my depression. I bought a bottle of single malt from the bar and returned to my cabana determined to get hammered.

Loud noise woke me before dawn.

The young couple beside me were arguing. I shook off the booze fog and crept toward the oceanside veranda to eavesdrop, hunkering down. The resort placed a glass panel in the center so you could look at the water below.

Sounds carry over water at night. I heard her say: "I thought you said you loved me." He mumbled a response. She said 'doctor' twice, each time dropping her voice, making it impossible to make out the context. The breeze shifted, blowing away their words except for 'lying' and 'spine.'

Arguing about that doctor as a sexual partner—it sickened me. I tiptoed back into my room and pulled the sheers. To hell with them if they think that's the way to spice up a failing marriage.

In the morning, I stood on deck with a hangover buzzing above my eyebrows when I caught sight of her in a V-bikini looking out over the railing. A speargun lay against the rail. I didn't want to be seen, so I started to leave when she looked my

way. Such sorrow etched into her lovely face froze me in my tracks. Her expression on spotting me transformed into a grim set of her mouth, and she went abruptly inside. I felt like a dirty-minded voyeur.

I lay down to get rid of my headache. I woke to an ear-splitting scream followed by loud gagging sounds. I hopped off the bed, still dizzy from the drink, and hurried out to my deck. The doctor, wearing a bathing suit, clung to the rails of the young couple's cabana. His face was as blue as the sky. He let go of the railing and collapsed backward on the deck.

By the time I raced around to their cabana, he was almost dead, his face bloated, purple, his lips bloodless.

I saw something inside his mouth—a black-and-white banded, spiky fin. I pried his jaws open with my fingers to see if I could remove it. She clamped a hand on my shoulder.

"Don't call the police!"

In the chaos of the moment, I didn't assess her odd remark.

She stood behind me, barefoot, one arm crossed over her breasts; she had on the bikini bottom she wore that morning but the top was gone.

Some kind of kinky sex game, I thought.

"We have to get help!"

Shoving her aside, I bolted for the landline phone in the bedroom. Theirs wasn't there on the nightstand like mine. The boy sat on the edge of the bed with his hands clasped in front of him as if he were praying. I cursed, raced back to my cabana, and called the manager's number listed on a plastic card.

An hour later, paramedics bundled the doctor into a black body bag and lowered his body to the sandy ground. Hours later, I signed my statement to the Belize police. I told them I had nothing to offer other than witnessing the doctor's last moments of agony. I left out our conversation in the bar the previous night.

"What happened to him?"

The cop who took my statement shrugged. "El senhor went spearfishing... un accidente."

"Who goes spearfishing at night?"

He asked how long I knew Nicole and Edwardo, her prometido?

"Her what?"

"How you say, su marido—before hus-band, you know, en-gag-ed."

"I just met them."

That provoked a leer from both cops.

Outside, I flagged a taxi. Back in my cabana, I packed up, emptied the rest of the Scotch into the beautiful turquoise waters and headed for Goldson International.

"How was your stay in Belize?"

The flight attendant's innocent question delivered the coup de grâce to my sordid weekend in paradise.

Cleaning out bureau drawers, I found a lost letter. It was from Micah back when we first dated. She listed all her hopes for our marriage and said she would love me forever.

The doctor's ugly demise bothered me for months. Those half-heard words rattled around in my head like puzzle pieces. I found his obit online. 'He collected luxury sports cars,' the admiring author penned. That led me to an article in a Morgantown newspaper. The doctor had been investigated by the state's medical ethics board but cleared. His clinics were waiting rooms for addicts to line up for prescriptions.

I found her on *Facebook*. She had a degree in marine biology. She and the boy had recently married. I read some postings. They both lost people to drugs—a sister and an older brother. Their overdoses occurred in Hamilton County, ground zero for Ohio's fatal overdoses.

Then it clicked like a child's kaleidoscope; all the bright pieces fell into a pattern. She wasn't accusing him of lacking 'spine' in a proposed rendezvous with the doctor. Nor was she accusing him of 'lying' about loving her. I didn't hear the full word: *lionfish*.

How many people without a degree in marine biology would know how to capture and safely handle the poisonous lionfish with its deadly spines? I saw that spine sticking in his throat all over again and her blurting out for me not to call the police. This beautiful young couple murdered the man responsible for their loved ones' deaths by overdose.

I debated calling authorities. It was a short debate. I turned on the game instead.

About the Author:

Born and raised in Northeastern Ohio, Robb White has published several crime, noir, and hard boiled novels as well as crime, horror, and mainstream stories in various magazines like Down & Out, Mystery Weekly, Tough, Mystery Tribune, Switchblade, Out of the Gutter, and Near to the Knuckle under the pseudonyms Robb T., Robb or Terry White.

Demonette | Kasey Hill

The bitch had it coming. First off, he was my therapist, to begin with. Secondly, she was a whore that gave it up to the orderlies whenever she could. Being as that was, it didn't stop the love of my life from porking her on his couch during their sessions. It had to have an end to it—a way out for him to give her up and be mine ever so completely. The question was... who was going to help me? There was no way any of the orderlies would help dispose of the body with me, especially not Mike. She was his favorite too. Not to mention, there would be all kinds of questions concerning her disappearance from a locked room. I'm crazy, not stupid. Would He miss her once she was gone? Would He cry on my shoulder? I had gained and lost so many people I had cared about, but I refused to let Him be one of those losses. I would kill to keep Him. And if I couldn't have what I wanted, no one would either.

Cheeky little whore, my roommate, or shall I say cellmate, was. From the day I arrived, she was gunning for me to be removed. Blubbering and crying into her pillow each night how I took the love of her life. Bitch, sex is sex and being locked up, you take what you can get. "Oh, I fell in love with him." Grow a pair of balls. The man is married and fucking insane chicks in an asylum. Needless to say, you are not on his list of priorities. However, I am because I don't give a damn that he fucks me and goes home to his wife with me all over his dick. All she can talk about is one day, him leaving his wife and them getting married and having children together. Pfft, please. That is never going to happen. What can you expect from someone as delusional as she is, though? I mean, she's been locked up in here since she was like twelve-years-old. She's eighteen now and has never experienced any type of love, so the fantasy land she lives in is actually one of the saner aspects of her mental handicap.

Each night I watch her fall asleep and count the minutes and seconds it takes for her to be in deep REM. I may be crazy, but I know what fucking REM is. This bitch probably didn't even graduate middle school as stupid as she is. From what the orderlies say, she has bounced from asylum to asylum and each one resulting in the same conclusion: she was too fucking crazy. Honestly, she should be put out of her misery. It has to suck to be so crazy even the asylums don't want to keep you. That's money in their pockets. Apparently, she isn't even worth the time and effort. She doesn't know that this place is where they give you shock therapy treatment, and I have read her reports by the therapist. She is the number one candidate for the treatment. I don't know which would be more satisfying; me taking her life in my own hands or watching them slowly steal the light from her eyes with every flip of the electrical switch.

She thinks I am asleep, but honestly, I am insane. I don't go to sleep. Those horse pills do not affect me. Believe it or not, they amp me up instead of knocking me down. Uppers and downers have never been my friend. So, I lay in bed, letting her watch me, letting her grumble under her breath at how much she hates me and how bad she wants to kill me. She has no clue why I really bounced from asylum to asylum and why my name is, most of the time, wiped clean from the slates of the crazy houses. I guess tonight... she may just find out if she keeps acting like the crazy bitch she is. I know what she is planning. Joke's on her.

I talked the orderly she fucks into getting me some things. I have seen her take the pills they give her here. They don't work. But, I am sure anesthesia would surely put her to sleep. I just haven't decided how I want to finish her off. I have a cleaver from the kitchen hidden under my bed. But I really want to wrap my hands around the bitch's throat and strangle the life from her. I want to see her eyes turn red and rollback in her head.

But... oh, the blood seems so lovely and comforting. Maybe I could do both. I could choke her to death and then play with her entrails. Yes, that sounds feasible and delightful. I grin inward to myself. She is sitting there eating her food, unaware that I laced it with sedatives compliments of the unattended nursing cart. And hidden under my pillow...a syringe of a cocktail: Lidocaine, Thorazine, Xanax, and a little bit of morphine just to ease the pain. I told her he was mine. I told her to leave him alone. I told her to keep her shit in her pants... but she wouldn't listen anymore. Maybe had she actually paid closer attention to my files when she sneaked through them while waiting in His office, she would have seen that I am not just an innocent, naïve little girl in this asylum. I am in here for killing my family. I burned their house to the ground while they were in there asleep.

Quite truthfully, I haven't really been locked up for long. It wasn't until high school that they saw how crazy I was and committed me to the looney bin. I had escaped a few times and was placed right back in here. I killed my boyfriend and best friend. He was cheating on me with her. I stalked some college students a few months ago and killed them all. They were a joke. They were dressing up as their favorite scary movie characters. They died like they should have been killed except for the ones that got away. Their names weren't forgotten, though, and I would slip this joint like the rest and be able to finish the job I started with them.

She's been giving me this creepy fucking grin all night. I feel like smacking the smile from her face. However, I stay composed and try to gag down the poor excuse of what they call food here. Seriously, you think school lunch is terrible or prison food is awful, go to the loony bin. Each one is the same. Sometimes it looks like the meat was just squeezed out of tubes into molds and baked to make it look real. For all I knew, this was rat meat. They were feeding us rat meat, and we were stupid enough to fucking eat it. God, what I wouldn't give for a fucking cheeseburger. I choked down what I could, washing it down with the horrible, skanky water they gave us. Sometimes, I would rather lick the dirt from the floor than drink the water here. Sometimes it's clear, and other times it is so laden in rust that you can't even see through the orangish/brown color. I glance up, and the crazy banshee is still staring at me. I glare at her and nearly throw my glass at her. Maybe if I asked, they could give me someone who is less of a loon.

I watched as she slowly began to nod and smiled to myself, pleased. Now came the fun part. When she was to the point of complete blackout, I would jab the needle in as hard and quickly as possible. Fast asleep, she will go and unable to be awakened as well. My smile grew wider. Such deviance. She didn't even know why she felt so tired or understood it. She was a perpetual insomniac. She never slept. I always heard that if you never sleep, you die. But not this bitch. God, I would give anything for her to kick the bucket.

Strangely enough, I was oddly tired. Beyond tired, actually. I was unable to keep my eyes from closing shut. I fought it for a few minutes and then thought, what the hell. I reclined back on my bed and soon was unaware of my surroundings. That was until I felt a sharp jab in my chest. My eyes flew open as I watched her push the plunger down on the syringe. I was mortified. I had no clue what she had given me. I could feel the rush of the warm liquid through my veins. My heart sped up and slowed; its uncharacteristic tachycardia made the anxiety run through my body. I struggled up and lunged at her. We collapsed to the floor with me on top of her.

I had it coming. She had literally just begun to relax when I jabbed the needle in. But I did not expect her to go Exorcist on me and jump me down. She's been throwing punches and smacks as I lay covering my face. Each throw has less of an impact than before as she works the injection through her bloodstream. I could see her running out of energy, overly exerting her body with each forced movement of her arm. I began to cackle at her. I laughed maniacally as I watched her face adjust to the realization of what was happening. She was going to be unconscious but aware of everything done to her. And I was going to have fun with her.

My body began to sag from exhaustion. Her laugh bounced off the walls, and a laugh of true conquering it was. She indeed had it all planned out tonight. I fell back off her body and lay on the ground. I tried to roll over on my stomach, but I couldn't move. I couldn't blink. I couldn't even fucking fall asleep. I could only watch as she circled me like a vulture. I had no idea what she had in store for me, but I knew it wasn't going to be pretty or any less painful than my imagination of what she would do. She knelt beside me and stroked my hair. It was rather motherly of her, that is until she produced a cleaver in her right hand.

I ran the blade of the cleaver alongside her cheek. It gleamed in the moonlight shining through the bars of our window. I took it and pressed down into her forearms, tracing a line of blood from her elbow bend to her wrist. Fresh blood spurted to the surface and drained. I did the same to her other arm. I made my way down to her legs and drew lines up the sides of them. Finally, I took the cleaver to her throat and pressed it against the pale skin. I could see her begging with her eyes for me not to do it, but I craved it. I leaned in and kissed her lips ever so lightly and drew the blade across her throat. I grabbed her by the throat, digging my fingers into the open wound. She

gagged and choked on the blood. I then sliced the cleaver into her stomach and pulled her entrails out. It was such a wondrous feeling.

She really was a stupid bitch, smart, but stupid. I watched her as she rocked back and forth in the moonlight playing with her bloody hands. She didn't see the slight movements of my body reanimating. This is why I bounced from asylum to asylum. This is why I was written off.

Simply put, I was not human in the least. And now, as my body lifts from the floor, snatching up the cleaver she used to destroy the vessel I had gone five years without being mangled in, she looks up at me eye wide with fear. She doesn't understand and can't comprehend what the situation has become. "Simply put," I whisper into her ear as I run the blade along her face, mimicking her actions. "I am your worst fucking nightmare." I breathed in the scent of blood that covered her and myself.

"Take me," she begged me. "Take me as your new body."

I grinned, flashing her my teeth. "That was the plan, my dear Amelia. Your soul is the darkest I could ever merge with." I dragged my tongue against her cheek skin. "You will be the best I have ever had."

"My name is Joni," she replied, with a grin.

"What do you think she is doing in there?" Mike asked Dr. Thornton as they watched Amelia rocking back and forth in front of her window.

"Probably creating more delusions about her and me," Dr. Thornton replied. "She has a new split personality that has been rearing its ugly head as well. That will make four in total, including the normal personality that is really her."

Mike slid the cover to the window on the solitary confinement door shut. "How long will she be in there?" he asked Dr. Thornton.

"Most likely, forever. She is a paranoid schizophrenic with Dissociative Identity Disorder. She has murdered more than ten people in her past," Dr. Thornton explained. "If she ever gets out of there... blood and mayhem will follow where she goes."

Mike nodded as the doctor walked away. He slid the cover to the window open again, and she stood in the window staring at him. He jumped back slightly before smiling.

"Amelia, you scared me. What can I do for you, babe?" he asked.

She pouted her lips. "It's Amber. Not Amelia. You always like Amelia more."

"I'm sorry, babe. My bad. It's bad lighting. I can barely see you," Mike replied.

"I want you, Mike," Amelia purred.

Mike grinned and looked up and down the hall before he opened the door to her cell and walked in.

"We have to make it a quick one tonight. We are short-staffed," Mike said as he undid his pants, pulling them down.

Amelia smiled as she bent down to her knees...

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The screams could be heard from the third floor. Every available guard and orderly rushed to Amelia's room, where Mike lay bleeding out on the floor. Amelia was nowhere to be found. Dr. Thornton arrived and took a step back away from the door covering his mouth.

