The Sirens Call

Summer 2022 issue 58

A Dark Fiction

«L Horror Zine!

Short Stories, Flash Fiction, Poetry, and Artwork

Mike Lera's Corridor of Horror

Featured Artist: Jeanette Andromeda

Featured Project:
Dancing in the
Shadows

Featured Author: Rebecca Rowland

Featured Book:
'Shagging the Boss'

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#### Beware Burning Snow | Kristi Petersen Schoonover

Darkness isn't black. Darkness is the deepest shade of gray.

The first time I saw the ash people, it was three months before Mount St. Helens erupted.

They hovered in the frigid, boreal dark at my bedroom window, a man and woman, their gray faces flaking into the wind like misplaced snow flurries. Human forms in groups of threes and twos milled in the driveway by our silver Dart. Some of them were alone, staring and disoriented, emerging from the pitch of our unlit road.

I was ten, sequestered under my Robin Hood blanket because Dad was yelling at Mom again. Beneath it, I could pretend I was Robin's damsel in distress, and he'd come save me the way he'd rescued Maid Marian.

But I knew no blanket could protect me from what was outside, and I screamed.

\*\*\*

"I don't get why you're making me do this." My seventeen-year-old daughter, Rebecca, fastens her seatbelt.

"You need *skills*, Reb." The scent of pine and wildflowers laces the breeze as our aging Toyota chugs up Spirit Lake Memorial Highway. I'm dropping her at North Fork Survivors Gift Shop for her first day of summer internship with my friend Kristina, who also lost her house to the Helens eruption when we were kids. "You're going to learn to run a retail business."

She rolls her eyes, mirrors of mine—dark, accentuated with a winged eyeliner stamp where my crow's feet are and hers will eventually appear. "I'm *going* to be a marine biologist."

This is what comes from fishing with her dad—more obsessively since our bar burned down last spring. The cause was a gas leak, and I'd taken it as a sign to leave, but Brenton's family had owned the place since logging's early days. Brent was—like *his* father after Helens had obliterated it—determined to rebuild. "And I was going to be a fashion designer. Life doesn't always go the way you want. You need a back-up plan."

"I have one. If I can't go to Santa Barbara I'll do Miami."

"And who's going to pay for it?" The words scrape, but those colleges are fifty to seventy grand a year. Rebuilding the scored, ash-covered lot that was SMALLEY'S LAST SHOT'S gouging us; insurance is high premiums and low payouts on volcanically-vulnerable property. We've done our best, but we're barely making the mortgage. "I'm just saying you need *some*thing in case it doesn't work out."

"I'm not getting trapped here!" She lodges a pink bud in her ear, unleashing a tinny scratch of drums.

I'd hurled that vow at my mother. I was going *any* where away from a volcano. Anywhere I wasn't pummeled by images of fossil-gray trees felled like God's discarded toothpicks and cars crushed in slate-hued mud. Anywhere there weren't stories of finding clayed-over objects of the dead under random logs or encounters with half-burnt, shell-shocked elk. I wanted neon and bright silks and city parks, but the lahars buried that dream, too.

I don't want my baby to leave, but I don't want her stuck here like me.

If anyone's made stock from bones, it's Kristina at North Fork. The tan ranch, its deck festooned in graphic tees, pops behind a sign heralding VOLCANO COUNTRY SOUVENIR CENTER. The landscaping's lush, including around the half-buried A-frame, which was deluged by mudflows. Tourists pay to peek at its damaged contents—a debris-spattered refrigerator, a faded bed frame snaked with cracks. Those wanting something less intense can pose with the Bigfoot made of ash who stands sentry on the rumored spot of his death.

Reb barely waits for the car to stop before shoving the door open. "This place is a dump."

"Excuse me?"

"It's a shitty tourist trap."

"Language!" I spot movement at the A-frame.

My gut and breath seize.

Gray forms. Clouded in ash. Lurching. Broken-gaited and limping. Holes in their chests. Mouths gaping. Reaching for me. The leader's definitely female, and seems familiar; so does the slighter, wild-haired woman holding her hand. The man nearest them is—

Go. Go now. I stomp on the gas. The car jerks forward.

Reb's still gripping the door. "Mom! What the hell?"

I jam the brake. It wasn't them. It had to be tourists. That's all.

"Are you trying to kill me?"

I'm not sure what to say to those burning eyes I see more often than not lately. "I'm sorry. I don't know what happened." Her outfit is acid wash. Every few decades, things come back. "You look nice. I had a skirt exactly like that when I was your age."

She slams the door and tromps away.

"Pick you up at three!"

She flips me the bird. "I'm nothing like you!"

She doesn't know how grateful I am for that.

\*\*\*

When Jimmy Devane claimed he fed Bigfoot at his bedroom window every night, they dumped him in the class with the kids who rode the short bus. So I didn't say a word about the ash people; I let Dad believe it was 'that shit you let her watch, Celia!'

Mom seemed troubled, but didn't press.

The ash people did. Against the glass. Their gray skin sizzled with fire, so they glowed through the drapes. They spoke in gurgling, throaty whispers: *beware burning snow*.

I barely slept. Every unfamiliar noise, every thunk, every hiss was bludgeoning. I desperately repeated, now I lay me down to sleep—including the if I should die before I wake part; it was the only prayer I knew. We weren't church goers.

Every night they came, different faces, no one I recognized. Every night, my parents fought, and Mom sometimes had a random bruise, black eye, or sewn-up tear in her blouse.

Every night, I wished Robin would spring from my bed sheets and whisk me to a neon Sherwood Forest.

A few weeks later, Mount St. Helens rumbled awake.

In the end, it was Officer Letourneau—Danny, eventually—who saved me. He visited so much he had a designated coffee cup, but that day, he couldn't stay—he had thirty-nine other families to evacuate. Mom said to take clothes and favorite things, and I was surprised when she pulled an already-packed suitcase from the hall closet. She threw other items into her tote, but Danny's cup wasn't one of them.

We went to Aunt Lucy's in Yakima. Dad crewed for the logging company, so he'd stay with someone in a safer zone and continue working.

The ash people didn't come either.

The Sunday Helens blew, no birds sang. A distant boom rattled the framed pictures. Aunt Lucy's house grew dark; ash fell like black snow in damp, egg-smelling air. The radio told us to stay inside.

Yakima was okay. We shoveled ash, and kids added water to make cement cakes. Streetlights stayed on twenty-four/seven, breathing was sketchy, and the TV showed police cars rigged with hoses so the engines wouldn't seize.

But our house, near the mountain, was gone. People in the blast zone met terrible deaths—trapped in cars, catapulted from ridges, impaled on trees. Some were buried and never found.

The Herald memorialized the dead and missing. I recognized their faces.

The ash people were visions of those who were about to die, and they'd been trying to warn me.

\*\*

On the return drive from North Fork, I hawk the rearview. My flesh crawls. Inside, a hamster wheel churns, a need to pace or run shrieking or slither into a hole.

At home, I haul Brent into the bedroom, and pour everything—all of me—into him, into us.

Afterward, our sharp, sweat-black cherry musk clings thick, but my usual post- calm is instead knotting sorrow that throbs like a sore.

Brent rolls over and props his head on his hand. "That spot in your back's tense. Usually means you're about to cry."

His evergreen eyes are such an unusual shade they were the first thing I noticed when we met. "I saw the ash people today. First time in thirty-nine years."

He takes my hand, laces his thick fingers between mine. "Where?"

"At the A-frame."

"Probably tourists."

"No. It was them."

Brent shifts onto his back.

There's an electric silence.

"I shouldn't have told you."

"You know you can tell me anything." He sits up and swings his legs over the bed's edge. "I'm sure it doesn't mean what you think. What happened when you were a kid—it was a natural reaction to the dysfunction between your parents. Just coincidence."

"I saw the faces of the people who died, Brent. How do you explain that?"

"You were stressed out then, you're stressed out now."

"With what?"

"With whatever's going on between you and Rebsy. And this college business."

"That's just teenage stuff."

"Doesn't mean it's not stressful." He bends over and retrieves his boxers. "Helens is the most watched volcano in America. She always gives warning. And remember '04? Nothing happened. If there were trouble, we'd know."

"I really want to believe you."

"Then do it." He stands up. "Want a beer?"

I look at the clock. "I have to get Reb."

"I'll get her."

It's tempting. "No, I want to spend as much time with her as I can."

"Understood." He steps into his boxers. He's hard again. "I'll stick one in the freezer so it's your preferred ice pack for later."

Out our bedroom window, a breeze rustles the evergreens.

I make a note to close the blinds.

\*\*\*

The ash people weren't the only ones I lost.

Mom's Jean Naté was overwhelming as she pulled me against her and Danny explained Dad was working near the mountain when he was killed. I felt punched, remembering happier times, watching *Mr. Roberts*, camping in the yellow tent, sharing coffee ice cream, the smell of Marlboros. I wouldn't miss Dad's screaming, but I would miss him. He'd never been mean to me.

Mom pulled Danny's cup from the cabinet. They'd gone back to our house the day before the eruption, when evacuees had been allowed to retrieve belongings. "Sissy, go in the other room."

I did, but garnered snippets through the wall. I heard Danny say I killed him, buried him in the woods and the eruption did the rest. No way they'll find him now.

Dad used to scream 'Celia, you make me see red!', but I didn't know what that meant until that moment, and it wasn't something I saw; it was something I felt, an anxious drive to destroy everything in my path. I raced into the kitchen. "I hate you!"

Mom let go of Danny's hands. "Sissy, honey—"

Sissy. Inspired by Sisyphus, who eternally pushed a rock up a mountain only to have it roll back down as he reached the top.

I fled to what served as my room and slammed the door so hard my parents' wedding picture fell off the wall.

\*\*\*

Every night, Brent's snores—shallow breaths and a buzz like insect wings—aren't enough to drown the hissing ash people, who sizzle and glow beyond our blinds. The three that led at the A-frame are the most persistent, but I refuse to acknowledge them.

When I jostle Brent, he mumbles and pulls me against him, but it's never comforting.

Reb withdraws completely. When I talk to her, she stares at me with terror and pity and says only what's required.

Every night, I repeat *now I lay me*. Every night, I trust Brent's insistence that *we'd know*. Every night, I consider packing a suitcase. Every night, I wait.

The eruption isn't the one I anticipate.

Brent returns from another grueling day at the site. He slumps on the edge of our bed. He's never seemed as crushed by anything—even the fire—as he is now. "We're going to need thousands more to finish. We can't do this and Reb's school. It was already tough, but now, it'll be impossible even with loans."

The window's open. The ash people hide in the rustling trees; I hear their sinister hishling.

What I don't hear are birds.

I scuttle across the mattress, drape around him, kiss his neck. "Maybe... we should go."

"What?"

"Pack up. Sell. Move to... Santa Barbara. Her school's half price for in-staters. And we'll be out of harm's way." He breaks free, stands up, turns. "Are you serious with that again?"

His doubt stabs. "They've been relentless. This is a sign—"

"Our lives are here." He rubs the back of his neck. "We have to tell her."

"No you don't." Reb's curly hair's a mess. Her green Volcano Center polo is wrinkled. "Your stupid bar is more important than me?"

Brent approaches her. "Maybe just wait a year, until things get squared."

She backs away. "I have to get out of here! I'm going crazy! Seeing shit like her!"

Brent blinks. "What?"

Seeing shit like her. Fuck no. No.

"Forget it. Fuck you both!" Reb storms to her room.

Neither of us speaks.

Finally, I manage, "You told her I'm crazy, and seeing things makes her crazy too? When are you going to wake up and understand this is *real*?"

"I didn't know she was seeing things!" His eyes blaze with something I've never seen before: resentment. "You know what? You both need help." He furies out. The screen door slams, and the Toyota chugs into the distance.

In her room, Reb sobs. I knock.

"Go away!"

"Honey." I hesitate. "What you said, seeing things. Is it true?"

"You don't understand."

"If they're glowing people made of ash, you're not crazy. Your grandmother saw them, too." Mom died without a word, but I figured it out while packing the suitcase in anticipation of the day I went into labor. I suddenly recalled Mom's, packed, in the hall closet, and I understood. Despite my denial, I've known from the second Reb arrived this moment would come. "And you're right. If you leave, they'll go away."

She opens the door.

There's a weight between us.

She throws herself at me. "I'm sorry, Mommy!" Her grip's so tight it vices the air from my chest.

I rub her back. Her bones are delicate, like a sparrow's. "Let's talk."

We sit on the bed, and I tell her everything. What it all means.

When I've finished, Reb goes to the window. "They're out there. We're all going to die."

I join her. The ash people are at the lawn's edge. Pieces of them drift into the dying summer day. "It'll be okay, baby."

"It won't." She grips my hand. Her sharp nails dig into my palm.

I can almost feel her fingers when she was a tiny thing. So full of promise. "We'll convince your father to leave."

"We won't. Beware burning snow, Mom." Fear fills her eyes. "I saw us."

An ominous rumble passes beneath our feet.

#### **About the Author:**

One of Kristi Petersen Schoonover's most treasured possessions is a lamp made from Mount St Helens' ash. Her stories have appeared in many publications, including Generation X-ed, Horror Library Volume 7, and Dancing in the Shadows. She holds an MFA from Goddard College and is founding editor of the journal *34 Orchard*. She enjoys watching birds with her husband, Nathan, in the Connecticut woods.

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## Some monsters you can't outrun.

"Curated as perfectly as a rose garden, only one will need to watch out for the thorns . . . and the bodies buried below, nourishing their roots." —John Palisano, Bram Stoker Award-Winning author of Ghost Heart

# THE SHADOWS BEHIND

# KRISTI PETERSEN SCHOONOVER

Author of Bad Apple and This Poisoned Ground

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#### **Cold Case** | *Paul Lonardo*

I didn't remember driving home, but I was glad when I rolled safely into my private driveway. As soon as my feet touched the pavement after stepping out of the car, I felt the rotation of the Earth and I stumbled to the side. I braced myself against the rear quarter and waited for the ground to stop spinning. While looking down at the laces on my shoes dancing, I heard a faint taping sound. I listened carefully and realized it was coming from the trunk. Something was moving around inside.

A squirrel, I thought.

I felt my way around to the back of the car, fumbling for my key fob so I could let the animal out. I hit the alarm by mistake and the sudden shrill startled me, causing me to drop it. I lost sight of it in the dark as the alarm continued to sound. The flashing brake lights illuminated it, but in the condition I was in it was still a challenge to pick it up. I jabbed at the buttons repeatedly until I was finally able to silence the alarm. I unlocked the trunk in the process. It popped up a couple inches. The adrenaline rush had sobered me up quickly. I took a deep breath and raised the lid.

Eyes as wide as dinner plates and filled with terror peered up at me and I jumped back in surprise. "What the fuck!" I gaped at the girl, disbelieving what I was seeing. She had lanky blond hair. Her face was streaked with tears and she had duct tape across her mouth. She was no more than eighteen. Her arms were tied behind here back and her legs were bound.

Who could have done this? Nappy? Shawn? Dennis?

As delicately as I could, I peeled the tape from her lips. "Are you okay?"

She whimpered and withdrew from me, fresh tears streaming from her eyes.

"It's okay. I won't hurt you." I reached into my jacket pocket for my phone. "I'm going to call 911 and get you an ambulance."

"No!" She started shrieking.

It was 2 AM. I thought she would wake the neighbors. "All right. I won't. I won't." She continued to scream, stopping only when I put my phone away.

This was no practical joke, I realized. Not even those derelicts I used to work with would go to this extreme to antagonize me.

"Let's go inside," I suggested. "I'll get you something to eat and drink and figure out what to do."

I removed the ligatures. She was too weak and petrified to walk, so I carried her into the house. Her clothes were wet and soiled, as if she had been in the trunk all day.

"Who did this to you?" I asked after I set her down on the living room couch and placed a heavy blanket over her.

She didn't answer. She just sat curled up in a ball, looking affrightened. I wanted to alleviate her fear, but I didn't know how. She was pale and gaunt. I brought some water and bread over to her and sat on the chair beside her.

"You have to eat something." I laughed awkwardly. "You'll die if you don't eat."

She stared back at me with hollow eyes. "I'm already dead."

Her words rattled me to my very core. "You'll be alright. I have to call someone."

"It's too late. Just leave me. Try not to think about me." Her words floated to me from lips that suddenly appeared withered and dry. The yellow lighting made her skin look jaundiced, her hair stiff as straw bristles.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"You know my name."

My head started to ache. I just wanted to lie down. I could no longer keep my eyes open. I dragged myself to the bedroom and plopped down onto the mattress, but I couldn't fall asleep with that girl in the house.

Why didn't she want any help? And why did she refuse to eat?

It didn't make any sense.

Disjointed thoughts tormented me, stoked by the volume of alcohol I had consumed and all the talk about the case involving the teenage waitress who went missing that long-ago Halloween night after leaving a dance club.

What was her name?

I couldn't recall it earlier that evening, either. I had all but forgotten about the case until Nappy brought it up and everyone started talking about it.

Donna DeLongo. That was her name.

Her family was devastated and the town was in a panic, fearing that she had been abducted by a serial killer. However, not a single suspect could be named and little to no evidence was uncovered. It was as if she had just

disappeared. As head of the Criminal Investigations Division that handled homicide, I had been burdened by guilt when the case went cold so quickly.

I must've passed out, but I felt better when I got up in the morning, and I was relieved to find that the couch was empty and the girl was gone. As real as it may have seemed, I had imagined the whole episode, the product of an old unsolved cold case and a night of binge drinking. When I saw the cellar door ajar and the dim light filtering up, my heart began to flutter. On legs that felt like they were made of lead, I made my way over to the door and pulled it open. The wood risers creaked as I descended the stairs. Past the clutter of years that were packed in boxes and plastic containers stacked to the ceiling on storage shelves was the entrance to the root cellar. The old wooden door which had been locked shut for years was now wide open. There was no light inside, but the single bulb in the center of the room behind me was sufficient to illuminate the half-buried skeleton with wisps of blond hair attached to the skull.

#### **About the Author:**

Paul Lanardo has authored numerous titles, both fiction and nonfiction books, in a variety of genres. Most recently, *The Legend of Lake Incunabula*, a collection of dark fantasy stories, was published this spring, and *The Goblin Pitcher*, a children's fantasy novel, was released in 2021.Paul is a member of HWA..Paul has a passion for baseball. He studied filmmaking and has worked as an embalmer.

Website: Paul Lanardo
Blog: The Goblin Pitcher

#### Wash Me | Sonora Taylor

Kayla froze when she approached her car. A message awaited her, scrawled on the front bumper of her number one beauty: WASH ME.

Kayla frowned as she jerked her car keys out from her coat pocket. The nerve. How dare someone touch her beautiful car with their dirty fingers? How could they rub through years' worth of desert dust, garden dirt, and human detritus with a swipe of their hand and a flick of their wrist?

"Hey lady!"

Kayla turned and saw a man walking towards her. He held a grocery bag in one hand and held up the other in a motion to stop her. His hand was filthy.

"You forgot this," he said as he held up the bag.

His fingertips had smudges of dirt. Dirt that had once been on her car.

"You need help with—" The man's words curdled behind a yelp as Kayla plunged her keys into the man's throat.

"Don't. Touch. My. Car!" Kayla screamed.

The man only replied with bewilderment. He touched his filthy hand to his throat. Blood covered his palms and fingers. Kayla got into her car and sped away. The message on her car blinked like neon in her brain: Wash Me! Wash Me! Wash Me!

Her car didn't need washing—just the dirty fingers that had smudged it. She'd find them and clean them once and for all.

#### **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, Camden Park Press, and others. Her latest release, *Someone to Share My Nightmares: Stories*, is now available. She lives in Arlington, Virginia, with her husband and rescue dog.

#### The Meth Monster | Harrison Kim

Down round the Eugene freight yards Tex met Scavenger.

"I live in the boxcars," said Scavenger, a creosote-stained sweatshirt-hooded man with brown dirt embedded deep in his skin.

Tex declared he needed a fix.

"Come on down we can set you up," answered Scavenger, "but first we obtain the doughnuts."

Then he looked at Tex.

"You sure you're not a meth monster?"

"What's a meth monster?" Tex asked.

"It presents like a human being, but it's all craving, man, it sucks people right inside it."

"I know the feeling," Tex grinned.

"Yeah, it's just that you have kinda funny eye centers," Scavenger said.

They entered the mission, a square squat dirt brown hall by the tracks, men stood around a table waiting. In came two brawny boys with gunny sacks, "Stand back and let us pour," they shouted and emptied doughnuts and bits of pastry all over a grimy green table. The waiting men lunged forward, and Scavenger elbowed a couple of them in the chest. "I'm first," he yelled, pushing a wrinkled, toothless fellow wearing a boy's short pants. "Outta the way."

Tex managed to grab two jam filled dough pastries, but he didn't eat them. He handed them to the short pant man.

"Thanks, man, thanks." said the old man, munching fast and wiping off his hands on the brown stains all over his legs. "What the heck is wrong with your eyes, buddy?"

Tex shook his head and pounded his hand on the wall, and everyone jumped up.

"Get the hell out of here, old man," Tex yelled.

The ancient fellow gaped and hobbled from the Mission as fast as he could.

"Where did that come from?" asked Scavenger, as they walked out after him and Tex said, "From nowhere, mister."

Tex resembled a tall, loose-skinned boy, blonde-haired, elfin eared with a round and thick lipped mouth, his arms hung so long they came almost to his ankles. He whispered to Scavenger "Where's the fix location?"

"In the boxcars," Scavenger told him, as they crept across the railway tracks beneath the light of the setting sun. "You better have the money."

In the dusk light the shape of Scavenger's back showed first, the man's ripped grey scarecrow sweatshirt with all the creosote on the shoulders, then came Tex, following in the shadows, with saliva dripping from his open mouth.

"I've got more money than you'll ever waste," Tex said, his voice a guttural whisper. "I can't wait to spend my load."

"Ya, you're Mr. Moneybags," said Scavenger.

He heaved himself up into the black maw of a boxcar and held out his hand. "Come on up."

Tex stopped for a second.

"Why are you offering your hand, Scavenger, where's that coming from?"

Scavenger tossed back his dread hair head, laughed and retreated into the boxcar's darkness.

"That's my good hand," he yelled.

Tex grinned for a moment, and his mouth moved as wide as his shoulders. He put one foot on the boxcar door and lifted his whole body up with his long arms.

Nothing inside, but three pairs of eyes reflected in the setting sun's light.

"Can you smell the meth?" said Scavenger. "Carlos and Joseph have the stuff."

Tex sniffed the air. He breathed in harder and harder, so hard the Scavenger remarked, "where's that gust coming from?"

Tex rammed his back hard against the boxcar walls, exhaled and spread his arms out in one great gout of flesh. Within two seconds, his arms encircled the entire inside of the boxcar and the three men inside.

"What's he doin', Joseph?" came a quavering voice. "I can't see him too good."

"He fricking got thin and stretched," Joseph called. "What the ...?"

Scavenger screamed, "he's a meth monster, get the hell outta here!"

He lunged towards the boxcar door, right into Tex's skin. The stretched-out arm blocked Scavenger's face like a strong sticky plastic.

"I can't get loose!" Scavenger screamed, and then he pushed too far forward. His mouth and nose sealed up. Tex inhaled, his arms shrank and pulled the men in closer.

Carlos, his face misshapen and twisting from the shock gargled "Who are you?"

"You are correct, I'm a frigging meth monster," said Tex. "Tell me, how are you useful?"

"What do you mean?"

"What have you ever done that's useful?"

The man hesitated. He saw Scavenger's face buried in Tex's skin, Scavenger's neck muscles pulling, trying to wriggle free.

"I'm a father," said the man. "I have two kids."

"Did you ever litter? I bet you littered," said Tex.

"No, man, please, I always put my garbage in the can."

Tex's chest expanded out and encircled Carlos, dragged him back.

"Come into my liver, you piece of useless flesh."

"I'm useful!" Carlos cried, "I'm a father!"

Tex stopped for a second.

"Yeah, you've been a great baby daddy," he said, then puffed out his chest and Carlos shot into the stickiness. Tex sucked him back and Carlos disappeared somewhere inside Tex's thorax.

The other man, Joseph, lay flat out on the floor. Against the dusk light he saw Carlos' struggling body inside Tex. Then he turned to see The Scavenger still fighting the sticky flesh by the boxcar entrance. Scavenger's hands moved slower and slower as Joseph watched.

Tex pulled Scavenger close to him.

"What good have you done?" he whispered.

"I... I held out my hand for you," Scavenger answered, his voice weak now, and fading.

"Come into my liver. Everything except for that hand," Tex said.

He opened his skin and sucked Scavenger inside his thorax, to join Carlos. Scavenger's hand fell out of the hole, dropped from the boxcar door and rolled onto the tracks beside it.

"Joseph, tell me your good points" whispered Tex.

Joseph looked up at Tex's shadow, blocking the last of the light from the sun at the boxcar door, with the two bodies slow moving lumps within the Meth Monster's contracting shape.

"I was a preacher and a professor," Joseph said to Tex, "But I lost the Lord and the University."

He looked up. "I'm totally useless, I've ruined my life and I deserve to die."

"You've been thinking about this meeting a long time," Tex said. He yawned as the lumps inside him stopped struggling. "This digestion is a lot of work."

"I knew I'd meet the Meth Monster face-to-face," Joseph said. He raised his head a little more.

"What would you say if I told you I was going to quit?"

"I'd say you were a liar."

"Yeah," said Joseph.

He looked at Tex's stretched out chest, dark as the night behind him, the buttons on the Meth Monster's cheap shirt all popped and the ragged remnants hanging. The Monster yawned again. Joseph remembered way back when he studied Buddhism, in the days before the pills the doctor prescribed for the pain from his crushed hip.

"Waiting," he thought. "That's the ticket."

Whatever happened was going to happen. As he watched, Tex began to shrink, as he absorbed the addicts within him. His eyes began to close.

"There's so many of us, he'll never get us all," Joseph thought.

He lay there on the floor of the boxcar, staring forward at his creosote covered hands, wondering when he'd have the courage to make his move, to crawl past Tex's long arms and out of the opening, back into the world again. Above him, Tex began to sleep, hanging from the boxcar door with two fat embryos held inside his bursting thorax. As Joseph watched, Tex's mouth opened wider and wider and Carlos' face appeared, then the rest of his body, clean and naked as the day he was born.

Carlos dropped out onto the floor of the boxcar. Scavenger followed, sliding down Tex's chest as the Meth Monster snored.

"Are you guys ok?" Joseph asked.

Carlos smiled. "I feel calm, man, for the first time in months." He put his hand to his lips. "Man, my breath smells fresh! I'm going to walk.... Over to the Mission. I've got a great hankering for doughnuts."

"You look like you've gained twenty pounds," Joseph told him. "I can't believe this, the Monster's guzzled you both immaculate."

"He's that spidery creature above us?" The Scavenger quavered in a high-pitched voice.

"Yeah," Joseph told him. "He sucked up your meth and spat you out buck naked and straight as the day you were born."

"He's given me back my hand," Scavenger looked down at his clean, fresh arms.

Tex loomed above everyone, back stuck to the boxcar walls, sleeping, his chest caving in and out, in and out.

"I've got to find some pants," Carlos said, "and apply for a job helping other people."

"Yeah," said Scavenger, talking on the same high pitch. "This is embarrassing, hanging out here on the railway tracks. I must do something positive with my life."

"I kind of wish the meth monster had eaten me too," Joseph told them. "Now I've got to kick this habit myself." He looked up at Tex, hanging like a great blonde bat, folds of skin drooping down, the mouth sagging almost to the floor.

"I suggest we go now," Carlos told him. "I need to get to the Salvation Army and put on some fresh clothes."

The three men slid past the dozing meth monster and hiked up the tracks under the moonlight, two hairy backed fellows on either side of Joseph, who scanned ahead for a discarded towel or piece of cardboard his companions could cover themselves with.

Back at the boxcar, the meth monster's skin crumpled inward, he shrank into a pile of bones dominated by a grinning skin-covered skull. His breathing rose and fell faster and faster, his face twitched. He opened his eyes, looked out at the world, grinned, and began to rock his body back and forth. All night he'd twitch and rock from the boxcar walls, smiling at the moonlight on the railway tracks until his substance high faded and the sun rose to expand his skin and warm his bones, set his body straight, skinny and free once more.

Tex smiled wider, from within his meth stoned mind.

"I'll clean this whole town up soon enough," he whispered.

#### **About the Author:**

Harrison Kim spent some time in the freight yards of Eugene, Oregon and often thought there might be Meth Monsters in the area. The story is based on this hypothesis. Harrison also worked many years at a Forensic Psychiatric Hospital and became 'somewhat' knowledgeable re: psychotic behavior. He lives and writes in the spooky town of Victoria, Canada.

**Blogspot:** <u>Harrison Kim</u> **Facebook:** Harrison Kim

#### **Breathless** | *Miracle Austin*

You reached inside of my frail chest and snatched my heart out to wrap chains around it.

I collapsed, and you buried me under the Japanese Magnolia tree in my backyard—thirteen feet of dirt and snow covered me up.

Next spring, no flowers bloomed. My endless teardrops rained down onto my grave, until my body was exhumed for all to witness...

#### **About the Author:**

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

Instagram: @MiracleAustin7
Twitter: @MiracleAustin7

#### In Memoriam | RJ Meldrum

The three men sat slumped on the ground, their hard hats discarded beside them. Dave spoke, his voice heavy.

"It's getting dimmer."

"Yeah, the last battery is nearly done."

"We'll have to wait in darkness."

"What time is it?"

"Nine a.m. Just after."

"John should be grateful he missed this."

"For once, being late worked in his favor."

There was a laugh from the three men, then the light went out and silence descended.

\*\*\*

They had been on the early shift, start time 5 a.m. The crew had been instructed to head to a new seam and start the laborious task of removing the hard anthracite coal. Because the seam was in a small cavern, the coal would have to be removed by hand. The miners, old hands at the job, knew the routine. The plan was for two men to work the coal face while the other two loaded the coal onto the conveyor belt. The pairs would swap regularly, each miner taking his turn at digging. Dave, Bob, and Phil changed and geared up in the locker room. They were down one man.

"John's late again," noted Dave.

"These young guys, no discipline," said Phil.

"He's going the right way to get fired."

"Should we wait for him?"

Dave shook his head.

"He was half an hour late yesterday. Let's go. He can catch up."

They headed to the lift to take them underground, to the coal face.

Deep underground, they followed well-known paths toward the new seams, recently discovered. The whole area was honeycombed with tunnels dug by generations of industrious humans. The coal seam had lain undisturbed for millennia. It was about two feet wide and extended into the bedrock for an unknown distance. To reach it, the miners had to shuffle, bent-double, down a passageway. Eventually, after about fifty feet, the tunnel opened into a wider space where the seam was located. Dave, the most senior of the group, looked around, the light from his head torch reflecting off the moisture clinging to the walls.

"Let's get started. The boss will be wanting a decent amount from us today."

He swung his pick, his muscles feeling the familiar sensation. The tool cracked against the seam, knocking small shards of coal onto the ground. Dave noticed a small crack had appeared in the seam. This was normal, but unbeknown to them, the area was unstable; the strike of the pick had caused more than just a crack in the seam. That one small impact had caused the rock, already unstable after years of water erosion, to move.

Dave swung his pick again, the steel point sticking into the coal, creating more cracks. There was a rumble from above and then, before any of them could respond, the tunnel was full of dust and noise. The pit props groaned, bulged, and finally broke. The trio dropped to the ground, curling up to protect themselves. Rocks and debris fell around them. After a few seconds, the noise ceased and they stood, dusting themselves down. There had been a rock fall, not an uncommon occurrence. The conveyor belt was destroyed, as were the lights. Their only illumination came from their helmet-mounted flashlights. It didn't take them long to establish that the entrance to the tunnel was blocked.

\*\*\*

After the batteries died, the men couldn't see an inch in front of their own faces. They sat together, not saying too much, each lost in his own thoughts.

Phil wondered aloud, "How long has it been now?"

"No idea. It was four hours ago when the batteries died. Must be at least six now."

"Thought they might be here by now."

"So did I."

"Do you think they know?"

"The noise would have alerted them. They'll be on their way."

Silence descended once more. There was no point speculating.

"They'll rescue us. We'll be home soon."

There was a faint noise from the tunnel.

"Do you hear that?" asked Bob.

"I do, there's someone coming."

The three miners breathed a collective sigh of relief. Help had arrived.

"I can see a light!" said Phil.

It was true, the darkness was no longer absolute. They could see a shape. John walked into view, carrying a large flashlight. The tunnel was clear. John stood in front of them, playing his torch across their faces. His hand rubbed his grey, balding hair, his face wrinkled with age. He spoke.

"I thought perhaps this year you'd be gone."

He opened a pocket on his fluorescent jacket and removed a bottle. Scotch.

"Every year I come here to toast you, hoping you've left."

He took a slug from the bottle.

"But every year for twenty years now, you've been here, waiting for the rescue team."

Another slug. A tear fell from one eye.

"Oh boys, it is so hard to keep telling you. You died. There was another rock fall. You were buried. We cleared it as fast as we could, but it was too late. The seam was abandoned after you died."

Another tear fell.

"I should have been here with you. Died with you. Instead I survived. I came back on the first anniversary to toast you. Imagine what I felt when I found you all still here. And it's been the same every year since. We recovered your bodies, but somehow your spirits stayed trapped. Every year I pray to find this chamber empty, but every year you're still here. It breaks my heart."

He stared into the eyes of his comrades.

"Please, listen this time. Go. Go and find peace."

He turned and walked slowly back down the tunnel, wracked with guilt for leaving his comrades in the darkness once more.

#### **About the Author:**

RJ Meldrum has been published by Culture Cult Press, Trembling with Fear, Black Hare Press, Smoking Pen Press, Tell Tale Press, and James Ward Kirk. He's had stories in The Sirens Call, the Horror Zine and Drabblez Magazine. His novella *The Plague* was published by Demain Press.

Facebook: Richard Meldrum
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#### Summer's Stillness | Tina Hudak

Choking and coughing, my head shoots up from below the wild waves at the farthest end of the shoreline. Papà swoops me up into his arms and swings me out over the waves that barely reach his knees. My mother sits like a marble statue on the rough terrycloth blanket, not even daring to wade into the shallow surf. Yet, I laugh with utter joy and carelessness. What do I know of the sea? Nothing. What I do know is this: money is tight in my family; I have never been to the ocean, which terrifies my mamma. This is my first, real vacation—one away from the tightly packed neighborhoods of wooden row houses and blaring street noises. Here, in this cheap rooming house we are crammed into one square space with only a closet and a bathroom down the hall. Here, in this popular beach town with loud sounds and cries from the crowds on the boardwalk rides, it is a world far away from home.

On this moonless night while laying on my cot at the foot of their bed, a soft flannel sheet covers me like a shroud, and my fingers rub against the silver 'cornicello' that hangs around my neck. "It is important to keep the malocchio away," mamma whispers. She constantly reminds me of the sea's dangers. Papà smiles, shaking his head slightly against hearing her stories about sea serpents and merfolk, all who lure the innocent to their deaths or seek revenge. "Superstitions, cara!" he murmurs in a low tone. Having never been one to believe in 'those silly stories' from the old country, I have heard them argue often about his disrespectful words.

But here, at night in this different place, sitting snugly with her arm around me, I am enthralled to listen once more regardless of my papà's snickering. Soft warm breezes heavy with saltwater blow in gently through the open windows. Soon I am asleep. I dream of ropes of viridian green seaweed swaying under the ocean's gentle swells; of lithe, long bodies glistening in shades of violet swimming around me and through my legs. My braids have long since untwined and now form a halo as the water ebbs and flows above me. I am embracing this underwater existence with joy.

In the morning, I am rested and happy. We return every day to the wind and waves. Standing upright on skinny legs wobbling in the rough surf, I lick my lips. Smile. Lick them again. The waves kiss me full on the mouth. I am falling in love with the water, the salt, but especially the utter stillness below the pounding surf. Every day I become bolder going out into the sea farther despite my mother's cries of 'too far!' Always my father swims out with me, but today he continues to go farther and farther. With my new found confidence I follow along oblivious to my ineptness. I underestimate the sea. Soon, I am thrashing wildly, and pulled down with tangles around my legs and quick stinging sensations. Gulping salt water, I shoot up with one high-pitched cry. My father turns, eyes wide. His strong arms propel him forward quickly and he grabs at me to no avail. He dives under and I feel him ripping away that seaweed that ensnares my legs. When I am free and without a look backward I thrust myself toward shore, toward my mother who is crying and screaming at the water's edge. We stand in the searing sun shaking and sobbing together before finally turning toward the sea. It is surprisingly and suddenly calm with splashes slapping at the sand. Scanning the beach and then, the horizon together, my mama finally asks in a low fearful voice, "Where is your father?"

Later that day, his body is pulled from the sea "wreathed in seaweed." While mamma is grief-stricken, I am numb. What do I know of life and death? What I do know is this: I will never visit the ocean again; I will never doubt my mother's stories, and I will wear my silver charm close to my heart. Always.

#### **About the Author:**

Tina Hudak 's childhood in a steel town surrounded by smoke stacks and sounds of trains inspired her to begin scribbling stories at an early age. Today she lives in a small town on the outskirts of Washington, D.C. with her spouse and two cats, where she still hears some train whistles and subway toots. She continues to be inspired and to create visual art.

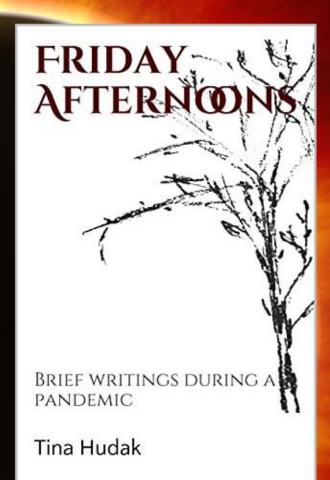
Wordpress: A Blue Bunny
Twitter: @Not2BEaten

# THIS SUMMER read in the dark

Poetry

Prose

Flash Fiction



amazon

Kindle & KindleUnlimited (Free)

#### 8mm | K.A. Johnson

New York City Police Department

Case: 4587982

Witness Name: Morton Goldstein

**Voluntary Witness Statement** 

I am writing this account about the events that occurred on the day of June 3<sup>rd</sup>. I will be as honest as my memory allows and won't leave out any details, no matter how unbelievable.

To start out, I am a filmmaker. Some, well most, would probably call me a pornographer due to most of my filmmaking revenue coming from the creation of adult loops. I know that I am admitting to an illegal act since shooting adult films violates obscenity laws. Still, I am trying to be as truthful as possible, so you'll believe everything within my account.

In between shooting footage for documentaries and nature specials, I shoot 16mm film loops that are edited to eight minutes and then printed on 8mm film for sale in adult shops around the city and beyond. I package each loop into individual boxes with a still shot and the name for each. I then bring all the boxes to the distributor who pays me, minus Jimmy "Knuckles" Verazi's cut. Jimmy Knuckles is the representative for the Italians that oversee the adult film industry in my area.

By mentioning Jimmy Knuckles in my statement, I know I'm putting my life in danger. However, as I've said, I am trying to be honest about the events of June 3<sup>rd</sup> and the details leading up to it. Jimmy Knuckles is intricately involved with how I ended up in the building and, therefore, must be part of this account. I usually write the set-up for my loops, but there isn't any dialog since loops are silent. The set-up gives the loop redeeming social content, so my finished loops aren't just sex. However, sometimes the Italians send special requests from people who pay extra.

These requests come to me through Jimmy Knuckles. Usually, they are for some fetish wear that I have to pick up. Not that I could say no. Jimmy Knuckles being a button man, I mean he is good to me and treats me well, but if you say no to him, you know how many people he's removed from this city? And if you don't, I'm afraid my memory becomes hazy very fast on that subject.

It was through one of these requests that ultimately led to my involvement in the events of June 3<sup>rd</sup>. Jimmy Knuckles came to me to produce six numbers for a special client. Unlike most requests, this client had a specific location where the shoot was to occur.

I hate shooting outside my studio. My studio has four sets in it, one in each corner. Then only two need to be redressed to complete the six numbers. The lights are already set up, and I know how to light my studio perfectly. My Auricon and Bolex cameras are in a safe because when you live in New York City, it isn't if you've been robbed, it's when you've been robbed, and I can't afford to lose my cameras as they are essential my livelihood. The talent shows up starting at about seven in the morning, and in roughly 12 hours, I have all the footage shot. Then it's just developing, editing on the Moviola, and prints from the lab.

When I have to go to a location, my assistant Andy and I have to load the lighting and the cameras into the van. Find the location. Find a spot for the van, which producers never think about. You want the van close to the location because the lights and cameras are heavy and a pain to drag into the location. Then it takes forever to set up the lights and figure out how to light the space properly. A 12-hour shoot in my studio can quickly turn into 24 hours on location. But as I said, you can't say no to Jimmy Knuckles. It wouldn't be healthy.

Jimmy Knuckles told me the client wanted the line shot in the basement at the location. Now, I want to stress I didn't know the history of the place. Had I known what had happened there, in that basement, I probably would have tried harder to get Jimmy Knuckles to turn it into a studio shoot. I could have made nice basement sets in my studio. But I didn't because I figured if I did a great job and the client was happy, Jimmy Knuckles would owe me one, and it is always good to have Jimmy owe you. It is healthier than owing him.

The client wanted an occult set-up, which I don't get, but who am I to judge. As long as it isn't illegal, I'll shoot it. Then Jimmy Knuckles gave me the worst news. The Client had their own female talent and their own story for the loop.

Sometimes the client will want a side girlfriend in their custom job. It makes them happy. But the girlfriend is not always so eager to perform on film when she gets there. So I figured I'd book my own girl anyway. That way, if the client's girlfriend crapped out, I'd have someone to shoot. And if the client's girl worked out, I could always shoot myself a loop with my girl to sell.

The client's story ideas could be detrimental. Whatever is in the client's mind doesn't necessarily translate well

into a silent film of about eight minutes. Then Jimmy Knuckles gave me even worse news. The client was going to be on set. I almost never allow a client on set. They end up being a distraction to everyone involved, and they end up being needy. Neither of which one wants when trying to efficiently shoot what needs to get on film before the day is gone. And more than that, the client will insist their story is shot, no matter how impossible it is to do. Jimmy Knuckles wouldn't take no for an answer. The client would be there, and I would make him happy, no matter what. Jimmy Knuckles was perfectly clear on that.

I picked up some props, including a spirit board, and brought along my fetish gear from the studio. I also went to a Christian store and picked up some crosses. I figured I could hang them upside down. The clerk wouldn't have smiled and told me she hoped I had a nice day if she had any idea where those crosses were headed. I talked to a friend who worked on Broadway who said he could lift some hooded robes for the day. I won't provide his name since he has supplied me with many costumes over the years, and if his boss were to find out, I would lose my costume connection and he his job. They weren't being used in a current production, so as long as they were returned unharmed, no one would even know they had been borrowed.

I lined up the necessary talent for the shoot. Often I do my own casting, people who respond to my ever-running ad in The Village Voice are interviewed, and those who are promising are kept on file for when I need them. But they aren't always reliable, and a shot like this requires reliability. There is a lady who runs a service here who will supply people who will show up. They cost more, but given all the complexities of the job. It was just easier to pay the higher price.

The morning of June 3<sup>rd</sup>, my assistant and I got the van loaded up with our equipment and then collected our cast for the day. Most of them were new to me since I don't use that service often. I was able to find a spot close to the brownstone that we wanted. I had one of the cast members stand in it while the rest of us unloaded gear from the double-parked van so we wouldn't have to lug it up the street. One of the damn cast members almost broke a tungsten light. Then Andy drove the van down to the spot.

I went up the steps and knocked on the black wooden door of the townhouse. Hearing no answer, I used the key that Jimmy Knuckles had given me to open the door. I wanted to get the equipment off the street. The last thing we needed was to have someone call the police on the shoot. The townhouse smelled musty and was empty. There wasn't a piece of furniture visible inside. There was dust on the floor with shoe prints in it, showing somebody had been inside recently. Had I known the history of the townhouse, its vacancy would have made sense. Had I known it was fifty years to the day of the events that had happened there in 1922, I probably would have left immediately and taken a long enough vacation that Jimmy Knuckles would no longer want me rubbed out. But it wasn't until you guys told me what had happened there that I found out.

I tested the light switch, and I was relieved when the foyer chandelier came on, meaning the building had juice. Amazingly, the building hadn't been split up into apartments, and all four floors, plus the basement, were one unit. I had to corral my cast members, who were checking out the empty townhouse, and enlisted them to bring equipment and the other necessities down to the garden level via the staircase in the back of the building. Hearing two of them struggle to get the costume trunk down the stairs, I decided to make the garden level rooms the changing rooms for the cast.

Andy and I went down to the basement to see what we would be working with. The basement of the brownstone was different than others I've seen. It was segmented into two chambers, a small one with stairs that led to a larger one below. The walls were constructed of stone. Each one had a bare bulb hanging from the rafters. There was no way we could shoot in the first chamber, no matter what the client expected. It was just too small. I went to the larger back chamber and felt really stupid about the spirit board with the plastic planchette and the cheap Christian store crosses I had bought. Someone, I assume the client, had set up a large stone altar and an enormous stone statue of a coiled snake. There was a pentagram within a double circle painted in red on the floor. Within the star was the image of a snake's head.

I started getting the lights set up while Andy ran an extension cord hooked to a two-gang outlet box up to the garden level since there weren't any plugs in the basement. Andy came back down, escorting an old white man of about 70 carrying a suitcase. He introduced himself as the client, his name though I can't tell you. He asked me to call him Mister. A girl of eighteen and three days, wearing a white tunic, followed him.

I got the Auricon set up on a tripod, and Andy would run the handheld Bolex. Mister liked the cloaks I provided. He wanted one cast member standing on each of the five points of the painted pentagram. It became apparent fast that Mister planned on directing the shoot, which was fine with me. That way, Andy and I could just capture the action, and if the scene was poorly directed, Jimmy Knuckles couldn't come down on me. Mister pulled out an ancient book from his suitcase that looked like it was covered in dried skin, and the pages appeared to be papyrus. There were symbols all over

the pages. He also got out a stone bowl that he filled with liquid that looked like stage blood from a plastic bottle. He had his girl sit in the middle of the pentagram on the snake's head.

He donned a cloak of his own, and told the cast to paint their faces with the viscous liquid when the bowl came to them. Then, he asked Andy to light the candles. Andy and I started shooting, and Mister passed the bowl to the first of my cast members. He then started speaking some language I had never heard while looking at the book. I tried to tell him that this was silent, so nothing he said would be heard, but he just kept going. Soon I smelled sulfur.

This brings us to the part that you may have trouble believing. A violet flame started rising from within the pentagram, circling and engulfing the girl Mister had brought with him. The fire rose until it was touching the wooden rafters. A snake head of flame formed from the side of the fire and started lashing out at the cast members. The purple flame caught the rafters on fire. I was the only one close to the door of the chamber. I turned and fled. When I took the corner to go up the stairs, I saw the fiery snake head darting after me. I sprinted for the main level, headed for the front door but could feel the heat of the snake behind me. At the last moment, I changed my mind and ran through the living room and leaped through one of the turret windows, which caused all the cuts and bruises you see on my body.

By the time I had stopped rolling, and I was able to look back, the entire brownstone was engulfed in flame, and it was spreading to the other row houses. I saw no one else make it out of the front of the brownstone. Obviously, if someone managed to get out to the back garden, I would have no knowledge of that. I haven't heard from Andy, who I fear passed in the fire, nor Jimmy Knuckles since the events that happened on June 3<sup>rd</sup>.

#### **About the Author:**

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

Blog: <u>K.A. Johnson</u> **Twitter:** @kenjohnsontnh

#### The Hourglass | Tess P.

This was not how I planned our day at the beach. Your crushing weight is deadly. My breaths are short, panicky, parched. I toss my head to expel the sand filling my nose—my only airway, remaining. I refocus on your glassy eyes willing you to stop. I dare not open my mouth to scream, knowing you would enjoy pouring these burning grains down my throat and quell the voice you hate.

"Thirsty, darling?" you finally speak.

I beg. "Nooo, please..."

Your mouth grins, dribbling into mine as the sand swiftly follows. I choke. This ain't no summer, seaside picnic.

#### **About the Author:**

Tess P. self-published *Secret Whispers*—a delicious collection of dark/light poetry in 2021. This year, she's focussing on writing shorts and has several stories coming out for Bag of Bones Press, Shacklebound Books and Dark Rose Press. When she's not penning or chatting on Twitter, you'll find her wandering English woodland with Willow her spaniel or snapping weird and wonderful photos.

Twitter: @Tess 2020

#### Heatwave 2076 | Alex Grehy

Happy birthday, Libby Mackenzie!

I raise a glass of champagne to my image in the mirror.

Happy birthday, sweet one hundred and thirty.

It doesn't scan. I am not sweet, and my flawless face could pass for thirty. My fingers lock in painful spasms—the consequence of pride. The glass slips from my fingers and shatters on the floor.

I study my reflection: slim, brunette, no grey hairs. I remember when that bitch Fionula, fashion editor of our local paper, had a dig at me for not allowing my 'natural elder beauty' to shine. I think she was jealous of my endorsement deals with the cosmetic companies; but the truth is, I don't need any products to maintain my youthfulness.

Journalists. The curse of an unnaturally long life—always looking for the trick. When I turned the century I tried charm—my secret's simple—mindfulness, exercise, a healthy diet. Still they came, simpering journos from the women's supplements. In my hundred and tens, I tried being offensive—my secret's alcohol and not giving a damn. Strangely, that had made me even more popular. In my hundred and twenties I had tried being a recluse—but the paparazzi still pursued shots of me in my bikini, agog that an old woman could look so sexy.

Some have even speculated that I had died years ago and that my identity is maintained by a series of body doubles. I had my lawyers stomp on that one. I can never lie about my age; that's part of the deal, and I cannot afford the cost of cheating.

So here I am, wondering what games I'll play with the journos in the next decade. Jason Marshall, health correspondent of the county magazine is due to call today—well, that makes a pleasant change from fashion.

\*\*\*

I'm sunbathing when Jason comes to the veranda overlooking the garden. I wave at him to join me, but he cowers in the shade, unwilling to move into the merciless sunlight.

"Ms. Mackenzie? I'm here to interview you, could you come inside? It's not safe to sit in the sun."

"No! I've been sitting in the sun for over a century, and it's never done me any harm."

"But it might harm me, please, Ms. Mackenzie?"

"Do you need this interview?" I ask.

"Not as much as I need my life," the journalist says fervently.

"Ha!" I get up and walk toward the house. Jason is young, handsome—in a homogenous, reality TV way. He is wearing a light linen suit, no doubt trying to look good as well as staying cool. It is not working. His face is red and his sweat-soaked shirt clings to his torso, which I admit seems admirably toned.

"Very well, I'll come inside. I could use a cool drink—I expect you could too."

I go to the kitchen to prepare a couple of glasses of iced tea. My hand hovers over the last, special ice cube. I bite my lip in frustration. *Is this the time?* My right hand cramps agonizingly, reminding me of the cost of getting it wrong.

I use only plain ice cubes.

I invite Jason into the lounge, where the ceiling fan takes the edge off the heat. I throw a cardigan around my shoulders—I can't abide the cold. He gulps his iced tea greedily.

I raise an eyebrow. "Slow down, young man, wouldn't want you to choke before you've asked your questions."

Jason puts his glass down and opens his laptop. "Hope you don't mind my taking notes, we have a lot of history to cover."

I sit back in my chair. So he wants to ask me about the past, as if an old woman like me didn't have a future. He might be right.

"I wanted to talk about the summer of 1976," Jason says brightly.

So predictable, I thought.

"According to the archives, there was a heatwave in the UK in 1976; you're one of the few living people who experienced it—would you describe it for me?"

"You want to talk about the weather a century ago?"

"It's a period which interests me, and there seem to be parallels with the current heatwave. It's rare for the UK to suffer drought and crop failure; some pundits are even predicting famine this year." Jason replies.

"Ha! The 1976 heatwave only lasted a fortnight. It was hardly the apocalypse." I lied, "I doubt whether this year's will be either. I don't see pestilence and war riding out."

"You think it's funny? In 1976 daytime temperatures almost reached 100°f, overnight was scarcely better; there was a prolonged drought, water control measures were introduced. Then there was the polio outbreak."

"So? It was dry and hot; nothing came of the polio outbreak—the disease was eradicated decades ago. What is it you want from me?"

"I don't know yet." he says, closing his laptop with a loud snap and looking at me directly. "My grandad was just a boy when he caught polio that year. But you're right, there were only a handful of cases, and he made a miraculous recovery—the doctors thought he'd be paralyzed."

"I'm glad he recovered." I say, noncommittally.

"Indeed. He lived to a grand old age, though I never really got to meet him, which is a shame, because this is a fascinating read." Jason takes a tattered notebook from his briefcase. "My father passed away when I was a boy. I found an old box of his stuff in my mom's garage. This is one of my grandfather's journals. It's taken me a long time to track you down."

"I'm sorry for your loss." I say, uncertain of where the conversation is going.

He waves the notebook.

"My grandad writes about his time on the polio ward when he was a boy. He was scared that he'd have to live in an iron lung for the rest of his days. He writes about the nurse who cared for him." He moves to the very edge of his chair and leans forward into my space.

"Nurse Mackenzie. You."

I relax. He's just come to thank me for caring for his grandad. I shiver, realizing how close I'd come to putting the special ice cube in Jason's drink.

"I remember, Douglas Marshall."

"You remember his name?" Jason seems surprised and frowns. I look up, maybe I gave too much away. *Damn!* "Of course, he was the last case of polio I ever nursed."

Jason looks distant, eyes fixed on the past.

"I can only imagine the terror of a six-year-old boy, dreading that creeping paralysis; one day running on the beach, the next in hospital with a monstrous iron lung on standby. He wrote this—'I prayed to God, then to the Devil, because I didn't care who saved me as long as I didn't have to live in one of those contraptions. Then she came, an angel."

Jason is too close, his eye contact too intense, but I can't read his expression. Could it be resentment? Hatred? Why? What else had his grandad revealed in his journals?

"I don't think you're an angel, Ms. Mackenzie. I think you took something from my family, something precious." Jason's pupils are pin-sharp, though the room is shady.

"What do you want?"

"I want the years that you took from my father. You see, I think you took advantage of my grandfather when he was just a sick child. I think you brokered a deal with the devil. You stole time from my family, isn't that why you've lived so long?"

I try not to laugh. He's so far from the truth it's hilarious. "Jason, I'm sorry you lost your father so young, but your explanation is preposterous."

"It's not preposterous. It's all my grandad talks about in his journal—the price, the price, it has to be paid'. He was terrified of having a child, but my grandmother somehow conceived my father in her forties. After that, my grandfather suffered from crippling anxiety."

Jason flicks to a new page of the journal.

"'The boy wants to go to a birthday party, I said no, snotty kids, disease everywhere, got to keep him safe.' How ironic that my father, fit and well, died aged 40, walking for his health along a cliff path that collapsed under his feet."

I hear peals of laughter in my head. The devil always had a piquant sense of humour. I feel a sick thrill as I sense his evil presence nearby.

"Young man, my long life has taught me is that chaos rules the universe. Why one dies when another lives is just chance."

Jason's hands grip the arms of his chair. His face is sheened with sweat, though I'm shivering in the cool breeze from the fan.

"Jason, you're obviously not well, is there anyone I can call to help you?"

He shakes his head and loosens his grip on the chair. "I'm sorry, I just wanted some answers, I didn't mean to frighten you."

"I'm not frightened." I say, and I mean it. I am immortal—he cannot hurt me. For decades I tried to escape my fate—overdoses, cutting my wrists, throwing myself off high bridges—but I always recovered. That's when I realized you can't break a deal with the devil; but you can enjoy it, so I embraced the life of a bon vivant. I feel a surge of sympathy for Jason's grandfather, who had obviously suffered the torment of a deal he'd made when he was too young to understand the ramifications.

"At least let me get you another drink, something stronger."

I go to the kitchen, trembling with excitement. *Are you there?* Is it time? I silently project my question and am almost driven to my knees by the devil's uproarious laughter ringing around my skull. That's for me to work out.

1976, a ridiculous little heatwave on a ridiculous little island. I was there. The first few days were glorious. I and my fellow nurses paddled in the warm sea after the night shift and wished it would last forever. But day after day the humidity

built, the heat making us edgy, the drought turning our green county brown, grass withering in fields, lambs starving on the hills. Then the polio outbreak. We scrambled to protect the children, giving out cubes of sugar infused with the vaccine, desperate to halt the scourge of a disease we never thought to see again in our lifetimes.

My hands cramp painfully—the palsy that the devil bestowed on me in the 2018 heatwave. When I believed that the oppressive heat heralded the return of Hell to earth; when I believed I could pay the price, while we still had the resources to control the disease. But it was not the time, and he punished me with this weakness.

I pour generous measures of a fine single malt into two glasses and open the freezer. This heatwave has a sickly taint; our infrastructure is failing—there is little wind to generate power, heat-warped cables are struggling to function. Food supplies are being disrupted and there is a hint of civil unrest. Pestilence will come. Hell is here on earth, as it was a century ago. Jason being here can't be a coincidence. It is time.

As I put the special ice cube into his drink, I wonder whether to tell him about his grandfather's deal with the devil. I try not to scream as my back spasms. It feels as though a giant hand is folding my body in on itself, twisting and crushing. This fierce pain would be the price of getting it wrong, the price I'm unwilling to pay.

I walk into the lounge and hand Jason his drink. He seems a little calmer and sips his whisky appreciatively—the ice is completely dissolved by the time he's finished. *All to the good,* I think.

"I'd better go. I'm sorry, this...this didn't go to plan."

His voice trails off and I decide to give him something. It's the least I can do.

"Your grandfather was a terrified, febrile boy. Please forgive his ravings—memory is a strange thing. Let it go now. Live your own life."

Jason doesn't thank me for my advice as he walks out of my house. I pick up the drinks tray, ready for the usual painful spasms, but my hands are strong and supple. I can sense the devil's crooning satisfaction—he's always been as quick to reward as he is to punish.

I wonder what will happen next.

I remember Jason's grandad, a thin, freckle-faced boy, mousy hair plastered to his sweaty forehead, his temperature dangerously high. I remember the pool of light around the single reading lamp on Sister's desk and the flickering shadows it cast across the ward as moths beat themselves relentlessly against its radiant bulb. There was no hint of breeze from the open windows. The heat grew and spread as the portals of Hell opened in my ward and the devil's presence filled every corner. As the child's fever peaked, he raved, offering the lives of his unborn children and grandchildren if he were spared. I pleaded with the devil to ignore an innocent child's words. He read my desires and offered to eradicate the disease if I would give him something in exchange. He made me immortal so I could be sure he'd kept his promise; but the price was my agreement to unleash the scourge sometime in the far future. I was prideful and desperate enough to think I'd saved the boy, but the devil took the child's pledge anyway. How the evil one laughed then, as he was laughing now. Jason was right, his father's life was stolen, but that was his grandad's doing, not mine.

I put the empty glasses in the dishwasher. The last of the special ice cubes, ancient and laced with polio virus, is already doing its deadly work in Jason's body. I'll give the devil his due, his timing is perfect. With no natural immunity and no stocks of vaccine, the devastation will be dreadful.

Despite the renewed health the devil has granted me, I sense that this is his last gift. My spirit feels light, as if the weight of future years has been lifted; I am mortal again. I have dreamt of this moment. I take a bottle of Chablis from the wine cooler, set it on a tray with my favourite crystal glass and a bottle of tranquilizers. I will sit in the summer loveliness of my garden and have some peace, at least until the devil claims my soul.

I glance out of the window. Jason is getting into a flashy car which he revs noisily before speeding off. *Enjoy it while* you can, I think.

#### **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: @<u>Indigodreamers</u>

#### Mr. Jakk | Guy Medley

The old woman paddled the small boat along the dark waters of the river, her three small passengers bunched together as close to the center of the small craft as possible as it slipped quietly through the deep shadowed crevice of the Devil's Canyon, far beyond any part of the river they had ever been allowed to venture before. They trusted her, the children in their village collectively adopting her as their Granny Jin Jin, and it wasn't an uncommon practice for her to plan such adventures into the jungle surrounding their huts to teach the children of natural things, plants and animals, the ways in which the villagers survived in their jungle home. But, never before had she traversed the river so deeply into the forest, so far from the safety of the village, not with children in tow, and they were growing weary of that fact with every new twist and turn of unfamiliar river that passed by.

"Your mammas might have told you stories about the things that live out here, away from the people," Granny Jin Jin said, letting the small boat drift with the gentle current for a bit. "Things that are livin' in the rivers, water dragons that eat fishermen up whole, or things that come swoopin' down from the sky and carry people off. Maybe other things that live deep in the forests. Scary things to be sure. Most is just simple tales told to scare children, to keep them safely near the villages, where they won't get lost and become a meal for the real bad things that hunt in the jungle."

The children crowded closer together, their eyes wide with fear as they scanned the leering canopy that hung dark and low over the water of the small river.

"Maybe they even tell you of Mr. Jakk," she continued. "But what do they know of him? They've never seen him up close, in person, not like Granny Jin Jin has. And they lucky not to have. He's a terrible, awful thing, Mr. Jakk."

One of the children, tears beginning to slip from her swollen eyes, pleaded with the old woman, "I'm scared of ghosts, Granny Jin Jin."

"As you should be, child. But, Mr. Jakk ain't no ghost. No, he's something else. Something worse than ghosts.

"See, we wasn't expectin' to see nothing more than a full basket each of fish that day, my two brothers, Riki, Tio and I. We come way up the river, past the canyon of devils and into the darkest forest we had ever seen. And there, we set out our nets and cast our baited hooks into a pool so calm and deep it looked like the night sky had laid down and went to sleep right there on the forest floor, and we just knew a pool like that had to be full of the best fish.

"And, it was! We caught fish after fish, our baskets filling faster than we ever imagined possible. We were so happy with our catch, so delighted with our good fortunes, that we wasn't any longer mindin' our surroundings. Like the children we were, we forgot the warnings of our father, about if we was to go wanderin' into the jungle, we better be prepared for the things that be waitin' for us in there. So, when we finally see them eyes peerin' out of the darkness at us, we dropped our nets and screamed, thinkin' it was a panther about to pounce and rip us all to shreds. But it wasn't any panther that come creepin' out of the shadows lookin' for its dinner. It was something much worse."

Granny Jin Jin looked out across the black water to the dense jungle beyond, searching for a memory that lived out there somewhere.

"His eyes was like moonlight shinin' through amber. When Mr. Jakk stepped out from the trees it was like he was bringin' the darkness of the jungle with him; his skin was so dark and smooth, some of him covered with leaves and moss and growing things. Atop his head was a topiary of living plants rooted right to his skull."

Granny Jin Jin's eyes filled with sorrow and tears as she retold the story, recalling the terrors of so many long years past to the children.

"That Mr. Jakk, he come out from the forest, angry at our trespassin' on his home, and he took my two brothers, Riki and Tio. They kicked at him and punched and yelled, but he took them easy as can be back into the jungle with him and I never saw them again.

"The village sent men out to find them, and some of them never came back neither. The ones that did were so stricken with horror they wasn't never the same men again after that. They didn't speak none of what they saw in the jungle, not for the rest of their livin' days, but I know what they saw. I also knew they wasn't never going to find my brothers, that nobody could. Mr. Jakk had hidden them away in the jungle and nobody would ever see them again."

"Why didn't Mr. Jakk get you too, Granny?" asked a young boy.

Granny Jin Jin let slip a half smile, still starring off into the darkening jungle as they drifted slowly through.

"You wonder how Granny got away from a thing like that, one that easily dragged two strong young boys away forever? Well, I was smarter than my brothers, you see. I cut a deal with that ol' Mr. Jakk, like he was some kind of devil man."

The oldest of the three children spoke up, "What kind of deal can you be makin' with a thing like that, Granny?"

Granny Jin Jin broke her gaze away from the forest, finally looking at the children, her face streaked with tears, her mouth trembling as she spoke.

"A bad deal, my babes. But, one that has finally come time to make good on."

#### **About the Author:**

Guy Medley scribbles down dark and horrific fiction from his cobweb infused and possibly haunted home in the Mojave Desert. Brought-up to fear the mythological nightmares that roam small desert towns, snatching children who don't mind their moms, he is never short of terrifying material to further inspire his disturbed mind and writing.

Blog: Guy Medley Fiction
Twitter: @medleyguy

#### Evening Primrose | K. A. Williams

Darleen smelled the fragrant night blooming flowers of the evening primrose bushes as she greeted guests in her backyard garden. Warily she watched the moths flock to the flowers, thankful that they were not landing in the snacks she had set out on the table.

Everyone was eating, drinking, talking, laughing and enjoying themselves.

Until the bats came.

They chased moths and guests alike. A lady in a red dress screamed as a bat got tangled up in her curly hair. One of the bats collided with a Chinese lantern and fell into the punch bowl.

Darleen's yard man had missed a stick when cleaning the garden this morning. She picked it up and hit a bat hovering over her primrose bush.

"Is that really necessary?"

She turned to face the speaker. He was unfamiliar, but a handsome man could crash her party any day. As a new divorcee, she didn't have a long list of available male friends.