"What do we do, doc?" one of the orderlies asked.

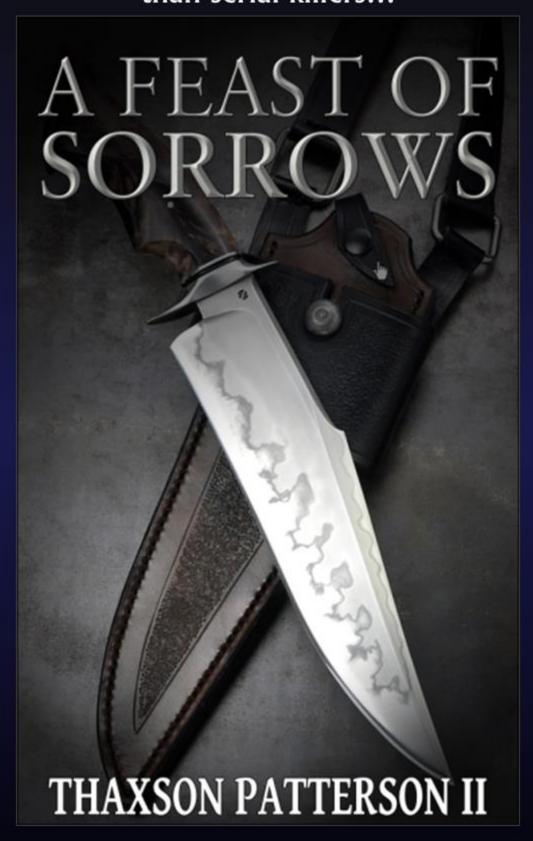
"Pray," Dr. Thornton replied.

About the Author:

Kasey Hill has lived in Franklin County, VA for most of her life. Spending two years in journalism in high school, and a few articles published in the Franklin News Post, she built much of her young adult life around reading and writing. She has several novels published and many more stories circulating for anthologies as she pushes her passions forth into the writing community.

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There are even worse things in the world than serial killers...



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Gravel Estate | *Terri Mullholland*

All the houses on The Estate were the same. They all had the same bleak exterior of peeling paint and rotting window frames. A gravel drive led up to the doorway of each house.

The day she moved in was wet, and Jenny left pieces of damp, grey gravel trailing around the house. It clung to the bottom of her shoes, and then her socks, and then her bare feet. Even after sweeping all the floors thoroughly, she still felt grit between her toes.

Moving to The Estate was supposed to be a promotion. A whole house, not just a room in a rookery of other rooms. She couldn't complain. The house was clean and contained basic furniture; whoever had lived here before had left it in good condition. Not like some places that needed decontaminating before they were habitable again. She had got lucky.

She didn't feel so lucky when she woke up later that night and heard scurrying sounds across the kitchen floor and the tiny pitter-patter of claws on the tiles.

The next morning, there was a tell-tale trail of wet gravel from a tiny hole next to the front door to the kitchen. It looked like something had gnawed its way into one of the cupboards and ransacked her cereal. The cereal smelled putrid, and there were even tiny pieces of gravel among the oats and the raisins.

The man in the garden next door watched her tip the gravel from the dustpan back onto the drive. "Gets everywhere," he said.

"Yes, it certainly does. I think this lot was brought in by some little night visitors. Do you know if the previous person had a problem with rats?"

"No, not rats, they didn't have a problem with rats. If only it were just the rats we had to watch out for." He gave her a pitying look and went back into his house.

Jenny found some wire wool, left by the previous owner, in the cupboard under the sink and stuffed it into the hole. They wouldn't be able to chew through that.

But when she came down for breakfast, she saw another gravel trail from the front door to the kitchen. The hole gaped open; there was no sign of the wire wool.

On the kitchen counter, a loaf of bread had been reduced to bread crumbs, and to her horror, a whole bag of brazil nuts, still in their shells, appeared to have been eaten. Her neighbour was right; they couldn't be rats with teeth that sharp. She wanted to ask him about it, but as soon he saw her come out, he disappeared into his house, shutting the door behind him.

A few days later, Jenny was late home from work. She had stopped off to pick up a takeaway curry on the way home, as she had thrown out most of the food in the house. The things that her neighbour said were not rats had eaten their way through everything. She had holes in most of her cupboards, and whatever it was had even managed to pierce her cans of beans and soup. She had been too terrified to go down in the night and confront them, so she lay in bed, night after night, listening to them devouring their way through her kitchen. She told The Estate managers, but they said the house was checked before she moved in and there were no rats. She had asked them if they could please come around and check again. They said they would put her on the list. Jenny knew what that meant.

Jenny started going to bed earlier and earlier, anxious that the creatures would return while she was still in the kitchen. That night, before going to bed, she had gone around the house, blocking up all the gaps with the last of the wire wool.

By the time she climbed into bed that night, Jenny was exhausted. She pulled the blankets tightly around her like a cocoon.

She almost didn't feel it at first, a tickling sensation, like leftover crumbs in the bed. Then came the first bite. Too late, she realized her bed was full of gravel.

About the Author:

Terri Mullholland is a writer and researcher living in London, UK. She has a PhD from the University of Oxford, where she has taught English Literature and Critical Theory. Her flash fiction has appeared in Litro, Flash Fiction Magazine, Every Day Fiction and Six Sentences.

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On My Way | Katie Ess

"What's that?" I asked Lexi, peering over at her drawing. Like all mothers, I knew with absolute certainty that my 5-year-old was the most observant, precocious, and amazing child in the world.

"Our family," she replied. And of course I already knew that. Drawing our family was Lexi's favorite pastime. Today, her father, Wyatt, stood next to Lexi and myself, all represented as stick figures of appropriate relative sizes. Each figure was embellished with a round belly, a happy smile, and large shoes that would have been physically impossible to walk in. My picture had a large black dot in the center of the belly.

"And what's that black dot on my tummy? A belly button?"

"No, Mommy. It's my brother," she replied, beaming. Gold curls framed her angelic face.

"But you don't have a brother," I said, smiling.

"Yes I do," she replied. "He's in your tummy right now. He talked to me."

"Oh, I see. And what is this brother's name?"

"Silly. He doesn't have a name yet. He's not even born."

"Well then how did he talk to you?"

"I don't know. I just heard him in my mind. He's looking forward to meeting me."

"Hmmm..." I said, my attention drifting back to my work as she finished her drawing.

I worked at home as an animator for a small firm. We mostly did animations for motivational speakers and ads for businesses, but sometimes branched out into animated shorts. I loved the freedom it gave me to stay home with Lexi, even though it required flexibility and a lot of multi-tasking.

Lexi wanted muffins for breakfast. We headed to the kitchen, and soon puffs of flour and dribbles of blueberry juice were everywhere. I used my fingertip to smear batter on her nose. She giggled and tried to lick it off with her tongue, but of course couldn't reach. I wiped off her nose with the same fingertip, savoring the gritty, sweet taste of the batter as I popped it in my mouth.

The next morning, hovering over the toilet, I wondered if I had gotten some salmonella from the raw batter.

"You okay?" my husband asked before jetting off to work. Wyatt was a general contractor—lots of long hours and travel, but the pay was good.

"No, I'm not. I probably have food poisoning. But I'm okay enough to take care of Lexi. Go to work!"

"You haven't been sick like this since you were pregnant with her," he said before heading out the door, and I felt a small flutter of panic. Did I miss any pills this month? I'd never been good about remembering to take them.

The pregnancy test was positive. We were shocked, but happy. We had intended to wait another year, but we'd always wanted to have two children. Maybe it would be better this way. Lexi would go off to school around the time the new baby was born, so I'd have more time to focus on him or her.

I decided to go to a midwife for my prenatal care, just as I had with Lexi. I believed that pregnancy was a natural state. Wyatt and I didn't need ultrasounds and blood tests to know our baby was okay. The more natural, the better.

At five months into the pregnancy, I began to realize that the morning sickness wasn't going away. I was exhausted, and constantly nauseous, which was making it hard to keep up with work and childcare.

I was drawing a storyboard for our next animated short. The main character, Terence the Trustworthy Turtle, was trying to figure out how to cross a busy road. Lexi was curled up next to me, with her head on my belly and a drawing pad and pencils at her side. She kept smiling and nodding as she worked on her drawing, clearly pleased with her subject matter. Her drawings had gained more detail lately—this time our family had full arms and legs instead of sticks, and our ever-present giant shoes had gained loopy laces. We each still had our round, protuberant bellies. Inside mine was a green circle with red eyes.

"Is that Terence the turtle?" I asked Lexi, pointing to the drawing of my belly.

"No, silly mommy! That's my brother!"

"Brother, huh? Well, why is he colored green and red?"

"I don't know. That's just how he looks in my head."

"Don't you think he'll probably be colored like a person, not like a turtle?" I asked, poking her playfully in the ribs.

Lexi giggled and swatted me away. "I think he'll look however he wants to when he comes out. He'll probably come out soon. He's hungry."

I gave her a big hug, trying to be reassuring. "Don't worry about your brother...or sister. Babies are meant to be inside their mommy's tummies for a long time. They have a special cord that feeds them, so they don't get hungry until after they're born."

"I don't know, Mommy," Lexi said. "I think he's going to eat you all up."

"Like the big bad wolf?" I said, snarling at her until she shrieked. I went to turn back to my work, but Terence's smile had turned from friendly to menacing. I must have overworked the drawing. Thinking I needed a break, I chased Lexi down the hall, shouting "I'll huff, and I'll puff, and I'll blow your house down!"

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By six months, the nausea was worse, if that was even possible. My midwife was worried about how much weight I was losing. I'd dropped over 20 pounds since the beginning of the pregnancy, and I'd never been big to begin with. My eyes were sunken and my hands and arms looked bony, like a skeleton covered in skin.

"I know you don't want to take prescriptions," my midwife told me, a concerned look on her face. "And ordinarily, I'd support you 100%. But you've lost so much weight, and I'm worried about the health of your baby. If you're not eating, the baby isn't eating." Lexi's words rang in my ears—"he's hungry,"—and so I reluctantly consented to try a prescription medication for nausea.

When I got home from the drugstore, Wyatt was home. He'd been on a job site out of town for about a month now, and planned to be home for a few days before heading out again. As I walked in the door, his eyes widened in shock.

"Honey, you look terrible!! What's going on with you?"

"The morning sickness is strong with this one," I said, trying to laugh but producing a whimper instead. "The midwife gave me a prescription to help me keep things down."

"Then take it right now! You look like a walking corpse. Let me take care of Lexi for a while."

I relented without argument, taking one of the pills and heading straight to bed. Several hours later, I woke up starving. The nausea was gone, and I found myself ravenous. I went into the kitchen, where Wyatt was getting ready to put some hamburgers on the grill for dinner. "Hello, sleepyhead. I hope you feel better after your nap."

"I do," I replied. As Wyatt went out to start the grill, I eyed the pile of raw hamburger, pooled in blood on the plate, and I was...starving. It had been so long since I'd been able to keep anything down, and I felt my stomach gnawing and churning. Without thinking, I snatched up some of the raw meat and devoured it in one bite. I grabbed a second handful and shoved it in my mouth before, horrified, I thought through what I was doing. I debated between spitting it out and finishing it, but my hunger won. I raced from the kitchen before I could take more. Rushing to the bathroom, I washed my hands thoroughly, then brushed my teeth. That probably wouldn't stop me from getting food poisoning, but it made me feel a little better at least. I was disgusted with myself, but hadn't felt this much energy in months.

As I was brushing my teeth, Lexi leaned in the bathroom. "Mommy, whatcha doin'?" she asked.

"I'm brushing my teeth, silly," I replied.

"Oh." Lexi said, wrapping her arms around me for a big hug. Before she left the bathroom, she looked me square in the eyes.

"My brother says thank you."

By seven months, I alternated between exhaustion and starvation. Terence the Turtle's story was coming along nicely, but our deadline was looming—my boss called me at least twice a day for updates. Wyatt found a job closer to home so he could help more, but I still struggled. Without the nausea medications, I was unable to function. With them, I slept for hours, then got up to eat anything I could find. I craved raw meat constantly. A google search showed me that an iron deficiency might be causing the cravings, so I started a supplement in addition to my prenatal vitamin. It didn't help.

I tried spinach, beans, and lentils to bring up my iron levels. But what I really wanted was steak tartare, raw pork, or even raw chicken. When I couldn't stand it anymore, I would sneak to the kitchen and gorge myself. I felt stronger each time I binged, but wilder, too. Almost feral. It worried me, but I couldn't stop.

In a daze, I pushed hard to get Terence's story done. Once I finished it, I could start maternity leave. Then maybe I could get more rest, and I wouldn't find myself sleeping, binging, and working in a constant cycle.

When it was finally complete, I sent it to my boss right away, then collapsed into bed. A few hours later, the phone rang.

"Is this some kind of a joke?" my boss asked me, his voice equal parts worried and angry.

"What...is what...what are you talking about?" I slurred, having been woken from dreams of biting into a live pig. I could still feel my teeth sink through its hide, hear its squeals of pain.

"This animation you sent me. Is it a joke?" he asked.

"No, I don't think so," I said, still sweaty from my nap. My hair clung to the sides of my face, and I brushed it away, trying to remember how I'd finished up the project.

"I've sent the file back to you. Take a look at it and see if this is what you sent me."

Hanging up, I went to the computer and opened the file. It started just as I remembered. Terence was trying to figure out how to cross the road. He tries roller skates at first, but falls and gets swept back to the side of the road. Then, he tries to build a bridge, but the bridge collapses before he can get on it.

Then he lights a fire. He chants, and a giant...creature...swoops down from the sky. The creature tears people from their cars, eating them whole as they scream. Terence looks at the destruction, ecstatic. Once the last person is consumed, as the cars lie abandoned in the road, Terence slowly wanders across the street. "I'm on my way," he smiles and winks into the camera as the cartoon winds to a close. At the end of the video, I felt my baby kicking harder than I'd ever felt him kick before.

"No! Of course that's not my file!" I protested. But was it? I had been in such a drugged, exhausted state for the last few weeks that I honestly couldn't remember for sure WHAT I had drawn.

I went into the kitchen and wept as I ate a pound of raw hamburger. Turning, I jumped to see Lexi standing behind me, just watching.

"You startled me!" I said. "I didn't see you there!"

"My brother's on his way, isn't he?" Lexi asked.

No, sweetie, it will be a while longer," I said, shaken.

The bad weather started at eight months. Most of the time, we couldn't leave the house because of the rain. Flash floods sprung up at least once a week. Hailstones the size of golf balls pelted down for hours at a time. "No one has seen weather like this before" the weather casters crowed, trying to pretend they weren't excited.