"They just wanted to eat the moths, you know," the man said and gently took the stick from her grasp.

The garden was empty now, except for Darleen, the stranger, and a few bats.

He plucked the little bat from the punch bowl and set it on the white tablecloth.

"Ew," commented Darleen, as she watched it flop around before flying off.

"I can change your opinion of bats," he said, drying his fingers on a napkin.

"Oh, I don't think so."

He moved closer. "You have a lovely neck."

She was pleased that he'd noticed. She'd always considered it one of her best features.

He kissed her neck and Darleen's pulse quickened. Then he bit her.

"Ouch!" She jerked away, picked up the dropped stick, and hit him with it. After the sharp end scratched his face, he dissolved into a mist.

Darleen stared at the clothes on the ground in disbelief and wondered how the stranger had disappeared. When something wriggled out from under his blue shirt and moved towards her, she shrieked, and jabbed the point of the stick into the bat until it lay still.

Then she grabbed a bunch of napkins, scooted the dead creature onto a paper plate, and tossed it in the trash can. Darleen really hated bats.

#### **About the Author:**

K. A. Williams lives in North Carolina and writes fiction and poetry. She has been published lots of different places including The Sirens Call, Black Petals, Yellow Mama, Theme Of Absence, The Creativity Webzine, Corner Bar, Tigershark, Oddball Magazine, Calliope, and View From Atlantis. Apart from writing, she enjoys music (mostly rock), Scrabble, and CYOA games.

#### Women of Monster Filmland

#### A Look at Ladies in The Horror Movie Director's Chair

It can be argued that slasher films, paranormal terror and psychological thrillers throughout horror movie history have been dominated by filmmakers who are men. And while dramas, romantic comedies and "chick flicks" are what's usually thought of when we hear of a female director or producer, we often forget that some of the most terrifying and thought-provoking films have been hemmed and helmed by the hands of women. Near Dark, Pet Sematary (1989), American Psycho, Carrie (2013), Goodnight Mommy, The Babadook, Relic, and, most recently, Fear Street and Candyman (2021), to name a few.

Because women within the horror genre are more than just pretty protagonist teens chased by sickos with masks or finger knives, *The Sirens Call* wanted to spotlight a few scream and screen queens *behind* the camera and their latest projects, showcasing examples of the many successful women directing, producing and writing horror films today.

Luciana Faulhaber

Director/Producer/Writer/Actress



Born the youngest to a single mom in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Luciana Faulhaber grew up fast as her four older siblings turned her onto gritty and gory horror movies at an early age, often running fright film marathons (four in a row) for the neighborhood kids. While she admits to being way too young to watch the types of flicks her family exposed her to, in retrospect, she is grateful for all the childhood nightmares and monster memories, because without them, she would have never understood the universality of fear and how it transcends cultures. She certainly would have never been able to conjure up the right elements for some of her latest horror movie projects, including *Don't Look*, *The Curse of La Patasola* and *Never Hike Alone 2*.

Her film *Don't Look*, which she directed, co-wrote and coproduced, could be thought of as a Thanksgiving holiday horror film and a clever (and cleaver!) homage to old school slashers, a la *Halloween* and *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*, as five friends celebrate Turkey Day in a dilapidated farmhouse in New York's upstate woods. Her feature film directorial debut, Luciana not only did a remarkable job at leading a talented cast and crew, but starring in the award-winning horror film as well.

The Curse of La Patasola, a paranormal horror film Luciana had starred in earlier this year, was directed by AJ Jones and explores Columbian folklore. According to legend, La Patasola is a beautiful woman who inhabits the South American jungles and hunts unfaithful men as her prey. "My role in the film really was the beginning of my reawakening towards the supernatural," says Luciana. "There has got to be more to this world than the eye can see."

Her most recent project, *Never Hike Alone 2*, is part of a successful fan film franchise created by Vincent Disanti and serves as a fresh innovative "What If" version to the



Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> movies and die hard Jason devotees. Having a strong fan base, the first two films in the series, *Never Hike Alone* and *Never Hike in the Snow* currently hold over a million views on YouTube. Which was why Luciana didn't hesitate in saying "Yes" when asked to be a part of it. "We shoot this summer, and it looks to be a blast!" states Luciana.

Asked to impart some guidance and considerations to other women pursuing a career in film, Luciana has this to say: "If advice was good, it wouldn't be free, so be careful who you listen to and who you surround yourself with. Many people are quick to discourage you, or have opinions about your life choices because they genuinely care about you and don't want to see you get hurt. But that doesn't mean they are right. The only person that knows what's best for you - is you."

Melissa Vitello
Director/Writer/Producer



Like many of us, Melissa Vitello was terrified of horror movies as a kid. Yet she was also curious, and would often watch scary films in spite of her hair standing on end — totally oblivious that the genre of monsters and mayhem would later contribute to her storytelling style and mark her identity as a creator of macabre cinema.

Abigail, a feature horror/thriller about a boy in a small town seduced into a world of darkness, is Melissa's latest project as director and stars Ava Cantrell (*Lights Out*) and

Gene Farber (*Captain America: Civil War*). A lover of YA fiction, the story had Melissa's attention from the beginning. "I absolutely loved diving into the characters' story, their motivation and choices," says Melissa. "We got to play in this dark, violent kind of Tarantino world at points. It was such a creative playground for me and an opportunity to really explore my own voice as a director that I'm grateful for."

Accepted into its first festival recently was Melissa's horror short *My Left Arm*, which she co-directed with Chris Sheffield, about a recovering stroke victim who finds her life unraveling before her, placing her young daughter in danger. Starring Elizabeth Mae Alan, My Left Arm premieres this summer at *Dances With Film* film festival in Hollywood, California.



Having moved from Northern California to Los Angeles at the early age of 20 to pursue her film career, Melissa's biggest inspirations she looks upon during her moviemaking journey are other female horror film directors such as Prano Bailey-Bond (*Censor*), Mimi Cave (*Fresh*), Natalie Erika James (*Relic*) and Jennifer Kent (*The Babadook*).

Asked whether or not the challenges for women filmmakers of long ago still exist today, Melissa replied, "I can definitely say from personal experiences that those challenges still exist! However, I do see and acknowledge there is some amazing progress and women are definitely thriving and climbing much more than they used to. It is certainly my own mission to continue bringing women along with me and supporting talented women wherever I can in this industry and genre.

### Jill Narciso Director/Writer/Producer



With a background in journalism and comedy writing, Jill Narciso spent a great deal of time trying to find her true *voice*, and after much introspection, the writer and director eventually landed in what she really loved – horror! While *Tales From The Crypt*, *Beetlejuice* and *Edward Scissorhands* stand out as her childhood favorites, a big inspiration for Jill has always been the *Childs Play* franchise and the concept of creepy dolls.

Her recent horror short Dolls, which Jill wrote, produced, directed and self-financed, captures the musical essence and character quirkiness of one of her cinematic heroes, Tim Burton. It also embodies the diabolic eeriness of her other idol, Don Mancini, the screenwriter responsible for creating her most cherished horror villain of all, "Chucky". Dolls follows the story of a conflicting relationship between two close sisters, one of them a middle aged "special needs" woman who prances around in jammies and occupies a rather unique toy – a freaky-faced doll who she often sees moving and walking by itself. And just as we the audience are convinced that this is all in the woman's mentally challenged mind, her sane sister gets a rather surprise visit by a plastic three-foot intruder seated in the back of her car, saying to her in a soft echoey voice, "Drive, bi--!"

Another short horror film Jill recently wrote and produced which did well on the film festival and live streaming circuit was *Stall*, about a woman who uses a public restroom one day and, after entering one of the stalls,

#### finds that it's haunted!

Sumpa, a short film Jill directed earlier this year with an all-Filipino film crew, tells of a Filipino folklore curse in which a brother and sister — whose parents just died - play with a Ouija Board and conjure up... something. "I wish to bring to light creatures or stories from other countries because I don't think they get much exposure," says Jill. "I'm tired of seeing the same old vampires, werewolves and zombies recycled in different ways. There's so much more scary out there."

As a young Filipino woman directing and producing movies, horror in particular, Jill was asked what it's like to be a *woman of color* (WOC) in a tough, competitive industry such as film.



"I don't see an abundance of women of color on film sets because this isn't an easy industry to break into and the life cards are already stacked up against women in general. My mother wanted me to be a nurse, common in Filipino families, and my father was always saying 'Girls shouldn't do this — only boys do that', so there's a lot of competing against self when family and others are telling you that you can't or shouldn't.

"I've had many people come up to me after a shoot and thank me just for being a director who is a woman of color, and it becomes more about me as a WOC than my work. When that changes, then it will be easier for other women of color on this path to succeed. There's still so many stories of women of color that need to be told!

### Ida Lupino Director/Producer/Writer/Actress



One of Hollywood's first female directors and the second woman admitted to the Directors Guild of America in 1950, *Ida Lupino* wrote, produced and directed an assortment of films throughout her illustrious 48-year career. Of her various works were *horror films*, helming grim masterpiece thrillers such as *The Hitch-Hiker* (considered the only film noir made by a woman) and episodes of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (original) and *The Twilight Zone* (original). She was also one of the first to direct highly controversial films, including *Outrage*, exposing the sensitive subject of *rape*, and rattling the cages of the censorship office during the 1950's.



As an encouragement for women filmmakers up against the monstrous barriers of a male dominated industry *and* genre, and for *other* artists struggling to get their voices heard, let us end with this quote:

"I'm mad, they say. I am temperamental and dizzy and disagreeable. Well, let them talk. I can take it. Only one person can hurt me. Her name is Ida Lupino."

~ Ida Lupino

#### **About Mike Lera:**

Mike Lera is a Los Angeles-based author, screenwriter and journalist whose horror fiction can be found in over a dozen anthologies, including All Dark Places 2, Horror USA: California and Rod Serling Books' Submitted For Your Approval. He has also published with such prominent magazines as Famous Monsters of Filmland and The Literary Hatchet. Having written and produced several short horror films based on successfully published stories of his, Lera has found equal success in both the film festival and streaming service circuit with his screen work.

When not scaring people, Lera scavenges comic/martial art/horror cons for anything to wear, hang, tac, shelf and add to his geek shrine.



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#### The Sacrifice | Naching T. Kassa

My name is Maira Falak. I come from the poor village to the west of the Ganges. The village which still believes in the supernatural. The one that never moved into the computer age. We still believe in demons.

I can tell by your expression you are an unbeliever. That every word I've spoken is colored as a lie because of how I dress. Do not be so deceived. Just because I am clad in jewels and wear the crown of a rani, does not make me any less poor than the other girls of my village. Even though I was chosen, I am nothing special.

Unlike the people of my village, the demons have moved into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Humans are nothing but vessels to them, and they have learned much from their hosts. They can work a cell phone, a tablet, a laptop. They are as enchanted by the screens as those whose bodies they ride. But they still need us. They still skulk through the jungle at night, looking to feed. Though they have forgotten the reason behind it, they have not forgotten the bargain they made.

The bargain. How many have died as a sacrifice, I do not know. But it keeps the peace between us. The sacrifice must always enter the jungle during the full summer moon. That is why I stand here now.

The gems glimmer in the moon's soft glow, and a hush fills the air around me. The heat of the day has not yet fled the earth, and it warms my bare feet. A soft breeze, scented with jasmine, caresses my cheek. In the distance, a twig snaps.

The demon's approach is rife with sound. There is no stealth in these footsteps. When a ragged cloud veils the moon and plunges the world into darkness, I shiver.

The moon reappears a second later, and in its light, the demon is revealed. It has taken the form of a pale tourist, a woman with shoulder-length blonde hair. She smiles and holds up her phone. "Damn GPS led me to the wrong clearing."

"I am glad you found your way," I reply.

Her eyes shine like a panther's in the gloom. She licks her lips. "I certainly worked up an appetite."

Every muscle in my body grows taut. She closes in on me, and in her demonic glee, begins to change. Fingernails become talons, blonde hair shimmers to black.

"Do you remember why we are here?" I ask. This question is required of me and has been spoken by many of my ancestors in days past.

"To keep the peace," the demon replies. "A sacrifice must be given. It must become the feast."

"And do you understand the words you've spoken?"

The demon cocks her head to one side and her brow furrows. This question is new, not part of the ritual. I am the one who added it.

"I understand," the demon says.

"Have you forgotten the traditions?"

Saliva drips from her tongue and a long thread, like spider silk, drops to the jungle floor. If she hears my question, she has no answer. She rushes me, hands outstretched.

She freezes when I reveal my other set of arms. I think the moonlight obscured the fact that my skin has shifted from brown to blue. I grasp her with four hands and lift her into the air.

"Don't you remember?" I whisper, just before I rend her apart. "Who the sacrifice is?"

#### **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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#### Waldenheide's Ghost | Kieran Judge

Colin screwed his eyes shut. He couldn't, wouldn't, dared not look outside. Over the threshold of the cave, back out in the glare of the twin suns burning the sands of the desert moon ablaze, far beyond the wreck of their downed escape pod on the side of the dune, the figure would be standing there, screaming, burning without fire in sight.

This was the third time he'd seen it. It came every night, or what counted as night due to the suns keeping everything in perpetual day. Kasey, who was asleep in the cool of the cave, hadn't seen the figure and had scolded Colin when he'd tried to show him. We're in the year 6747, Year of our dear, departed, fictional Lord, Kasey said. We tossed out ghosts with the bathwater when we left Old Earth. We don't believe in spirits anymore, unless we drink them.

But Colin believed in ghosts. Especially ghosts of women he'd seen burn in the crash several days before.

A stray breeze blew sand into the cave, where it pooled around Colin's boots. The rustling sounded like parchment shifting, skin shifting, flesh, and it made what was left of his own skin crawl and whisper. He reached down with a gloved hand and brushed the sand away. He couldn't bear to see it. Couldn't bear to spend another day marooned here on this dusty moon.

Overhead loomed the phantasmagorical image of Waldenheide. So close, all the way across the slips and drops through intra-space and sub-space and closed-and-open space, and the ship malfunctions with their destination in sight. Into the escape pod they'd scrambled, jettisoning for safety. The tech malfunctions had crossed over to the pod's controls, because bloody cyber crews can't engineer a working piece of software for shit. So they're strapped in, Kasey wrestling with the controls whilst Colin and Amanda grip each other's fingers tight, and then Colin lets go in the final seconds to bring his hands up over his head. Brace For Impact.

"Got anything?"

Kasey sat up and went to scratch his bald head, wincing as he touched the scar that ripped across his skull in a jagged crescent. It was healing quickly thanks to the medi-pack they'd salvaged from the wreck, but it was still ugly and hurt like a bitch.

Colin looked to the cracked monitor opposite him. The screen was blank and useless and dead. No flashing lights, no beeps, no sign of life. Just like Amanda, even though she was outside with her flesh peeling off in charcoal strips. "Nothing."

"Fucks sake. Waldenheide isn't that backwards; there are ships passing overhead on a daily basis. Why aren't we picking up anything?"

"Moon must be a dead zone. Nothing gets in or out."

"Bullshit. Might be nobody here but that doesn't mean coms'll block. Must be something else."

The ghost, Colin thought. Amanda's stopping us. Revenge, maybe. For not dying with her.

"Maybe it's malfunctioning," Kasey suggested.

"Could be."

"Like the rest of our shitty gear."

"Yeah."

"I'll have a look at it when I've slept a bit more. Leg's still fucked and I can't see too good. Just rest for now." He looked across at Colin. "And you. Nothing'll happen. Just have to wait and hope it isn't bust and we're out of here. Just got to chill for now."

"For now," Colin muttered.

Kasey nodded before turning over again, putting his head against the rock he'd claimed as his pillow, and closing his eyes.

Colin couldn't sleep. Whenever he tried to, he kept thinking of that awful phrase: The Long Sleep. Some didn't sleep so easily.

He risked a glance outside to where Amanda would be writhing in agony, but her hazy, fuzzy image had vanished in the heat haze.

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Kasey woke up a few hours later, took a sip of scrounged water, and reluctantly crawled over to the coms unit. He pressed a few buttons (the buttons both of them had almost worn out upon arriving), looked at a few menus whilst trying to look like he was deep in thought, then finally shook his head.

"Everything seems fine," he said. "Maybe the cave is blocking it out. Something to do with the rock."

"Well then we're screwed," Colin sighed. "We'll never make it somewhere else in this heat, and we can't keep it here, and someone needs to stay by it to receive the call. And you can't move, anyway. We're fucked."

Kasey continued to look as if he was thinking hard, and then stuck his finger in the air to prove that no, he actually had been thinking a little bit.

"We set it up by the pod."

Colin shook his head. "Nuh-uh. If you want to do it, go ahead. But I'm not..."

"Because of the ghost? This terrifying ghost you keep claiming to see? Look out there now. Go on. Look."

Colin shook his head again. Kasey took Colin's head in his hands and twisted it around to look out over the threshold. "See? Nothing there."

As he said, there was nothing.

"I can't get to there, even though it's not far away, 'cuz of my injuries. But you can, so you've got to."

"I can't," Colin whimpered. "Please, Kace. Don't make me."

"I'd do it if I could. I'm captain, so you know I would. Wouldn't make anyone do anything I wouldn't do myself. But cuz I can't, you've got to save us both."

Colin's gaze was fixed on the spot where Amanda would appear. Always there. Not all the time, but always there. And as she wasn't there now, he'd got no excuse. Kasey was captain, after all. Even now, he was, and he knew it.

"Okay," he said. "Okay."

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There was, thankfully, shade up against one side of the pod's blackened monocoque. Colin hastily set up the monitor out in the sun, then retreated into the cool with sweat beading on his forehead. He dragged pieces of scrap metal around him to build a kind of den to keep the sand from his eyes. Out of the slot-like entrance he kept an eye on the horizon. On the side of the dune where the wreckage ended. On her.

Because she was back again. Always the same, shrieking silently as flames licked her suit, boiling body fluids leaking from rents in the fabric. Her eyes were open wide; the lids had burned off. Always they looked to Colin. Always they protested. Always they asked the same question. Why didn't you save me? Why did you let go? Why did you not come with me?

"It wasn't my fault," he pleaded with the figure in the distance. "I promise, it wasn't. We tried everything we could, remember?"

But the figure never answered him. It just kept screaming as sand devils whirled around her. And he couldn't go inside the pod because the door wouldn't open, even if he wanted to go in. And so he would screw his eyes shut again, just as she couldn't. He would wait, his head tucked into his knees. And then he would look up and see she was gone, but was still out there waiting for him.

"Just leave me alone and move on. Please, just move on."

\*\*\*

The noise woke him.

In the distance great clouds of sand billowed up. He heard it rumbling in the air, a great thrumming which, as it got closer, began to vibrate the ground underneath him. The metal walls of his fort tickled with the tiny pitter-patter of sand.

Through the gap he saw Amanda there, shaking with the dust in the air.

Colin's eyes widened.

She wasn't where she was before. She was coming closer.

The empty dunes for miles around were livening. The sand rolled and drifted in lines like waves making their way down the slopes towards the downed craft. And as if leading them, Amanda slowly advanced like a screaming pied-piper.

"Colin!"

Kasey was halfway out of the cave on his knees. Colin looked to the ghost, steeled himself, and ran from his shelter. His feet threatened to betray him as they sank into the viscous sand, but he managed to get over and threw an arm underneath his captain.

"Need to turn round. Into the cave," Colin said.

Kasey shook his head. "Too wide and open. Sand'll just sweep in. Into the pod. Close the doors. Safer."

Colin stopped. Stared at him. "No. Cave is better."

"Are you mad? It's just a dug-out! We'll be sand-blasted to the next life in minutes!"

Colin shook his head. "I can't. I... Kase. She's still in there."

There it was. There was the real reason. Amanda's body, or whatever blackened remains were left, were still on the latticed floor of the pod, leg hooked around the base of her seat as she'd tripped, tried to flee from the wreckage, burning, burning. Exactly where they'd left her.

"I'll move her! Don't worry about it, let's just get in before the storm hits!"

"[\_\_'

"That's an order, Colin."

What else could he do? Colin swallowed hard and lifted. Kasey grunted as he put weight onto his crippled leg. Between them they hauled him across the sands with heads down to stop grit drilling through their eyeballs. Soon they weren't so much walking as dragging their boots through the drifts. The wind echoed through the cave behind them in hollow howls.

So hard to go forward. Almost impossible. Can't go further.

Out there, somewhere, Amanda's spirit was still advancing.

Then their hands slapped the metal of the monocoque. Heaving against the storm they edged around to the door.

Kasey grabbed the monitor and clamped it under his arm. "Have to be quick!" Kasey called over the storm. "Else the sand'll get in and we won't be able to close it again!"

Kasey gripped the handle and heaved. Wouldn't move. He yanked harder and harder but still it refused to shift. "Colin! Help!"

Colin, bent-backed from the sandstorm, was frozen in the chilled heat. He couldn't do it. Not even now, with his life depending on it. He was sure that when he got inside, the flickering spirit would have already passed through the door. She would be waiting for him, choking on spectral smoke, mouthing for him to join her, where he belonged. If only there was a way to calm her spirit...

"Colin!"

Colin grabbed the door and heaved with his captain. The metal creaked and groaned as the wind caught underneath it and rattled the frame.

"Put your back into it! Come on!"

One. Two. Heave for you. Three Four. Open the door. Five six. Get in quick.

It jolted open a couple of feet. Colin shoved Kasey from behind and threw him through the gap into the wrecked interior. "Give me your hand."

Colin shook his head. He turned into the wall of gray and shaded his eyes with his hand. He was unsteady on his feet, but through squinting eyes he could make out the shimmering figure of their shipmate, almost on them.

"Colin!"

Kasey reached a hand out through the gap, but Colin was away, staggering through the sandstorm.

If I can bring her spirit inside somehow, reunite her with her body, maybe she'll leave me alone and I can...

Behind him the door shook, and Kasey snatched his arm back just before the panel slid across and latched shut. He tried to pull it back open, but the adrenaline he'd feasted on to get across the sand was failing him now. He struggled hopelessly, then fell back onto his ass. He peered through the window to see Colin disappear into the swirling sands. He screamed and banged on the door, as if that would help.

He looked behind him to the husk of a body. "You bitch," he whimpered. "You selfish bitch."

Out in the storm, Colin staggered. Blind. Bloodied. Ripped apart by the sand. He looked through sightless eyes for his lost love. He just wanted her to be at peace. Where was she, now that he wanted her? Why had she abandoned him?

He collapsed face down, life leaving him quickly. The wind picked up his body and rolled it across the dunes, then off to some other empty stretch of wasteland to be eroded into nothing.

\*\*\*

Three days after losing Colin, after some weary jigger-pokery, Kasey got the monitor working properly. Despair had overridden the pain and mental fatigue, and all the better for it, because now, finally, a ship touched down outside the crippled craft.

In his hotwiring madness, Kasey had found the hologram projections they used for communicating across the stars. In the crash it must have been twisted around so that it shone outside the pod instead of into the cabin. Kasey concluded that it must have recorded something on the camera inside the cabin during the crash, then the broken and bloody awful software programmed by engineers who couldn't engineer for shit, projected it intermittently onto the dune.

Presumably that was what Colin had seen. Kasey didn't tell his rescuers that Colin had been lost whilst chasing shadows of Amanda, eternally burning over and over again, shining out onto the ridge of Waldenheide's desert moon. He'd just said he'd lost him in the crash, probably flung out of the pod and buried in the sand. Telling them the truth wouldn't look good. Especially when the manufacturers of the pod had, obviously, taken shortcuts in the software for the sake of time and money, and not allowed it to record holograms. The pod only showed live projections.

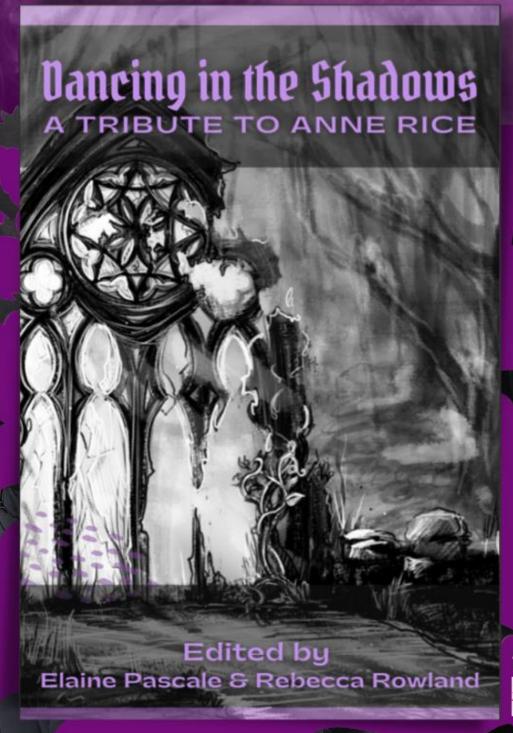
And after all, Kasey didn't believe in ghosts.

#### **About the Author:**

Kieran Judge is a writer from Cardiff, Wales. His fiction has appeared in publications such as Lovecraftiana, Schlock!, and Beyond the Adventures of Sherlock Holmes, and he writes articles and reviews for The Film Magazine and Horror Addicts. He's waiting for that call to write for Doctor Who, and may be waiting a while. This is his sixth appearance in The Sirens Call.

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In tribute to Anne Rice's legacy, nineteen Gothic tales from today's most innovative authors, drawing from the darkness where vampires and witches, mummies and rougarous, spirits and demons move to the music of nightmares.



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#### Mother's Work Is Never Done | JB Corso

Her ocean of grief filled the empty living room. Sunset painted inside her home a reddish-pink mix through the grand portrait window. Grief for her husband mixed with an overpowered screwdriver. Catia drank through a collection of large vodka bottles and orange juice to subside her emotional catastrophe. *I need to connect with Jacob's soul one last time.* She paged through her family spellbook before refilling another glass.

When the bottle's in your hand, keep this book away. Nothing good will come of casting a spell that you can't control. Her mother's cobwebbed words blew apart from her thoughts as she took the cup's first gulp. I'll find a means to connect with him one way or another. Her fingers flipped the pages through the book's curious spells. The search stopped under her blurred vision. This option looks delightful. She entertained another long swallow.

\*\*\*

Catia broke open her heavy eyelids against the offending morning light. An active ritual spread across her long coffee table. Panic slammed through her headache. What did I cast last night? Her clouded vision assessed the display. Oh, no. She bolted into a tall, seated position. The room spun. Not that spell.

Blue candles burned around a circle of salt decorated with dried blood drops. Orange wax spots formed her interpretation of a ram's head within the perimeter. She noticed her hand. A speck scab coated her pinkie finger. I used my own blood. I used my own fucking blood. How could I've been so stupid? She grabbed a tall glass holding the remains of vodka and warm juice. She hurled the sloshing container against a far wall. Angled shards and liquid exploded across the white carpet. She sobbed into her hands at another careless drunk decision. Thoughts of calling her mother for help grew and instantly wilted within her consideration. She visualized the elder Ms. Thomas coming down on her like a hammer against a rat's face. I made this mess, so I need to fix it.

Catia referenced through the incantation. <u>Pregnento Acrelqius</u> (The Pregnancy Spell). Such a waste of time. Every doctor has told me that I can't get pregnant. Underdeveloped Fallopian tubes and immature ovaries, she recalled. She sat back against the cushions as the candles cast an unnatural glow into the sun-drenched room.

Okay, okay, it's possible I could've completed the spell correctly, she lied to herself. Eight blue candles, one for each month before delivery, check. Ocean salt water dried under a full moon, she looked at the table salt ring, um, well, it's salt. Check. Blood from an ovulating woman, her heart raced. Fuck. Okay, moving on. Fifty yellow drops to create the image of a uterus. The word yellow was underlined three times by her mother's pen. She cringed at the orange spots. Fuck. Catia read through the two page long incantation. Oh, there's no way I said these properly, especially along with the action prompts. At best the spell didn't work. She searched her alcohol-soaked memory for any warnings about misusing magic. Her thoughts stumbled back to her mother's most stringent lesson.

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"Don't ever summon the lich under any circumstances." Her mother's words held a rare seriousness. Silence encapsulated the home office.

"Why would I even do that?" Catia wondered aloud.

"Because he can provide an unnatural boost to your spells. An extra push to its success, but at a most terrible price. Am I making myself clear?"

"Yeah, I guess." The young woman's attention fluttered around the room.

"Pay attention, Catia. As long as three same-colored candles are lit with blood present in the air, someone can summon his influence through these six words." Her mother tapped the linen page.

"So let's say for the sake of argument that someone did summon this dude, how would somebody send him away?"

She watched her mother's face grow pale. Her remarks dipped into a near whisper. "They don't. He leaves that person in whatever condition he likes."

Catia's heart raced. "Have you ever summoned him?"

Her mother bypassed the question. Her skin contorted from ashen to beet red. "Please, Catia, don't ever, ever call upon him. This isn't some sort of parental trick or joke. I'm telling you about that undead wizard so that you keep clear at all costs."

A last inquiry burned in Catia's mouth. "So he's real or just a spell manifestation?"

Her mother looked out the window as her body shook. "Him, or his kind, can only materialize into the world by being birthed."

Catia sighed a deep breath of relief. "Well, that's easy Mom. My inner lady parts don't work, so that won't ever be a problem."

Ms. Thomas swung an angry look toward Catia. "Just stay away from that spell. No exceptions." "Jeez, fine, I'll stay clear."

Her mother continued with their weekend lesson.

\*\*

Catia posted on the couch, looking over the open pages. A yellow sticky note's corner protruding from several closed pages caught her attention. I don't want to know. I really don't want to fucking know what else I did. She leaned forward. Her shaking finger flipped to the note. Her hands moved to her face. Oh, no. Manifrestuous Lichar (Summoning the Lich). She slammed the book closed and stood up onto shaky feet. Fatigue crawled into her head as the room spun. I really want to lie down. There's nothing I can hope to do right now. Catia stumbled through the long hallway to her bedroom. She rolled into bed, pulling the covers over her. Her eyes shut. She dreamed of the skeletal wizard emerging from an orange mist.

Catia, I offer to give you a baby. His gritty words scraped throughout her sleeping thoughts like jagged glass being pulled across concrete. She shuddered under her blankets. I promise to make you a mother as you've always wanted. All you have to do is walk past your deck and take one of the sapphire berries growing just for you, his voice echoed. Make me proud, his tone enticed. Tears welled up in her eyes. Go, my sweet and eat from the berry bush, he ushered. Her heavy eyes cracked open to the hanging photo of her and Jacob between their closets. His sliding door went on untouched since his death. I so want to carry a baby more than anything in the world. She pushed the covers off and walked out of the bedroom. She imagined her child's smile as she stepped outside.

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The warm sun followed her to a sapphire-tinted berry bush along the front yard deck. Unfamiliar fruits sparkled atop a small orange-leaf bush. An overwhelming desire to eat the tiny treats compelled Catia closer. Stop, stop, what are you doing, she demanded of herself. The temptation reached out like a free drink to her inner alcoholic. I'll just look at it. Catia picked a large morsel. She desired it more the longer she stood there. The fruit's texture rubbed like silky cotton within her fingers as a sugary aroma lifted into her nose. It smells so peaceful somehow. I'll just put it in my mouth and see what happens. There's no harm in that. The berry rolled past her front teeth onto her tongue. What's the worst that could happen? The enticement became overwhelming. I must know how this tastes. Catia crushed the fruit. A smooth taste set upon her tongue as her eyes closed in joy. It's as if it mixed all the sweetest flavors into one bite. She swallowed with a wide smile. Pleasure waves grabbed her, lighting up every nerve as if she was experiencing the most intense orgasm ever. Her eyelids fluttered. Her body shook as she remembered Jacob making her feel. The experience subsided into placid bliss. All of her lingering grief melted into bliss. Catia floated into her backyard and sat on a shaded lounge chair. She basked in maternal thoughts as time passed into the early afternoon.

Catia recognized a stretching sensation spreading across her stomach muscles. Her abdomen pressed hard against her shirt, creating a swath of exposed skin. She could see her belly button. Oh my god, what's happening? Her clothing felt unnaturally snug. She jumped to her feet and entered the house. Catia hurried into the bathroom to check herself against the sink mirror. Oh my god, it's like I'm in the second trimester of pregnancy. Her hips obscenely stretched out her sweatpants. She slid her shirt up. Her bra cups filled out more than she could have imagined. Catia studied the weight gain around her cheeks. No, this can't be possible. Her logical thoughts tripped over a rock. She swatted away a sneaking panic about what her uterus could be gestating. She removed her clothing onto the bathroom tiles.

Catia hobbled into the kitchen. A ravenous appetite overwhelmed her. I want to eat everything in this room. She grabbed the first available cracker box and began shoving snacks in her mouth. I should get to a hospital, she told herself while continuing to swallow another mouthful. I'll go after I'm finished. The clock moved ahead without her concern. The refrigerator door remained open and the cabinets stood bare. Empty packaging and condiment bottles littered the room. I literally ate everything that wasn't frozen. I've never felt so full in my life. I'd really like to lie down for a minute. Regaining some perspective after a rest might be helpful. Catia curled up on the tile floor among the empty packaging. Sleep overtook her. Catia awoke with a sudden urge to use the toilet. She struggled to sit up while trying not to acknowledge movement within her extended stomach. I look like that woman who birthed those eight kids. She groaned through her contractions.

She pushed herself to her feet and waddled toward the bathroom. Stabbing pains shattered her progress halfway down the hall. Catia cried out as she pushed her hands against the walls. Jacob's framed photo fell. She wailed louder at spasms passing across her uterus. She assumed the worst. Intense misery tore through her womb. Her eyes squinted shut. Her body convulsed thick, sapphire-blue liquid onto the hardwood floor. Her sweaty palms crushed against the off-white paint for support. My body's ripping in half. She squatted low, desperately hoping for the slightest

relief. Catia screamed through the strain with tears pouring over puffy cheeks. Large globs of dense, gelatinous ooze drizzled out into a thick slush underneath her. She fought against the stench.

Catia worked though a staggering need to continue pushing. High-pitch screams evolved into hoarse cries. Fatigue overtook her muscles. Her face held large sweat beads as she fought for a full breath. One final push, one last good effort. Catia bore down. She felt something immense begin to pass out of her. Her body perspired. A slimy glob of blue mess splatted across the floor. She caught her breath and stood up. Catia panted through a momentary pause. Her stomach remained extended. I can't do this, I can't do this. She shook her head in frustration. The contractions assaulted her respite. She dropped into a squat over the chaos and pushed harder than she believed possible. Her eyes closed tight through the building pressure. She hollered in mortal pain. An elongated, tubular object slowly descended from within her shaking legs. She cried out as it passed between her thighs into the pulsing muddle. Catia sighed with immediate relief. Her breathing slowed as she carefully stepped back. A decomposing roadkill stench overtook her. Catia stared at the floor's mess with confused terror. It's not moving, she panicked. An untapped motherly instinct rippled through her heart. The blue gel encased itself over the tube into a hardened shell. Catia's eyes grew with fright. Four stick-thin legs descended from around the outer casing. The oddity rose up to her shin and scurried off. She recoiled from its pattering steps through the house. A casement window shattered causing her to jump. Catia looked at the hallway floor. No birth residue remained on the ground. What in the fuck just happened? The dried coating smeared against her inner thighs and feet became the nightmare's only evidence. She slid down the wall to the hardwood and cried in puzzled exhaustion as her focus locked onto Jacob's photo.

She rose and sauntered to the bathroom after catching her breath. Her sanity washed away as she cleaned herself in the shower spray. A fresh desire swirled in her mind. I have to get outside. Catia hurried through the house to her front lawn as cascading water continued behind her wet footprints. The sun's rays dried the water drops from her skin as a towering form stomped through the street. A dark blue humanoid with four long arms and four muscular legs peered over the suburban rooftops. Catia watched in disbelief. What have I done? The eminent creature used its lanky fingers to snatch up her neighbors running for their safety. Screams called out as wiggling victims toiled in its crushing grasps. The beast affixed its human prey onto its gel coated frame. Each person struggled high over the ground.

She remained frozen on the manicured lawn. Catia accepted a saturating maternal pride for her firstborn. The searching creature used its three-fingered fists to smash through docile walls and ceilings, grabbing the terrorized occupants. Its extended smile showed multiple rows of spiny teeth as a long, flat tongue licked bright blue lips with anticipation. She watched its quarry flail as the beast pummeled one home after the other. Catia listened to continual cries through the neighborhood without an inkling to help. The gleeful monstrosity attached her favorite neighbor to its last unoccupied spot. She smiled at her struggling friends along its hind section. The creature lumbered into a nearby forest preserve with people dangling across its frame. *My baby's going to eat now. Screams* trailed behind its crushing path.

An errant thought formed in her overwhelmed thoughts. She attempted to free the obstructive idea far from the warm feeling nesting under her chest. Catia walked out into the empty street. I wish I could've held my baby at least once. She looked over to her house. The shining sapphire clusters beckoned for her attention. She hustled to the bush with a renewed appetite and plucked a fruit between her fingers. Her exhausted willpower became dominated by a pressing need to chew the morsel. Catia popped the blue delight into her mouth. Her teeth crushed the soft berry. Sweet liquid splashed upon her tongue. Her eyelids fluttered as pleasure waves expanded within. Catia publicly shuddered through an intense climax. She re-opened her eyes. What will I eat when the cravings come back? She stared at her neighbor's smashed-up home. I bet they've food there. She gazed around the neighborhood. I'm certain that they all have a lot of food. Catia ripped off a handful of berries and hurried across the pavement. A wide smile matched her eagerness for a large family. Mother's work is never done.

#### **About the Author:**

JB Corso is a health care professional who has worked with the mentally ill and geriatric populations for the last 20 years. He appreciates time with his children, writing, and pondering existential dread. He's a veteran with an overseas deployment as an international peacekeeper. He lives with his significant other and enjoys afternoon drives while listening to background Grateful Dead songs

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# Full Moon Saga | Kathleen McCluskey

The sallow orbital spectre rose through the cold arctic sky. Its solemn return triggered the age old nemesis' to stir. Dark craters and scaring on its surface reflected the turbid water beneath. The brimming sphere had full restorative strength. Its soft glow woke the ancient mortal enemies. They had fought once before ending with the rival of peace enjoying the victory. Its sheer power devastated the land and sea. The earth had suffered one of its greatest calamities at the hands of this adversary: the ice age. Eons passed as the two hostiles slept. The planet had been crying out for justice to prevail as the seas and soil were polluted. It was finally time to see which direction the earth would go. This incursion would determine the fate of not only the planet but of all of its inhabitants. Now once again they would clash, holding the earth's future in the outcome. Mankind, as always, was oblivious to the ways of the planet and the ancient rivalries. The old gods had always remained hidden.

The shell of the great loggerhead breached the water first. His massive shell pushed out of the water as the malcontent began to awaken fully. A large rush of air followed the shell out of the abyss. Its mouth snapped open and closed as it gnashed callously at the water. He had lain dormant for centuries; plotting and strategizing his next victory. Now needing a moment to gather its thoughts and to stretch the long comatose muscles it floated in the frigid foam.

The icy flotsam and jetsam began to bubble and pulse as the great defender of Mother Earth began to rise. He breached the water. His long, gray hair and beard dripped and moved in the sea breeze. Muscles rippling and pulsing as the venerable guardian began to wake. His lengthy slumber healed the massive wounds inflicted in the previous battle. Scars from their eternal struggles were evident. These great foes had levied battles with one another since the dawn of time. The ancient monolithic man spotted his long detested opponent.

The adversaries were ready, eyeing each other as they circled in the bitter liquid. The battle dance had begun. The turtle lunged first hitting the muscular man in the chest. The defender wrapped his massive arms around the turtle's shell. Waves of tsunami size gushed in every direction as the man went down, down under the water. He crashed to the sea floor with the turtle in his hands. Sand erupted in playful swirls as the pair hit. Cracks formed in the seabed as the earth quaked and rumbled. The water rushed into the gaping hole on the bubbling surface. The night was filled with its normal serenity as the pale blue liquid became briefly calmed. Then the whirlpool began. Rising up with the loggerhead in his grasp was the defender of Mother Earth. His large calloused hands held the mighty beast by the head. The adversary's mouth slammed open and closed as it tried to bite the defender. With one hand around the leatherback's mouth and one around its shell the great protector lifted his enemy into the air and crashed back into the sea. Rolling and rolling through the foamy liquid they grappled with each other. Both colliding with the barrier reef rocks they bounced apart, the battle dance had begun again. Around each other they moved, each vying for supremacy; trying to capitalize on any weakness. The huge turtle lunged once more; sinking its razor sharp snout into the mammoth man's stomach, they fell backward and into the water. Emerging first from the frigid water the turtle put its head back and bellowed. It was the signal to Mother Earth to prepare for the worst. The Earth's defender was mortally wounded. He staggered. His eyes rolled over white and in his mind he begged the earth to persuade her loyal companion to let loose his freezing blue hue.

The moon could only watch as the great defender began to become frozen again. It decided that this time the planet would prevail. Mentally calling to Mother Earth, the moon began to make its plea for guidance. It could only watch as the giant loggerhead began to swim circles around the defender to accelerate his fate into the icy realm of nothingness. He looked up to the moon and pled for his and the planet's salvation. The moon did not wait for the earth to respond. It began to cast its soft blue hue onto the giant turtle. The echoing sound of the loggerhead's carapace splintering shook the clouds and stars. The moon could only respond with a deeper color blue; pushing it harder into the combatant's inner being. The turtle tried to push itself out of the water and up to the orb. The celestial body was galvanized and emitted a large white pulse. Every fiber of the insurgent began to shiver. Trying with all of its remaining strength the turtle tried ramming the recovering man. The moon emitted another bright pulse; brighter than the first. Another loud bellow came from the assailant. The turtle lay frozen solid as the defender of man began to move. The colossal man pushed the gigantic turtle down into the icy abyss. He stood on top of the great beast and begged the moon to freeze them once again. The Earth defender formed a membrane around the two as the moon began to release them of this battle once again. The man closed his eyes and bowed his head. The respect had been shown to the immortal heavenly body. They quietly began to sink to the ocean floor where they would remain until the earth cried out for justice. Frozen together the two combatants once again slept.

The beautiful full orb shone onto the flaccid water and was relieved that the defender was victorious. It couldn't bear to watch the planet and mankind suffering again. It waited for the next time the two would meet and hoped that the defender would be victorious without help.

#### **About the Author:**

Kathleen McCluskey is the novelist of The Long Fall series. She enjoys her time swimming, reading and of course, writing. Being a native of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania she is an avid Steelers and Penguins fan. Kathleen is the mother of two and relishes in the time she can spend with her adult children. She is a lifelong horror junkie and Metallica fanatic.

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# Crunch | Sara Martinez

Crunch...crunch...crunch

The creature lay dozens of feet in front of her, gnawing through a pile of bones. The way out of the cave was behind it.

Patrice knew spelunking a new cave solo was risky, but how could she have expected this? Her muscles ached from swimming and climbing; sprinting past the beast would be impossible.

Crunch...crunch...crunch

The sound echoed off the walls and started to turn her stomach

Maybe she could distract it? Still lying flat on her belly, she searched around in the dimness, not daring to flick her head lamp back on for fear the thing would notice her. After a moment she spotted a pile of hand-sized rocks nearby. Pulling herself into a crouch, she hefted one and prepared to throw it.

Crunch...crunch...crunch

Taking a deep breath, Patrice hurled the rock as far as she could away from the mouth of the cave. A massive head raised up, then the strange, stocky body leapt to its feet chasing after the noise. She had no idea what it was, but she didn't want to hang around to find out. Bursting from the crouch, she ran as fast as she could.

Almost out, she was steps away from safety...

Closer...

Closer...

Crunch!

#### **About the Author:**

Sara Martinez is an author and game designer. She is a passionate gamer and devoted wife and mother living in the Denver, CO area. Sara has a wide and eclectic variety of hobbies that she occasionally finds time to pursue including cooking, historical reenactment, needlepoint, painting, cosplay, karaoke and others. One of her life goals is to someday be on the show Jeopardy.

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# **Dutiful Husband** | Joshua Skye

My name is Donald, and I have a confession. I look like the most benign among you, an appearance as normal and unassuming as it is illusory. I could be a father laboring in a factory for his family, a brother quick to comfort when the time is right, a pious boyfriend no one would expect of anything depraved, and an honest businessman never nefarious in my various dealings. I'm a lie, but so are you, so is the world, everything, but more specifically...

The world lies to us in regards to the dead about very many things, far more than mere appearances. Why wouldn't it? Most people are desperately afraid of where we all inevitably end up, departed and soon forgotten. Wasted.

Being forgotten is as inevitable as death itself.

Forgotten except by us, the connoisseurs.

"Waste not, want not," my wife always says.

But I digress. The lies, let us talk for a moment about the mendacity.

They get cold quickly, faster than you would imagine, which is, of course, why they're so desirable to begin with. It's the cold we like, but not so much the rest of it. The blood, having stopped flowing, settles to their lowest points becoming a massive and unsightly bruise made all the more glaring by the slow fading of the soft blush of life. It's a black internal smudge that doesn't grow green as it heals, but from a kind of infection that turns to decay, a darker shade of emerald.

There's a melancholy romanticism in the idea the eyes can simply be closed by quivering fingers in some mournfully respectful way. They don't. They refuse. Sometimes they'll stick about halfway, but complete somnambulant repose is utterly elusive. And what remains visible to the admirer are unseeing orbs that become cloudy and dry. Like the windows to the departed soul, the mouth remains agape too, and the tongue, cracking as it dries, will slip out ever so slightly as if peeking, searching, seeking moisture from a living counterpart.

As most of the flesh turns to pale gray, the lips become a sickly yellow matched by the fingernails, the toenails, the nipples, and the soft, spongy tissue of the genitals. It doesn't stay supple, none of the flesh anywhere on the body. It stops bouncing back from forceful touches, the indention there forevermore. Eventually, the icy landscape of the body truly takes on the uneven terrain of an undulating countryside. For a rare few, this is perfectly fine, but for most of us, myself included, we prefer the dead before they reach that stage. We like them fresh.

My vocation is not what you might expect. Unlike my rapacious brethren, I don't work among the dead. I'm a businessman, a contractor by trade, and quite a successful one. My wife, a beautiful, petite pixie with an affinity for chardonnay and almost pathological aversion to foul language, however, is a mortician. No one even remotely suspects that such a picturesque vision of a housewife from a bygone era would be an expert embalmer and highly sought-after specialist in body restoration and reconstruction. Her ability to bring a lifelike sheen to the long dead is admirable in and of itself, but it's her uncanny ability to take a body crushed in an industrial accident and give it fullness is practically preternatural.

I was privy to one of her most lauded accomplishments, the renovation of a child's skull flattened by the tires of her father's forklift. The face had been unrecognizable as human, the bones shattered to a thousand jagged pieces that protruded from the skin in clusters and at odd angles. Neither eye had even been found, but strangely enough, the girl's cherry flavored lollipop had been recovered from inside the jellied brain, undamaged.

I'd watched the delicate cleaning, the slow methodic rinsing away of the browned blood and couldn't imagine the remnants of what she'd been ever having looked like the grinning child in the picture next to the crushed cranium. But when my wife's work was finished, the skull replaced and formed by a mannequin's head, the holes in the flesh plugged with a type of clay, the eye sockets filled with giant marbles, and acrylic paints had been applied, you would have thought her perfectly fine, just sleeping.

It was a gift my wife possessed, a proper and astonishing kind of art.

The aroma of the corpse's sweetmeats made me drool. I had to, as on several occasions, discreetly wipe it away. She'd worked tirelessly on that girl for over forty-eight hours, we'd stopped counting at that point, both of us so exhausted we were unable to speak. My vision had gone blurry and right after she'd applied the last bit of shading her hands had begun to tremble eliciting an uneasy chuckle. We'd held each other on the walk home to keep from toppling over and curling into fetal balls right there on the street to go to sleep. It seemed hours before we made it to our house, a '50s style ranch and a perfect slice of vintage Americana.

She was snoring before she'd crawled under the covers, and I barely made it to my side of the bed before slumber took me. I'd dreamt of the dead in delicate dance with faceless devils in a forest around a roaring fire.

I've had that dream at least once a week ever since.

The first time I imagined her on her own cold slab, I was in the shower with her engaging in the masquerade of normalcy, making love to her as any dutiful husband would. It had been a fleeting vision, her eyes pallid, back and buttocks blackened by pooling blood, white lips parted and tongue sticking out awaiting my kiss.

I'd unconsciously intensified my thrusting contrary to my usual routine and it resulted in a wave of orgasms through her that made her spasm and twitch and whimper. When she focused her gaze, scanning my own, she wasn't grateful, but

confused and suspicious. I had no idea how I should respond, so I simply gazed back grinning and grunting, pretending I'd enjoyed it too.

Without a word, she pulled away from me and left. I watched her go, glad that I wouldn't have to fake the slow fade of bliss, but worried. What was she thinking? Did she somehow know I'd been spurred by a fantasy of her dead?

It was nonsensical, of course. She was an atypical person to be sure – an artisan that worked with the deceased, but not a neon-tinted downtown psychic, although there were far worse things out there, not that she would be aware of them. She was, after all, utterly oblivious to my true identity. And I certainly wasn't going to clue her in.

The longer her unnerving silence continued, the more possible her mysterious awareness seemed however. We can so easily convince ourselves of absurdities in the shadow of uncertainties. She went about her own domestic routine ignoring me, locking the bathroom door when she took her showers, never venturing in when I took mine, and she no longer invited me to witness her deadly creative endeavors. The cold shoulder took its toll after a few days.

I didn't miss her voice or tender caresses. In fact, I would be quite happy should she never speak or touch me again. I did miss not accompanying her to work, however. The nude porcelain sway of women in the early prime of their deaths had sated me enough through the years of my marriage to keep me from engaging in my preferred predilections, though it had been no easy abstinence.

Oh, I'd occasionally sniff, touch, and sneak a tongue-tip taste when left alone while my wife used the restroom or answered the phone, but for the most part I'd been a perfect gentleman, by certain standards, and never appropriated much more than a pinch of pubic hair or fingernail scrape of skin. I kept my secret souvenirs in a little jewelry boy my mother left me after she'd passed. His name is Chester.

Chester is a kitschy plaster statue with a hidden compartment my mother would keep her most treasured jewelry in, expensive pieces she'd been given since her childhood, mostly from her adoring father. Thinking it tacky, my wife made me hide it in the closet after I'd refused to throw it away at her adamant behest. I denied her few things, so when I did, it was rarely an argument.

But I digress, back to Chester. Where once platinum, gold, and silver had been secreted, there now rested secure my precious mementos. When alone, I would take them out with cautious intent, pinkies extended with aristocratic pretense. I'd spread them out before me at the dining table where, most evenings, my wife and I would eat the quick and simple meals she prepared.

Sometimes I would deliberately spill morsels only to scoop them up and consume them under the wishful notion they carried with them some small fraction of my treasures. Just the idea roused me in electric ways, goosebumps rising over the whole of my body, nipples tightening, cock hardening, salivary glands pumping into consummate overdrive. My wife, when spying me eat the fallen bits, would coyly smile and mutter, "Waste not, want not," like a suburban sage revealing ancient wisdom.

I'd smirk knowingly in return and give her a quick patronizing wink she imaged to be flirtatious. She always thought me coquettish when I was really skirting a perversion beyond her naive little worldly expectations. I pondered a moment what she might think should it happen now in the wake of her unexpected pleasures in the shower and subsequent misgivings about me.

Would she recognize it as the belittling gesture I intended it to be?

Was she questioning past instances?

When I realized I didn't care, I dismissed the concern, her, and even the air as I set about displaying my gruesome keepsakes, relishing everything about them, especially their smell. And there at the dining room table, alone in an old dark house, I had my own multiple gratifications.

After a delivered supper I forgot about as soon as I'd consumed it, I slipped beneath the covers in a bed that, for some odd reason, felt too big, and slowly fell asleep. A familiar dream haunted me, zombies dancing with devils around towering flames out in the middle of a night-shrouded forest.

It repeated itself, like a scratchy, hissing porn flick from the seventies playing on a loop. I even saw myself in a makeshift auditorium watching it on draped white sheets, the folds distorting the image. Something about it became as arousing as my mementos. Distortions, distortions everywhere.

A voice from the darkness, bold, brash, accusatory, and demanding drew my attention. "Who is she?"

When I opened my eyes the dream was gone and a sour nostalgic sadness washed over me immediately followed by a pointed anger. I was aware it was aimed at a very particular person, and she was there. My wife was sitting on the edge of the bed, not looking at me, her hands clutched tightly in her lap. She stunk of formaldehyde, an irrefutably cadaverous stench, but one I didn't particularly care for. I liked the natural aroma of death in all the earthy nuances of its bouquet.

She repeated herself, "Who is she?" There was something else in her voice that time, a meekness, a trembling.

I suppressed both a yawn and stretch as I sat up. So this was what she was vexed by, the ludicrous fear that I was having an affair. There was absolutely no one else. I could barely stand dealing with one living woman in my life, let alone another on the side. The very thought of it was as daunting as it was revolting, all those rapidly cycling emotions, strange

physical needs, and peculiar habits. Cheers to the man who could handle twice or thrice the burden, but I wasn't even remotely interested in inviting such hardships upon myself.

Knowing her well enough to realize that a dismissive laugh would make her even more...emotional, I summoned every ounce of fallacious empathy I'd learned over the years, combined it with wearily applied charisma, and explained to her she was genuinely the only (breathing) woman in my life. There were other misleading assurances, deceptive declarations of love and devotion, and tender caresses of distinctly non-erogenous areas. Oh, the tedium.

It took quite a while, and I teetered on the edge of losing any and all patience, but she finally accepted my worthless sympathy and untrue assertions. Weeping for whatever emotional reason she was wallowing in, she fell into my arms and apologized profusely. As any dutiful husband does, I told her she had nothing to be sorry about, it was really all my fault for trying something new without warning. I should have done this. I should have done that. It was all me, there was nothing wrong with her or her jealousies and fearful suppositions...blah, blah.

What is it the proverbial they say?

Oh, yes. Happy wife, happy life.

No wife, better life.

The candid thought elicited a chuckle that I was able to quickly transform into a cooing, comforting sound as I ran my fingers through her hair where, as I'd long ago grown accustomed, were chunks of flesh and splinters of bone from the exploit of certain power tools utilized in her trade. I'd found a tooth in her cleavage once. We'd both boisterously laughed about it. It had been my first souvenir. I'd sucked it like a bitter lemon drop many, many times. There was still flavor in it all these years later, the idiosyncratic flavor of a teenage boy in perpetual heat.

I snapped her neck before even realizing it, continued to comfort her for a long time, unaware her low cries had stopped and that her hands had fallen away from me. My fingers went about raking her hair and occasional consoling words oozed out of me. It was when her head slithered unnaturally far down, her chin slipping into the valley of her bosom to rest there like that tooth once had, that I finally noticed.

There was no care, no remorse, just a mumbling kind of relief tainted by the nagging reality of such a deed's ramifications. Killing someone was a crime, after all. Well, if you got caught. It was definitely advantageous that I did not.

It wouldn't be easy, no goal worth achieving was, but it was not impossible, contrary to the insistence of true crime shows. My kind have been disposing of bodies forever. I was out of practice, there was no denying that, years had passed since last I had performed such a task, but it was like riding a bike. You never really forget how. I let her go and watched her crumple to the floor in a weird tangled heap, legs crossed, arms akimbo. She'd soiled herself, I could smell it.

She'd go cold soon, the blood would pool, and her open eyes would fog. As I peeked over the edge of the mattress down at her, I couldn't help but hear her wise words, "Waste not, want not." Before disposing of her remnants, I could satiate a few hungers I'd been repressing for far too long. Just thinking about doing it made me drool. No need to be discrete, I licked it away with an overt, mouth-wide gesture, my tongue reaching the underside of my chin with ease.

It was longer than that...much, much longer. I'd never showed her that while she was alive, not even when I'd kiss her passionately or dutifully perform services between her legs. I was always mindful of keeping myself in check, especially my particular physical attributes. Ghouls only appeared human, it's how we've survived over the long eons. But look close enough, especially if you catch us off-guard, and you'll notice the dissimilarities, our inordinately lengthy tongues were but only one of them.

As I stared at her in the dark, I wondered what morsel of her I'd keep inside Chester. It had to be something real tasty, something different from the rest. Ah, yes, that would be a perfect keepsake I could occasionally suck on...her clitoris. I'd revisit it as often as I so desired as I played the ever despondent role of a pious boyfriend no one would expect of anything depraved.

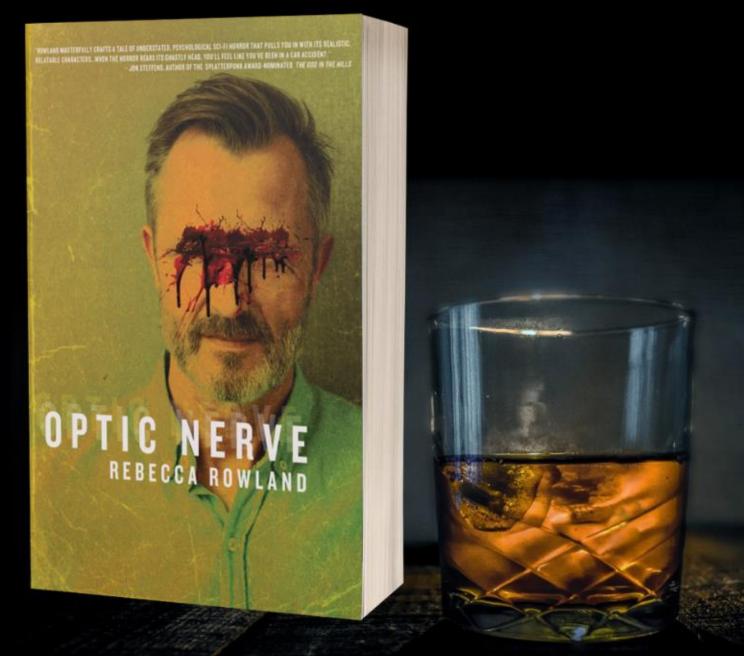
# **About the Author:**

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

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# Shawn wanted to cure blindness.



# Now he wishes he could look away.

a sci-fi - body horror - mystery mash-up

Available July 8 in Godless eBook and July 22 in print from



# Last Bullet | Patrick J. Wynn

The roar echoed off the walls, but his ears were still ringing from the previous times he pulled the trigger. This time his aim was off, and the bullet struck her just above the left eye. The bullet punched a small hole and exited with a puff of red mist and gray matter that splattered against the wall behind her. He hadn't wanted to shoot her in the head and ruin the face he loved but the shots to her chest, stomach and throat were unsuccessful. Bright moonlight began to flood through the kitchen window and a low growl sounded from under the kitchen table where his wife's body had come to rest. Nervously he fumbled with his last bullet, but it dropped from his shaking fingers, bounced then rolled under the fridge. Moaning he dropped to his knees and shoved his hand under searching for the bullet. Another growl sounded and the smell of wet dog filled the room. The sound of sharp nails coming across the floor made him shake. Shoving aside dust, dirt and toys his fingers touched the greasy cool bullet, but he froze as a long howl let loose. A dark shadow fell, and drool dripped down on his cheek and a deep growl followed by a raspy voice made his bladder let go and warm piss spread across the front of his pants.

"It didn't work honey," the voice growled.

# Cold | Patrick J. Wynn

Sadness folded over him like a warm blanket and seeped into his inner soul where it beckoned him to come fully to the darkness. His cries of sadness rolled out into the night driving his depression deeper and deeper with the mournful sounds. He glanced back at his car parked just beyond the edge of the bridge and gave one last thought to returning to it but shook off the thoughts, he knew he could not live without her. He turned back and stared down at the icy water where she'd ended her suffering not so long ago and knew. He climbed over the cold metal railing and leaned out then with a growing smile he let go. The fall was long, and the cold air rushed by him painfully, but the sudden embrace of the freezing water sucked the very air from his lungs. For a second, he panics and wants nothing more than the warmth of life and he struggles to reach the surface, arms and legs pumping. But the feel of cold icy fingers makes him give up the fight. A gray face appears from out of the dark depths, its familiarity brings him happiness. Her icy dead lips meet his and together they fall through the depths happily as one.

# Remember | Patrick J. Wynn

Dave shivered as he jumped up and down. The apartment was freezing, and he was doing all he could to keep warm. He didn't understand it, the thermostat said the inside temp was 75 degrees. Walking to the window he saw the bright sunshine of the day and people walking around in shorts and T-shirts. The people ran around enjoying the hot summer day, tossing around frisbees or playing catch. He badly wanted to join them in the warmth of the day but something deep inside told him he was not allowed, every time he reached for the doorknob a deep sick and dreadful feeling filled his being. Turning away from the window he felt the cold deep in his bones and he just couldn't understand how cold he was. Deciding that a few jumping jacks might help warm him up he began jumping up and down his arms making wide arcs on his sides. Getting a little too high on one jump he lost his balance and fell forward. He stuck his hands out to catch himself and to his astonishment he fell straight through the couch and the wall behind it. Rolling to a stop on the floor of the bedroom he spotted the gun on the floor. He let his cold stiff fingers feel up his face and across his forehead to the ragged hole. He remembered then.

# **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.



# Rest Area | Ken Stephenson

We have all taken a long car trip, haven't we? We have all passed that rest area sign rolling down the highway and passed it up in favor of a truck stop or gas station. I wished I had last week.

I was traveling for work last week and opted to drive since I like to drive versus flying. You see I have a bit of a fear of flying. My boss understands my reluctance and usually does not have a problem with me driving instead of flying unless it's way too far to drive.

I left early on Monday morning, hoping to make good time on the highway I was headed to Memphis from Pennsylvania which was a nearly 16-hour drive. If I got on the road early, I would be there at a decent time. I was about 8 hours into my trip and needed a rest, so I decided to stop at a gas station to stretch my legs. The place was clean enough and the clerk was friendly. I gassed up and paid for my snacks and hit the road once more. I wish I hadn't chugged down that whole 1 liter of Pepsi so quickly.

The sun was beginning to hang a bit low on the horizon, when the urge to use the bathroom began to rear its ugly head. I thought that I could power through for another couple hours until I hit a bigger town to get a bite for dinner and some leg stretching time.

Well, I made it about another hour down the road until I had to use the bathroom badly enough to break my own rule of never stopping at a rest area. I had just crossed into Tennessee, and I knew that the drive across the state to Memphis was gonna be a long one. In my desperation to find a place to pee I saw a sign for a rest area coming up in two miles.

I pulled into the deserted car park which only had two other cars in the lot and there were no big rigs there at all since it was most likely too early for them to come off the road to sleep for the night. I thought that if the lot had only one car in it I would have just peed right on the side of the road and kept rolling. God, I wished I had done that.

I parked as close to the entrance of the restrooms as I could third in line beside the other two cars that were already parked here. Shut my car door and locked it and walked briskly to the front door of the building. I saw nothing out of the ordinary save for the lack of anything in the vending machines. Oh well I just had to pee anyway not thinking about any snacks. I walked into the men's room and what I saw there would forever change my life.

I turned the blind corner into the restroom and saw a man hunched over a red mangled mess on the floor in front of the last toilet stall, at this point the man didn't notice me. He was busy chopping something off that mangled mess with an axe. I stood there rooted in horror. He brought a piece of gore-soaked meat or whatever it was to his mouth and began ripping a rather large chunk of meat from the hunk of meat he was gripping. My eyes wide in terror and shock, I stood watching this dude eat whatever it was on the floor. I looked closer and saw what the man was chewing on was an arm severed at the elbow, its dead fingers flopping around as he tore flesh from the forearm. The man hunched over the butchered corpse made guttural sounds as he consumed the flesh, almost like growling.

Suddenly I realized that I no longer had to pee. I began backing out of the bathroom slowly, and as quietly as I could. As I was backing out, the car keys that I still had in my hand struck the metal trash can by the exit of the restroom. The blood covered guy snapped his attention to me, eyes burning hatred into my very soul. He threw the half-eaten arm in my direction. Its dead flesh smacking against the wall next to me, sticking for a brief second, and sliding down the wall in a trail of gore and blood. What the fuck? The gore drenched man stood brandishing the axe and roared some kind of battle cry at the top of his lungs baring his blood-soaked teeth at me.

I turned and ran for my life, the bloody man hot on my heels. I burst through the front door hitting the unlock button on my key fob as I sprinted towards my car. I don't think that I have ever ran so fast in my life. I mean I could have won a gold medal in the 100-yard dash at this point. The man who was covered nearly head to toe in carnage slipped on the sticky goo that was coating his shoes and went down hard as he rounded the corner heading to the front doors. He gained his feet within a second or two, so it maybe gave me just enough time for me to reach my car and safety. He crashed through the doors and was about 15 or so yards behind me and I could hear him screaming unintelligible gibberish as he ran after me. Maybe I was screaming too. I don't really remember, I probably was.

The lights flashed on my car as I repeatedly hit the button on the key. He was gaining on me and fast. I was a few feet from my car and glanced behind me he was really close now, how the fuck could this guy be so fast? I got to the car door pulled on the handle, locked!! FUCKING LOCKED? I was hitting the wrong button on my key. I could hear his footsteps slap on the pavement, and they were way too fucking close. I mashed the tiny buttons on the key and I heard the door unlock. I yanked the door open just as the man slammed into my opening car door shattering the driver's window in the process, getting blood and filth all over the broken glass and door panel. I was nearly knocked off my feet from the impact of his savage blow.