Wyatt, usually upset when the weather slowed down his building projects, took it as a good omen. "It's the universe freeing me up so I can be home when the baby is born!" He danced with Lexi around the living room. When I slept, I dreamed of meat. My nights were filled with visions of eating more pigs, or horses, or...Wyatt. Sometimes I woke in the dark of night, standing at Wyatt's side of the bed.

My water broke on the same night that tornadoes touched down all over the city, and contractions started almost immediately afterward. They were so intense that I found myself gasping for breath in the short pauses between.

"Wyatt!" I screamed. "It's time! You have to take me to the hospital!"

He poked his head excitedly around the corner. "It's time! okay! I'll go get the car!" As he ran to the garage, Lexi showed up. She deadbolted the door behind him.

"It's okay, Mommy. My brother will be just fine." She took my hand, and patted it gently.

"Sweetie, let your daddy in," I said. "We've got to go to the hospital. Your brother's on his way."

"Oh, I know," she said. "He's excited to meet me."

As she said that, I doubled over with a strong contraction. I felt the baby crowning, but the pain was different, sharper, like a thousand razors cutting me apart. Screaming, I pushed, and felt its head, and its teeth, and its hunger.

"Lexi!" I heard Wyatt screaming from outside the door. "Lexi, sweetie, let me in the house!" He pounded and swore as he tried to figure out how to get in. But Lexi just looked at me, transfixed, as I labored on our kitchen floor. Her eyes glinted red in the flash of lightning through the window.

I screamed again as I felt the baby deliver. There was a wet thunk, and I saw my child, a beautiful baby boy. Only as he opened his mouth to cry, there were rows and rows of sharp teeth—far too many for a human child. His skin turned from pink to green, and his eyes became deep red, as something sharp bit into my thigh. There was the sinking sound of teeth into flesh, remembered well from my dreams.

Paralyzed with pain and fear, I couldn't move to get away. I felt him chewing through muscle, tendon and bone, so hungry, and finally free. Lexi, smiling, came to my side and ran her fingers through my hair.

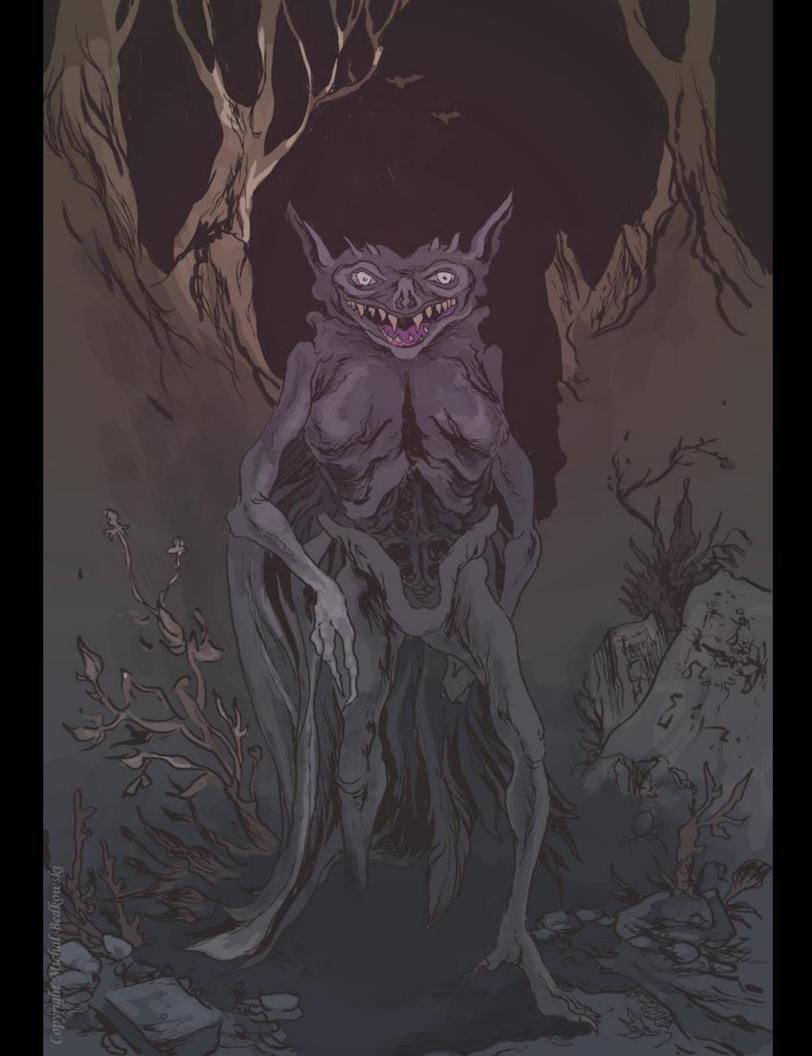
"Don't worry, Mommy," she said. "It will be over soon. My brother's here now."

About the Author:

Katie Ess lives in Colorado with her husband, two sons, a bulldog puppy, and two ferrets. When she's not writing, you can generally find her cleaning up a mess. Aside from someday becoming a world famous author, her most important life's goal is to teach the six of them to clean up their own messes.

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The Route Home | Cathie Aylmer

Sitting in the lounge, Jack heard the familiar sounds of the car pulling up outside and reversing into the space in front of the house, the muffled babbling of the radio before the engine was switched off, followed by the slamming of a car door and footsteps on the front path, before the front door creaked open.

Tye walked into the lounge, his normally cheerful face looked washed out and somber.

"Hey," Jack smiled in greeting, looking up from working on his laptop.

Tye went straight to where Jack sat at the dining table, leaning against his strong muscular body for support, not saying a word, his chin brushing against the soft blond hair on the top of Jack's head. For a moment Tye stood there, wrapping his slim arms around Jack's solid, comforting presence.

Tye took a breath and stepped back, "It was awful; I hit something..." he began hesitantly, his voice unsteady. "It's ok, you're safe and that's all that matters. Take a deep breath and tell me what happened." Jack looked reassuringly at Tye.

"I was on my way back and I pulled out to go round a van parked at the side of the road..." Tye took a deep breath, Jack waited patiently his eyes filled with concern, as Tye continued, "There was nothing I could do... a car was coming the other way, so I had to pull back over... I thought they'd move, they could see I was coming... but..." Tye stopped, his voice unsteady.

"It's ok," Jack repeated, fully focused on every word Tye was saying, "Just tell me what happened. We can deal with it, ok? What do you mean 'they'?"

"I know I'm probably over-reacting... I mean why wouldn't they move..? I assumed I'd miss them... maybe the car would just go over the top without doing any damage... but that's when I glanced in the mirror and saw the body in my rearview..." He sobbed, "I'm a killer!"

Jack's brow was creased in confusion. "What did you hit?" He questioned gently.

"A bird. A tiny little innocent bird, that never hurt anyone. And I saw it, it's not like I didn't know I was going to hit it. I just thought it would move, I didn't even try to stop!" Tye blurted out. "I'm a bird killer! I've never killed anything before."

Jack breathed a sigh of relief and pulled his partner closer, hugging him. "Ssshhhh..." He soothed, it wasn't your fault, if you'd tried to stop someone might have had an accident. It's just a bird, maybe you just stunned it, or it was sick and that's why it didn't move. Let me make you a cup of tea."

Tye hoped that Jack was right, but the nauseated feeling of knowing that he had killed something so small and helpless was hard to shake.

The daily commute home followed the same routine each night: with a shudder, he approached that same spot in the road, and guilt washed over him. Every time he drove home, he felt sick to the pit of his stomach. What kind of person was he? Should he have stopped and gone back? Perhaps the bird had just been injured... He knew these thoughts weren't helpful. His therapist had told him he needed to control unhelpful thoughts. What he thought he needed was to find a different way home. That's what he'd do; he'd check Google maps later and find an alternative route.

Tonight was the last time he'd have to drive down this road, tormented by reliving that moment. Just like the day it happened, he pulled out to pass that same van parked at the side of the road again, as he passed it his gaze was drawn to the rear-view mirror, scanning the surface of the road he almost expected to see the body again: laying on its back, tiny feet pointed to the sky, not a feather disturbed, as the other sparrows looked on like mourners at the graveside.

He redirected his attention to the road ahead, but it was too late to stop for the child who had stepped out, there was a sickening thud this time and no need to check the rear-view to see what damage had been done. The fragile body bounced across the bonnet of the car, the head smacking the windscreen, a mess of darks curls in complete disarray. Too late, Tye stamped on the brake pedal, heard the tires screech on the tarmac and watched the crimson trickle of blood down the cracked glass as the car finally came to a halt.

About the Author:

Cathie Aylmer is a writer and full-time educator. She writes flash fiction, poetry and short stories. Based in Hampshire, England, she writes about what she knows with a little added embellishment or excitement, aiming to capture the mood of the time in her writing. She is a fan of the classics and tales with a twist.

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Homecoming | Ngo Binh Anh Khoa

My son's been gone for weeks now. I've missed him terribly, so I decided to call him up yesterday, telling him to come home. My words were clear enough, which should have been able to reach him. He'll return. Definitely. Hah! Someone's knocking on the door now!

Immediately, I yank it open. An unrecognizable face greets me, but from the bracelet he's wearing (which I personally made and buried alongside him), that's my boy. I study his decaying features, stupefied as he reaches out, leaving chunks of dirt, crawling maggots and rotten flesh to smudge the 'welcome' upon the doormat.

Nighttime Call | Ngo Binh Anh Khoa

"Open the door, Tam," comes my mother's voice from beyond my bedroom's door at midnight.

Not asleep yet, I raise myself up from bed in response, wondering what she needs me for. My hand's hovering before the knob until a sudden sense of awareness strikes me. My mother's not home tonight. She's at grandmother's place due to a sudden cold. A wave of chill washes over me, binding me in place.

"Open the door," the voice sweetly repeats, accompanied by the haunting sounds of something sharp grating against wood. I step backward as the knob begins to turn by itself.

Rat | Ngo Binh Anh Khoa

There's a rat in my kitchen. I can hear it every night, rummaging around for leftovers and leaving the place completely trashed by morning. I've tried everything I could think of: setting traps, using poison, even borrowing my cousin's cat. Since then, the cat's refused to enter my house, staying out of sight in the garden whenever my cousin visits.

Tonight, I'll deal with the pest myself. I've sealed up all possible escape routes and prepared to ambush it. The rat's right on time, and I realize too late how ill-equipped I am when its mouth engulfs my head.

I Told You So | Ngo Binh Anh Khoa

My brother loves tormenting stray dogs. Mother thinks he's just being mischievous, but she doesn't know him like I do. She's hardly around nowadays, too preoccupied with the messy divorce and battle for custody.

"Keep doing that," I've told him repeatedly, "And one will eventually bite back." He's simply laughed it off.

Now, as I stare at the transparent face of my brother's soul, ripped out from his mangled corpse nearby, the words 'I told you so' get stuck in my throat. Powerlessly, I watch as the pitch-black dog with fiery eyes drags his flailing spirit into the yawning abyss.

About the Author:

Ngo Binh Anh Khoa is currently teaching English at Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology (HUTECH) in 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: Khoa Ngo



All Things Great and Small | Kilmo

"There's no need to be like that. I'll tell the story again; and after you'll let me eat?"

The old man with the scars where his eyes used to be groped through the air.

"Please... I'm so hungry."

Footsteps pattered over the tower block's roof and a blade flashed in the moonlight.

"Agh! Wait! I'll begin."

Muffled titters spread through the huddled figures round the cook drum and the old man shuffled back against the parapet to nurse his fingers.

"We still had power, water, and TV's, then."

Sparks shot into the sky and for a moment the wind brought the smell of the feral's meal through the air. The blind man's mouth watered, but he could tell they were listening as excited chatter rustled around him. His words were the stuff of legend, not one of his captors had been born in a hospital, or even knew what a doctor was, and their parents were long dead. Like their prisoner would be if he didn't give them what they wanted, thought the old man.

"There was a woman in the area that fell under my guidance, not far from here, a bad woman. They said she'd done things, terrible things, to the city's children although the authorities could never prove it. They'd tried police investigations and trials, but nothing ever worked, and more than one of the jurors disappeared. When she died, I was sent to make sure it was true. It was my responsibility. My duty."

A half-gnawed bone flew out of the shadows and struck his shoulder.

"I know, I'm getting there." The old man paused as he gathered his thoughts. "At first I didn't believe it.

Although her flat was open, the door smashed down after the locals had finally taken matters into their own hands before another of their sons and daughters went missing. But that didn't mean it was empty. I could feel her everywhere like a weight pressing on my shoulders and the bloodless creature I'd seen scuttling out to get supplies looked nothing like what was on the bed. That woman had been young, but the corpse was much older."

The man sighed and drew his knees up to his chest as he raised his empty sockets to the sky.

"That's when I noticed the seeds."

Far below them, amongst the rust-eaten car wrecks, something howled and the old man shivered.

"I swear I didn't know what they were. They were just seeds, pack after pack of them, some in paper wraps, others in glass jars. I was young then and full of hope. I believed there was always good hidden in everything if you looked hard enough."

The howl came again and was joined by a scream. The old man waited until it had faded before continuing.

"I took them up to the roof and scattered them. The city could be cold, and heartless, at times and it felt good to spread life over it. I didn't realize what life though until I saw the seeds in the air.

"Those things should have fallen to earth, to take root in gardens, and parks, like I'd intended but instead what they did was buzz. It was like looking at a cloud of locusts and they flew much further than I thought.

"It took a week before the first plants appeared, and a month after the groves and thickets grew too dense to penetrate the monsters emerged."

A dreamy expression came over the old man's face.

"I saw one once, you know. Before the survivors found out what I'd done and blinded me. I think it was a harpy. The thing had attacked a gym. Lots of women there you see, and the harpies have always had this thing for women, particularly pretty ones. Anyway, it had killed most of them by the time I arrived. But the owner? He thought I could help. I don't what he expected me to do." The old man glanced sightlessly at his hands. "Banish it I expect."

Thunder rumbled through the storm clouds massing over the ruined city, and down below in the rubble choked streets hooded figures flitted between the buildings.

"But I'm not a magician, am I?"

Drops of rain had begun to drum off the rooftop, but it wasn't them that wet the blind man's cheeks.

"If only I'd read the packets of those seeds. I might have known. I didn't believe in witchcraft back then. I thought it was a fairytale, a metaphor at best. But that old crone had left a warning for us if we were stupid enough to plant what she kept. It was only afterwards that I saw what she'd written: Wood of the Suicides, Pandemonium, Atlantis, and other names out of mankind's dreams and nightmares, that I began to suspect. It was only when I saw what lived in the forests that had grown almost overnight that I knew."

There was a bang as the door to the rooftop burst open and the place filled with screaming kids and the men in long dark cloaks that moved among them stabbing and thrusting with their knives.

The vermin patrol had come early.