I guess what saved me was that I was halfway in the car and I bounced off the door frame into my seat. I jammed the start button on the car and the engine roared to life. I rammed the gearshift into reverse and laid a nice couple of tire tracks onto the pavement as my tires smoked. I turned the wheel hard which swung the front end of the car sharply and my front fender hit the man at his hip throwing him into the car parked next to me. He slammed into the side of the car and his head hit the top of the door frame and roof of it knocking him to the ground. I backed up about 25 feet, putting it in drive and staring at the body unmoving on the cold pavement.

I pulled out my cell phone and dialed 911, my right foot on the gas and left foot on the brake ready to burn rubber just in case he moved. I told the dispatcher what had happened and the voice on the line told me that officers were just a mile or two up the highway. I stayed there my car in gear waiting on the guy to move. If he had, I would have floored it and squished the guy like a grape. I saw red and blue lights in the rearview and got out to meet them, pointing like crazy in the madman's direction.

I saw on the news the next night that they found out the guy was high on bath salts and must have lost his mind tearing that other poor guy apart at the rest area. I don't care how bad I EVER have to pee, I will NEVER stop at another rest area ever again.

#### **About the Author:**

Ken Stephenson was raised on horror movies, is an avid Xbox gamer (NAPPYGUY) and has a damn good golf swing. He has been previously published by Dark Ink (Ghosts, Goblins, Murder and Madness). He has been married for nearly 30 years and has two exquisite daughters. He is a foul-mouthed Commissioning Engineer by day and horror fiction writer by night.

Facebook: <u>Ken Stephenson</u>
Twitter: @kenstephensonjr

# Their Blood | Brian Rosenberger

After a while, Tuan determined he had to move on from Johanna. Johanna was from Bolivia, a transplant college student, twenty something, majoring in engineering. Still, she desired a bad boy for a boyfriend, something to distract her from her studies. Johanna was fun, full of life, beautiful. They shared a love of Anime, soccer, spicy food, and the outdoors.

But Tuan had another lover with different desires.

Tuan knew the type, had known lots of girls who wanted a bad boy for a boyfriend. He was willing to play the part. Tuan showed Johanna his Glock and she'd suggestively lick her lips. She'd kiss his scars and bullet wounds. He whispered to her the stories of his wounds and scars. Johanna masturbated to orgasm at his stories.

She offered him everything but what he wanted, what his God needed.

Johanna, and the women that preceded her, their virginity already taken. Used goods.

Still Tuan's God, Okami, had a Dragon's hunger and a Dragon's needs.

Blood, one way or another.

Tuan polished his Dragon lover's blade with fresh blood.

#### **About the Author:**

Brian Rosenberger lives in a cellar in Marietta, GA and writes by the light of captured fireflies. He is the author of As the Worm Turns and three poetry collections: Poems That Go Splat, And For My Next Trick..., and Scream for Me.

Facebook: <u>Brian Who Suffers</u> Instagram: <u>@brianwhosuffers</u>

# In a Field of Wheat | R.A. Clarke

The sky darkened, the golden sun disintegrating into hues of rusted metal. We walked side by side through the field of wheat, each seed-tipped stalk whispering secrets in the warm breeze. Our footsteps slowed as we approached the lone tree at the top of the hill—our tree.

I remembered carving our initials into its bark senior year. Two short years later, we were married beneath those knotted branches. Though only a handful of months had passed since we said *I* do, it seemed like forever ago. Like we'd loved each other for ages.

There wasn't any better place than this.

"Do you think we'll change?" Emmy asked, voice quiet.

"I don't know." I stared at the amber cloud billowing on the horizon. Churning mounds of smoke and dust, growing and morphing as they steamrolled towards us.

Emmy turned to me, eyes imploring. "Maybe we should go back to the house? We still have time to plug the vents."

"This isn't something we can ride out, babe." I squeezed her hand, meeting her gaze. "Eventually we'll need to go outside. For food, water, medicine. Our supplies won't last forever. I mean, we couldn't even get enough wood to board all the windows. The shelves are bare. Everyone's gone crazy."

The last shred of hope withered on her face, and my heart fell. Wrapping her in my arms, I kissed her forehead. "Boarded windows and plugged vents won't help. The air would still get in no matter what we did. Or something else would."

"You mean one of *them...*" Emmy said, her words a breathy whisper. She buried her face in my chest, shoulders shaking as tears swelled.

My heart ached for a future we might never see. I nodded, unable to keep the moisture at bay. Blinking fiercely, I cleared my throat. "Everyone we know might become one of *them*. You and me—" My voice broke. I couldn't let that happen.

News reports all over the world showed the horror this cloud carried. People within the mist were changing, ripping each other apart. Before long, emergency broadcasts started telling people to run. But to where? Early projections showed this unearthly cloud would cover the globe in a week. Maybe two.

It would be the same no matter where we went. Chaos.

The sun was fully engulfed now, only a threaded outline visible through the haze. Our surroundings steadily darkened, tones of stained sapphire dripping from an ominous brush. From our vantage point, we watched as the cloud swallowed our nearby town—the community we grew up in. It wouldn't be long now.

I questioned my decision to wait. Whether we were immune or not didn't matter, did it? The end result would be the same. But then Emmy pulled back to grasp my face, eyes urgent.

"You know how much I love you, right?" Her blue irises shone green in the citrine glow.

"Oh, Emmy." My mouth fell upon hers, our kiss filled with passionate goodbyes. There was still so much we hadn't been able to experience together. When we parted, I rested my chin atop her head. "I love you, too."

No, I had to wait—to be sure of the change. I couldn't bear it otherwise.

The wind stirred, whipping the wheat against our legs. Volatile gusts of dusty air swept up from the valley, flattening the clothes to our bodies. "Do you hear that?" I asked, straining to listen. "Is that screaming?"

"Oh, God. I hear it too."

An explosion rocked the town below, fiery light slicing through the murk as it barrelled up the hill. We kissed once more before the amber storm crashed into us. The wind howled, growing cold as its force nearly pushed us over. I planted my feet, holding my wife tighter. But, in the next moment, the world fell still. An eerie silence settled over everything.

Like being in the eye of a storm, we now stood within the heart of the cloud.

The air smelled sour, thick and invasive, with swirling particles that irritated my nose.

"Oh, it's horrible." Emmy coughed, gagging from the rotten odour.

Hardly any light reached us now, and I strained to see. "Are you okay, babe?"

She coughed again, groaning as she held her abdomen. "I don't feel so well. I'm scared, Jackson. I don't want to change—don't want to hurt you." She was shaking, expression twisted.

Oh God, it's happening.

A ragged cough raked my own throat. My hands and feet tingled, stomach rolling. It felt like something was scratching at my insides. A weight settled like lead on my chest. The cool steel of the pistol burned against my back.

"You won't, Emmy."

Her fingers dug into my skin as she moaned in pain. An inhuman shriek ripped from her lips. With moist eyes, I watched as my beautiful Emmy began to convulse. The scratching in my guts intensified—like a nest of rats trying to chew their way out. Gritting my teeth, I pulled the pistol from my waistband. My hand trembled trying to raise it.

"I promise you won't." My arm moved sluggishly, as though submerged in water. What was happening to me? Wincing, I managed to press the muzzle to her temple.

Her eyes widened. I pulled the trigger.

Emmy's body fell limp, but my unresponsive limbs failed to catch her. A sob wrenched itself free before my body retaliated, the sound mutating into one of agony. The clawing pain inside my gut scored deeper into tender flesh. I doubled over and the gun slipped from my grasp.

No.

Reaching for it, I toppled, an unseen force forbidding my attempt to end the terror. To complete my task. Convulsing, my joints popped. Fog seeped into my mind, dulling my senses. Bones cracked in my back, and with a final violent shudder, the pain was gone.

Lying there motionless, my vision slowly blurred and refocused. My body twitched.

A body I no longer controlled.

I battled to reclaim what belonged to me—to blink. To scream. Anything. But my efforts proved fruitless. A sense of insatiable hunger took hold, surrounding and permeating my fragile sense of being. I fought to close my eyes as traitorous limbs dragged my body closer to Emmy's lifeless form. Desperation took over as I struggled to keep this thing from biting into my wife's still-warm body. However, my pleas only filtered through deaf ears. It didn't care what I wanted.

Floating somewhere behind its eyes, I existed only as a passenger now.

Helpless, I watched as my haggard frame stood in one swift motion and turned towards town. An echoing shriek let loose from my lungs, while my legs stumbled down the hill.

Sniffing the air, it licked my lips.

# **About the Author:**

R.A. Clarke has won both Writers Weekly and Writer's Games international short story competitions, and was recently nominated as a finalist for the 2021 Futurescapes award. Her short fiction has been published by Polar Borealis Magazine, Sinister Smile Press, and Sirens Call Publications, among others.

Website: Rachael Clarke Writes

# Restrained | Corinne Pollard

Bionca made tea. Two sugars with almond milk.

The guard, Travis, mumbled; he was coming round slowly. The sedative was more powerful than she thought. A slurp was gratifying as his struggles intensified. The wrist cuffs and ankle cuffs rattled. Her bed banged. Bionca stood over, slurped and smiled. It served him right. He had visited her too many nights.

Travis spoke against the sticky tape. It was muffled, but the venom in his black tea eyes was clear. He hadn't learned. He still thought he was in charge.

She stroked the empty syringe. The needle could come in handy.

#### **About the Author:**

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

Twitter: @CorinnePWriter

# Tranquilo | R.D. Davidson

Sweat stung Crispin's eyes as he surveyed the coastline. From his thirteenth-story balcony, the interplay of white sand and the blue Mediterranean stretched for kilometers until it left his sight. A stifling breeze met his face. It felt like a blow-dryer running from an unseen location. Darkening the coast, a long, dark shadow drifted toward him. He looked skyward to find the source but couldn't see any clouds.

"Ready to go, babe?" Charlene asked behind him. "I want to make sure I get some souvenirs before the stores close."

Crispin rolled his eyes at the sea. "We've flown for ten hours and you want to go shopping?" He turned to gauge how negative of a reaction he had elicited.

Very negative.

"Come on, let's just go," Charlene shouldered her purse frowning. "We'll still have time for you to go to the beach and pretend to sleep so you don't have to talk to me."

He couldn't help but smile but turned to face her with a frown of his own. "I have no idea what you're talking about. We'll go buy some junk and then I'll make sure to treat you to an overpriced dinner you'll barely touch."

"Sounds like a good deal to me," she faked a smile and glided to the door. Her white satin dress flowed with the wind of her movement. She opened the hotel door and proceeded into the hall without looking back.

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A cobblestone switchback meandered up from the resort. Squat storefronts overflowed into the path. Leathery merchants stooped over tables of low-quality wares. Crispin struggled to differentiate the contents of one store from another, but Charlene at least acted as if she discerned items of value.

"Crispy, look!" she exclaimed. "They have plates!"

"If you call me Crispy again, we're getting a divorce."

"Plates," she reiterated pointing at the colorful ceramic disks. "We should get one for both of our moms."

Crispin yawned and scanned the ratty tables for anything of interest. Everything looked like a rainbow of refuse recovered from a dumpster. Gazing past the tables, another venue caught his eye.

Three leather chairs faced into the street. A tattered off-white awning fluttered above them. At the foot of each chair sat a small aquarium filled with fish the size of minnows. The fish swarmed and pulsed like a single, larger mass before dispersing and coalescing again. Crispin stood entranced by their rhythmic movements.

"I think I'm going to go try the fish thing," he said flatly. "I think they eat the dead skin on your feet."

"Really?" Charlene set down a rainbow bowl she was trying to haggle over. "Are you sure it's like...clean?"

"Of course, it's clean," he scoffed. "Look at how clear the water is in the tanks."

Indeed, the water was clear enough to make out detailed features of each fish as it milled about its confines. Sharp teeth protruded from each and every tiny mouth as it fluttered in the water.

"Whatever your little heart wants," Charlene shrugged. "It'll give me more time to shop anyway."

Crispin didn't bother responding as he proceeded to the leather chairs. Beyond them, darkness obscured the rest of the building. Despite the sun angling behind his back, Crispin couldn't see anyone or anything inside. He drew closer to the chairs and called out.

"Hello? Hola?" he craned his neck. "Anyone here?"

Like a dead body surfacing in a lake, a gaunt woman materialized from the inky dark. She crossed her arms behind her back like an eighteenth-century philosopher. Sun and worry had crossed her face enough times to erode deep lines around her eyes and mouth. Concern gripped her still.

"Yes," she said, looking over Crispin' shoulder.

"I'd like to do the fish...thing," he said.

She cocked her head and frowned.

"Pescado," Crispin pointed to the tanks. "Feet." And pointed to his foot.

"Espere aquí," her frown deepened. She turned on her heels and disappeared into the store.

Crispin looked up at the building's façade. Crumbling white plaster threatened to fall into the street. Darkened windows without shutters stared outward. Wind chimes tinkled in the near distance. From the darkness inside, light hissing like whispers echoed. Crispin leaned in to listen more closely but was startled away from the shadows when the clerk reemerged. Still frowning, she motioned to the chair for him to sit.

Stale, moldy air exhaled from the chair as he pressed his body on it. Facing toward the street, Crispin looked for Charlene, but she had disappeared. The sinking sun heated his face and restarted the pools of sweat below his skin. He craned his neck to look around shop corners, but the clerk stepped in front of him to obstruct his view.

"Zapatos," she pointed at his feet.

Dutifully, Crispin removed his shoes and socks. He stared at the store clerk dumbly and awaited further instruction.

Silently, the clerk spread an orange paste over his feet and ankles. She jerked his soles from the ground and smeared the substance on them. The odor rose to Crispin's nostrils— something like a cross between motor oil and rosemary. Shivers paraded up his spine at the sensation of the viscous paste cooling his feet.

Without another word, the woman gripped both of his ankles with surprising strength. A loud splash echoed in the dark room behind him as Crispin's feet submerged in the water. Clouds of fish scrambled away from the new entrants to the tank. Wide-eyed, they floated in the corners, piling atop one another to gain distance from Crispin.

"Tranquilo," the woman patted his shoulder with a heavy hand and disappeared into the store.

Crispin took a deep breath and leaned back in the chair. He closed his eyes and focused on the cool sensations wrapping his feet. Whatever the orange paste was, its effects had begun tickling his toes and heels. The sun sank lower releasing some of the oppressive heat from the air. Once his body stopped moving, jet lag caught up with him.

Sleep overtook him.

A sudden pin prick on his pinky toe jostled him awake. He shook sleep from his head and peered down at his feet. Finally adjusting to the foreign objects in the tank, a few brave fish hovered near him. Crispin watched another fish swarm near his dorsal flexor before lunging and clamping on his skin. The same needle jab pain resulted.

Crispin winced but convinced himself it was beneficial. Maybe it was something like a deep tissue massage or hot yoga or whatever Charlene did at these resorts. A little pain, a lot of gain. Crispin took another deep breath and tried to settle in.

Like a boulder gaining momentum down a hill, the speed of the pricking sensations accelerated. Crispin found it harder to relax. He rationalized that it was a pleasant kind of pain. Something his sister described as 'type two fun'.

As the jabs gained speed, the intensity also increased. What began as sewing needles breaking the skin grew to something akin to wood screws. Fresh sweat glistened below Crispin's hairline and he checked the tub at his feet again. Previously sheepish fish had joined the feed and both feet floated lousy with tiny sucklings.

Once the water took on a pink hue, Crispin decided to cut the spa treatment short. Lifting his feet, however, proved impossible. Signals from his brain to his upper legs seemed lost in the circuitry. Stifling panic, he knit his fingers together and scooped under his hamstring. His legs trembled and sagged like rubbery buckets of lead.

The pain in his feet grew harsher still. Pink water turned decidedly red as the hungry fish plucked flecks of skin from his feet. Panic and adrenaline pulsed through Crispin's brain as he cried out into the cobblestone streets.

"Jesus Christ! Someone help me" his voice echoed from the beautiful white plaster. "Ayuda!"

Though the streets stood mostly empty, the few passers-by turned to Crispin, but none approached. In the dying light, he saw their faces twisted into scowls. Tourists and natives alike spat on the cooling gray stones and locked eyes with Crispin.

"What the fuck is wrong with you people?" he moaned. The water below him grew so bloody he could no longer see the carnage therein. "Someone please!"

Sweat poured from his temples as he twisted his body in the chair. His forearms, slick with sweat, slipped from the arms of the chair. Wild-eyed, he attempted to pitch his weight forward, but the paralysis had metastasized from his calves to above his hips.

An old German couple passed by, sand still stuck to their legs. They stared in disbelief at Crispin's thrashing, bloodied scene.

"Yes! You two!" He called to them. "Please help me!"

The couple approached but stopped short of the bloody aquarium. They turned their backs to Crispin and angled a selfie-stick skyward. Their smiles were immaculate.

"Oh, fuck you!" he screamed as the flash lit. Satisfied, the couple continued up the stony path.

The surface of the tank burbled and pitched as the feeding underneath became frenzied. Dozens of tiny teeth pecked at bone and Crispin felt every chomp all the way up to his teeth. Shock began to set in as a crippling thirst robbed his mouth of moisture. What little of his body could still move shivered without reservation.

Crispin lolled his head back in the chair. He had never thought much about how he was going to die, but he never could have imagined this would be it. Tears rolled down his cheeks as he thought of Charlene. He would have given anything to be shopping for plates with her. He closed his eyes and tried to picture her face one last time.

After a moment, a hand clapped on his shoulder. The clerk stood behind him with a humorless grin.

"Listo?" She said and stooped to lift his legs from the water. Crispin's bare heel bones clicked like colliding marbles as they touched the ground. With a firm grunt, she stood with the tank cradled in her arms and disappeared back into the store.

Arrows of pain loosed from his feet and up his legs. Crispin dared to open his eyes but couldn't bring himself to look down. He shivered in the warm night air. His eyes caught a woman rounding the corner ahead. Charlene beamed as she practically skipped to him. Her arms akimbo with fancy white paper bags.

"Crispy! I had such a good time," she neared him, breathless. "I bought you some shoes!"

#### About the Author:

R.D. Davidson is an author of weird and horror fiction. He currently lives in South Korea with his wife, son, and two dogs.

# Remembering the Cellar | Will H. Blackwell, Jr.

The cellar-door was kept locked.

But I remember being down there once, during a summer long ago. I recall the unexpected chill, the staleness—the odd shadows among dim light from a half-underground window.

Root-vegetables were heaped in one corner—an old lantern hung in another.

I thought I had glimpsed a skeleton, crumpled, beneath the opaque window—surely, childhood-imagination? If there was some cryptic secret, though, I wanted to know.

These many years later, accidentally [it seemed], I found the key.

The stairs down groaned, unnervingly—the door suddenly closing behind me, locking!

And I realized...the secret was me!

# Daguerreotype | Will H. Blackwell, Jr.

It was the perfect method for framing vignettes from summers past—warm scenes frozen, narrowed to a distant place.

Nothing gaudy, nothing theatrical—this one, just a simple image—captured plainly, flatly—faithfully?—edges tarnishing like a window silvering.

This photograph is an elder window, offering a glimpse—wanted or unwanted—far back in time.

Colors drained from the picture, their residue stiffens—like old memory—in hues of gray and brown.

One, though, yet senses the deceit that left you lying in that field—the grass already blanched for fall—the sky already steeled for winter—all motion stilled.

# **About the Author:**

Will H. Blackwell Jr. is a retired professor (botany) living in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. His fiction has appeared in Brilliant Flash Fiction, Disturbed Digest, The Drabble, Outposts of Beyond, Shelter of Daylight, 365 Tomorrows, and Trembling with Fear.





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# Dear Martha | Gabriella Balcom

"I stand before you with a heavy heart," Pastor Nebbens began. "With tomorrow being Mother's Day, this is usually a happy time, but today the death of a loved one has brought us together. Our dear sister Martha Price has departed this mortal coil... She will be greatly missed." He continued. "Our thoughts and prayers go out to her husband, Thompson. May God watch over him and his family and see them through this dark time."

When the memorial service ended, people flocked to Thompson, shaking his hand, hugging him, and offering their sympathy and best wishes.

"I'm dying inside," he sobbed to an elderly lady. "Just miserable without her."

"Call me anytime you want to talk," she offered.

He nodded, wiping his eyes.

Once Thompson got home, he crumpled his copy of the service program, tossing it in the trash. He ransacked his wife's jewelry box, tossing inexpensive pieces away, and making a pile of valuable ones to sell. Afterward, he boxed up her antique glassware and lamps to dispose of, too.

Then he drove to the funeral home. He'd made special arrangements to 'spend more time with my sweetheart' in a private room before she was transported to the cemetery for burial.

Closing the door behind himself, he locked it, opened Martha's casket, and removed her large, diamond-studded earrings, replacing them with fakes.

He frowned at her suit, wishing he'd managed to get to it before her sister had. He bet he could've returned it to the store. It had cost a little over \$2,500, and he wanted to accumulate every penny he could. *Needed* was more accurate, since she'd cut him out of her will after catching him with another woman.

"Miserable bitch," he muttered, glaring down at her body. "If I'd known you would do that, I would've poisoned you much sooner." He was tempted to slug her. She wouldn't feel it, but it would make him happy.

A glint from her hands caught his attention, though. He'd forgotten about her rings.

Thompson took Martha's left hand in his, smirking at the brilliant emerald she wore. He began sliding it off but flinched when her finger twitched. Surely he'd imagined it. He snorted but froze when it moved again.

Her hand shot toward him, grabbing and squeezing his throat.

He tried to pry the appendage loose, but it tightened, pinching off his airway.

Raspy sounds filled his ears. His chest tightened when he realized it was him, and horror sent his heart galloping. Fear and adrenaline made him stronger, enough to pry the hand off.

Gasping air into his starving lungs, he couldn't move, let alone run. Martha sat upright, head swiveling in his direction, eyes popping open. They were no longer gold, but a disturbing red.

She parted her lips slightly but didn't speak. Her mouth rapidly expanded past what was humanly possible, and she grabbed Thompson, yanking him toward her.

Her mouth became a gaping hole, enveloping his entire body.

All he could manage was a faint burbling sound before her teeth pierced his body. She chewed rapidly, then gulped him down.

#### **About the Author:**

Gabriella Balcom writes fantasy, sci-fi, horror, romance, literary fiction, and more. She loves forests, mountains, and back roads, has had 307 works accepted for publication, and was nominated for the Washington Science Fiction Association's Small Press Award. Gabriella's books, On the Wings of Ideas and Worth Waiting For, resulted from her winning publishing contracts. Her novella, *The Return*, is also out; three others pend publication.

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# The Wolves Den | Dawn DeBraal

"Keep your head down, Blake." My cousin Vern whispered. I gave him a soured look.

"I'm not stupid. Don't you think I know what'll happen if McCreedy catches us on his property?" My cousin Vern was born six and a half weeks before me. He was using his older age as if the extra six weeks of experience made him wiser and stronger than me. But McCreedy was my neighbor, not Vern's. I knew where he was at all times. He'd be milking his cows right now, so we were safe.

It was hot, and the river that ran through McCreedy's property was only a few yards off our lot line. He'd caught us in the water already this summer, and we swore to him it would never happen again, but we were twelve, and you can't take a boy out of the water on a ninety-degree day.

We stripped down to our tighty whiteys, leaving our clothes and shoes on the bank, stepping into the cold rushing water.

"Woo!" Vernon shouted. Now it was my turn to shut him up; noise carries far when you are on the water. "Shut up. He'll hear us!" Vern clapped his hand over his mouth and shrugged, diving under the water, and I followed him. Picking up rocks was our favorite thing to do.

Sometimes we'd find crawdads that would scurry out from under the rocks. I didn't bring a bucket today because we weren't going to come here ever again.

Vern and I spent all day playing wolves in the wilderness. It was the thing to do in 1973 after my older brother went to Vietnam. We prayed for him every night at the dinner table that he would survive this day to come home to us. He was already six months into his tour of a year, so we felt pretty good that our prayers were answered because we were good Christians and went to church most Sundays, not like the Keister people. It's what my ma called the people who only went to church at Christmas and Easter so they could dress in their finery.

Anyway, we had an entire tunnel dug close to the property line. It came out of the woods, and it was only a hop, skip, and a jump to the river. I wished McCreedy hadn't caught us because it was a blessing to come out from the underground tunnel all itchy from the bugs, beetles, and sand fleas that drove us nearly crazy to jump into the river and clean ourselves off.

If Ma ever knew of how deep we dug that hole, she would never have let us go there and play. Pa was mad when the shovel went missing along with the good grain bucket and a length of rope, but it was how we could get rid of the dirt by hauling it out of the hole with a rope tied to the bucket and then carefully spread it around in the woods so's no one would discover our secret den. We were the Wolves. I was Lobo, and Vern was Timber. He got to pick his name out first on account of him being six and a half weeks older. It took me a long time to find the Spanish term for wolf, which was Lobo.

Inside the tunnel, we sharpened long spears because we were only half-animals; otherwise, the local farmers would shoot us, so we disguised the wolf parts and armed the man parts of us with spears and arrows. The arrows didn't do so well. They mostly broke the stick when we pulled on the inner tube that was strung from the top to the bottom of the stick and pulled tautly. We learned that using green wood made a stronger bow, but the arrows only went short distances. The enemy had to be upon us for our arrows to work.

I brought up a big rock, and Vern found an even larger one. We hefted them over our heads and threw them with all our might. The water splashed up and made us laugh. I guess we were laughing too hard to hear McCreedy hollering at us to get out of his river and off his property. Our mouths dropped open as we scrambled onto the bank to grab our shoes and shorts. He had a pitchfork in his hand and came wading across the river. We both skedaddled into the tunnel and pulled the brush around us so that he wouldn't see the opening. I think he didn't care that he got wet because he was so mad that we'd broken our promise made to him only a few weeks ago.

"Where are you, little varmints? I'm gonna give it to you good." McCreedy shouted as we pushed ourselves back into the tunnel, scared out of our wits. There was no way that Vern or I would leave the tunnel's safety voluntarily. We heard him rattle around the brush, and then he laughed real wicked. We knew he'd found our secret den.

"Tunnel rats, are you? Get out of there!"

We were in total darkness, not lighting the candle, but I could hear Vern's slight shush. Like I was going to shout back at McCreedy. Well, now the guy was on my property, and I almost dared to tell him that. Almost.

"Come out, you two—no sense in pretending you aren't in there. I've got a good mind to jump up and down and cave this tunnel in on you. You know what? No one would ever find you. You'd suffocate or starve to death trapped underground." McCreedy jumped up and down above us. Sand came down around our heads. Both Vern and I panicked.

"We're coming," I shouted. Nothing could be worse than being trapped underground with the sand closing in on you stopping your lungs from breathing in.

I reached the edge of the hole when a big thunk sounded. McCreedy came down the shaft and landed on his pitchfork.

Vern and I screamed when the blood gushed from his mouth and spilled down the fork's handle. There was barely enough room, but we could squeeze around him and climb up the side using handholds we dug into the ground.

"What are we going to do?" I asked Vern, who was calm and collected.

"You heard him. If the tunnel caved in, no one would ever find him." I couldn't believe what Vern was saying.

"We should get help."

"Do you really think that's our best option, Blake?" I could see his mind racing. Vern jumped up and down near the opening, which started a landslide of dirt reigning down on Mr. McCreedy.

"Stop it. We have to get someone to help him."

"Come on, Blake. No one will know, just you and me." Before I knew it, I jumped up and down too; God help me. More and more of the den filled in, and she gave way, everything collapsed. We sprinkled the brush over the disturbed earth.

"Come on, let's go!" Vern got to his bike first, and I followed, riding as fast as our legs could peddle away from the crime scene.

I couldn't sleep or eat. It took a few days when they reported McCreedy was missing. They combed his farm and found nothing unusual. McCreedy walked away from his milking cows and disappeared.

"Well, you know he was in the big one." I heard Pa tell Ma one night. "I'll bet he suffered some kind of a breakdown and wandered off into the woods, maybe done himself in. Some poor hunters will find him during deer season.

"It's not nice to talk about the dead that way." Ma said in hushed tones.

After that, Vern stayed away from my house, and we sort of went our separate ways. I think the guilt of what we'd done back then got to us. Technically, McCreedy fell down the hole and landed on his pitchfork. Just because we jumped for joy didn't make it a crime, at least, I didn't think so.

Vern started down the path of trouble that year while I went the opposite direction, studying hard, getting good grades, earning a scholarship to college, while my cousin was in the Founder's Home for Boys.

I don't go to church so much anymore. I've become a Keister since Ma died. They never found McCreedy, but there are not many nights I don't see him in my nightmares.

## **About the Author:**

Dawn DeBraal lives in rural Wisconsin with her husband Red, two little dogs, and a cat. She has discovered that her love of telling a good story can be written. You will find many of her stories, poems, and drabbles in online magazines and anthologies.



# Fossils | Donna Cuttress

Ann had noticed how rare it was to find a good fossilized specimen nowadays. She blamed the younger crowd for pilfering all the interesting examples. To her, their interest in fossils served merely as set dressing in their apartments, something to place on their vintage coffee tables, next to their houseplant collection. She fancied herself a true paleontologist

and had been holidaying at the same beaches in northern England for years to pursue her calling. No visits to sunnier climes for her. The thought of laying on a sunbed, greased up, turning over every few minutes to make sure both sides were done, was abhorrent.

Ann and her husband arrived early at the gray pebble beach. Derek sat uncomfortably on a spread towel. His flask of over brewed tea was wedged upright into the shingle next to him. He gripped his binoculars with his sweaty hands and began leering at any other woman nearby under the guise of 'birdwatching'.

"Bye then."

She waved absently over her shoulder as she commenced with her hunt. If she was lucky she received a nod in return, while he continued with his search of the coastal horizon.

She trudged away, adjusting the too tight wetsuit she had bought during a brief interest in wild swimming, relieved to be alone. Over her suit she wore her trusty waistcoat of many pockets. She loved it when it was replete with finds. The familiar rattle against her chest thrilled her, as the weight of copious fossils clattered against each other. Thousands of years worth of history and biology and she now owned it. *They were all hers*.

Ann avoided the small bays that were already infiltrated by noisy newcomers and headed toward a rockier path that was difficult to access. The fresh wind from the outgoing tide burned her face leaving her cheeks ruddy and her hands raw. The deserted coastline continued. She glanced upward now and again, incase of a rockfall from the looming cliffside. Ann wanted to *collect* fossils and not be killed by one.

As she rounded a high rocky outlay, she felt she had walked into another world. A sudden silence engulfed her. There was no wave sound or seagull screech, just an overwhelming quiet. Her ears rang with the sound of her own blood gushing around her skull. She stopped walking. The northern chill had suddenly warmed.

Ann had arrived at a small beach. It was beautiful, like something from a holiday brochure. White rock cliff met bleached sand. A tropical place that should not be here. She took a step, then stopped, feeling suddenly terrified, as though she was being watched. A fly in a jar. There was a rumble beneath her that reverberated, making her heart pound. She stretched out her arms to steady herself as she staggered. Her feet sank in the wet sand, as she crouched low shielding her head with her hands expecting to be hit by the crumbling cliffside.

The sudden tremor ceased as quickly as it had begun. Tentatively, she looked up while wiping dust and grit from her eyes. The rockfall had left an inner section of the cliff exposed. The rocks had formed a pathway to the freed cave that seemed to be enticing her. She couldn't stop herself from smiling, even when her ears popped and the sudden burst of noise from the waves made her start. The sea rolled against her feet wetting her socks and sandals, but she didn't care.

'That cave will be teeming with fossils!' she thought.

"And they're all mine!"

She punched the air, then immediately began coughing up rock dust. At the mouth of the cave she stopped, stunned at what she saw. Sunlight danced on the bright streaks of azurite and amethyst that reflected around her. Seams of polished jet mapped out the crevices of the rock. Pale jagged crystal poked through the sand.

"Impossible!" she whispered,"These shouldn't be here."

Her eyes adjusted to the dimming light as she ventured further in. It was then she saw them, scattered across the sand and sprinkled across the cave walls like stars.

Fossils.

Some were huge and would need a wheelbarrow to carry them, others she reckoned she could shove into a decent sized holdall. The smallest ones she grabbed by the handful.

"Come here my pocket sized beauties!"

She examined them greedily.

"These are definitely extinct", she shouted, "They have to be! They've too many legs and thickened bodies! Proboscis? Probosci? Too many anyway! This is amazing! *Amazing*!"

Ammonites that curled within themselves, still gave off a sheer pearlescence that should have dissolved millions of years ago, and yet, they looked almost fresh. Fauna and flora looked more like paintings than faded dreamlike outlines.

Rock and plant fused together leaving tendrils, veins and stems carbonized within a marriage of earth crust and leaf. She wiped sand with her clammy hands, or spat on them to see the definition of their pattern.

"Beautiful. No one is getting these!"

Ann thought about the boxes she would store them in, and the drawers in which they would be hidden away. Carrying as many as she could, she took them to the beach and kneeled at the tideline. They cascaded through her fingers into the surf. The sunlight reflected on the quartz and silicone. Her thoughts were dancing, she was so happy! She washed the fossils, scooped them up and returned to the cave mouth to examine them more. The shade was welcome as she scrutinized each one, then dropped it into a waistcoat pocket.

A warm breeze blew from within the cave. Ann turned slowly. Despite its warmth, she shuddered. Something didn't feel right. That terrifying feeling had returned. There was movement, gentle at first then urgent and aggressive, as her treasures began to split and shatter in her hands leaving painful cuts across her palms. The sea had activated something within them. She cried out in shock at first, then in pain,

"What? What's happening? No!"

She threw them onto the sand, and immediately began sucking at the thin slits on her palms. A fossilized fern like leaf began to rejuvenate and flourish, a green colour surged into the reactivated veins. She stared as the leaf began to develop and uncoil into a vine, it began creeping and stretching, as it edged toward her feet. Another fossil hatched. There was the brittle snap of thin rock, as an insect, centipede-like, stretched out its many legs. It crawled slowly then gathered speed as it spun in circles, unaware of where it was, or where it should go. It came toward her, she jumped away.

"No you don't!"

But the creature did not understand and carried on until it reached her foot. It headbutted her toes, then bit down hard. Ann screamed and shook her foot until it flew off her. Immediately she felt the stinging pain, which developed quickly into agony. Something flew past her eye line. She swatted at it, but the moth fluttered at her, getting entangled in her hair. She fell over the now thickened creeping vine that had twisted around her right leg and was squeezing. She felt her blood pulse in her veins as it applied more pressure. Ann clambered to her feet, and began dragging her leg hard to snap the vine and free herself. She yanked at it and fell again backward as it snapped. The release of pressure was instant, but instead of the vine dying back, it continued thrashing about in the sand, then turned and headed out of the cave toward the sea. The moth wings began flapping against her face again too near her eyes. The giant centipede creature, now joined by many more, was racing over the sand, excited to be using its many legs again.

In panic and pain, Ann stumbled deeper into the cave. It was no longer home to the beautiful fossils, but now with living, breathing life forms! They surrounded her, then began to envelope her, crawling like a living carpet. The ones she had tipped into her waistcoat pockets, had begun to waken. She screamed as she unzipped each pocket. The fossils were wiggling, climbing over each other to escape. Insects with claws and wings were fighting to be released. Ann felt the sharp nip of fangs, snipping away at her wetsuit. They scratched against her chest, desperate to reach the skin of her torso.

She pitched toward the cave's narrowest point, then fell, banging her head on the jagged wall and collapsed onto a large rock. Insects and vines began to crawl, fly and swarm around her. Her head spun, not just from concussion but from the poisonous bite. It hurt to breathe. She was limp, paralyzed prey.

The ground shifted, as the rock she lay against began to tremble. The large ammonite began to reform beneath her. Ann was amazed, yet terrified, as its stimulated tendrils began to creak and crack into life. The cephalopod's eyes opened after a millennia of being sealed shut. It focused on her. In the dimming light of the cave she admired its beauty. There were a few brief moments of silence, before it moved. Ann's screams were muffled as it slowly began to crawl suffocatingly across her face. Rocks began to fall from above. Dropping lightly at first, then the whole cave began to shudder. It was collapsing, swallowing her up, until she too would be crushed by the immense pressure of the rock, petrified forever.

#### **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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# Spinal Escape | Radar DeBoard

Marcus felt the ridge of his spine push up against the skin of his back, creating another wave of agony. He stumbled forward, desperately trying to fight off the pain. The creature that had taken refuge in his body pressed up harder against Marcus' spine, wishing to be free. In a last-ditch effort, Marcus frantically pressed down to keep the bone from ripping through. The creature proved too strong however, and the ridge punctured the skin, sending a stream of blood out along with it. Marcus fell to the floor, gasping in agony as his spine was slowly pushed out.

# An Example | Radar DeBoard

The ancient ones needed a show of their power. The weak Medothainins would be perfect. The ancient ones came to them bringing new knowledge, greater technology, and strength. They only asked that in return, the Medothainins worship them.

In just a few decades the Medothainins had grown into an empire. They had conquered their enemies and had become the pinnacle of culture. But they had forgotten to give praise to their gods. Just what the ancient ones wanted. The Medothainins were wiped from the earth in one fiery blast. A perfect example of why the ancient ones must be worshipped.

# Secret Compartment | Radar DeBoard

When Tommy had cried out in the middle of the night that something was in his closet, he was partially correct. There indeed had been someone lurking in between Tommy's hung clothes, watching him in the darkness. However, by the time Tommy's parents had come to investigate, the individual was no longer in the closet.

Instead, the terrifying individual was hiding in the secret compartment that blended flawlessly into the back wall of the closet. So then all the creeper had to do was wait patiently for Tommy's annoyed parents to return to bed, leaving their poor son all alone.

#### **About the Author:**

Radar DeBoard is a horror movie and novel enthusiast who resides in Wichita, Kansas. When he's not living in his own nightmares, he's writing horrifying tales to help others find theirs. He's had stories published by Gypsum Sound Tales, Eerie Lake Publications, Macabre Ladies Publishing, Black Hare Press, Black Ink Fiction, and Little Demon Publishing.

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# Vile Nights | Lee Andrew Forman

As the light of day begins to hide below the horizon, its final glow casts fleeting hope on those who dwell beneath its last rays. They know how short their joy is, so on long summer days they rejoice the seemingly languid time. Once darkness reaches over the clouds, and halogen bulbs flash to life over the not-so-sleepy town, prayers go unheard, muffled by thick atmosphere. The overbearing weight makes even a subtle breath too dense.

The flooding of artificial luminescence over every inch of land does little to slow the nightly feeding. One by one they crawl from the trees and search for sustenance. The food supply has dwindled over time, but they won't be sated until not a morsel is left.

No one knows what afflicted the children, what made them change. Not a mother, father, or sibling understands why their own blood has turned vile and ravenous. They only wish it would end.

Blog: <u>Lee Andrew Forman</u>
Instagram: @<u>leeandrewforman</u>

# A Good Thrashing | Edward Ahern

The thrasher swung out like a bull whip. Most of its talon-curved thorns struck harmlessly on my padded jacket and gloves, but twice hit the exposed skin on my wrist, drawing blood and leaving welts. I was implanted.

The damned thing had been coiled up within some innocent looking ferns. We're required to keep our lawns chopped back to prevent their growth, and that hot summer day I put the shield in place on the front of the mower and as it rolled along, watched several immature thrashers swipe the plexiglass before getting chewed up. But I turned the mower to avoid mowing down the ferns, and as soon as the shield had pivoted it struck.

I'd yelled when the thorns ripped into me, and then cried. I went in the house and put rubbing alcohol on the punctures, knowing it was useless. My odds of death from septicemia were a little over fifteen percent. The odds of agonizing rheumatoid arthritis or other disabilities seventy percent. Odds of substantial recovery a little less than ten percent. Odds of quickly dying if I survived and was struck again one hundred percent.

I sat down in my easy chair and waited for the panic to subside a bit, then began thinking. I wanted to call Sarah, but there was nothing she could do, and she'd moved on. We'd been computer geeks who'd stumbled into each other, and then fallen apart. And then I did call her, because she deserved to know, and I needed her.

"Sarah? It's Phil."

"Phil, ah hi, what's the matter?"

She's still attuned to me, despite our breakup, and immediately picked up on the panicked tone in my voice.

"I've been thrashed."

"No! No, you're usually so careful. How?"

"Just stupid. I let something live, and now I'm apt to die."

A few seconds phone silence, then, "Phil, talk to your doctor, maybe he knows about something new."

"I will, Sarah, but we both know how this will play out. Listen, there's no one else, I'm hoping you'll take care of my affairs in case I go." I rushed ahead before she could demur. "Everything will be organized, and paid for. Just sign some papers."

Another pause on her end, then "All right, Phil, just in case. But I know you'll pull through."

Her lie was awkward but well meant. "Thanks Sarah. We talked about some nothings for a few minutes and hung up. My next call was to the local CDC office, advising them that I'd been struck and would self-quarantine. I remained sitting, casting around for something, anything, that would get me through this. Then I relapsed into agonizing about my new status as an unwilling host.

My next call was to my boss.

"Hello, Pete?"

"Hello, Phil. What's up?"

My voice cracked. "I got thrashed, Pete. I'm going to have to be out for a few weeks."

"No sh.., Jesus, I'm sorry. Look, we'll cover your work, just get better."

We talked a few more minutes and he switched me to HR.

"It's Phil Creighton. I need to notify you that I've been thrashed and am going into quarantine for a few weeks."

There was a pregnant silence that I figured I'd be hearing more often if I survived. "Mr. Creighton, we're so sorry to hear that. As the law mandates, we'll cover your salary for the duration of your illness. Please contact us as soon as you're recovered and we can go through a few steps."

"Steps? Like what?"

"Ah, we'll need to test you for fine motor skills and intellectual capacity in order to resume your work for us."

I wanted to blow up, to scream at her, but HR, more than most corporate entities, has no independent say so. She was just following orders. I hung up and resumed trying to think.

The first plants had sprouted the same day in Asia, Europe and North America. The paranoid among us blamed conservatives or liberals or Russia, or even aliens, but no aliens showed up, and there wasn't enough justification to go to war. Not yet, anyway.

Coiled up, the full-grown perennial plant is less than six inches high, easily concealed by tall grass. When its single stalk whips around, it reaches out six feet. It doesn't care which mammal hosts it, but most animals have thick enough fur or hide to significantly lower their rate of infestation. Humans are the most vulnerable host species, because, like I did, they sometimes neglect to completely cover up.

My cell phone began to buzz and burble. The CDC had alerted the local police, and they wanted to make sure I would soon be confining myself to quarters. There is no airborne infestation at any stage of the thrashers' cycle, but the authorities didn't want the panic to get any worse—our bodily alterations as the spores develop are grotesque.

I wanted to pour myself a triple and fuzz out, but couldn't, there were too many preparations to make. I settled for a beer while I copied off a shopping list from the CDC site and added in some items. A week after infestation I'd be restricted to remaining alone inside my house. I put a bandage over my punctured wrist and left. My first stop was an emergency warehouse that distributed prepackaged survival kits. Gestation took three to four weeks and I needed to stock up.

The watchman at the warehouse entrance waved me to a stop.

"You're supposed to be open 24 hours."

He shrugged. "We were, until the hoarders faked being infected, using dummy IDs so they could get the parcels. We've been out for two weeks. If you've got the money you can go on Stanley's List and buy it back for four hundred a package. No guarantees, though. Sometimes they just fill an empty packet with cardboard and resell it."

"Shit."

"Yeah."

"Any suggestions on where I can find stuff?"

"Not really. You've probably already seen that the stores are out of most essentials."

"Yeah '

I got back in the car and went to the closest supermarket, then the next, and the next, picking up a few odd items, but realizing I had little hope of buying enough to eat to last a month. I could feel panic seizing my lungs. I figured that if I wanted to avoid starvation, I'd need to steal my food.

Once back home I went on line to Stanley's list. Most thieves fortunately are also stupid. It only took an hour of electronic hacking to locate the home address of one high-volume operator. I checked further. He had a day job, and no relatives apparently lived with him. Better and better.

The next day at 10am I drove by his ranch style house. No cars in the driveway, a detached garage, no lights on that I noticed. He did, however have a security camera that I cut the wire to. The camera was from a home security company that also provided intrusion and motion detectors. It was going to be a smash and grab. The blinds were partially open at all the windows except for one, which I hoped was where he kept the containment packages.

I backed my car up across the lawn to almost the outside wall of the house, then swung a tire iron into the window glass, and ran it around the inside edges to clear off the shards. No alarm sounded, which meant he had only door alarms and a few motion detectors. Inside the room at least thirty of the care packages were stacked up. I crabbed inside and started tossing packets out the window toward the car. After I'd liberated seven of them, I crawled back out the window, packed the car, and left, leaving one package behind on the lawn so nosy neighbors would know what he'd been up to.

Adrenalin laced fear had me gasping shallowly. But I was pretty sure he couldn't report the theft to the cops without incriminating himself.

Sarah was waiting at my house when I got back. She was wearing an unneeded mask, but she relied on healthy paranoia. "Phil, I know how hard it is to get food, so I brought over some things." She held up a half-filled overnight bag.

I wanted to hug her, but knew she'd cringe. "Are you sure you can spare it? I have some stuff already." I stopped, realizing that the food was an offering for the relationship we'd had and lost. "Thank you. I know you cut into your rations. Look, once this is over, I'll get the leftover food back to you. It'll be decontaminated."

She winced. "That's okay, I'm not sure I'd be comfortable eating it."

I wanted to invite her in for a drink, to talk at length, but could see by her uneasy stance that she feared contamination and wanted to back off. "If I survive this, Sarah, I won't be pretty, but I'd really like to see you afterwards. Maybe the park near where we used to live?"

"It got infested with thrashers and is ground down to dirt."

"Oh. Maybe the parking lot where I work-or maybe used to work?"

Her expression was pained. "Sure, Phil, as soon as you get better."

We stood fifteen feet and a busted relationship apart. "You'd better get going, Sarah, I've got a lot of prep work before it hits me."

She knew I knew how she felt. It didn't make it any better. "Okay, Phil. Call me if you need any emergency supplies and I'll leave it just outside the house."

We waved to each other and she turned away.

Once Sarah had left, I toted the stolen packages inside and opened one. Toilet paper, nutrition bars, rice, MREs, enough food in the packages to last over a month if I was disciplined. Then I called Dr. Peters. "Dr. Peters? It's Phil Creighton....No, not so good, I've been thrashed...Should I come in?...Ah, of course, we wouldn't want to alarm the other patients...So you're saying there's nothing much I can do?...I'm going to need painkillers... Vicodin? Yes I see...And they'll deliver it?... Okay, anything else you can suggest?...Thank you, but I'm not much into praying."

That night I did have the triple, the whiskey burning reassuringly on its way down my throat. I slept until four am before waking in a panic. I got up and began another to do list- update the will, specify bequests, get rid of some mildly embarrassing personal items, call the decontamination service and put them on notice. Around 8am the doorbell rang. Went I stepped out there was only a large envelope left on the front porch, which I brought in.

It was from the CDC. One booklet spent twenty pages telling me how to seal up the house from the inside, and that tape and sheeting would be delivered later that day. An instruction sheet told me to put a house key in the smaller envelope enclosed and hang it on the outside doorknob. I realized they dealt both with contaminated houses and dead bodies. Including very possibly mine.

A second pamphlet described the progression of the disease- tiny sprouts emerging from pores, generalized rash and itching, severe arthritis pain and muscular distortions, vomiting and diarrhea. In this process the sprouts grow to three inches and exude spores. Once the spores dissipate the sprouts shrivel into dry flakes and drop off. If I'd survived to that point I might live, disfigured and partially crippled. Survivors often wore feature-hiding face masks that served the same purpose as leper bells used to have- 'keep away, keep away'.

The plastic sheeting arrived that day, and for the next week I wrote instructions, taped windows and doors and waited. By the fourth day, with no symptoms, I'd almost deluded myself that I would be the miracle, the one who hadn't gotten infected. But on the morning of the fifth day I could see and feel green nubbins in hundreds of my pores.

Showers, hot or cold, did nothing for the aches and itching, only opened the pores and facilitated sprout growth. By the tenth day I had resigned myself to heavy doses of painkillers, staying just lucid enough to feed and clean myself. I knew that cutting the sprouts would only cause accelerated regrowth, but snipped off some of the sprouts on my arm anyway. They regrew faster than before.

I spent hours cursing the ripping pains and the unfairness of my infestation. By the third week I could barely move, and lay on the tiled kitchen floor near the food, once having to defecate in the far corner. It was, I think, the second day of the fourth week that spores began drifting off my body like fine dust. Like mustard seeds, I vaguely thought, tiny but creating huge lethality.

By the first day of the fifth week, I had quit delivering spores into the world. I called the number the CDC had provided, my words barely articulate, my throat cracked raw. "It's Phil Kepler. 115 Morningside Lane. I'm through it."

"We'll see. Strip, take full body photos of yourself and send them via message to the link we provided."

I did, and the next day they tented my house and opened up the front door. Men in hazmat suits entered and put a breathing apparatus and IV feeding tube on me. Then they gas bombed the entire house, including me. The vegicide they used burned my skin badly, sharper pain than even the infestation had administered. After the second day they pulled the equipment off me and declared me spore free. I was apparently going to live.

When my rasp had subsided and I was coherent I called Sarah. "I made it."

Her tone was relieved. "Thank God. How are you feeling?"

"Hard to tell. They were pumping serious narcotics through my IV. But they're going to try and wean me off them over the next few days. I'll know then how bad the pain is."

I wanted to say that we should have a meal together, but I knew that wouldn't happen. I'd be in a mask and gloves and no restaurant would be happy to see me. And even high I knew she'd be better off not having to suffer through the experience, not because she couldn't put up with my looks and voice, but because she would want to help and couldn't. "I really appreciate how you helped me, Sarah. It was a leftover act of love. Once I stabilize I'll call again."

She understood, as she always had. I was saying goodbye. "Get well Phil and we'll be talking."

The agonies of the drug withdrawal segued into the constant pain in my joints and muscles. Chewing and swallowing hurt. Badly. My focus and concentration were so rat holed I couldn't think three moves ahead in chess. I called my company back, and they scheduled an evaluation at a neutral site. I failed it, unable to move, type, speak or think at a normal level. Like almost all of those who recovered I was unemployable, and was put on relief payments and food stamps. My neighbors had seen the tenting and continued to walk across the street to avoid my house. My life was soft food, and streaming programming that required no concentration.

I did go out several times, both hooded and with pitted pores on display. No one let me get within twenty feet of them, and sometimes yelled at me to stay away. I joined two supposedly therapeutic groups of survivors, but quickly stopped going—listening to others shrilly whine about their aches and disfigurements only made my own feel worse.

I withstood it all for three months, but I was a spent vessel. I wrote a brief letter for Sarah and clipped it to the mailbox for the postman, stripped off my shirt, and then stumbled around the house and into the back yard. "Let's get it right this time," I yelled.

The backyard had only partially regrown during my confinement and the juvenile thrasher plants weren't ready for me. But the plant hidden in the ferns had coiled back up and struck out. New pains from the thorns layered onto the pains from my first infestation, putting me into a giddy agony. I lurched back into the house, grabbed a whiskey bottle and took several hits off of it. No calls, I said to myself, no notifications, just Phil the soon dead seedbed.

## **About the Author:**

Ed Ahern resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He's had almost four hundred stories and poems published so far, and six books. Ed works the other side of writing at Bewildering Stories, where he sits on the review board and manages a posse of nine review editors. He's also lead editor at The Scribes Micro Fiction magazine.

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# I'm Talking to You | Harrison Kim

I'm talking to you, giant mutant Daddy Long-Legs eight-legged walking drone. Revolve your bulbous head to scope out the house of delusion. Observe its yellow planks burned by the psychiatric meltdown, seeping out from inside and staining the wood to yellow-brown hallucination level 5006 warped synapses per second. Humans can't go in without a suit lined with risperidone. For you, my drone, no suit needed, you are fortunate to have all your vertebrae on the outside. The work will be machine precise. Your mission: clean this place of insanity and bring the delusions back to me. Inside, the patient's bones lie white. Their hallucinations seeped into the cracks, while their bodies died and moldered. How interesting it was, all these past days, via my powerful binoculars, to observe the gradual dispersal of these delusions within the changing colour of the planks.

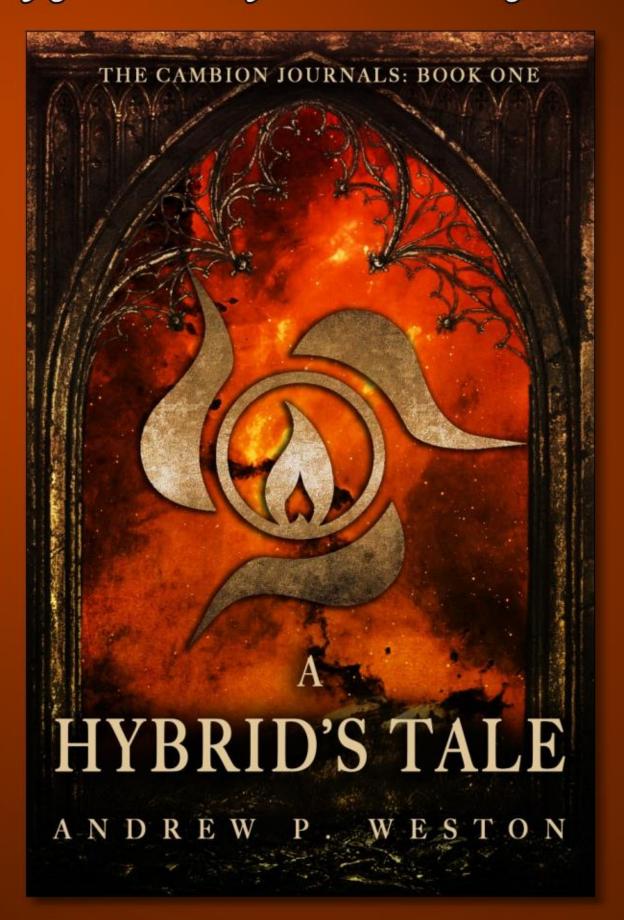
Daddy LL Drone, stand facing the door and spread all your limby tentacles into the openings. Poke them through the windows. Can you feel who the patients were, as you tickle your way round the rooms? They couldn't escape before the meltdown. All locked in. The staff ran, left their psychiatric charges shimmering, glowing in collective insanity. Delusions burst forth, burned into the walls, seeped through the wood in black and gray. This house stands now only because of delusion. You will explore this psychoactive creature with your tentacles, and when the tiny windows are securely gripped and entered, hold fast. Then, split the building in twain, with your longest tentacle, and suck all the delusions into your maw. After you skitter back to the studio, I'll unload everything into my computer, and have enough material for another three books of stories.

#### **About the Author:**

Harrison Kim lives in and writes from the spooky town of Victoria, Canada. He worked many years in a Forensic Psychiatric Hospital as 'The Teacher'. He picked up some story ideas there. Recent work was published in X R A Y literary magazine, The Horror Zine, and Liquid Imagination as well as Pen of the Damned.

Blogspot: <u>Harrison Kim</u>
Facebook: <u>Harrison Kim</u>

To fight monsters, you need something worse...



**AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!** 

# No More Mr. Fungi | Sara Martinez

I loved mushrooms. Especially on pizza. Especially when it was the sausage and extra mushroom pizza from Lorenzo's. When I was carb-loading before a cross-country meet, I could practically eat a large pie by myself. Now, I can't even look at a mushroom without feeling queasy.

The trouble started a few days ago; one of my dorm mates, Greg, was rushing Mu Theta Rho and convinced me to tag along. All the official rush activities were done, and a couple other pledges were in the basement of the frat house playing a video game with one of the MTR brothers, Chad. He rage-quit after losing the third match in a row and turned it off to a chorus of groans.

"Game sucks, anyways," he grumbled. "I have a better idea of what to do."

He pulled a mason jar off the top of a tall bookshelf and cradled it to his chest, obscuring the contents. "Now, with the understanding that this isn't officially condoned by the chapter, but will definitely help me put in a good word for you pledges," Chad grinned widely while presenting the jar to us. "Who wants to do some shrooms?"

The MTR brother held out the jar; inside were spindly dried stems ending in wrinkled pale brown bulbs. I didn't really know what to expect, but I had a vague memory of hearing that shrooms could be a fun time. Two of the pledges chickened out and went upstairs, but that left five of us to start our trip. After sitting us down on the floor, Chad passed the jar around. Greg pulled one out before handing me the jar, and I took a small handful.

"I love mushrooms!" I exclaimed and shoved them in my mouth.

"Dude, you're only supposed to start with one..." Chad gaped. "I guess you're in for one hell of a night." I chewed the mass in my mouth, swallowing with difficulty. They tasted awful: musty, bitter and chewy in the wrong way. The other four guys each ate one shroom and made faces the whole time, though Chad tried to hide it. He passed around some water bottles to wash it all down. Nothing happened for a while as everyone made small talk. I grumbled to myself that if they tasted that bad, at least they should do something, right?

Awareness gradually crept over me that something was off; a distinct sense of wrongness with no discernible cause. It was still the same rundown basement, with the same ratty couch and decades old carpet. Greg was sitting next to me giggling to himself while Chad grinned at all of us. The other two guys stared into space.

Abruptly, I lost all sensation in my body. Nothing I touched registered with my brain, I couldn't smell the stale odor of the basement, even the foul taste was gone. My eyes involuntarily rolled back and stuck to a spot on the ceiling that began to glow pale green.

As the glow spread across the ceiling, I disconnected from my body entirely. My consciousness floated up and fused with the glow. Up close, I could see spores of mold hidden under a fairly recent coat of paint that were the glow's source. I continued to float upward, through the house and past the roof. My mind spun. What the hell was happening? Was this how a trip was supposed to go? I had no idea. I should have asked before eating the shrooms.

I floated above the frat house. More glowing spots spread throughout the town. They varied in thickness and intensity, but converged at a point near a wooded area. The sun had long set and shadows loomed everywhere. Unwittingly, I moved towards the convergence point: a cemetery. As my consciousness drifted among the markers, I found the graveyard deserted. Even though I wasn't physically there, it had an undeniably creepy vibe, and I felt cold.

I stopped at a spot along the edge of the cemetery; underneath me a stream flowed swiftly. The banks shone brighter than daylight. Settling down next to the creek, I found the origin of the glow: countless mushrooms and algae grew there mostly hidden among the grass covering the graves

Suddenly, I felt pulled into the ground and came face-to-face with a skeleton within a coffin. Mold infused the bones, and the skull leered an awful grin at me. Fear welled up as I swore the thing moved. I stared for a long minute and had almost convinced myself I had imagined it when its arms shot up and grabbed my face. I twisted and shrieked but couldn't escape its grip. Its jaw fell open, it devoured my spirit before everything went black.

When I woke up, my mouth was bone dry but my body was drenched in sweat. I was sprawled on the basement floor and everything looked more or less the same. Four faces looked down at me, riddled with concern. "You okay, man?" asked Greg. "You froze up for a long time and screamed before passing out."

I groggily sat up, fighting back nausea and exhaustion. "I think I'll be okay...just a bad trip, I guess. Let's just go home." I came unsteadily to my feet and followed Greg back to our dorm.

Sleep that night was poor, as I tossed and turned. The images of the graveyard were seared into my brain. Even though it seemed impossible, I couldn't shake the feeling that what I had seen was real. I became determined to find the source.

The semester was only a couple weeks in, so I still didn't know the town all that well. I spent most of my free time looking over maps to find the right cemetery, but I eventually identified it. While I didn't want to investigate alone, there wasn't anyone around who I could trust to not think I was crazy. I marked out a map then gathered a bag with a flashlight, camera, and spade. The last thing I wanted to do was to go at night, but I knew I would be too conspicuous in the daytime. Once the sun set, I headed out.

The chill was undeniably real this time as I crept up to the cemetery. I tossed my bag over the fence before fumbling up it and down the other side. The cold bit through my hoodie, settled on my skin, and wouldn't go away. I slunk between the graves until I came to the creek. My flashlight shone weakly along the bank for a long time until I finally found the patch of mushrooms. They looked like the ones Chad had given us, only in fresh form. I slowly followed the creek until I came to a different fence.

A few hundred feet beyond, a building loomed. I squinted, thinking I saw something. With my light, I illuminated a pipe jutting out of the wall. Something flowed out of it and seeped down into the creek. Whatever came out of that pipe probably fed the fungi growing there. After snapping a picture, I awkwardly scaled this fence and walked alongside the water until I reached the pipe.

Up close, I had to crane my neck way back to look at the top of the massive building. I couldn't see any windows or doors on this side, so I followed the wall around the corner. Up front, an illuminated sign read *Wasson Chemicals*.

"Hey, you!" I heard someone shout.

Shit! They must have seen my flashlight.

Two figures ran towards me. A trespassing charge could mess up my scholarship, so I turned tail. Rounding the corner, I put all my cross-country training to use to make it to the fence before I got caught.

I leapt the final few feet and made it about halfway up the fence before two pairs of hands grabbed me. The security guards yanked me down but then suddenly let go. I twisted as I fell, landing on my ass. When I saw why the guards had let go, I wondered if I was still on my trip.

Giant mushrooms had sprouted from nowhere, filaments of mossy flesh snaking out of them and twisting around the guards' limbs and mouths. The doomed men writhed ineffectually against the sinewy tendrils as they were pulled towards the mushroom stalks. Their cries were soon muffled under the caps; the dark, moist gills smothering their faces. The huge fungi receded down into the earth, leaving little trace they had ever been there.

Staring in stunned silence, I slowly got to my feet. A few patches of loose soil were all that remained of the monstrous mushrooms. What the hell could that plant be dumping that would cause the mushrooms to grow like that? I wasn't going to stick around to find out.

I shakily walked back to my dorm, took a shower, and laid down to try to sleep. After what I'd seen I knew one thing for sure: I can never eat mushrooms on pizza again.

## **About the Author:**

Sara Martinez is an author and game designer. She is a passionate gamer and devoted wife and mother living in the Denver, CO area. Sara has a wide and eclectic variety of hobbies that she occasionally finds time to pursue including cooking, historical reenactment, needlepoint, painting, cosplay, karaoke and others. One of her life goals is to someday be on the show Jeopardy.

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# Boo-B-Q | Ken McGrath

The smell hit Delton Waynes as soon as he stepped from the car.

It came as a sticky heavy waft that clung like tar. It caught around the backs of his teeth, left a filmy, slimy feeling on his tongue and crawled down his throat. His nostrils stung with the hint of sugar, smoke, rot and decay. Of meat gone putrid.

Discreetly he removed a cloth mask from one of his waistcoat's pockets and a small bottle of lavender oil from inside his jacket. Despite the sweltering, summer heat he was dressed in heavy tweed and wool. Delicately, for such a big man, Delton unscrewed the top and used the pipette to drip a few drops of liquid onto the mask. Then, having let it seep in, he returned the bottle to the pocket and fixed the straps of the mask over his ears, adjusting them so it fit snugly over his nose, mouth and chin.

He looked up and noticed a lady standing at the corner of the bungalow. She gave a small wave and smiled shyly. Delton nodded in return.

"Hi. I'm really sorry about the pong," she said as he approached and tugged embarrassedly at the front pocket of her green, corduroy dungarees, eyes darting over the ground nervously.

"Not at all. Honestly, it's fine really. You wouldn't believe some of the smells I've encountered in my line of work. They've been... interesting, to say the least," Delton smiled broadly. Although the benefit of it was mostly hidden behind the mask his eyes were warm, calming. "I believe you called for an exorcist. I'm Delton Waynes."

"That's very nice of you to say Mr. Waynes. I'm Lovely," she smiled in return and it lit her up, like an internal lamp had been turned on.

"Oh. Yes... yes. Are you?" Delton mumbled. He felt his cheeks redden and was suddenly extremely thankful that most of his face was covered.

"Lovely. Lovely Boyne," she laughed, all bright and joyous. "You can ask my mum about why she chose it if you want. She's out back keeping an eye on... well, the situation."

As if on cue there came a blast of black smoke from around the other side of the house. This was followed immediately by a roar, as if something were calling out from the very depths of Hell itself.

"It's lucky that we're secluded here," Lovely said when the din had died down. "There's forests on pretty much all sides, for a good kilometre at least each way, and we managed to send our guests home before anyone had really noticed what was going on. That's when I called you. As soon as I could. I found your details online."

"You did the right thing. Definitely. Best to get everyone clear until we know what sort of apparition or infestation it is we're dealing with here. Is it okay if we have a look-see?" he asked.

Lovely nodded and Delton followed her around the side passage to the back of the house, where it opened out onto a big patio and lawn that were divided with a loose, gravel driveway. In the middle of this, balanced on a set-up of bricks and metal was a huge, extremely DIY-looking barbeque. Another lady, an older, plumper version of Lovely, this one wearing a brightly coloured dress of greens, yellows and blues was watching over the flames, a metal tongs in one hand, a wooden spatula in the other. Her arms were decked out in thick bracelets of coral and wood.

"Momma this is Mr. Waynes. He's here to help," Lovely announced.

"Call me Delton, please," he said, eyeing up the barbeque carefully, like a zookeeper who'd just come across a very interesting specimen in the wild and wasn't sure yet if it was dangerous or not.

"Thanks for coming," Momma Boyne said. "Things have been starting to heat up."