When the struggling figures knocked the cook drum to the rooftop and the torso that had been roasting on its grill flopped to the dirt the blind man shook his head. Already those nearest have descended on it like vultures.

"Nobody's got any patience these days."

A patrolman with a shaven head who'd stopped in front of him snarled a reply. A cross has been smeared over his face, and his teeth are filed down to points.

"Get on with it then," answered the blind man squatting on the floor. "I've been wanting a few words with my maker for a while."

He bared his throat and waited as lightning slammed against the earth and in the glare the priest's collar was visible reflected in his murderer's eyes a moment before blood stained it red.

About the Author:

Kilmo writes. He brought it from squatting in Bristol, to a van in a pub car park, to Dark Fire Magazine, CC&D Magazine, Feed Your Monster Magazine, Blood Moon Rising, Aphelion, and The Wyrd. He has a story published in the anthology 'One Hundred Voices' entitled *Closest* and is considering purchasing an iron these days.

Author Blog: <u>Pirate Frequencies</u>

Twitter: <u>@piratefreq</u>

Heat Stroke | Nicole Henning

It's only safe to go outside at night, even then the heat is unbearable. If the heat doesn't make you sick the smell will make your head spin. Their flesh bakes on the cracked pavement even after the sun has been down for hours. The unfortunates who didn't have a home to hide inside during the blistering heat of daytime. Nuclear winter would be a blessing compared to this radioactive heat. We scavenge through the night and try to sleep on basement floors during the day. They stopped collecting the dead weeks ago, we wait our turn in the dark.

About the Author:

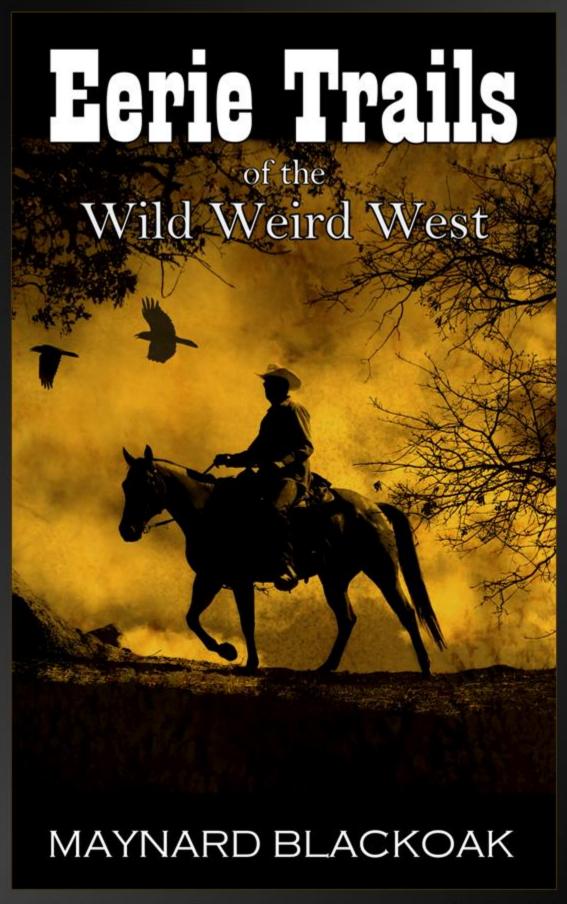
Nicole Henning is a book-a-holic who lives in a big-little town in Wisconsin. She surrounds herself with all things scary and bizarre and enjoys creating unique art. When she isn't writing she enjoys playing video games and spends a lot of time snuggling with her dog Allie aka Princess Prissy Pants. Reading, writing and horror are her biggest passions in life.

Coming Back | Patrick J. Wynn

His wife sobbed as she sat on the bench, Phil could hear the wood creak as she rocked back and forth wailing in sorrow. His three children cried as several people tried their best to console them. Phil could take no more and pushed past the heat and flames then took the long black tunnel upward, it was a struggle, but he continued on. He found the closer he got the easier the road became and finally with one last push he broke through. He fell into the cold stiff thing and knew pain. It took several moments before he could make things work, but with loud pops and screams of agony he arrived with a rush. Screaming from the pain he sat up from the cushioned coffin and turned toward his family and the gathering of the mourners. He didn't get the reception he thought he would.

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 by Sirens Call Publications, Dark Dossier, Short Horror and Trembling with Fear. You can follow him on his Facebook page and look for his short story collections on Amazon.



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

The Sound of Mischief | Leah Holbrook Sackett

The Tin Man was wheezing. Luke could hear him through the door of 6E. It was a laborious sound, a gasping, grasping at life sound. The sound of the Tin Man's assisted breathing had become a sound of comfort. When alone in his apartment, waiting for mom, the silence built a timorous tower of anxiety. He turned the TV on for company, but he was compelled to watch the sensational America's Most Wanted religiously even though it scared the crap out of him. He was afraid to close his eyes lest a serial killer bust out of the kitchen. Because in Luke's mind that is where killers reside, in kitchens with the knives. This anxiety pushed him out of doors and made him vulnerable to the bullies.

Luke stood on the landing longer than he should, listening. He was losing ground. Soon, Tyler and the other boys of the west side apartment building would find him, and then he would be sorry. He could hear their jeers growing in volume.

"Hey, Ass hat, We're going to find you," Tyler yelled.

The other boys laughed and repeated, "Ass hat, ass hat."

Luke still had a black eye, not even fading yet, from the other day when they found him by the recycling cans on the curb. Now, he heard the rapid trample of feet coming up the stairs, and he turned to flee to his apartment with the scuffed door from where the boys would kick and holler insults.

Luke should have stayed inside all day while his mother was at work, but looking out the window at the Sun glinting off the cars, the birds hopping on the sidewalk at the edges of the trashcans, and the girls playing hopscotch, he was beckoned to play a part in the springtime city. Just a few weeks ago, snow and ice melted on the walk. Today, you'd never even know that winter had extended its reach trying to stake one final claim before the bursting warmth of spring hatched. The heat of the sun once more beat through the window, and Luke answered its call. He'd been outside unmolested by his bullies for 20 minutes. He checked his mother's old Swatch watch too big on his wrist. It was a purple mesh lace design. It was girly, but it fit. And he liked to guess at the time. Of the moment, it was half-past a lace flower. He liked the watch. It made him feel closer to his mom. She worked long hours and sometimes weekends at an office that didn't pay enough for childcare. So, Luke was left alone for long periods, a difficult feat for an eight-year-old. He endured the bullies, and his mother pretended to believe his stories of falling and bumping into things to get all of those bruises and black eyes. She had to believe him because she had no choice but to leave him behind.

The street was full of children's traffic that Monday of late May, and Luke sat in the window picking at a scab on his knee. The siren song of school released children and the promise of summer to come coaxed Luke back out. Maybe this would be a good day when the boys would be mesmerized by Tyler's Xbox, and Luke could enjoy the breeze under the Sun. But it was not; Luke was not out long when he heard the whistles and shouts of the small band of bullies. They were not much bigger than him, but they outnumbered him, and they were mean. Luke made a quick turn of it from the sidewalk and headed back to his apartment. The rhythmic sound of the old man breathing caught his attention on the landing between the Tin Man's apartment and his own; he paused and pressed his ear to the door. Luke wondered what the old man looked like and envisioned him as the Tin Man from the Wizard of Oz, wheezing, needing oil. Luke stepped back from the syncopated sound and quickly ascended the last flight of stairs.

On Sunday, Luke saw no light seeping from under the Tin Man's door, just darkness. He stopped on his way back from the corner market to get milk and cereal for breakfast. He had a box of Lucky Charms hanging in a plastic bag from his left arm. He considered his mother still asleep upstairs, and then he got down on his stomach on the commercial-grade mottled brown carpet squares. He used his fingertips to pull at the edge of the carpet, to try and sneak a peek under the door. Nothing. He listened to the sucking and pumping sound that broke the silence in the dark, ripping open life, forcing oxygen in and out of the Tin Man. Through the wooden door, the peeling paint, Luke could envision his Tin Man waiting.

On Wednesday, Tyler and the boys were hot on Luke's heels. Their summer camps had not yet begun. Luke was not going to make it to his door this time. He tripped up the stairs. His feet failing him in fear, and then he noticed the Tin Man's door ajar. Luke spontaneously and stealthily nudged the door open just enough for him to

sneak his small body through the crack. The boys rumbled past while Luke waited just inside the door for the bullies to come back down the stairs in retreat giving him the all-clear. As he waited, his eyes adjusted to the darkness, and he could hear them banging on the door to his empty apartment. Luke crouched in the pitch-black room. With time, he could even make out the silhouette of the Tin Man in bed and he appeared to be sleeping. As he crept closer, he kept his steady gaze on the Tin Man's face. The Tin Man's eyes were closed. The room was stale and motionless, except for the pumping of the ventilator. He continued to step softly across the room to the old man elevated in a hospital bed. The bed and ventilator were centered in what should have been the living room.

Luke ran his fingers over the ventilator on a small side table. He was careful not to press any buttons. It was benign in shape and color, but Luke knew it kept the man alive despite its mundane appearance. Luke peered over the metal railing of the bed, taking in the domed plastic mask strapped to the old man's face. He wondered how the man could sleep like this. Luke once tried his mother's sleep mask, but he couldn't stand the pressure across his eyes. However uncomfortable, he figured the old man didn't have a choice. Then Luke noticed the flutter of the gray lashes. The Tin Man opened his eyes and turned a cloudy, fogged eye toward Luke. Luke fled the blind eye only to return hours later. The door was still hanging open as he left it when he raced home, up-stairs. He stepped into the broad shaft of light, partially blocking the illumination from the landing.

What light remained fell across the old man's face bloated with a pearly sheen. He was barrel-chested like the Tin Man. His right eye was cloudy, and he seemed to rely on his sense of sound and smell to navigate his small world. With a large, wrinkled, and meaty hand, he waived Luke in. As Luke crossed the room, he watched the Tin Man struggle to remove his ventilator. He fumbled and grasped with his fingers inside his mouth. Finally, he clutched and withdrew a wet tube with webs of saliva from the depths of his mouth and throat. This grotesque liberation was bound with the smell of foul breath. Luke's knees weakened, and he grasped the metal railing of the bed to steady himself, while the Tin Man struggled with the mask and straps wrenching them from his face. The apparatus tumbled and dangled at his side. When the Tin Man parted his dry, cracked lips, a whispery, shaky voice shattered against the continual hush of the ventilator.

"Water," the Tin Man whispered.

Luke went to the neglected kitchen and fetched a glass of water. He felt the Tin Man was more like Darth Vader when Vader says, "Luke, I am your father." But Luke knew this elderly man was not his father. His father was across town and too busy to see him. The Tin Man was right here, and Luke suspected that they needed each other.

The Tin Man lived in a cave of shadows, which Luke found comforting, like a blanket to hide under. Luke made garlic bologna and mayo sandwiches on white bread with the crust cut off to share with the Tin Man. As Luke ate and the Tin Man choked down his lunch, Luke told the Tin Man stories of the world outside. Eerily, the Tin Man knew the number of boys in the band of bullies. He could smell and name each one. Luke wondered what he smelled like.

"Fear, it is fear and Lucky Charms," the Tin Man said, and he coughed with a grimace of discomfort.

Luke could believe him. He often caught a whiff of sweat and Lucky Charms lifting off his body when hiding in a small space waiting for the boys to pass.

The Tin Man had good and bad days, and sometimes he dismissed Luke as soon as he entered. Other days, he told Luke horrific tales that kept Luke entranced in the darkness. He spun breathy yarns of mischief and magic. On a chill and wet afternoon, he told Luke about the Draugr.

"A Draugr is a powerful spirit that can possess the living and once occupying a body can shape shift into another on contact. They are cruel creatures," the Tin Man said.

"Have you ever seen one?" Luke said.

"Oh, yes," the Tin Man said.

Luke wasn't certain, but he was inclined to believe the strained voice that strummed the air in the shadowy room.

It was late in the day, on what otherwise would have been a beautiful Thursday. It was warmer than it had been in some weeks, and the promise of summer was beating down strong. Tyler had Luke penned to the sidewalk, and he was raining down blows on him. Luke's skinny arms did nothing to protect his face. Tyler beat him savagely, and when he rocked back on his heels, hovering over Luke, to see what he had done, he was worried that he had

gone too far. It was two weeks before Luke dared to leave the apartment, and when he did, he sprinted down to the Tin Man. He had forgotten how dark it was inside the Tin Man's home. He hesitated to get his bearings. But all in all, Luke was thankful for the darkness. He was embarrassed for the Tin Man to see his shame.

"Let me see how bad," the Tin Man said.

"How did you know?" Luke said.

"Everyone knows," the Tin Man said.

The Tin Man gave him a once-over with his good eye.

"I think it's time," the Tin Man said.

"Time for what?" Luke asked.

"Revenge."

At first, their plots were fantastical and fun to imagine, but then things took a turn. The Tin Man was plotting something beyond mischief, something doable, something sinister. Luke had a momentary lapse of judgment and played along with the Tin Man's fantasy of revenge. Initially, the plan seemed harmless. Luke was to lure Tyler into the Tin Man's apartment, and the Tin Man would scare him. While Luke doubted the Tin Man could scare someone like Tyler, he did like the idea of turning the tables.

"The next time we hear Tyler on the stairs below, you taunt him and run in here. When he gives chase, you duck into the dark, and I'll let loose while you shut the door," the Tin Man said.

It was mere hours before they heard Tyler coming into the building. You could tell it was him because he was always singing the same song.

"Do your balls hang low? Do they wobble to and fro?"

"Hey, Ass hat," Luke shouted with glee.

Just like they'd planned, Tyler came barreling into the darkness. Luke slammed the door shut and leaned against it with his back to watch the show. Tyler was disoriented. The Tin Man was out of bed and slowly staggering forward. Luke and Tyler were both paralyzed in surprise. By now, Luke was used to the dark. He could see enough. The Tin Man lurched in his thin cotton pajamas. The pants were baggy, for they once fit a bigger version of the Tin Man. But through the threadbare shirt, Luke could see the Tin Man's frame. He had once been a hulking figure. Age had worn him soft and saggy. Crossing what looked like an impossible distance for a man in his condition, the Tin Man reached out and grabbed Tyler by the throat; as he tightened his grasp on Tyler's throat, he shifted, they changed. Bones cracked and collapsed to the floor. Bones snapped and built up a sturdy albeit child's small stature. The flesh transaction was weepy and sticky. The Tin Man was shape shifting into Tyler, and Tyler was melting into an old man on the floor. The Tin Man gave a shudder as his new skeleton slipped into place, and his hunger was satiated. The new Tin Man Tyler stretched out his new arms, flexing and feeling their twiggy nature. He strolled toward Luke and gave him a hard stare.

"Come teach me about this Xbox," the Tin Man Tyler said, and he ushered the speechless Luke out the door.

About the Author:

Leah Holbrook Sackett has published two short story collections and a novella, *Raising St. Elisabeth* (all available at Amazon). She is a Pushcart Prize nominee with over 75 published short stories, and she is an adjunct lecturer at the University of Missouri - St. Louis, where she earned her M.F.A. Leah has an extensive collection of Lewis Carroll books, art, and trinkets filling up her home.

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The Dark Content of Nowhere | Nat Whiston

I feel safe here, in the dark with my own company, engulfed in the pitch black. I find so much peace and contentment surrounding me. I was confused and lost when I first arrived here in this desolate wasteland of emptiness. My garment was initially white, a plain but straightforward dress I'd come to love. My memory is fuzzy, but as I look down to see a gold necklace with a name in bold. 'Amelia', it said. As I examine the bold letters, I could swear I could see drops of blood dried on the A. Before I had time to inspect it further, it vanished off my neck. At least now I know my name and pieces, my life gradually slip back in place.

However, the longer I stay, the more things begin to change around me. I hear whispers of a man's soft voice in my ear as my outfit now becomes a black silk evening dress. My hair and makeup have also changed, plain simple mascara and liner replaced with scarlet red lipstick and thick black eyelashes. The change is gradual, and soon jewelry adorned my neck, a beautiful jeweled choker, and a silver bracelet encircles my wrist; I feel like a princess. I walk on now in silence as the floor simmers beneath me. I see my watery reflection tremble.

Never had I been given such exquisite gifts and beauty, but something felt strangely wrong about it. Like I was being changed to suit another person's needs, stripping me of the things that made me who I am. This unnerved me, as I had been manipulated in the past by an overbearing mother. I moved into my new place just this week, enjoying my first instants of freedom in my menial apartment. I'm so lost in thought; I don't notice the ever-increasing glow underfoot. The strange water is the only source of light in this never-ending black hole of nothingness and quiet. It is steady now, and in the shallow pools surrounding me, I see visions of a man.

The balding middle-aged gentleman is moving around in a dark basement. His face is familiar, but I can't place where I know him from. He moves quickly around the dingy lit room, frantically tidying. Sweat pouring from his forehead as he grabs two large gas canisters and hauls them up the broken wooden stairs. The light catches his bald spot as he ascends the staircase, and again my reflection returns. The waters lap the sides of my heels, so I tread lightly, following the man's movements as he wanders around beneath me. The air feels thick, and I feel like I'm constantly out of breath with every step I take. Even if water flicks up and catches me, I always remain bone dry. My reflection comes and goes, and I realize now I am tracing every step this man takes. My stomach churns, and worry rises within me, as I have no idea why the waters show me these images. My throat feels sore and dry, the tightness like a vice around my neck, so I remove the diamond choker. Curiosity gets the better of me.

I notice the burn marks around my neck, and my fingers trace the rope etchings that cover my throat. The whispers continue to daze me, as does the horror of my injuries. I stare down into my mirrored reflection, trying so hard to come to terms with what's going on. But I don't know what's going on; this whole place is a mystery. The pools move to shake out my reflection yet again, and I see the man from before emerging from a car in the middle of the field. He is panicking, and tears stain his dusty face as he goes to the back of the car and opens the boot. He pulls out a sizable flat-packed bag and yanks it onto the floor, and then he pauses to catch his breath. I know what is happening now.

The pools turn a crimson red at my realization, I hear the echoes of my cries, and I feel warm tears break down my face. This new knowledge is unbearable as images of torture swim through my mind. As entrails wriggle at my ankles like snakes, I let out a shrill scream at the horrors around me. I try to avert my eyes from the pictures below, but I can't look away even though I'm horrified to my very core. My hands shake as memories flood my mind, and I remember the man below my feet. He goes back to the bag and unzips both sides hauling its content out onto the floor; he looks at the mass in front of him.

"Perfect", he mutters to himself before caressing the object of his affection and then rising to his feet. He reaches into the passenger seat and pulls out a red rose; he then discards it onto the corpse and moves back to the boot. He lifts the canisters of gas out one at a time and tips it over the beautifully decorated physique. All I can do is hug the freshly materialized rose, tight in my grip as the thorns pierce my skin. I can't bear to watch him set my body alight, so I shut my eyes, and even in pain as the flames rip up my soul. My flesh sizzles, and the dress seals itself to my skin, blood boiling in my view. I still find solace in the dark.

About the Author:

Nat Whiston is from Birmingham, England and first started writing in her first voluntary job with Magazine Voice 21 as a feature writer and reviewer. When her health took its toll, her writing took a backseat. But now intent on reinventing herself, she posts stories and reviews on her Chrystal Vixen page. She has drabbles being published with Raven and Drake and Black Ink Publishing.

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The Good Life | Matt Scott

"We don't know this is his, Hal. It's not his." "It's his."

Bonnie kept talking. Her words were a muddled whisper. Hal knelt in the damp grass with her behind their home. Her black, tangled hair shimmered in the fog. Their house darkened as directed. Eyes were most likely following their every move. He knew they had to be careful. They were at the far edge of their back yard, near the tree line which marked their property. The hardwood forest stared back at them as they examined the clothing. Oak and walnut trees, barren now this late in the season, witnessed their distress. After a long pause, Hal took off his round rimless glasses and rubbed his hands across his face, as if trying to smooth the worry lines from the corners of his mouth and beneath his eyes. "The note said to come alone." His voice was flat, defeated. He inhaled deeply and the cold, crisp scent of the woods wafted up to his nose. A hint of pine and evergreen lingered in the night around them. How many times did they tell their son not to cut through the woods? Of course, their warnings were only for evading grass stains, torn jeans and poison oak.

"Then go Hal. Do something. Get him back."

"Do what Bonnie? They'll kill me. It's what they want."

"They don't want you dead, Hal. God knows why but you are too valuable to them. They need you." He turned to her, "Then why do this? Why take Nick?"

"My God, you're clueless, Hal. Helpless. Worthless. Just fucking worthless. It's no wonder those men laugh at you. They know you're a pussy. An ineffectual nothing. They won't kill you, they have too much fun with you. If you weren't so good at cooking the books for them, if you had balls enough to just do what they wanted, they wouldn't have taken him."

"What should I do?"

"He's my little boy, Hal. Keep doing what you're told and GET HIM BACK."

Bonnie held Nicholas' dark blue windbreaker and his Chicago Bulls hat in her hands. She knelt at the tree line with her husband, trembling, lost in the blood stains on the jacket's collar. The brim of the boy's hat was still sticky and crimson. This was more than a message. This was her fault too. Anger rose within her as she thought about Nick and what this all meant, the life they had been living, the risks they had taken to afford such luxuries.

"Do you hear me? Hal?" She pushed him hard on the shoulder and he lost his balance. He fell from his knees to his left. A small man, no bigger than a hiccup, he had been tossed around quite easily most of his life. For the past sixteen years, it had been Bonnie shoving and pulling the genial old man like a piece of salt water taffy. Bossing him around and making fun of him to her society friends. The little Jew boy. The little fairy. But the money was good even if the sex was not. Sex she could get on the side. Money, she got from the numbered accounts in his book.

Mist collected on the blades of grass and fallen leaves littering the fringes of the yard, staining the ground. It was late autumn in New England. Everything was dying, or waiting to do so. Hal laid there, hiding behind empty eyes. "Do something." Bonnie broke down and wept, holding her son's blood-stained coat to her face. For a moment, she could smell dryer sheets and Mountain Dew, then the cold metallic smell of melted copper. Goose flesh crawled over Hal's skin like rain soldiers on the windshield of his car. They marched, relentlessly, never knowing their destination. He searched for an answer, a way out of all this without anyone else getting hurt. Some problems have only one solution.

Hal righted himself on the manicured back lawn of his Southbridge home. A half-acre on a cul-de-sac. 3600 square feet, in ground pool. Three car garage. They were fortunate to have so much. Fortunate indeed, but, everything has a price. He wiped his face with the sleeve of his shirt, stared at his fingers for a moment, how they were long and delicate, like a piano players' fingers, then his gaze moved down to his hands, soft, smooth, not a callous on them. An accountant's hands. He looked at Bonnie, still weeping into her stolen son's blood-soaked shirt. "Do we deserve this Bonnie?" His voice was distant. He could hear the words come out from between his lips, yet he felt no control over them. They came from somewhere deep within himself, a place he rarely ever went. Down where his conscience lived. His moral compass. His humanity. He had buried those parts of himself long ago. "I'll go. I'll talk to them. Tell them it was all a mistake. He doesn't know anything. He won't say a word to anyone."

"Damn right you'll go." She stood to get more leverage, looming over him. At five foot eight inches tall, not counting her hair, she had a few inches on him. She put her full weight behind her this time when she swung. "You and your friends, Hal. You did this. Not my little boy. Not Nikki. He hasn't done shit" She screamed and spat as she swung her right fist downward toward his face. He looked up and cowered back down into the cold Massachusetts earth. The blow glanced off his cheek and she landed in a heap on top of him. He squirmed beneath the weight of her, desperately trying to get free. She screamed obscenities into the night. Only the half-frozen forest which lay before them could be offended by her outrage. She spat in her husband's face and cursed him. She cursed God. She cursed everyone else involved. "Don't let him die Hal. Don't let them kill our son."

Hal relaxed beneath her. Both shivering from the elements and from the sheer exhaustion of the moment. She stopped fighting him when he spoke.

"They won't let us go, not now Bonnie. It was naïve of us to ask. Naïve of me to think they would listen. They'll never let us go." His eyes were wide, but his voice never went above a whisper.

She raised herself from his chest and rested her weight on her knuckles, dug down into the frost covered ground. She looked him in the eyes, hatred dripping from every exposed tooth. "You go get our son damn you. Pull your ass together, man up for once in your miserable, pathetic, limp dick life, and go get my little boy."

"I might not be coming back. You know that, right? They aren't going to just give me Nick and show me the door. They're going to show me where they keep the shovels."

"Do you think I give half a shit about what happens to you? You go tell them to let my Nikki go. You do this Hal. You do this for me. You owe me this. You owe Nikki and me a fucking future. Do your job. You have to be good at something."

"I tried to make a good life for us." Defeated. Deflated. His small frame slumped in the wet, trampled grass.

"All you did was make a mess by getting into business with those goons, those psychos. You go fix this. Make it right." She got to her feet and helped him up. They stood in the back yard of their suburban home, under the foggy light of the late autumn moon.

"God, it's beautiful here." He stared out into the forest for a moment and then fished around in his front pants pocket for his car keys." I'm going now."

"Get our son."

"I love you."

"Just get my boy, Hal"

"Good bye, Bonnie."

Hal walked around the corner of the house to the driveway. He stood in front of his silver Lexus for a moment trying to screw up the courage to get in and go get his son. It shouldn't be this hard. There should be no hesitation. A real man would speed down the highway, balls to the wall and bust down doors to get his son back. But, confronting liquored up mobsters in the middle of the night wasn't exactly making him feel brave. They had beaten and kidnapped his son and were doing God knows what to him, but he didn't feel too bad about it. Nick was his mother's son more than he would ever be his father's boy. The two deserved each other. Spoiled little shits.

Hal opened the driver's side door and got in. The plush leather seats were heated and they felt good on his back side. The muscles in his face relaxed a little, and the semblance of a smile slowly developed on his smooth, boyish face. He tuned the radio to the oldies station and put the car in reverse. "Fuck you Bonnie. You go get him."

About the Author:

Matt Scott is the author of *Darkness Calling* and *Voices in My Head* as well as more than three dozen short stories appearing in anthologies across the country. He recently moved from the Midwest to the beautiful mountains of Colorado, where he lives with his wife, Heather, and their ever-growing gaggle of furry friends.

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Longbeard of Green Briar | David A.F. Brown

Green Briar was a small hamlet typically characterized by peace and tranquility, but nothing lasts forever. One sundrenched day at the height of Violet Festival, the only child of the town blacksmith went missing. Some villagers said they'd seen the girl chasing a faerie in a clover patch near the West Woods, a dense forest near the edge of town, known by the elders to be ripe with black magic. The blacksmith had warned his daughter against following faeries more than once. They were mischievous little creatures, and in some cases, the minions of greater forces of evil, including witches.

A fortnight passed and another child disappeared. This time, it was the bread maker's firstborn son. Seven blood-red moons passed and two more girls vanished. Again, they had been spotted near the West Woods around the time of their disappearance. While no one had seen any faeries, many reported hearing sounds of chiming bells and mysterious giggling, tell-tale signs that fae were about.

When a fifth child disappeared, the strongest man in Green Briar, Angus of the Armstrong clan, whose arms were as big as boulders, set off into the West Woods in search of the missing children. After a night in the forest, he hobbled back to town with his eyes gouged from his head, his cheeks stained crimson with blood. He could offer no explanation for what happened, only smiling and repeating, "The glee in thee sets me free," over and over again until he eventually stumbled off a cliff to his death.

At the opposite end of Green Briar, at the peak of the wildlands, far away from the West Woods, an old hermit named Tavish lived in a small, stone cave. The dusty abode was naturally camouflaged season-round by wild bluebell, long wheat and thick marsh thistle.

One afternoon, Tavish heard the distinctive wailing of yet another mother who had lost a child to the woods. He felt her cries deep in his chest and hastily made his way to the mouth of the cave, peering down on the town's inhabitants from miles above like an old weathered hawk.

Tavish knew the pain of losing someone very well. It was a feeling he had carried for a long time, deep in his bones. He had lost his twin sister to the West Woods, and on that dreadful day, vowed to never return. He could never forgive himself for what happened. The memories shot through his mind in a deluge. *Tavish! Please hel—!*

Tavish clenched his fist and punched his own forehead in a desperate effort to ward off the red tattered flesh, the crunching bones and the wet gurgles, pleading for help. As usual, he couldn't. He was frozen now just as he was then, when the she-devil had crippled him with her enchantments. He had to watch the whole thing...

His body jerked involuntarily, causing his knees to buckle. He fell to the ground, a small cloud of dust erupting in his wake. The years had not been kind to his mind or body. His muscles were flabby and weak. His beard was down to his waist, grey and scraggly. His tunic reeked of sweat and dirt. It hadn't been properly washed in years. He lived solely off wild plants, berries and mushrooms, and his frail body showed it.

Throughout the years, Tavish had tried coming down from his cave and rejoining Green Briar on a few occasions, but it never took root, for as soon as he set foot near the West Woods, the memories returned like fire to flesh. Tavish hadn't spoken to anyone since his sister's death. In fact, he couldn't even muster enough energy to speak to himself. Nevertheless, the townsfolk were aware of his existence and often referred to him as 'Longbeard,' the creepy old sloth in the hills. But on that day, Tavish felt compelled to forge a new path in his life. He knew he had to return to the West Woods.