"Not a bother. It is my job after all," Delton removed a handkerchief from a third pocket and wiped a layer of sweat from his brow. "Has it spread from this location at all?"

"No," Momma Boyne said, throwing a sausage at the barbeque. The lid flipped open all by itself, something smoky lashed out, caught the piece of meat, whipped back inside and the lid snapped shut happily again. "I've been tossing food at it all day. Anything to try and keep it contained."

As Delton edged closer a tongue of fire rasped from under the lid, like one child taunting another. As he approached it suddenly lashed out at him, tentacle-style. Delton deftly stepped aside just in time to avoid being scorched.

"Hmmmm, don't think it likes you very much," Momma Boyne said. flicking another piece of sausage at the barbeque, which caught it deftly.

Delton rubbed at his eyebrows, uncertain if they'd been singed off, when Lovely appeared at his shoulder.

"Did we do something wrong? Are we being punished for eating too much meat? Is this a pro-veganism demon maybe?"

Delton snorted and looked around the garden until his eyes settled on a wooden bench that was covered in condiments and sides, bottles of soft drinks, hummus, tubs of coleslaw and of course cutlery. Everything you could need to turn a simple BBQ into a well organized feast.

"No, not at all. I don't think anyone should be punished for eating something so delicious as chicken and pork," he looked sadly at where his own stomach strained against the severely under-pressure buttons of his waistcoat. "Although my doctor might tend to disagree. She's been at me to shift a few pounds since, well, too long to mention really."

With a shrug he began sifting through the things on the table until he gave an 'ah ha' when he laid his hands on a salt shaker.

"Perfect, this will be perfect," he walked over to the barbeque, then began casting white granules as he went in a circle around it. "No, this honestly looks like you might have inadvertently called up something demonic, totally by accident I reckon."

"How?" Lovely asked.

"The arrangement of meat products on the barbeque."

"What? Really? We called up something from the depths of Hell by how we placed food on the grill?"

"Definitely," Delton nodded as he made it back to where he'd started. "You'd be astonished by how many of these situations I get calls about. It's not even all that uncommon."

While they spoke the barbeque continued to spit flames and tongues of fire licked out, singeing the grass. Just before he closed up the salt circles Delton stepped around to the outside of it then dropped a final handful and nudged the boundary closed with a toe.

"I had thought maybe it might burn itself out eventually," Lovely said. Her mother nodded in agreement.

"No. Unfortunately, these demonic apparitions can maintain an eternal flame," Delton said then whispered softly. "Close your eyes, give me your hand."

Beside him Lovely slipped her hand into Delton's. He flushed fire engine red and looked down. "What's... this you're doing?"

"Is it not part of the ritual?" she asked confused and opened one eye curiously. "I thought you said to take your hand and shut my eyes."

"No, I... um, I was referencing The Bangles song."

"Oh," Lovely said and went to pull away.

"No, no," Delton closed his fingers gently around Lovely's. "This could actually help if you don't mind lending some strength."

Lovely looked at her mum, but the older woman just shrugged.

"Okay. I trust you."

Slowly Delton began chanting. It was mostly vowel sounds and back of the throat noises. The sky above began to fill with clouds that hadn't been there even a moment ago. They started to darken, going from white to gray to a purple-ish black.

The barbeque lid, which had been flapping up and down loudly stopped, in a wide-open position and a jet of flames shot upwards, like a spout from a fancy fountain. This raged with a tormenting heat for a full minute while Delton continued to chant, sweat breaking out on both his and Lovely's foreheads.

Without warning the fire dropped, as if someone had cut off the gas, but it didn't go out, it just calmed to a mere steady gush as if it were pausing and considering things.

Delton's chanting changed tone, becoming lower and more guttural. In response the barbeque-demon erupted like the jets of some great fighter aeroplane preparing to take off. With howls and screams of fury it leapt from the grill and began to circle the edges of the salt ring, a tower of walking flame. The lawn burned up beneath it as it went.

Sweat broke out on Delton's brow and above them, the sun which had disappeared behind a wall of gray cumulus, had begun to reappear.

The demon reached out with flaming fingers and picked up the barbeque. Coal spilled out onto the ground. Metal creaked and groaned under the intense heat as it shook and pounded the apparatus against the invisible barrier. Slowly the salt circle began to burn.

Lovely slipped her hand from Delton's. She grabbed up another salt shaker and began to run around the diminishing circle, throwing salt over any gaps as she went. All the while the exorcist continued his chanted incantations.

Above them the clouds began to gather closer, like a phalanx forming. They crackled ominously, indicating an oncoming storm.

Just then Momma Boyne appeared at Delton's side, armed with a fire extinguisher.

"I love that lawn," she growled, then unloaded a blast of soft white foam all over the barbeque, dousing it fully.

Delton stopped chanting and everything went deathly silent as the trio stood there, looking at the melted marshmallow-like mess.

"Do you think that'll work?" Lovely asked just before Delton grabbed both her and her mother, pulling them to the ground.

"No," he shouted. He reached an arm up and carved an arcane symbol in the air with his fingers. "We've just made it angrier. What we needed was a cleansing rain to vanquish the demon."

A raging hot flame licked over their heads and held there for a brief instant, ready to drop like a vicious guillotine, when the clouds above finally burst and disgorged a shattering shower of torrential rain. It descended on the barbeque bound demon like a volley of arrows and in seconds the area was drenched, the lawn becoming a swirl of muddy puddles. A final cry went up, ringing in the air for a moment before dwindling away, like water down a drain.

Then, as quickly as it came, the rain subsided. The barbeque was in a heap. A knocked over, battered, sad looking thing, thankfully, devoid of flames.

Delton got up with a groan and two creaking knees then helped Lovely to her feet.

"Sorry about your clothes," she said.

He looked down at himself. His outfit had been mostly browns and greens to begin with so you could argue that at least the colour-code had been maintained. He frowned and tugged at his saturated, dirty waistcoat to try and give it some shape, realized it was a fool's errand and gave up.

"Not at all," Delton said to Lovely, with a smile. "I should have known to pack a brolly. You just can't trust this Irish weather. Even in summertime. Do you think it'll put an end to your barbequing days?"

"Never," Momma Boyne grinned at him. "We girls have hot sauce flowing in our veins I'll tell you."

"Not a hope," Lovely said as she lifted the lid of the cooler box, revealing a bounty of red meat inside. "And we can't let all of this go to waste."

"I guess we could always do a few burgers under the kitchen grill. We certainly can't let you go home until you've dried off Mr. Waynes," Momma Boyne continued. "You'll catch your death of cold in those."

"I have a change of clothes in the car," he said.

"Fancy sticking around for some dinner afterwards?" Lovely asked shyly.

Delton felt his cheeks flush red above the mask again and nodded.

# **About the Author:**

Ken McGrath's fiction has appeared in Cirsova Magazine, K Zine, The Society Of Misfit Stories Presents..., Liquid Imagination, Daily Science Fiction and the anthologies, 'The Devil's Hour' (HellBound Publications) and 'Transcendent' (Transmundane Press) among others. He lives with his wife in an upside-down house in Dublin, Ireland.

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# Summer Break | Gloria Bobrowicz

Having finished school for the semester and wanting to do something special for the break, I decided to invite a few friends for a mini summer vacation. No matter how old you are, there's something special about being a kid again at an amusement park that is irresistible.

I asked Sherri and her boyfriend, Sam, if they were up for it. They thought it would be a great idea. We decided to ask another good friend, Fred, if he wanted to join us as well, he quickly agreed, and we decided to make it a fun weekend away. We were all ready for some fun after a hard school year.

Weeping Hill Park has one of the oldest roller coasters still in operation, a fun house, and a ton of thrill rides for people our age. We found a reasonably priced motel nearby, and made reservations for a three day weekend.

Fred and I have been friends since grade school. We went through high school together, and even went to the same college, but no romance for us, just really good friends.

Excited to spend time together off-campus, we met up on Thursday for the four hour drive to the motel.

We packed the car with sandwiches, snacks, beer, water and wine, and laughed the whole time. Off we embarked on our mini getaway.

The trip was long, but we had a blast. We played loud music and sang at the top of our lungs the entire way.

As we got close to the park, we could see the outline of the coaster sticking up in the sky. We were all excited knowing that tomorrow, we'd get the chance to ride that woody.

We checked into the motel and unloaded the car as quickly as possible. Fred and I shared a room while Sherri and Sam shared another. Dropping our bags, we gathered in the lobby to see what kind of nightlife the town had to offer. We asked the desk clerk what was open, he laughed and replied, "Everything closes early around here." That was a downer since we were all energized and didn't feel like starting our vacation trapped in our dingy motel room.

Huddled together, we decided to sneak into the closed park and just walk around. We knew that none of the rides would be running, but it would be cool anyway.

Sneaking into Weeping Hill Park was easy. We went through a hole in the fence. It was seriously dark and scary though—just what we were hoping for. We walked down the dirt roads four across; Sam, Sherri, Fred and I. Something on the left caught Sherri's attention.

"Hey follow me, I see a light over there and wanna check it out," Sherri said.

Sam, only too happy to follow grinned, "Sure, let's go."

"You guys go on and have a look, June and I are gonna head that way," he pointed in the opposite direction, "And we'll meet back up with you at the hole in the fence around 3:00 A.M., if that's okay with you guys."

Sam and Sherri agreed and off they went.

"Why didn't you want to go with them?" I asked.

"I wanted to give them some alone time, they're a couple and they've been stuck with us for hours on end," he raised his eyebrows and wiggled them at me.

"Oh, I get it, I didn't think. You're right."

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The light that Sherri saw turned out to be the entrance to The Tunnel of Love.

Sam was excited and said, "Hey let's go in and walk through it. There's a path alongside the cars. Come on, it'll be fun."

"You think? I'm kinda nervous, so no messing around," Sherri whispered.

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Fred and I headed to the carousel and admired the painted horses. They were magnificent, so brightly colored and inviting. Like children, we climbed on the ornate animals, yelping and giggling. All of a sudden the lights flicked on, and the carousel started to rotate. Surprised, but delighted, it was an unexpected joy that we gleefully indulged in.

Faster and faster around it went; so fast that we became dizzy.

"Oh shit, how much did I have to drink?" I shouted over my shoulder to Fred.

As we rode, Fred thought he saw another person riding with us who was dressed like a clown. I didn't believe him until I saw another. The clown was holding an ax and his smile was upside-down. *That can't be right*.

When I turned to look for Fred, his clown had an ax, and it was dripping blood. Fred's headless body was sitting upright riding the carousel under what now seemed like garish light and distorted music.

"Fuck!" I cried out. As I leaned over to vomit, something hit me in the back of the head just as I blanked out.

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When I came to, I ran in the direction Sam and Sherri had headed. What I found was a sick tableau of the couple posed in the Tunnel of Love. Some psycho had torn their bodies apart and arranged them so each wore the other's parts. Hand in hand, whose I couldn't say, the car began it's journey into the dark tunnel while I turned and ran. Startled, I stopped when I saw yet another clown hanging from the rigging; tongue protruding, eyes budging, and arms hanging straight at his sides. He looked dead. What the fuck is going on in this place! He let out an ear piercing shriek that seemed to last forever. Then the maniacal laughter began, he wasn't dead, he was bait. Feeling a rope tighten on my own throat, I watched as he freed a sandbag that lowered him to the ground, and raised me up. Kicking and flailing, I saw the pack of clowns laugh as they cracked a few beers and toasted my imminent death.

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When they didn't check out on the morning of the third day, the desk clerk called the police and handed over their belongings.

"That's the third time this month, ya know," the deputy said. "Young people, they never learn follow the rules. Welp, I guess I'll put this in the lost and never found bin."

"Hey Kurt," He turned to see what the desk clerk wanted. "You forgot something." She laughed as she tossed him the clown mask he'd left behind.

#### **About the Author:**

Gloria Bobrowicz lives in the beautiful countryside of western New Jersey surrounded by farmland and vineyards. She has been a horror lover from an early age. During her free time she enjoys writing and reading whenever possible. Another passion and creative outlet she enjoys is crocheting afghans and making other homemade gifts for friends and family.

Facebook: Gloria Bobrowicz Instagram: @GBobrowicz

# In Tents Summer | Doug Hawley

"Hey babe, let's go camping this weekend. We're finally out of school for the summer and we need a break. I want us all alone for a big surprise. It's a secret location, so don't tell anyone what we are doing. The weather will be perfect, and it will be a great summer day." He had been hoping that she was willing to take the next step in their relationship after they had been going steady for two years since they'd been sophomores.

She asked "Is this place safe? I don't want to get lost or get eaten by some big wild animal."

"There is nothing to worry about, I've checked it out. You'll be safe. Unless you think I'm a big wild animal." She laughed "Or I am".

Later at night in the tent she said "Honey, I'm so glad you thought of this" as she caressed his side, "this works out great for me. I've got a surprise for you too." Her nails and toes turned into talons as he screamed."

When she was done feasting she pulled what was left of him into the ground to feed her friends and relatives.

#### **About the Author:**

The author is a former actuary who is just as boring as that sounds. He restarted writing when he was inspired by local author Cheryl Strayed's *Wild*. She has a lot to answer for. Despite a lack of talent or nuance he has published around five hundred 'things' in all the usual genres (and Monster Porn), the plurality of which landed in the UK.

Blog: Doug Hawley



# Yearning | Gregory L. Steighner

"Welcome to the Nye Family Get-Away." Delia proudly flung the door open to reveal a spacious cabin. Emelle followed Melinoe into the large central room with rustic décor.

Melinoe strolled into the center, spinning around once, "Not what I envisioned."

Emelle placed the suitcases on the floor as Delia turned on the lights, "It's a cabin in the woods."

"More like a lodge. This is huge." He said walking into the kitchen, disturbing the musky air.

Delia placed her hands on her slim waist, "My family settled this area in the early nineteenth century, building their fortune in coal and natural gas. My great-grandfather built this house in the nineteen-thirties. Since then it's gone through several renovations."

"So you're sure we have three weeks of alone time?" Emelle looked at his... They fled here to get away from their daily confusion, to work out what was their relationships.

Delia played with a control panel, and a humming spread through the room as the air-cooled, "Yes. I asked my family not to come, but Nathen will be here at the end of the month to work on his art. So, you guys want to pick out your rooms? There are two master bedrooms on this floor."

Melinoe shook her head, "No way girl, I'm not sleeping alone."

"The master bedroom then." Delia's smile gleamed from the room's far end. "Its king-sized bed can handle us, as can the shower and bath."

Melinoe gave her signature quirky smirk, as Emelle noticed a glossy magazine resting on the coffee table. A reprint of Amazing Tales from the mid-forties with a story about remembering Lemuria. Delia and Melinoe began to unpack the groceries, so he tossed the magazine back onto the table and to help them.

Delia's assertion proved correct, as they found the master shower quite enjoyable. The bed, however, would wait as they nested in the living room for the night. They spread several large comforters over the plush carpet, creating an altar toward the large flat-screen television. Emelle rested against the base of the sofa, Melinoe, and Delia on his right, slowly munching through assorted snacks while watching the classic Planet of the Apes.

As they watched Taylor being chased through the museum, Delia spoke up, "It would have been better if the humans were naked."

"They couldn't do that back then. I doubt that could be done today without triggering someone." Emelle timed taking a popcorn kernel out so he could graze Melinoe's hand.

"In the book, the humans were feral. It would make the concept more impactful. I would do it as an extra," she said. Delia gave her a side glace, prompting a response. "It could be an insightful experience."

Emelle loved her passion, "You crazy anthropologist."

She gave him a hard look with sharp green eyes, "Always. I fancied seeing myself displayed as the Dodge character in some future museum. A very fitting ending for an anthropologist."

Delia sat up, and looked up at the glass ceiling for a moment, she finally asked, "So, how are we going to outdo this?"

And so began the avalanche, Emelle thought, riding the slide, "Dad told me that it was okay to like bacon and sausage, and he would say eggs make a complete breakfast."

The girls knew that his father's passion for cooking included a full library of food sayings. Eating at the Ionnis homestead was an experience.

"Jenny was furious when I told her I was Bi. In the end, it was a good thing, it exposed her nightmarish jealousy." Delia edged forward, her hand stroking Melinoe's dark thigh.

"My family, it's going to be a real mess," She sighed a breath heavy with dread. "Mom and Dad, they figured us out long ago, but they won't bring it up until we do something."

Melinoe's Pitt jersey revealed her long legs intertwining with theirs. He couldn't imagine loving only Delia or Melinoe. They felt the same. He knew as the feeling came from the deepest part of their souls. It was at a paranormal con where they met, bonding at that very first moment.

Delia's fingers danced along Melinoe's side. His hand slipped beneath her shirt. Melinoe played with the rim of Delia's gray shorts. They knew each other's thoughts and feelings. In these moments, there weren't any words between them. One wasn't complete without the pair. A Duquesne boy with girls from Pitt and Chatham managed to join together.

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Dull red eyes stared through the ceiling glass down at Emelle. Trapped between Delia and Melinoe, he remained fixated on the shadow with a thin head hanging on a long neck. Immersed in quiet, Emelle gently nudged them. They didn't stir. Their faces were still, painted in blood flowing from open necks. He screamed without sound a fountain of blood.

"Wake up!" Delia pulled the blanket off of him, dancing around wearing only his shirt that flailed openly around her. "We got a full day to explore."

Melinoe drifted by sporting Delia's Chatham jersey that barely crossed over her hips. "Hey, you okay?" Scrambling for the bottoms of his sweats, Emelle spoke up, "Weird dreams."

Giving him a swift kiss with a smile, "Well, we'll make better dreams today."

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They came to the wilderness to explore their relationship without the world intruding its opinions on them. Devoid of craziness, Emelle felt their bond intensify. On Saturday evening, they sat around the fire pit talking about their careers and life after college.

"You honestly think we can stay together with our careers? Even if we pair up it would be difficult." Melinoe spoke her mind.

"If we continue onto grad school at our colleges that gives us two more years." Emelle countered, he noticed Delia's pensive quiet, "Delia, are you okay?'

"I had a weird thing happen near the slaughterhouse," She looked at them, the firelight caught her haunted eyes. "We're butchered, hanging by the feet, blood flowing over our faces, while deformed black geese feasted on our guts."

A chill spun on his spine, as Melinoe slowly said, "Delia, only a nightmare."

She rose like an unleashed demon, "It was real. I felt it all! The blood rushed down into my head. The blade sliced my skin. You both were there. I felt your pain, and you mine."

Emelle gazed into the flames as he confessed. "I dreamt last night that we were gladiators, fighting for beings with lanky black bodies. Their thin heads were on long necks with black eyes. We fought others, cruelly, then ourselves. They who watched savored our misery."

"We were in a cage, but not alone. Our naked bodies pressed against one another as we screamed. The creatures appraised us like lobsters and fish at Wholey's. They selected a teen girl. No person should make those sounds. We cried for her, for them to kill her. But the creatures wouldn't do it. They will not let us escape through death."

Melinoe curled up on the lounge chair. "We have shared dreams before."

"You did teach us how to use lucid dreaming." Delia tossed a block of wood into the fire. Sparks danced towards the sky. "Tomorrow, I'll take you to Shaver Falls for a swim."

"Sure," Emelle watched the rising flames consume the wood. In the crackling and popping, he heard whispers of their names. Compelled, he remained silent.

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"See, I told you so," Deli stepped onto a large rock in the pond. A slim waterfall cascaded over several ledges creating a spray over the pond. "The steady mist occurs only at high water. Let's go swimming!"

He watched Delia pull off her clothes to reveal a milky white body to the bright June sun. Melinoe cuffed his arm, smiled, and began to strip down. In under a minute, they were playing in the mist. It accommodated them well. Emelle kissed Melinoe, then turned her lips towards Delia. His hands glided over their bodies. He heard their hearts thundering. Their breathing bound them.

They fell in unison into a mad passion. Their desire and love concentrated into a feral runt. They joined with the surrounding forest creatures. On this afternoon, the trio discarded humanity for its true raw atavistic nature.

"Our clothes! They are gone!" Melinoe's terrified voice broke Emelle's slumber. Slowly, he regained his awareness.

He saw Delia scramble around the rocks. "Someone took our stuff!"

Stumbling over the rocks, he joined them in confusion. "We were right here. No one could just take our stuff without us seeing them!"

"They did." Delia's voice panicked.

"Look at these footprints." Melinoe knelt to the ground, her fingers traced slender prints clearly defined in the mud. "They went that way!"

The trail went into the forest, Emelle asked, "What's down that way?"

"The old mines in the valley. They were closed over a century ago." She turned to them. "They took my card. I can't unlock the lodge without it!"

His mind raced trying to solve this problem, "We have to find them! Without that card, we are screwed!" "What?" Melinoe shouted.

"He's right, Mel." Delia gazed fearfully at the path. "It will be night soon. The nearest neighbor is over ten miles away."

Melinoe crossed her arms, "Then what? How do we get our stuff back?"

Delia started on the trail, "We'll figure it out."

Without shoes, the harsh trail took its toll on their feet and made for a slow pace. Darkness dogged them. By the time they reached the valley floor, it was practically night. Delia rubbed her feet, bruised and bleeding. "Rest here, I'm going to check ahead."

Emelle and Melinoe dropped to the ground, exhausted. She gave a bitter chuckle, "Welcome to the Planet of the Apes."

"We'll get out of this."

"No, Emelle," She touched his chin, "We won't. I can feel it. Something has shadowed us this whole time."

He kept quiet to her correctness. A muffled sound broke in front of them. They rose up worried as Delia went in the same direction. They charged forward. At barely twenty feet, they found her.

"Delia!" They screamed together at the sight of her on the ground, wrapped in a glimmering capsule.

They tried to reach Delia, but the cocoon was hard as plastic. After a frantic effort, they gave up freeing her from the clear coffin. Melinoe futilely reached for Delia's face, then she whispered, "Look at her eyes. She is alive!"

He didn't notice before but Delia's were wide brown pools that looked at them with fear. "How can she be?" Melinoe froze, then looked around panicky. "We need to get the hell out here!"

"We won't leave Delia!" He protested as she pulled him up.

"Run! Get help!" Melinoe raced away.

Fear burned through his mind, he couldn't choose between staying or fleeing. Emelle stood as Melinoe slammed into something that killed her scream. She twisted around, fighting against the clear sheet that enveloped her body. In seconds the material hardened, and Melinoe dropped to the ground.

Emelle heard a muffled pop. He didn't struggle as the material encased him. He would stay with them until the end.

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"Melinoe! Delia!" He yelled.

"Here!" Delia stood beside him.

On his right, Melinoe whispered, "Are we dead?"

Emelle hesitated to answer, "I don't know."

They stood on raised daises in the center of a chamber illuminated by sterile lighting making it difficult to focus on the walls, the ceiling, and the floor. There were no shadows, but reflections upon reflections creating endless visages of the trio.

"Shit!" Melinoe yelped in agony, holding her right hand. "Something is surrounding us."

A shimmering curtain of light encased them. Emelle didn't see it until his eyes adjusted to perceive the shades of light. His skin tingled as the hairs perked up. He tried shaking off the growing dread, but he could sense it from Melinoe and Delia.

"Guys. Can you hear me?" Delia sounded confused and afraid.

Melinoe turned slightly to the left, "Yea."

He wondered why Delia asked that question, to which she responded, "We aren't talking."

In the same instant, the realization that they weren't speaking yet could be heard terrified them.

The shimmering turned to a dark purple with multi-colored sparks popping at them. A high-pitched whine erupted into the room, causing them to instinctively clasp their heads in a vain attempt to block the noise. It resonated within their minds, a painful download of information directly into their memory.

It ended abruptly, leaving them in a fugue state. Slowly, it began to clear into their memories. Delia's anguished fight with Jenny surfaced. Followed by Melinoe arguing with her parents about her college and career choices. The middle-school gang cornered Emelle in the boys' room, forcing his head into the toilet for a muddy swirly.

They shared memories as one. It went beyond their feelings for each other. Everything they had between them was stripped bare and spliced together.

"I can see through your eyes," Emelle said, or thought, it all jumbled together. He saw himself through both of their perspectives as they saw through his.

"There is more." Melinoe spoke, "The Dvergar."

A burst of information flooded their minds. Delia screamed out, "Close our eyes."

In unison, they jumped into the darkness. Within the void they found the Dvergar, thee dark dwarfs that dwell beneath the Earth, hidden from wild humans above, but their influence herded all of history. Masters of the mind, the Dvergar remained unseen from loathed humans, for the species was an admonition to their existence.

The trio shuddered as they learned how Dvergar husbanded humanity. Selecting thousands per season into captivity and dragged down into their domains. Vast cages of screaming flesh waiting for the abattoir. The dwarfs culled the special ones for entertainment, for they gouged on the feelings and emotions of their victims. Over the centuries, they bred humans for specific breeds. The most prized were those with the faint gift of telepathy.

The Dvergar fully domesticated those persons to be conduits to the masses of the surface herd. One thrall can dominate a person into performing any action the dwarfs desire. They relish the suffering of humanity.

Melinoe, Delia, and Emelle witnessed their own breeding. Their psychic connection exceeded their masters' expectations. Through them, the Dvergar would collapse civilizations; cities and governments would fail. All religions to be forsaken.

Collectively, the trio recoiled in the horrors they were shown. They would never be separated and never be alone. Emelle managed one final private thought and passed it to Delia and Melinoe.

They smiled.

### **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.

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### Atargatis | K.L. Lord

Moonlight glitters off the dark current, a sweet song rises from the depths. The crystalline notes resonate in my soul. She offers only death. Yet, I step across the tidal line in the sand. Water laps against my shins. My thighs. Her voice rings louder, clearer, the deeper I go.

"I can't," I say.

"Be my love, my pretty thing."

"Please." I try to step back.

Scales graze my bare flesh. A sob escapes my trembling lips. Her song lulls me. I open my eyes and see her for the first time. Beautiful and terrifying. My goddess of the deep.

### **About the Author:**

K.L. Lord is a queer author of horror and dark fantasy. She loves to explore twisted themes and dark realities. She loves all things ink, collects books, gothic and macabre art, and tattoos. When she's not working on her English Literature Ph.D., she's hanging out with her family watching horror movies and doing her own creepy crafting.

Website: Quirky Book Life
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# Cult of the Box



@CultoftheBox

### Beneath | Josephine Queen

The mountains steep the road in shadows. Cassie's reminded of ocean trenches—deep, dark, fathomless. She looks out the windshield, to where the road should be, but it's lost in the gloom. She feels strangely weightless, as if she's floating in water—an insignificance in the vastness. Nicky and George sit on either side of her, tethered into their car seats.

The boys are asleep and Cassie's off-duty—for now. No more rounds of 'I Spy.' The boys' mother hums along to the radio as she drives them through the gathering darkness. She sings slightly off-key and tendrils of anxiety caress Cassie's stomach. She never knows what to call the mother—the woman isn't much older than her, so calling her 'Mrs' seems too formal, but she's never offered her name. Cassie thinks of her as 'Morticia'—with long, dark hair and a sardonic smile. The father is a lurking presence even when he's not around, like now. He's meeting them in Greece which—Morticia keeps reassuring Cassie—is just a few days away. There's a drive through Austria and down the coast of Italy, then a boat. Cassie doesn't like boats.

The night blankets the land and they shelter in one of the villages nestled in the creases of the Alps.

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The highway moves them closer to the port. Occasional glimpses of the Adriatic do nothing to calm Cassie's growing unease. She grew up far from the ocean and all she remembers of her one trip to the seaside as a child is being stranded on a causeway in a storm, terrified that something would emerge from the water and devour her. Now the blue sea twinkles in the morning sun, the light caught up in the edges of the small waves rippling to shore.

Morticia is talking in a mixture of loud German and Greek—alternately explaining the day's plans to the boys and arguing with her husband's tinny voice rattling from her phone's speaker. The baby, Nicky, gurgles at the dust motes drifting across the back seat, but George—a serious five-year-old, who speaks Greek, German, and English—is attempting to translate the conversation for Cassie.

"We're going to be late for the boat," he says.

They are late. But not enough to avoid the journey. Cassie looks out at the port as they crash through potholes and over curbs to the ferry. They're directed into the hull by a uniformed worker. It's difficult to see the water beyond the boat and Cassie has the overwhelming feeling that the leviathan she feared as a child has returned to swallow her whole.

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As Cassie lies on the bottom bunk in the narrow cabin, she wonders at her decision to leave home. Nannying abroad seemed the easiest way to escape and this job fell into her lap. The family wanted a young girl with no ties. Cassie never questioned their leniency, but now she wishes she had. She likes the boys—they're easy and, while the older one seems burdened with worries beyond his five years, fun to be around. Cassie wishes she'd been able to get to know them better before this trip. She didn't have time to find a sim card so she could let her family know where she was. Morticia promised to make it a priority when they get to Athens. But Athens is still far away, first they're spending time on the coast.

Nicky's sleeping while George plays with his action figures on the upper bunk. Cassie wanted to explore the boat, but the mother insisted she stay below deck with the boys. So Cassie still hasn't seen the water. The cabin's windowless. But she can hear the ocean stroking the sides of the boat, the impossible depth of the water below. She imagines things floating through its gray-green twilight world, imagines limbs reaching for her. She gasps awake. Nicky's still sleeping, a puddle of drool collecting below his open mouth.

"George?" Cassie whispers into the stillness of the cabin. A snore erupts from the top bunk.

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Cassie hadn't given much thought to the naps the boys took during the day and the night's fitful. They have boundless energy and being in the cabin isn't helping to alleviate any of it. Morticia stopped by at dinnertime with a tray of food and a warning to Cassie to stay put. 'I don't want to lose you,' she said. 'It's a large boat.' Then she closed the door, shutting them in their cell for the night.

The boys eventually drift off in the early morning. Cassie feels suddenly alone and vulnerable. She hears creaks from the corridor, as if someone's walking and trying to be quiet about it. Muffled voices drift from the cabins surrounding theirs, hurried footsteps echo above and below, and there's the ever present enormity of the sea. She drifts into uneasy dreams, but wakes gulping in mouthfuls of air, as if she's been submerged in her sleep.

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They reach Greece the following afternoon. Cassie finally sees the ocean—a blanket of blue. The ferry passes islands dotted with white buildings and comes to port on the mainland. Morticia rushes everyone into the car and they drive off the boat into town. The father's waiting for them outside a waterfront restaurant. They sit at a table shadowed by citrus trees. The parents resume their argument and Cassie shepherds the boys into their seats. They're joined, eventually, by cousins, an uncle, an aunt, and a grandfather. They kiss the boys on their cheeks, hug the parents, and welcome Cassie to the family. Then lunch is served.

As the food's brought to the table, clouds roll in. Cassie rubs her arms against the sudden chill, but no one else seems bothered. The sea reflects the dark sky, but Cassie thinks maybe the sky reflects the sea.

"Eat, eat," the grandfather gestures at Cassie. "Use your hands," he shouts, his lips greasy from the oily food. "Like with your women."

Cassie pushes the food around her plate. She glances around the table. George is looking at her from his chair opposite. He's eating, but it seems as if he doesn't want to. He didn't eat breakfast either. Maybe he's coming down with something, Cassie thinks. The waiters return with a large platter. A cheer erupts from the adults—it's the main dish, apparently. Cassie frowns as they place it on the table. It's a many tentacled thing—gray, with red pustules along its limbs. Cassie thinks it must be octopus, although she's never seen one this close. She thinks one of the tentacles moved, but it must be the way it glistens. Why are there so many tentacles? More than eight, surely. But one large, oval head—its beak lying motionless against the plate, black fluid seeping from it.

The grandfather stands, taking a large knife from his belt as he does. He sheers one of the tentacles from the body and places it on Cassie's plate.

"Eat," he encourages her. "It's good. Good, yes."

He cuts more tentacles from the beast and serves them to the family. They sit, forks in hand, smiling Cassie's way. She realizes, sickeningly, they're waiting for her to take the first bite. But how to eat octopus? She picks up her knife and fork and saws at the rubbery appendage. Having loosened a small piece from the narrow end, she puts it in her mouth and closes her eyes, trying not to focus on the consistency. There's a burst of garlic, but not enough to mask the odiferous flavor beneath. A cylindrical object detaches itself from the piece of tentacle and works its way toward the back of Cassie's mouth. It feels like an egg—a jello-like casing housing something indescribable. She gags and spits the egg-like thing into her napkin. No one notices. They're eating as if ravenous. Cassie places her napkin into her backpack and watches in horror as the others slurp and tear at the tentacles. Black ink drips from Morticia's mouth, grease pools on the father's chin, the red pustules burst and yellow fluid runs onto the tablecloth—like yolk. George sits silently beside Morticia, still watching Cassie with those deep, dark eyes. His mother nudges him.

"Eat," she says and pushes a forkful of octopus into his mouth. Cassie sees tears run down George's cheeks and wants to leave with him.