He prepared a small fire by rubbing a stick into some dried grass, then used his only weapon, a dagger made of unicorn horn, to carve a long wooden spear from a willow branch. The dagger was all that was left of his parents. They had gifted it to him on his tenth birthday. He tied the spear to his back with some twine and packed a satchel with a batch of his most intoxicating mushrooms. He then removed one of the little red puffballs from the bag, used his dagger to chop it into fine pieces and packed the shards into a long, curved pipe. Upon igniting the bowl with a thick blade of long wheat, he sucked the milky smoke into his lungs and spoke his first words in what seemed like forever: "I'm comin' for ye, hag."

Tavish made his way down the hill and into Green Briar, feeling like a new man. As he trekked through the dirt roads towards the West Woods, the townsfolk stared at him in astonishment, amazed to see Longbeard in the flesh. Tavish nodded to the crowd and smiled, revealing a semi-toothless grin, and loudly proclaimed that he would enter the West Woods that night, and would only return with the witch's head on a pike. His words were met with applause from the townsfolk, who quickly spread the word of Longbeard's bravery.

At dusk, Tavish had arrived at the edge of the forest. A cloud of blackflies picked at his bushy hair as a crowd of villagers gathered around to show their support and offer prayers. Tavish acknowledged them with a wave of his hand, pursed his fleshy lips and turned to face the West Woods. As soon as he looked through the trees, he heard his sister's cries. He winced and grabbed the unicorn dagger at his side, pressing the tip of the blade into his leg until it drew blood. The pain silenced the screams for now.

Tavish eyed the thick brush ahead. It was quiet save for the sounds of rustling foliage and a chorus of clucking frogs. The old trees were gnarled, wide and miles high, bathed in the last remnants of sunlight. Fluffy white thistle seeds floated in

the dense air, which smelled sweet and floral. The bed of the forest was dark green, covered in shaggy moss and sprouted a colourful arrangement of plants and flowers.

As the moon started to spread its lunar glow, Tavish packed another mushroom into his pipe and smoked up the remnants, feeling his entire body vibrate. His heart pounded, his head spun, and soon he felt his sister's presence around him, melting away his fear. He slowly but surely stepped into the West Woods in search of the sorceress.

Tavish walked for a mile until he heard something in the distance, the sound of soft, chiming bells. He removed his dagger from its leather sheath and scanned the woods, looking for any sign of the witch. In the distance, between the gaps in the tree branches, he saw a small white light surrounded by an intense purple glow. As he moved closer, it started to giggle.

"Come here, ye lil' devil!" he yelled, chasing the cackling little orb through a wall of wild rose bushes. Thorns cut into his skin, stinging like bees as he pushed through the spikey foliage to the other side.

The pointy-eared mite had led him to a wild garden with towering umbrella-shaped flowers and giant spotted toadstools. A sparkling waterfall led to a hot spring in the middle of the garden. The steamy pool had a deep, dark blue colour with veins of bright turquoise. The water moved like smoke, appearing sluggish and unnatural, but it was beautiful and unlike anything Tavish had ever seen before.

In an instant, a swarm of faeries, hundreds of purple, blue, pink, green and yellow orbs, erupted from the water in a swirling vortex, drenching Tavish with the murky liquid. The force of the cyclone caused a rush of wind so strong that Tavish was thrown to the ground. He lifted his hands instinctively, shielding his eyes from the bright squall. When the cyclone finally stopped, Tavish dropped his hands to see that the faeries were gone. In their place was the she-devil herself, the dark enchantress of the West Woods, floating above the pool with a warm smile. She was young and beautiful, not the wretched old hag that Tavish had remembered. But he knew it was her, as sure as the night is dark.

The woman wore a pure white gown. Her hair was long and golden, the colour of long wheat at harvest time, and her ruby lips were thick and sumptuous, encasing a perfect set of ivory teeth. Her eyes were jade, round and inviting, emanating a powerful and nurturing air, filled with vitality and life. She began drifting towards Tavish.

"I'm here for ye, lassie!" he proclaimed, holding out a trembling pointed finger.

The woman replied in an echoing, serene voice. "Me? What could you possibly want from me?" She curled her hand inwards, drawing Tavish's attention to her chest. He glanced momentarily then quickly turned his gaze back to the woman's face.

"Ye killed my sister, ye wicked thing. And ye've been taking the children. This ends now." His eyes began to well with tears. He could feel his heart pounding, the blood coursing through his veins.

The woman threw her head back and laughed, her golden hair shimmering in the moonlight. "Why would I want them? I have the crystal spring," she replied, motioning towards the blue pool in the centre of the garden. "The crystal spring gives me all that I need."

"Is that why ye look so wee and young?" Tavish asked.

The woman smiled thinly and extended her arms towards Tavish. He flinched as she made contact and caressed his bristled face in her palms. "The crystal spring grants one's most desired wish, if one drinks from its source. Come, follow me." She dropped her hands and walked to the hot spring, her long gown floating over the mossy ground. She motioned with one arm, summoning Tavish to the small pool.

Tavish crept to the hot spring, his eyes fixed on the woman the entire time. As he moved, he reached his hand behind his back and fingered the twine knot which held the spear to his tunic. "What if my greatest wish is to have my sister back? Can yer crystal spring bring Elsie back?" he asked.

"Of course, it can," the woman replied, "what you most desire, the crystal spring provides." She knelt on a tuft of grass at the pool's edge and started running her fingers through the inky blue water, leaving streaks of bright turquoise. She used her hands to cup a handful of water, lifted them to her mouth and began sipping the glittery liquid. The water dribbled from her mouth, down her neck and onto her breasts. She grinned at Tavish. "Will you drink from my hands?"

Tavish took a deep breath, but his heart would not steady. "Aye, I will," he replied. He could feel that he was under the woman's spell, helpless to her charms.

The woman again cupped some water in her hands and held them out in front of Tavish's mouth. "Go on, drink."

Tavish slurped down the liquid, which burned all the way down his throat and into his insides. The water tasted like an apple, sweet and tart, and had a bitter aftertaste.

"Good, my dear. Let the crystal spring nourish you," the woman said as Tavish finished the water with a gulp. "There, there," she whispered, stroking his head. "Now, you can have your sister back. Drink from the crystal spring and your greatest desire will come true. The glee in thee, sets me free." Her face beamed as she looked around the garden for Elsie, but there was no one in sight.

Tavish snickered as the woman's smile slowly curled into a scowl. "Ye got me wrong, witch. Elsie comin' back all bag o'bones isn't my greatest desire. My anger killed my grief long ago. My greatest desire, lassie, is to lop your head off, return to

Green Briar, and put that pretty little face on a pike for the entire town to see. We will admire it for a while, then burn ye into ashes for eternity, ye filthy hag."

The woman squealed as Tavish whipped out the spear from his back and jumped into a throwing stance, the spiked head of the pole pointed straight towards her. He lunged forward and released the spear, which flew right between the woman's eyes with a loud thud. She let out a moan and crumpled to the ground with the spear protruding from her head, sitting between two bulging eyes and a gaping mouth.

Tavish withdrew his dagger from its sheath and started cutting at the witch's neck until he was able to tear the head from its body, just as he had promised. He tied the spear back onto his tunic, grabbed a tuft of golden hair and carried the magnificent trophy all the way back to town.

As Tavish emerged from the woods, the witch's head in hand, the people of Green Briar cheered. Men, women and children of all ages had come to celebrate his victory. Tavish lifted the macabre display high above his shoulders for everyone to see. "The glee in thee sets me free!" he yelled to the applauding onlookers, letting their thundering ovations wash over him like a warm blanket. His greatest desire had come true.

Tavish felt so content that he failed to notice the colour of the sky—a deep, dark blue, accentuated by turquoise-lined clouds. He didn't even hear the chiming bells or the cacophony of laughter in the distance. And most certainly, he couldn't feel the warm blood dripping down his cheeks.

For in reality, Tavish had returned to Green Briar empty-handed, and the villagers were not cheering at all. They were gasping in horror at the flailing old man before them, eyes plucked from his head, laughing hysterically and shouting over and over again: "The glee in thee sets me free! The glee in thee sets me free!"

About the Author:

David A.F. Brown is a Canadian author whose fiction has appeared in various anthologies, magazines and podcasts, including *Tales to Terrify, Sirens Call Publications eZine*, and *Deep Fried Horror*. He was a finalist in the NYC Midnight Short Story Challenge 2019, an international competition of over 4,500 writers. He holds a BA (Hons) from Western University and resides in Caledon, Ontario, with his wife and son.

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Afternoon Tea | Donna Cuttress

She squeezed the beetle's elytra. Blood squirted into the cup. Her tea now tasted divine. The beetle, drained empty, was dropped into her bag. Beetle bodies rattled like teeth. She scanned legs underneath starched tablecloths. A stretch of toned ankle was just ripe for a bite. The comatose beetles awoke noisily.

"Calm yourselves my darlings."

She scraped the sugar and blood syrup from the bottom of her cup with her spoon and licked it greedily. Waiting outside, she heard a scream! A beetle crawled under the door, it's abdomen pendulous with blood. She grabbed it. "I'll save you for later."

About the Author:

Donna Cuttress is from Liverpool, U.K. Her work has been published by Crooked Cat, Firbolg, Flame Tree Publishing, Suicide House and Black Hare Press. Her work for The Patchwork Raven's *Twelve Days* is available as an artbook. She has also been a speaker at the London Book Fair, and has previously been published by Sirens Call Publications as part of Women in Horror Month.

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Twitter: @Hederah

In a world once ravaged by a terrible war, Katra is a hunter...



Available on Amazon, CreateSpace, Barnes & Noble, Smashwords, and the iStore

In the Dead of Night | Maria Bertolone

There it was again, that loud *Bang! Bang!* Coming from up above in the attic. This was the fifth night in a row that it had woken me at precisely twelve midnight.

"Can you hear that?" I asked.

"Can I hear what?" Edward said repeating the question, whilst in the middle of a yawn and still half asleep.

"That loud banging again, it's coming from the attic like it always does. I've been hearing it for five nights in a row, and it's always at the same hour twelve midnight," I answered.

"I didn't hear a sound, nor have I heard anything these past few nights, or even in the early hours are you sure you weren't dreaming?"

"No! I definitely wasn't dreaming. I've been awake each time, including tonight right into the small hours of this morning. It's a wonder you haven't heard the noise it's loud enough to wake the dead! Didn't realise you were such a sound sleeper," I retorted.

"Oh alright! I'll go and take a look just to put your mind at rest if it'll convince you that there's nobody up there," he sighed reluctantly getting out of bed.

I sat up listening and awaiting his return. Where could he be? He's been gone over thirty minutes now and there's still no sign of him yet. Presently a loud hooting sound startled me out of my thoughts, jumping out of bed I ran to the bedroom window and opened the curtains only to see a ghostly figure squatting high up in the top branches of our poplar tree in our back garden. It was a large owl illuminated by the strong moonlight.

"Edward, what the heck are you doing up there? Where are you? Are you alright?" I called out in alarm from the landing, but there was no answer only an eerie silence. It's now forty five minutes he's been missing. By now I began to panic realising that something was obviously wrong and that he must have had some kind of an accident. In the darkness I fumbled for the light switch, eventually locating it. The landing was instantly flooded with light as I hurriedly made my way to the chest of drawers at the far end and opened them rummaging through all the bits of bric-a-brac and odds and ends that had accumulated over the years and finally came across a flashlight, grabbing it I hastily climbed the retractable stairs leading to the attic.

Poking my head into the black hole and shinning the flashlight all around revealed nothing except a dark forbidding void filled with clutter and shadows.

"Edward this isn't funny! Stop playing games, I know your here somewhere!" I shrieked, with my heart pounding as I hauled myself further up the stairs and into the attic. Clambering along I nervously got to my feet and dusted myself down whilst beaming the flashlight over piles of cobweb invested boxes and long forgotten Christmas decorations, that were now gathering dust along side all the other clutter we'd meant to throw out, but never got round to doing so.

"Edward!" But again, there was no reply. Searching every inch revealed absolutely nothing, no trace of him at all, it seemed that he'd just disappeared into a puff of smoke. An overwhelming sense of foreboding gripped me as I made my way around. Where was my husband? What had happened to him? He came up here, surely I should be able to find him. The longer my search continued the greater my anxiety became, the hair on the back of my neck began to stand up as a creepy feeling began to take hold that someone other than Edward was in there with me watching every move. I tried to tell myself this was just my imagination, because it was the very early hours of the morning and still dark outside, after all I was in an attic and attics tend to be creepy anytime of day. But the sense of eeriness only continued to intensify as I went further in.

Suddenly a long and loud drawn out growl came from the far end, shinning the flashlight in the direction it was coming from I expected to see some kind of animal, but to my horror the light fell upon a grotesque half animal half humanoid creature. After my initial fright I thought that it was only Edward up to one of his silly pranks and dressing up in one of the many Halloween costumes that were now banished to the darkest recesses however, I approached with caution.

"Edward is this one of your *daft* pranks *again?* If so it's no longer funny, you're *scaring me to death,* crouching there making those weird *noises!*" The 'Thing' just sat there grunting loudly, as if it was trying to form

words then it began moving slowly heaving itself on all fours as it advanced towards me. I hurriedly retreated backwards tripping over a box, as my foot got caught I hit the floor with an almighty crash raising huge clouds of dust, and disturbing large spiders that scurried for cover in the glare of the flashlight.

The place was plunged into sudden darkness as the flashlight failed. Groping around blindly until I managed somehow to find the opening that led to the retractable stairs, and was about to crouch down in order to get myself in position to climb out, when the 'thing' grabbed me by the leg yanking me off balance. In the struggle I caught a glimpse of its face amid the horribly deformed gnarled and twisted features, its gaping mouth with huge wide open fangs poised, and in there amongst all that were the unmistakable blue eyes of Edward I opened my mouth to scream.

"Get off me you're NOT Edward!" I shrieked at the top of my voice.

"Your having that dream again, WAKE UP WOMAN!" He shook me so hard that I was almost jerked out of bed.

Now in the full realms of consciousness I sat bolt upright, dazed.

"That's the umpteenth time you've had this nightmare, you've woken me up, kicking and screaming at the same hour for the past week now. Don't you think that you should go and see someone about these recurring dreams you keep having?" Edward retorted.

"But who? Do you mean either a psychic or medium?"

"No! I mean a shrink,"

"Oh! I get it, so you're convinced I'm losing my mind," I replied getting up out of bed and crossing the room, in doing so I glanced in the dressing table mirror. The horror of the reflection in it took my breath away, the image was no longer that of Edward, but the 'thing' staring back at me with Edward's unmistakable vivid blue eyes, its ugly fangs with saliva glistening from them twisted and barred into a vicious snarl as it advanced growling just like it had done in my dream.

I hurriedly turned to face the bed dreading what I would see there. But to my astonishment sat up calmly in bed was my Edward, looking every bit as normal as he ever did, only with a mocking expression in his sky blue eyes that I'd never encountered before, nor could I fathom.

"What's wrong now my precious?" He enquired sarcastically.

"But you look completely normal, not like you are in the dream or the mirror," My voice trailing off at the intensity of his eyes as they bore into me. He didn't answer, he just sat there staring with his mouth twisted into a sardonic grin. However, upon turning to look in the mirror again his reflection had completely reverted back into the 'thing' I'd encountered in my nightmare.

"EDWARD!"

A deep guttural rasping voice I didn't recognize came from directly behind me.

"No my precious! I'm not this mortal you call Edward your so beloved husband and yes, you were right all along you're **NOT DREAMING!**"

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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Panic Me a Village | Milkana N. Mingels

Nobody suspects anything.

With my most seductive voice I whisper ever so softly in Dr. Cedrick's ear, "They want to dig her body out of her grave, Cedrick. Can you believe it?"

"What do you expect, Meredith?" He rolls his eyes. "We're in rural Rhode Island. It's 1892."

"And they want you to oversee the whole thing. You don't have to be there for the digging, but you have to be there for the rest of it."

"I don't know why I bother," Dr. Cedrick says angrily. My heart skips a beat. I love it when he gets flustered. "They don't care what I say. I might as well not be here."

"That's what I tell them, love," I say softly. "Frankly, I don't know what you're still doing in this dump."

"There is only one reason, Meredith. Only one."

His cool hand slides with ease under my pink knickers.

It had all started with my brother. He was studying abroad when he fell ill with consumption. He should have stayed where he was, as Dr. Cedrick advised, but nobody listened to him. My brother returned home and got both my mother and my older sister sick. All three of them died, but not before getting my younger brother, Timmy, sick.

That's when neighbors started knocking on our door. They pointed fingers at my dead sister. "She," my neighbors said, "must have turned into a vampire. She will suck Timmy's blood until he is dead, and then she will move on to the rest of your family. And once she's done with you, she'll come after us. We know what to do. We must dig her up, cut her body open, take her heart out, and burn it until it turns to ashes. And then you must put the ashes in a cup of water and have Timmy drink it. This will cure him."

'The hell I will," said my father and slammed the door at their faces.

But my neighbors were relentless. Finally, my father gave in but said the only way he would allow it was if Dr. Cedrick was present at the grave too. And no, my father would not attend.

Nobody cared if I would be there either, but I showed up. Not so much as a representative of the family, but to see how far my neighbors would go.

They went all the way.

Cedrick stood by the grave with a permanently frozen expression of disdain. The village priest was there too—blowing on his fingers, stomping around nervously, and occasionally crossing himself.

It was the end of March, and the temperatures were still near freezing. By the time the diggers were done chipping through the hard soil, a small crowd had gathered around my sister's grave. A mixture of curiosity and fear impregnated the raw, cold air. The conversations were short and muffled.

When the diggers finally heaved the coffin out of the grave, the crowd shuffled closer in nervous anticipation. The priest, after crossing himself one last time, bent down and opened the lid, then gasped. "Is anything the matter, Father?" I asked.

"Anything the matter?" he repeated disbelievingly. "Anything the matter? Of course there is!" Now he was shouting. "Look at your sister. She hardly looks dead! She looks like she's fattened up! Her fingernails and hair have grown, and there is fresh blood on the corner of her mouth. I've seen enough. I'm leaving!"

"Father, please," cried out a neighbor as he grabbed the priest by his shirt and thrust a long dagger into his hand. "Here. You have to finish this."

"Finish this?" cried the priest, his voice shaking. "I am hardly the one who should meddle in this ungodly affair. I—" "You promised, Father."

"I changed my mind. I now see that this was a horrible idea."

"Oh, give me that," hissed Cedrick, and he snatched the dagger from the priest's hand.

With a few quick and precise thrusts, he opened my sister's chest, cut out her heart, and shoved it into my neighbor's hand, a small amount of blood smearing on his hand.

Before my stunned neighbor could regain his speech to point out that the liquid blood on his hand finally proved that my sister was not completely dead, Cedrick gestured to him to keep his mouth shut.

"For the last time, my dear countryman and countrywomen," said Cedrick, unable to hide his contempt, "what you just witnessed is quite normal. This is the corpse of a person who was buried only a couple of months ago in the middle of winter. It is quite normal for the corpse to be bloated and for liquid blood to be present in some of the organs."

But the villagers would not listen. A sharp axe fell upon my sister's neck and severed her head. A couple of men turned her onto her stomach, then someone drove a wooden stake through her back, all the way down through her coffin. It wasn't until that moment when Cedrick lost his mind.

"Ignorant, backward dimwits!" Cedrick shouted. "As God is my witness, I tried. There is nothing more I can do for you. You will live and die in utter stupidity."

We left.

My little brother Timmy nevertheless drank the water containing the ashes of our poor sister's heart. It didn't help, however. This was quite distressing to me, as Timmy was so very sweet.

"I am leaving, Cedrick," I tell him a few days after Timmy's funeral.

"Where are you going?" asks Cedrick, sounding unsurprised.

"Connecticut. I have cousins there. My age."

"Am I invited?" he whispers eagerly in my ear.

The following night we reach my cousins' house.

"Time to start over," says Cedrick after flying down from the nearby tree and assuming his human form.

"Yes," I say. "Let's."

Nobody suspects anything.

About the Author:

Milkana N. Mingels was born in Bulgaria and currently lives in Massachusetts. She is the author of the *Tales from the Mountain of Perun* duology. Her short fiction has appeared in Sirens Call Publications eZine, Short-story.me and Every Day Fiction ezines. She would love to hear from you on her Facebook page.

Facebook: Milkana N. Mingels

A Quiet Ravine | Nina D'Arcangela

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

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

About the Author:

Nina D'Arcangela is a quirky horror writer who likes to spin soul rending snippets of despair. She reads anything from splatter matter to dark matter, and is an UrbEx adventurer who loves to photograph abandoned places, bits of decay, and old grave yards. Nina is a co-owner of *Sirens Call Publications*, a co-founding member of the horror writer's group *Pen of the Damned*, and the owner and resident anarchist of *Dark Angel Photography*.

Author Blog: <u>Sotet Angyal</u> Intagram: <u>@DarcNina</u>

The Aftermath | Diane Arrelle

Harvey moaned and wondered why he was cold and wet.

What a binge! He struggled to remember this apocalypse. Just like the last five world ending predictions he'd spent all his money, screwed anything that would let him, and, of course quit his job.

Now it was January 1, 2100. And he was alive. Sticky, but alive. He rubbed at the pus colored mucus-like substance that clung to him and moaned again.

"I need a shower," he said, wincing as he scooped a handful of the gunk off his genitals.

Pushing himself off the small bed, he stumbled across a strange, rumbling bedroom to the window and looked out.

Earth, a shattered ball, lay below. Harvey gasped. God, it really happened this time!

He shuddered, suddenly curious why he wasn't on the dead planet and what the hell was he covered with. As if in answer, something sticky rubbed his balls. He turned away from his demolished world to find himself facing a slimy, dripping, tentacled horror.

"Hello, darling," it gurgled. "How's my new hubby?"

Harvey glanced back at the shattered planet and then at his oozing savior. Sobbing he realized the end of the world comes in many versions.

Getting It Right | *Diane Arrelle*

On the brink of hysteria, time moving slowly, I sat by the large flowerpot day after day.

"Come on already," I prayed and finally the stalk began swaying seductively, the pod on top finally opening to reveal my newest, One-True-Love.

I smiled, but joy turned to ice as he held out his arms to me, his brown eyes crinkling with delight.

"Oh no!" I sobbed, and grabbing the blowtorch, set him ablaze.

After the screams and flames died down, I planted another Grow-A-Mate pod. Then I started my vigil again as I grumbled, "He better have blue eyes this time!"

Countless Second Chances | Diane Arrelle

Eric wept then slept.

"I miss you so much," he'd cry.

She'd been gone a year but sometimes in the early morning before daybreak she'd be back in bed beside him. He wept then slept and then there she was. He held her and said all the things he'd never had the chance to say the first time and she would snuggle next to him.

In the harsh light of day, after she'd vanish, Eric would change the sheets shaking off the clods of soil, tangles of hair and tattered strips of flesh, as he got ready for next time.

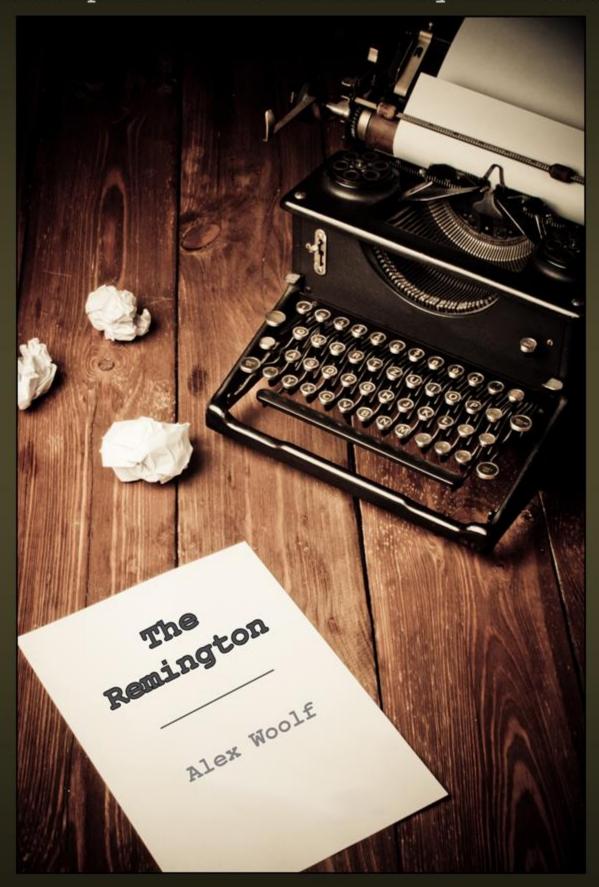
About the Author:

Diane Arrelle, has more than 350 stories and two fiction collections, *Just A Drop In The Cup and Seasons On The Dark Side*, published. She lives with her sane husband and her insane cat on the edge of the New Jersey Pine Barrens (home of the Jersey Devil). Diane's books can be found at JerseyPinesInk.com.

Author Website: <u>Arrelle Writes</u>
Facebook: <u>Diane Arrelle</u>



"...A splendidly comic tale that taps away at the keys to the creative process, whilst juggling parallel plots with a brilliantly deft touch..."



Available Exclusively on Amazon

Drifting On | *Jordan Marie McCaw*

Before I reached the bottom of the ocean, before I began the eternal task thrust upon me, I was falling.

Why I was falling is a memory that has mostly faded away. I remember a ship, but not her name. I remember a crew, but I can't recall their faces. I remember fighting, swords drawn, pistols aimed, canons loaded.

I think when your life above water has ended, your mind can only recall a finite number of things or faces. I remember my sweetheart's face, but in my effort to remember that I have forgotten her name. Her face is oval shaped, her eyes green flecked with gold and silver. Her lips are shaped like a heart when closed. When she smiles, her lips stretch to reveal a neat set of teeth. I've tried many times to remember her name, but nothing I can conjure satisfies me. I've stopped searching in the far corners of my mind by then. When I recall her face now, the edges have begun to blur slightly. I can't remember how long I've been at the bottom of the sea.

I remember the falling, the drifting downward, clearer than anything else. I even remember my body crashing through the surface of the water like shattering glass. Upon impact my body became weightless, the water taking me wherever it needed to.

I floated down for what felt like years. I believe it did take years to fall this far. In that time, I had come to terms with my fate. I was a dead man. A dead man lost at sea. Once I accepted this, I questioned if what was left of me, what was drifting downward, was my soul. My soul was sinking, never to be uncovered or buried properly. Even an unmarked grave is a final resting place for the physical form. In the water, under its crushing weight, nothing is real. Nothing feels real.

It took me most of my voyage downward to accept that my soul has been lost along with my body. Whoever had shot me or stabbed me or thrown me overboard no longer remembered me. Not in the frenzy I can only scarcely recall anymore.

Another face I do remember is my captain's. His eyes are small and cold. His beard is black, like his heart. That is what we said about him, I still remember that. My captain was a cold, black-hearted man who replaced all of his teeth with gold and trained his crow to peck out the eyes of his enemies. My captain was soulless while alive. I remember talk of him being immortal, damned to roam the sea in search of his soul, never to find it.

My life was dedicated to this man since I was a child. I didn't know most people in the world were living better lives than this one while I was under his command. I remember being thirsty most of the time, with only rum or brandy to quench a painful thirst while sailing with no land in sight.

When my feet landed on the bottom of the ocean, it felt like waking up from a confusing, mysterious dream. But I knew I wasn't sleeping. How can you sleep when you're dead? When you're dead like I am, all there is left to do is exist. For me, I must exist at the bottom of the ocean.

I roamed the rocky and sandy floor for what felt like another handful of years. Fish and hellish creatures with balls of lights hanging in front of their faces like lanterns swam around me. Some fish clung to me, sucking on my dead flesh. Crustaceans and other small deep sea dwelling creatures made their homes on what was left of me. I didn't mind. I was happy to provide a home in death, even provide sustenance to a hungry creature.

Thirst is all I know at the bottom of the ocean. Surrounded by water—submerged in water—all I want is to breathe deeply and quench this thirst. I want to feel the water filling my stomach, coating my throat, wetting my lips, but these desires are futile. All I can do is wander.

Finally, I encounter a child at the bottom of the ocean. She sits with her weight on the backs of her knees, her arms wrapped around her legs. Her eyes are two glimmering dots that look up at me. She asks me where she is from her fetal position.

My shoulders push up on the weight of the ocean. I reply, "The bottom of the sea, I suppose. How long have you been here, child?"

She stands up. Her dress is tatters floating around her ankles at the end. "I don't know."

I continue my wandering. She follows beside me. I guess she has been down here longer than myself judging by the amount of creatures living on her body.

As we continue on into the void of nothing but water, I wonder how a child's soul can be lost at sea. Are we too deep for God to reach in and scoop her up? Does God know the ocean he created travels this far down?

I ask the girl what she remembers about her life above the surface. She tells me she had a doll. She wore the same dress she wore now and she carried the doll with her everywhere. Then she stopped walking. I turned to find her staring upward with bulging eyes.

She says she was still holding her when the ship sank. There was a storm. The water was angry. Father told her to stay under the deck. Then the water broke through the walls of the ship. She spoke in short sentences, as if she was recalling different moments of her life second after second. She said she used to live in a big house with her father and mother. Her brother died when he was still a baby, and her mother died giving birth to him. She looks up at me.

"I remember mother's face," she says. "I remember brother's crying. I remember the day father gave me the doll. It was before we got on the ship. We were going—" She pauses, her eyes searching through her memories in rapid succession by darting back and forth. "We were going back home."

"Where was home?" I ask

She answers, "London."

As soon as she says the name, the ocean carries her upward. Her feet break away from the sandy bottom and she floats away from me. I watch her go, staying there until her body disappears from my vision.

I come upon a man not long after continuing my march through the water. He is walking toward me, his strides long. A dark-green cloth is over his head, tied at the base of his skull. From under this cloth is a tide of dark cherry hair reaching his shoulders. Creatures cling to his face, snapping open from time to time to catch the minerals in the water.

He tells me he doesn't remember how he came to be down here. He can't remember what's above us. He can't remember what the warmth of the sun felt like on his skin, although he has a feeling the sun is what killed him.

I say, "But you know that you are dead?"

He touches his chest, then his arms, as if testing some part of himself before answering. "I must be," he answers, "because I don't feel hot anymore. I feel cold. I think I knew this when my soul left my body."

"But you don't remember?"

"I only remember my name."

"What is it?"

"John," he says with confidence. "John Ready."

At the mention of his name his feet come up from the rocks. He holds out his arms, as though to balance himself as he floats up with the water. As I watch the sea carry him away, I remember my sweetheart's face. All I can see are her heart shaped lips and her eyes. Were they green or brown? Were there streaks of blue or flecks of gold?

I continue walking as I try and remember. I feel like my encounters with the girl and John Ready are taking up limited space in my memory. I didn't expect any more experiences after death, but these encounters have taken up storage inside me. I say John Ready's name aloud to myself as I walk, remembering the way the girl's tattered dress floated around her ankles as she walked with me.

Fish swim alongside me. A slithering creature I wish to never see again in my death passes in front of me. Its body is long, slender, and opaque. I see organs pulsating inside it as it swims by. I see smaller fish inside it, waiting to be digested.

By the hundredth time I say John Ready's name, I realize I cannot remember my own name. I keep my head down at the plumes of dust my boots create as I tread through the sand. I look upward, something I haven't done since John Ready's departure. What I see stills me.

Above me fish swirl and carry on with their lives, but above them are bodies floating, pulled with the ocean's current. Even in the very depths of the ocean, the water is pulled by gravity or fate. There are men, women, and children floating overhead, their backs to me. Their faces point upward at the ocean's surface, perhaps wondering how many miles above that is.

Placing my hands around my mouth, I shout upward. I don't utter any words, just a human call to get anyone's attention. None of the passing bodies acknowledge my presence, or my existence.

"John Ready!" I call next. Still, no one stirs from above.

Once the passing bodies no longer interest me, I carry on across the ocean floor. It doesn't take long until I meet a third person. This time a young man. Not quite a boy but not quite a man. His features are simple and round, while his eyes are deep set in his skull. As he notices me, I sense an uneasiness in him. He takes a step back as I approach.

He says, "Who are you?"

"I don't remember," I reply.

He looks up. "Who are they?"

I follow his gaze up at the passing bodies. "Lost souls, I guess."

He studies them for a moment longer. "They don't look lost to me. Look like they're goin' somewhere."

"Where do you think they're going?"

He lifts up his arms, admitting ignorance. "Maybe they be goin' onward. Goin' to wherever's next."

I look up again and see the girl. I know it's her by the way her tattered dress floats around her ankles. I call up to her, but get no reply, not even a turn of her head to look down upon me.

"I know her," I say. "I saw her float away."

"You helped her get out of this place?" the young man says.

I looked back to him and see he's taken a step toward me. His neck juts out from his shoulders pleadingly. His deep-set eyes look hungry.

I shake my head. "I don't know if I had anything to do with it. She just floated away."

"Can you help me?"

I take a step back. "Son, I don't think I can help you."

"Try it. Will you try it? Please? I've been here so long."

I watch him for a moment, recalling my conversations with the girl and John Ready. I ask, "Do you remember your name?"

"I think it was Bill," he says.

"Yeah? What else do you remember?"

"About what?"

"About anything."

His head lowers between his shoulders as he thinks. A family of barnacles have made their home on the top of his skull. I realize he has a hat in his hands. His fingers roll the brim up to the seam and then back out again.

After what feels like hours, he says, "I think I was hanged. I don't know why. Maybe it's cause I always feel out of breath, like somethin' is around my neck." He brings a hand to his neck as though to illustrate. "I must have been a criminal of some sort. I don't remember my life being a happy one. I think I had to steal. I was so hungry I was willin' to do anythin' for a bite of somethin'. I think I stole somethin' and that's why I was hanged. I remember feelin' wronged, like it was unfair. My whole life felt unfair, like I never really had a chance at livin' one." He lowers his head again. "I just remember feelin" wronged."

Space is created between his feet and the sand. He lifts his head to meet my eyes as he lifts off the floor.

"How did you do it?" he asks.

I crane my neck to watch him ascend. "I didn't do anything."

The young man lifts his face upward, as though he's prepared to meet the rushing wave of bodies above him.

"I didn't do anything," I say again, this time to myself.

Instead of watching him disappear up above, I continue walking. Out of nowhere comes the young man's voice.

"Your name!" he's yelling down at me. "What's your name?"

He's a pinpoint in the distant now. I cup my hands around my mouth and yell back, "I can't remember." And then it hits me like a wave in the eye of a torrential storm. I yell, "Davey! Davey Jones!"

But the young man is too far away to hear me now. Too far away or already moving on. I stand there for a while, watching the floating bodies, whispering my name to myself. The bodies snake through the water like a single entity.

With nothing else to do, I break my stare and move on across the ocean floor. Up above whole generations pass by, and yet I continue to wander through what's down here for the lost souls, but I don't feel as lost. My feet carry me onward with no destination, but I feel something welling inside me, almost overflowing. A purpose, maybe. An idea of what I can do with my eternity at the bottom of the ocean.

I see another person up ahead. As I walk toward her, I look up at the trail of souls swimming on to the next great beyond.

About the Author:

Jordan Marie McCaw works at Blackstone Publishing in Southern Oregon. She also writes a blog titled *Recount & Reveal* about bizarre historical events, interned at Dark Regions Press, and was an entertainment freelance writer and editor for several journalistic publications along the West Coast. Her fiction has appeared in *Blood Moon Rising*, *Showbear Family Circus*, and *BoneSaw Horror*.

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Oh, the Horror

Oh, the horror, the terrifying, the macabre and even the grotesque. What does it mean? Why do we love to be scared or to read about things that go against the social norm? For me, horror is like a rollercoaster; it may be scary, but it's generally safe. Now, that's not saying something can't go horribly wrong with either of those things, but in general, both are safe avenues of adrenalized fun.

For me horror began at a young age; 4 to be exact. My grandfather and I went to the local video rental store to get something to occupy my time. He accidentally forgot to bring his reading glasses and couldn't see what I had handed him. It turns out the movie I'd selected was 'A Nightmare on Elm Street'. My grandfather rented the movie, took me home, and popped it in. So, at 4 years old, I was left to watch a horror movie by myself. This was my first introduction to horror as a genre, but the love of being scared was with me forever.

I'm a natural storyteller, and have been since I could talk. When I learned to write, I wrote my first story...and it was horror. I loved to write as a kid, but more than anything, I loved to read. My favorite genre? You guessed it, horror. I started out with Goosebumps when I was young, but my reading level was pretty advanced and by the end of elementary school I was reading Stephen King. I read it all, Stephen King, Dean Koontz, John Saul, John Farris, you name it. In high school I strayed from horror for a little while to read some serious fantasy, but always found my way back to my true love.

As I got older, my love for writing increased. Some years were better than others and when I'd get an idea, I'd write it, but that was it. I didn't keep a set schedule or really seek publication very often, it was more just for fun. Then came my novella, *BILLY SILVER*. This was my first real foray into long horror fiction and my shot at extreme horror/splatterpunk. That book practically wrote itself and within a couple of weeks it was done. Not only did I finish that, but I realized I could write the hell out of extreme horror. The floodgates opened in my writing brain and from March 2020, to March 2021, I wrote over 200k words. I've self-published 3 novellas, sold a novella and novel to a publisher, and sold a handful of short stories to well-paying anthologies.

My love for writing was in full bloom and I wanted to share it with the world. In my short career I've learned so much from so many people and decided to share it with others. In 2021, myself, Aron Beauregard, Carver Pike and Rowland Bercy Jr, who are all extreme horror authors, created the Written in Red podcast. This show is based on indie horror and we talk about indie authors and go into some of the publishing and writing aspects of horror. The show is available just about everywhere: Spotify, Itunes, Google play, YouTube etc. If you like horror or are aspiring to write horror, check it out.

Thank you for making it this far and I'll leave you with a few last-minute things. My 3 current books that are out are, *BILLY SILVER*, *AWAKENED IN BLOOD*, and *TALIA*, all of which were edited by the talented Lee Andrew Forman. In July of 2021, D&T publishing is releasing my next book, *A GIFT OF DEATH* and in November 2021 D&T is releasing my longest work to date, *LEFT TO YOU*.

Thanks to Sirens Call Publications for allowing me this space to talk about horror and to you for making it this far.

You can follow Daniel on his social media accounts, or look for his books on Amazon!

Amazon Author Page: <u>Daniel J. Volpe</u>
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Twitter: @DJVolpeHorror



Featured Novel | Talia

Nico drove the van with a cigarette stuck between his fingers. Luke sat shotgun, his own cigarette burning, giving its smoke to the open window. Tommy sat on an old milk crate in the back of the van. He hated smoking.

The three amigos, the body boys, the clean-up crew, whatever they were called, the job was the same. Whatever the boss said. That was it, plain and simple. If the boss said, 'go kill that guy' they killed him. If he said, 'rape this girl and get rid of her body' they did it. Obedience and loyalty; that was the way to get ahead in their organization. Over the years, since the three of them were teenagers, they'd done it all, arson, murder, kidnapping, rape, extortion, assault, you name it, they did it.

That night was no different. Mike was filming another sick fucking movie where the main attraction wasn't expected to get out alive. That was where they came in.

Sally had called them the night before letting them know they were on for Saturday night. All three were happy to have the work. Since the night they raped that light-skinned chick, they really hadn't done much. They didn't even get to dispose of her body properly, having left that to Sally.

Nico sped down the street. They were going to be early, but that was ok. In their line of work it was better to be early, than late.

"You think we're gonna get to fuck again?" Tommy asked, leaning forward, his arms against the two front seats.

Luke rolled his window and tossed his cigarette butt. "Not sure, so I hope you didn't whack it today." He smiled at his buddy sitting behind him.

Tommy laughed, "I did, but trust me," he grabbed his crotch, "the ole *braciole* is up for another round." He thought back to the things he'd done to the last girl. "Besides, something living is always better than your hand."

Nico stubbed his cigarette out in the ashtray, a tendril of smoke still rising. "Don't tell that to Sally," he said, the man's name feeling gross on his lips.

"Don't even mention him," Tommy said.

Neither of the three of them liked Sally, but they respected him. Well, maybe respect wasn't the right word. No, they feared him, and rightfully so.

Sally was a butcher, a monster with no conscience who'd kill for fun. The rumors about his lust for dead girls started out funny. Then rumors came in from every angle and couldn't be ignored. When they saw him drag the corpse inside the suitcase into the Conex box, they knew for sure.

"Yeah, he gives me the creeps and I've done bad fucking shit," Luke said.

"Well, he's probably going to be there tonight, so get him out of your fucking brains," Nico said, looking at his passengers. He never saw the dog.

"Oh, shit!" Tommy said, pointing toward the windshield.

Nico looked up, and saw the black dog standing in the middle of the road. It didn't flinch at the massive work van barreling toward it. He slammed the brakes, locking them up and cut the wheel. The dog looked at the out-of-control vehicle, its eyes flashing red just before it ran into a dark alley.

The van went into an uncontrollable slide as Nico fought to maintain traction.

Tommy bounced around the back, not being fastened in. His head bounced off the metal walls, slicing his scalp.

The tires bit hard, digging the rims into the asphalt. The van found purchase in the roadway, starting it rolling.

"Fuck!" Nico yelled, bracing against the steering wheel. He could feel the van starting to tip, the center of gravity shifting. There was nothing he could do; he was just along for the ride.

As the van flipped, the impact shattered glass and popped open the rear doors.

Tommy felt weightless, like he was an astronaut in zero gravity. Except he wasn't in space, he was flying through the air in the back of a van. He grasped for anything he could as he flew toward the open rear doors. Smooth metal mocked him, not giving anything to grip onto. He flew from the van, seeing it tumble away moments before striking the telephone pole. His chest took the impact first, folding his body in half. The force of the collision snapped his kneecaps, breaking his legs so hard he kicked himself in the face. His mangled corpse came to rest on the curb, twisted and broken.

The van rolled again, glass and bones breaking alike. Finally, it came to a rest on the driver's side door.

Nico was in pain, but that meant he was alive. It wasn't bad at first, the shock and adrenaline dulling it, but then it hit him. The dashboard had collapsed on his legs, snapping them both at the middle of his femurs. Waves of nauseating pain rolled over him like the ocean, each rising in intensity. His face was a bloody mess from the broken glass, but it all seemed to miss his eyes. Something dripped on his face. The pain in his legs made him want to ignore it, but human curiosity got the better of him.

Luke hung from his seatbelt, dead. During one of the many rolls, his head had poked out of the window just enough for it to catch the ground. The force partially decapitated him, ripping his neck open to make him look like a macabre Pez dispenser. The skin on his face was pulled back, making his eyes bulge and bleed. His neck rested at such an angle, Nico could see into his mangled throat.

Nico listened, hoping for the first time in his life, the cops would show up. Anyone that could help. The dead van groaned. Glass tinkled, still falling from shattered frames. The engine hissed and ticked, fluids dripping like the blood from Luke's neck. The sounds of the city seemed miles away as Nico lay in agony.

Then, he heard a sound. Footsteps crushing bits of glass, walking toward the van.

"Help," he croaked. Even taking deep breaths hurt his injured body. He looked through the missing windshield, watching a shadow grow smaller as someone approached. "Call an ambulance," Nico moaned. A pair of legs walked into his view. A woman's legs.

"Oh my god," she said, crouching down to look through the crumpled opening where the windshield used to be. "Are you ok?" she asked, looking at his bloody face and the mangled corpse of his passenger.

Nico looked at the black-haired woman with disgust.

"Does it fucking look like I'm ok?"

"No," she said, taking in the carnage in front of her. "It does not." Her eyes tracked back to his face. Instead of brown or green, they were red.





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