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The drive to the family's home takes another hour. The father maneuvers the car through the darkening day, the boys are awake but sit silently beside Cassie. The mother watches out of her window, a smile playing around her lips. They reach the house as the sun falls into the gray water, turning it a dark red where it touches the waves. Cassie's room is at the front of the house, across from the boys' bedroom. A camp bed has been set out on the bare floor. Cassie sighs and drops her backpack on it. Her door's closed, but she can hear Morticia rallying the boys to bed. The father is talking in a low murmur, probably on the phone. Cassie opens her backpack and takes out the napkin from lunch. She sits down and unfolds it slowly. The thing she took out of her mouth is egg-shaped. A gelatinous globule, with a shadow twitching and writhing inside. Cassie gasps and drops it on the floor. The egg splits open and the thing inside skitters onto the concrete. Cassie stomps her booted foot onto it. She covers her mouth with her hands, a squeal trapped behind them. She thinks about how close she came to eating the egg. She thinks about the family ravenously devouring their own slices of tentacles and wonders if the eggs were in all of them. She lifts her foot and crouches to get a closer look at the thing that came out of the egg. It has at least a dozen string-like arms; like a grotesque spider. Cassie's stomach churns. She finds a piece of wood and scrapes the thing from the floor and throws it out the window. Then she closes and latches the window against the shushing of the ocean and the whispering of the breeze through the citrus trees.

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Cassie wakes in the dark, night engulfs the house and she can hear the sea as it sighs across the beach just yards away. The house itself is silent. She creeps from her room.

Shadows fall across the floor and walls—many-limbed things, that Cassie assures herself are the lemon trees beyond the windows. There's a sound from one of the other bedrooms, a dragging, wet sound, as if someone is pulling a large water-drenched sack across the floor. She stands still in the hall, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the gloom. The

sound comes again and Cassie steps back into the shadow, reaching out for the door to her bedroom, ready to shut herself in if someone comes out of the other room. The house falls silent again, as if it's listening. Cassie holds her breath. She tiptoes softly across the hall and eases into the boys' bedroom. She can see in the moonlight that falls across George's bed, that it's empty. Cassie frowns and steps over to the baby's crib. Nicky is awake and standing. He holds onto the crib rail and when his dark eyes find Cassie, he holds his arms up for her. Cassie picks him up and turns to look around the room. George isn't there, but there's a trail of something from his bed to the door. She takes the baby with her and kneels to get a closer look. She's afraid that it's blood—in the moonlight it's hard to make out. It looks like water, as if something wet was dragged from the bed and across the room. It leads out into the hallway.

The baby is strangely silent, as if he knows to be quiet. Cassie holds him close and follows the trail through the house. The parents' room is empty also. The same wet trails leading from each side of their bed. Cassie sees something from the corner of her eye. She backs up to the wall where the shadows are deepest and peers out of the room. Something gray slithers along the hall and into the family room. The sound comes again, this time louder and closer. Cassie whimpers and closes her eyes. What is it? She keeps seeing the black ink pouring from the grandfather's mouth at lunch, the cousins ripping into the tentacles with their teeth, the blank look of the mother as she chewed. Nicky didn't eat any of the main course. Cassie spat hers out. She remembers the way George looked as Morticia forced him to eat. Something's happened to the ones that ate.

The front door of the house seems so far away, but the windows are too small and high up to reach. Whatever's in the family room lies between Cassie and the back door, so her only way out of the house is through the front. She stands, shivering in the shadows with Nicky for what seems like forever, gathering the courage to run. She can hear the sea and, closer than that, something that belongs beneath its unforgiving surface. Something waiting for her in the darkness. She creeps to the bedroom door and looks out into the hall again. All she can see are the shadows. She takes several breaths and holds Nicky tight. She runs for the door, realizing too late that it's locked and she needs both hands to undo the deadbolt and turn the key. She puts Nicky down and he immediately starts wailing.

"No, no," whispers Cassie. "Shhh. It's okay." The key's stuck. There's a shushing from the family room, the dragging noise quickens and Cassie turns to see gray arms, red pustules, impossible things coming for her. She fumbles with the key and slides the deadbolt, grabs Nicky and, pushing the door open with her shoulder, rushes out into the night.

The sea bumps up against the front yard of the house, but the backyard is overgrown, a tangle of weeds and shrubs, so Cassie heads there, away from the water. She can hear the dragging noise entering the night. She crouches in the weeds with Nicky, hushing and rocking him quiet. She peers over the overgrown plants and sees those gray tentacles—thousands of them—reaching from the water.

Sunrise seems hours away, but light starts creeping across the land soon after Cassie hides in the garden. She wonders what it means for the creatures lurking in the sea. She doesn't know where she is or how to get back to the ferry. So she sits and waits, hoping, like the leviathan from her nightmares, that they can't bear the sunlight. Maybe she'll have a chance to get back home again, even if it means returning to the sea.

### **About the Author:**

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

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### Black Sorceress | Jonathan Worlde

The White Knight calls upon the Black Sorceress, seeking a spell to vanquish the Red Dragon and win the Virgin Princess. Overcome by her seductive charms, he moves to embrace her.

Her Egyptian cat hisses. She blocks his arms.

"No, my Darling. Though I am tempted to feel your Manhood, the Act would rob me of my Powers."

Trembling with lust, he falls to his knees: "I beg you, I'll pay anything, even renounce the Princess."

She seems to pity him. "How much?"

"One thousand gold denaris."

Turning him into an orange Newt: "The Red Dragon offered me twice that."

### A Romantic Interval | Jonathan Worlde

I was sitting on a park bench when a young woman sat beside me, favoring me with a coquettish glance. Lovely pale face, dark flowing hair. I was lonely—and interested.

Within moments her soft, voluptuous hand rested on my crotch, fingering my zipper. No one in sight. What could be the harm in it?

As clouds thickened, her hand transformed to skeletal phalanges with shreds of decaying skin and maggots. Her face became mummified skin, a gaping cadaverous smile.

I returned the smile, proceeding to snap off and devour the bony finger-joints one-by-one, just the way I like them.

### Gee, What Big Feet You Have | Jonathan Worlde

The boy inspected tracks in the mud along the riverbank, at least a foot-and-a-half long, certain he'd found genuine Bigfoot prints.

He followed the path of the prints, ducking under branches, jumping logs, visualizing his prey—a big, skanky, hairy monster. The tracks described an arc to his left, and he continued to follow until he'd come full circle back to the creek. Now the tracks were joined by his own sneaker prints.

Then a third set of prints, double the size of the others. Something following him. He turned at the sound of branches smashing right behind him—screamed.

### **About the Author:**

Jonathan Worlde is the fiction byline of Paul Grussendorf. Jonathan Worlde's stories are published in many literary journals, including *The Raven Review, Mystery Tribune, Trembling with Fear, The Sirens Call* and *Daily Science Fiction*. Paul is also a traditional country blues performer under the stage name Paul the Resonator, whose CD is **Soul of a Man**.

### Seeding Death | Sue Renol

This crop grows with the passage of time, the heat of the sun, rain from passing clouds. Seemingly innocent, red flowers populate this field. Yet, they are not of nature. I've planted them with hands of wrath, tilled the soil with ill intent. They shall grow, just as any other, but upon their blooming, my will shall be released. Their pleasant scent will be inhaled, enjoyed by those who inhabit this land. But their beauty will be a deceit, death wrapped in a coat of silk. Carried on their aroma will be the pestilence to end all who walk on legs, live within flesh. Their demise will be quick and unexpected. My growth will spread, consume all within its path. My precious blossoms will cleanse the Earth of the disease which infects its once vibrant exterior.

### **About the Author:**

Sue Renol is a dark and speculative fiction writer who makes her home in the North Eastern region of the United States. An avid reader, Sue finds herself living a quiet life with her four-footed roommates.

### Staring Contest | Charis Negley

It began with a single photograph.

The picture had been hanging on the wall for a decade, but when Gray passed it going up the stairs one particular evening, the hairs on his arm stood on end.

His parents and his brother smiled back at him, but where Gray's image should have been, a figure with large, black eyes that consumed most of its face stared back, empty but for pinpricks of white in the center. It wasn't smiling, lips drawn tight in a thin, chapped line.

No one else saw what he did. When he invited his parents over for dinner, asking them if they saw anything funny about the picture, they shook their heads and smiled, complimenting their younger images.

Gray couldn't stand the sight of it after a week. It wasn't his mind playing tricks. He would've come to his senses eventually. He removed the framed photo from the wall, revealing the faded wallpaper underneath. He shoved it under the couch, where he wouldn't have to look at it anymore. By that point, it felt less like he was the one looking at it, and more like it was the one looking at him.

An entire, blessed day passed where he didn't have that creepy thing hanging in his stairwell. He considered what he could hang in its place as he heated a microwavable dinner and plopped himself in front of the television that evening.

The next morning, as he was brewing coffee, something caused him to pause. The uncanny feeling of eyes on one's back. The tingle of unease.

Gray turned around, horror encasing him as his gaze fell on the photos hanging on the living room wall.

One was untainted, a happy picture of his parents grasping the hands of him and his brother when they were very young, swinging them up into the air.

But Gray wasn't in the other two pictures anymore. Where his face had once smiled back lay the figure, dark with black, gaping sockets for eyes, white pinpricks that held no life sewn into the center.

He was too terrified to move. Was this some sort of prank? Perhaps his brother had come in during the night and—No. That was ridiculous. They were thirty years old. Far too old to waste time on mindless, inconvenient tricks.

But then, what was happening? Gray had seen enough movies to know that this was the part where the dumb white guy would ignore things, or, if he was at least a little smart, consider calling an exorcist.

An exorcist? Gray shook his head. What was he thinking? There was no ghost, no demonic thing in his house. Only pictures. That didn't mean anything. He wasn't being threatened. And there was probably a logical explanation that he just hadn't reached yet. That was all.

He hated the pictures now, but he was too afraid to take them down, fearing that the next day, there would just be three more photos with the thing staring back at him.

Gray spent the day pointedly avoiding the living room, leaving for work and going straight to the kitchen when he returned home, keeping his gaze away from the walls.

The next morning, Gray walked past pictures corrupted with the thing's image. It was no surprise to him. All he had to do was ignore them, and—

Wait. It was in more of the pictures than it had been in the day before. To Gray's growing horror, as he paced the house, he couldn't find his face in any photograph. Only the shadowy fiend of a thing. Even his license, which he slipped out of his wallet, bore its unsettling, empty face.

"Well," he said, heaving a sigh as he tried to find the silver lining. There were no more pictures for it to hide in. It couldn't get any worse.

The thing must've taken that thought as a challenge, for the following day, Gray could have sworn it moved closer. In each picture, it had crept nearer. Gray couldn't stare back at any image long without getting a headache.

He made up his mind. He was going to burn each photograph in his house. Every photo he would rid himself of, and his passport and license would be shipped to his friend's house for the time being.

For the first time in years, Gray lit and stoked the fireplace, watching the flames lick the stone. Removing each photo from its frame (including the one shoved underneath the couch), he fed them to the hungry fire, staring at the distorted face each time as it disintegrated into ashes.

The action felt freeing. He could not be terrorized any longer. Apart from himself, there was no other image of Gray left in the house.

The next week passed in relieving peace. Nothing peculiar happened. Gray's days were mundane once more.

He only began to feel ill at the end of the week. Gray felt something like the flu coming on, so he spent his evening on the couch, eating instant ramen and ginger ale, staring blankly at a quiz show on TV before releasing himself to bed.

After taking medication, Gray huddled under his comforter, falling immediately to sleep.

He was frighteningly alert during his dreams, at first seeing himself. However, Gray watched his copy morph into the dark fiend haunting his pictures. Terror filled him until he felt his heart would burst. He thought he had rid himself of that monster.

He shot up, skin breaking out into a cold sweat as he was thrust into wakefulness. He gasped, chest heaving as he desperately tried to fight back the nightmarish images that crowded his head.

He opened his eyes to something even worse.

Instead of his face staring back from the mirror, it was the figure. Voids of pitch gazed back, nothing and everything all at once.

Shaking, his heart creeping up into his throat, Gray raised his arm, expecting his demonic counterpart to reflect the motion, but it sat still.

Watching.

"What do you want?" Gray asked, his voice hoarse and trembling.

It was silent, but Gray knew. If he looked away, everything would be over. It was here for him, stealing every image of himself until it possessed the real thing.

"Leave me alone," he croaked out, knuckles white against his bedsheets. "Leave me the hell alone."

It didn't move, and though it sat frozen, Gray knew it was not confined to the stillness. It was drinking him in, feature by feature, until it had everything for itself.

Gray was rigid, captured in terror as he looked back at the hellish thing until they were engaged in a sort of perverse staring contest. He didn't want to blink. He didn't want to move.

Its gaze penetrated his very soul, and Gray's chest grew tight, eyes watering. His breath grew shallow, and his heart stayed solidly stuck in the back of his throat. "Go away," he attempted one last time, his voice sounding foreign even to him.

And then it moved.

It jerked its arm to the side, and Gray screamed as his arm was forced into the same position. His limbs felt like they had been skewered with cold strings, jolting him about like a puppet as they mimicked the figure's spastic movements.

The shadowy demon wrenched its fiendish body forward, throwing Gray to the end of the bed. Closer to the mirror. To the thing.

"No, no, no, no!" He fought to regain control of his body, but he was held captive by the monster in the mirror, the one who had come for his face.

He screamed as the figure leaped to the front of the mirror, thrusting Gray against the glass. A sharp cry of terror ripped from his throat as his face was forced against the figure's, and his eyes met immediately with the holes of emptiness in the creature's face, the vacant pits that sought to be filled with Gray until there was nothing left.

Tears rolled down his cheeks as his stomach churned in agonized horror. "Please, please," he begged the monster, his voice cracking as it broke off into a sob.

And then he felt what it was like to have his very face stolen piece by piece.

### **About the Author:**

Charis Negley is from Wilmington, Delaware, currently studying at Taylor University in Upland Indiana to get her bachelor's degree in professional writing. Besides writing, editing and all things grammar are her true passions. On a typical day, you'll find her reading a novel and trying a new brew of coffee.

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### **Destroying Angels** | *Rivka Jacobs*

Mary tried to hop up using her left foot, her right knee as high as her chin. She grasped the exposed roots of a toppled, dead pine tree. Kate, already scrambling over the bare, rounded lip of damp sandstone above, glanced down. "Don't pull on that," she called to her seven-year-old younger sister.

"I can't go no higher," Mary whimpered.

Kate dropped and lay flat on her belly, peering back down over the ledge she'd just overtaken. "Yes you can, Mary. Put your hands on those rocks there and pull yourself up at the same time as you jump."

Mary wiped her forehead with muddy fingers and followed her sister's instructions. The mountain flank wasn't high, but it seemed like Mt. Everest to her. She propelled herself upward. She landed half on top of Kate, who laughed. "It ain't funny," Mary muttered. She drew herself into a sitting position and checked her knee. The denim was torn and there was a little blood. She tried not to cry, her face scrunching up with the effort.

"Oh come on," Kate said as she sprang to her feet. "Mommy wants us to find a very particular kind of mushroom and we have to be back by dark. It only grows on this side of Hinkle Mountain." She extended her hand.

Mary gripped it, pulled herself unsteadily to her feet. "I don't like mushrooms," she grumbled. "They're all nasty and ugly."

"Some of them are good, some of them are bad, kinda like people."

Kate soon found an overgrown path that wound higher at a more gentle angle, and eventually they reached a narrow meadow, at the far side of which hovered dark, tall, mature hemlocks and oaks..

"Come on," Kate said as she beckoned her sister and led the way across the grassy stretch. They paused at the edge of the ancient woods.

Mary panted, her face red and smeared with grime, her light-brown ponytail spotted with pieces of bark and leaves. "I'm not goin' in there."

"Come on!" Kate shoved the younger girl between her small shoulder blades. "We gotta sing the special song when we pick 'em, too. 'Destroy my angel, my pure angel,'" she sang softly, her eyes half closed in pleasure. "'Some are strong, others weak, seek, seek, seek....'"

Mary felt a flutter in her chest. Her legs rippled. "I don't like that song, it's creepy," she whined. "Why are they called 'Destroying Angels' anyway?"

They threaded their way around huge, gnarly trunks, pushed through brambles and brush. "Because they're all white and innocent looking but they kill people. The young ones even have veils like they're goin' to their first communion." Even though she was only thirteen, Kate had been hunting mushrooms in the mountains near Richwood for as long as she could remember. "Mommy depends on me to do this right." She slowed a little, halted. She kicked around at some half-rotten old leaves that filled cavities close to bulging, knobby oak roots.

"Why does Mommy want them this time?" Mary asked as she pressed behind her sister.

"They're for holy work. For the holiest of sacrifices. I told Mommy to give you this chance, that you'd step up. You need to help me search. They look a lot like button mushrooms, or horse mushrooms. The ones Mommy wants only grow here around the biggest, oldest hardwoods. These ones are special." She squatted suddenly and began flicking and whisking forest floor debris with both hands, palms flat, fingers splayed.

Mary watched Kate as she worked; the way her flannel shirt was tucked into her trim jeans and didn't come loose, the way her athletic shoes—even after the climb—seemed like new, the way her long, shiny, red hair was still neatly tied back. "I can't ever be like you. I won't ever be like you," she moaned, studying her scuffed and mud-caked Nikes, her stained and ripped jeans. "Mommy is always so angry at me. I fail every test she gives me. I hate the bugs and creepy plants and dried, dead things she keeps in her jars and baskets." Her face puckered and tears swelled along her lower lids, overflowed, tracked over her dirty cheeks. She sniffed, wiped her nose with a sleeve.

Kate stopped what she was doing, shook her head. "Mary, this is important. You have to stomp out sentimentality—emotion—like you were trying to put out a fire. Mommy has high standards. I can talk to her, I might be able to convince her but you need to step up ... now. Please, Mary ... focus. Help me look for the 'Angels,' okay?"

In the high distance, a lone bird trilled but no other sound broke the midday stillness—no mountain breeze rustled the leaves, not even a summer insect buzzed.

"I don't want to touch them mushrooms," Mary wailed. She took a few steps backward.

Kate rose slowly to her feet and turned, glared impatiently but then her features softened, melted into an expression of deep sadness. Her eyes also filled. The sisters remained locked in these positions for several minutes before Kate broke away, nodded. "It's okay, honey. It's okay. You just don't have the inclination for Mommy's work. I

hoped ... I thought maybe...." Kate settled once more in a kneeling, almost prayerful pose, her hands clasped together in front of her. She hesitated, her shoulders drawn, then squared herself, straightened with resolution. She began to sing as she carefully picked each chosen mushroom. "'Destroy our angel, our pure angel, some are strong, others weak, seek, seek the holy offering of the meek..."

### **About the Author:**

Rivka Jacobs lives in West Virginia. She was born in Philadelphia and grew up in South Florida. She has sold stories to such publications as The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction and the Women of Darkness anthology. In the last few years she's placed stories with The Sirens Call. The Literary Hatchet, Tell-Tale Press, and the More Alternative Truths anthology. Rivka most recently worked as a psychiatric nurse.

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### Goodbye Big Toe | JB Corso

Angelina blinked goodbye to the big toe recently cut free from her left foot. You were my favorite big toe, she mused. The frantic critters shuttled away the digit within their extended, orange-red mandibles. Seems like this one's going to meet my right foot's toes. She didn't realize the entire right foot had become amputated until her stump caught the new day's summer sunlight. She sat propped up against a low boulder facing the cave's entrance. Others like her remained still in all manner of disrepair within the thin meadow between the large rocks and extended stone outcropping. At least I'm sitting up for this. She watched a woman laying on the ground with her arm being systematically separated at the shoulder. We've become living cars being stripped for parts.

The five-legged critters scampered away with each person's severed limbs into the darkness. I hate the non-stop chomping sounds, like wood planks constantly being under a saw. Not a drop of blood trialed across the ground. Their mandibles must use some type of anti-coagulant. More importantly, they're using some sort of local anesthetic, because otherwise the pain would've been unbearable.

She shuddered with abject terror at her likely end. First, the fingers and toes become cut off one by one. The hands and feet are followed by the legs and arms. Angelina watched the industrious creatures come together to drag the living torsos deep into the cave's darkness. I hate not knowing for sure what happens next. Angelina had read that people waited limbless on the cave floor as their guts became warm larval sacks. I'm going to be chewed from the inside out as their pupa's first meal. Not a fucking pleasant way to die.

Angelina wondered about the last feast that sat idle in her stomach. She thought about the raw egg and moldy bread from the Clear Zone farmhouse. Not so clear of the scentless neurotoxin. I dreaded being stuck against the ground. And that god-awful odor I began secreting. Who could have imagined that attracting them? I should've followed the old drunk's advice and stayed to the road. Maybe I would've made it to my family instead of stuck as a buffet. Now, all I can do is think, breath, and blink as they cut me apart.

Angelina's heart pounded as more crept over her. Their tiny webbed feet shuffled across her hand causing her skin to itch. A pair of workers began chewing at the base of her left pinkie. *Chomp, chomp, chomp. I hate that sound.* She watched as they methodically gnawed through the bone. Her tiniest finger bent backwards towards her face. The digit detached with sunlight shining off her blue nail. She cringed at seeing the sealed, fleshy end. Angelina blinked goodbye to her pinkie as the looters carried it past others coming for her.

### **About the Author:**

JB Corso is a health care professional who has worked with the mentally ill and geriatric populations for the last 20 years. He appreciates time with his children, writing, and pondering existential dread. He's a veteran with an overseas deployment as an international peacekeeper. He lives with his significant other and enjoys afternoon drives while listening to background Grateful Dead songs.

Twitter: @realJBCorso

### Fire-Mania | Corinne Pollard

Bored. That was his excuse for going.

I knew about the abandoned cabin up in the mountains, rotting, cobwebbing, and sinking into the earth itself like a gigantic foot was squishing it. Their clubhouse.

He said Dino, the leader, brought the lighter, flicking it open and closed every few seconds.

He said they were just messing around, burning scraps, scorching the walls. He liked how pretty the embers were and how powerful it was.

Yet when I asked about how he ended up trapped, dying in smoke-he was tight-lipped.

Well, we had an eternity for the truth to come out.

### Fractured | Corinne Pollard

Utter it three times and you'll be one of us.

Marissa stared into the bathroom mirror; her copy blinked back. She desired to be their friend so badly. She knew it was foolish. Perhaps 'idiot' ought to be tattooed on her forehead.

Desire won and she said it.

Cracks zigzagged across; her mouth twisted and her eyes multiplied.

Pieces fell down into the sink. Not from the mirror, but her own mouth.

The crunchy acid bathed her tongue. The shards poured into her warm gums to be buried inside.

She coughed, but the shards stormed her throat.

It was slit.

### Sea Wasp | Corinne Pollard

They appeared out of the gloom.

Translucent bells aimed at him; a lone scuba diver. Usama's stomach dropped. He was boxed in. He couldn't swim away. He prayed to Allah desperately.

Their squared bells were nothing to be afraid of, but Usama saw eyes. Only one of their species had eyes. A human killer.

They didn't float. They sped, hunting with those clusters of alien-like peepers.

Bootlace tentacles dangled behind, tangling Usama up in their nets.

Unimaginable pain electrified every nerve, paralyzing his limbs, stuttering his heart.

Blood circulation stopped. His brain cried out for oxygen.

The gloom swallowed him.

### Tomb Tippler | Corinne Pollard

Moss grew on top. A brilliant pillow!

Avery's intoxication made him a genius. He laid on the table tomb, ankles crossed, and swigged from his bottle. His thoughts mushed together as giggles spilled.

Cherry vodka revisited his throat. Gulping it back down while keeping a locked mouth was no easy task, but Avery managed, allowing only burps to escape.

Unknown bones raced across his jaw with an unnatural swiftness. The fingers' flesh-peels puckered his cheeks. Rot slid up his nostrils. The phalanges dug, hooking themselves raw meat to devour below.

Rapid bites tore, Avery screamed, and the vodka bottle survived.

### **About the Author:**

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

Twitter: @CorinnePWriter

### Faces in the Water | Rohini Mori

From a distance, Khia can see the old boat's prow rising from the mist like a weathered, horned ghost. Past the trees that stand sentinel in the wood, the lake undulates in a shimmering turquoise dream.

She shivers. Above her, the morning is as soft as a newborn; skies pink-cheeked with sunrise, giant milk-pale clouds, a breeze that gusts like an infant's first breath. The air is shrouded with mist, with the first kiss of summer that promises aching blue skies and searing, saccharine heat. It is a season for lovers and friends but Khia hurries down the hill alone.

Her bike, abandoned at the entrance of the old service road, spins its wheels in a clump of wildflowers already crushed underfoot. At her memories' press, Khia stifles the scream that trembles in her throat.

Head hunkered down, she races into the surrounding woods. The air is brisk and biting, the treetops still canopied with faint ribbons of mist. The wind whips in her ears; goosepimples run riot over her skin. Khia's skirt flutters she crashes through the trees.

Around the bend, blue water grows brighter against the unfolding day, and this time, Khia doesn't muffle the scream that tears from between her teeth. The sound rips through the woods; red and raw and bleating.

Khia runs faster. Past the fragrant pines limning the little cabin in the woods, past the old hutch where no rabbits have lived since the neighbours moved last fall, past the crushing memories of summers long gone, Khia runs and runs until her heart threatens to explode.

Goddamn you, Michelle.

The words flit into Khia's throat even as her grief forces them back down. Through a gap in the trees, the lake comes into sharp, shimmering focus.

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By the time she arrives at the water's edge, pearls of sweat have started to glisten on Khia's skin. Waves, like so many hungry little mouths, lap at the shore's sandy lip.

About a hundred metres in, Khia sees her parents' boat. It is just as she remembers: its paint long whittled and chipped, the once-sterling shine of its bow weathered to a dull, dusty gray. It drifts, tethered to a shambling pier that casts its rickety wooden bones into the still, shining water.

Khia kicks off her shoes and wades into the shallows. Ripples spread quicker than a smile across the lake's placid surface. Khia's skirt clings to her thighs, the lap of water keeping time with her chattering teeth.

She wades to her left, towards the narrow embankment that rises in a tangle of wildflowers and grass under an old willow tree. Pulling herself up, Khia sinks her toes into the soft, moist earth. She takes her time wringing out her skirt as she stands unmoving in the willow's quiet green.

The old tree stands hunched over the ramshackle pier. A gentle breeze winnows through its leaves, its fronds trailing the ground like bright jewelled tears. Khia is reminded of her sister's hair, a graceful brown drift down her slender, curving back.

"Goddamn you, Michelle." Khia tastes her sister's name in the choking aftermath of her rage.

She raises a hand to her head. Her hair clings to her skull, the cropped brown tendrils curling across her nape, matted with sweat from her run down to the lake.

Abandoning the comfort of the old willow's shade, Khia steps cautiously onto the pier. Its boards creak, disgruntled under the assault of her pale, bare feet.

Khia clambers into the boat. It rocks from side to side, and her nerves jangle at its wild, unsteady motion. She tugs at the ropes that keep it tethered to the pier. Unmoored, the boat begins its long, slow drift across the water. In the morning's calm light, the lake lies as silent as a ghost, its face mirror-smooth in the rising sun's glow.

For a while, Khia is content to drift with the boat, an aimless wraith treading pale, unmoving water. On either side of her, the morning unfolds in a pastel dream: emerald leaves reflected upon the diamond-bright water, larkspur blooming in periwinkle bliss. Ignoring the graceful landscape, Khia fixes her gaze on the horizon, on the pale sliver of sun that dances between lake and sky.

Her mind floats to summers past as the day begins to brighten. She thinks of languid afternoons with her parents and sister, of late night campouts behind their cabin in the woods. Picnics and roasting s'mores and making memories—whether Khia wanted to or not. Lakeside vacations have been a Marshall tradition ever since she and Michelle were five. Each summer had felt eternal; eight weeks of sun and fun drawn out in bright, burning boredom.

Khia trembles as she shifts in the boat. Not all of it had been unpleasant, and she sighs as she remembers pleasures all her own: late night swims in moonstruck waters, strolls for two in sunset woods, kisses stolen under the old willow tree.

Her smile disappears as her memories turn dark. Sisters share—that's how the old adage goes. From the skirt that clings sodden to her skin to the bike she'd abandoned at the foot of the hill, there was little Khia had that Michelle didn't claim as her own.

Khia thinks of her sister's hair whipping in the wind, her face wreathed in rapture as she'd kissed their neighbours' son. Her passion had rivalled Khia's own, her chocolate gaze melting into Jason's hazel one. Khia had watched them both from the shore, her heart breaking even as her blood raged.

Sisters share—oh, how bitter the truth! From boys and kisses to the hair and faces they wore.

"Goddamn you, Michelle," Khia mutters again.

Above her, the skies flicker into life, blistering their edges in the ascending sun's glare. Khia touches the hair at her nape but no phantom braid dangles in its place.

Past the horizon, the lake's opposite shore floats into view. Against a backdrop of towering pines, Khia sees thatched wooden cabins huddled like children against the morning's misty cold.

Less than a hundred feet separate her from the shore, but still, Khia cannot bring herself to look into the water. Instead, she buries her face in her hands and swallows her sigh.

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It had been a beautiful August evening, the perfume of marshmallows thick in the air. The skies rippled with stars, each a diamond studded in the velvet fabric of night.

Khia had raced down to the pier. Her heart thrummed as Michelle dogged her heels, her pleas for Khia to stop falling on deaf ears. The rickety old pier had trembled under the sisters' weight. Its bones sung in protest, the slap of their feet loud upon its ageing face.

Goddamn you, Michelle.

Stripping to her underwear, Khia had cannonballed into the freezing cold lake. Its sting was welcome against her burning skin. She'd set a firm pace for the middle of the lake, her strokes cleaving water with effortless grace. Michelle, uncertain, had followed in Khia's furious wake.

Lips, hands, tongues, teeth... shaking off the image of her sister kissing Jason, Khia bit down her grief and plowed through the lake. Water washed over her head, her mind a bitter soup of heartache and revenge.

She'd paused at the deepest point of the lake. She was a far stronger swimmer than her sister—the one concession to twinhood Michelle would never share. Khia turned her face up to the star-spangled night as she floated on her back, cushioned on a bed of sour dreams.

She had continued to float, uncaring, even when the night turned rough. A sudden wind eddied from the north, courting a harsh current that coursed through the lake. The temperature dropped, and the skies pressed down close upon the water. Michelle's cries resounded in the distance. Her terrified gasps echoed through the midnight still, her limbs flailing in the current's wicked grip.

Khia had closed her eyes. She pictured the lake rushing into her twin sister's nose, filling her head with stars and her chest with fire.

It was over just as fast as it began. Scant minutes later, the lake was bathed in star-lit silence; nothing disturbed the night's picture-perfect calm. The wind abated and the current appeased, the lake's face mirrored Khia's smiling own. She swam languidly back to shore, her bones humming with tranquil joy.

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Dawn, like Michelle, is now a ghost. The sun, rising ever higher above the lake, bathes the day in balmy, welcome warmth. Though Michelle has been dead for almost a year now, Khia knows that her memories of her sister, like their parents' lake-side tradition, will forever live on.

As the boat drifts closer to the shore, a breeze pregnant with larkspur and pine gusts in the air. Khia tilts her head back and blinks to staunch her tears. The lens that turns her chocolate eyes bluer than the summer skies settles back into place. She runs a hand through her close-cropped hair, relishing the bristles that dance along her nape.

No longer afraid, Khia leans over the side of the boat. In the lake's mirror-bright waters, she searches for her twin sister's face but sees no one she knows.

### **About the Author:**

Rohini Mori writes dark fiction that is sometimes fantastical and other times whimsical. Her work has previously appeared in Infernal Ink Magazine. She lives, dreams and scribes in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

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# Africe and the Toy Maker Part One

Alice visits the graveyard of fables on a mission to repair the doll her late sister gave as a final gift. She whispers a familiar rhyme along the way to keep her courage up.

Broken boys and broken girls,
Can find their peace upon the hill.
Beneath the tree at full moon's light,
The Toy Man rests to hear their plight.
If earnest hearts speak so true,
The Toy Man heals them through and through.

Alice lays the shattered pieces of her precious doll at the base of the Toy Maker's grave. She weaves her story through whispered words feeding each painful, beautiful memory of her sister into her plea. She knows there's no bringing her sister back from beyond the veil, but she asks the Toy Maker to repair this one little doll and in the process, give her broken heart a chance to heal. Alice closes her eyes, hoping beyond hope that some magic still exists in the world. At least, just enough to mend one little doll.

Upon opening her eyes the doll has disappeared and with it the graveyard she had been kneeling in. Around her formless shadows swirl and catch hazing structures and creates into a new reality.



Alice huddles behind a stack of newly formed barrels and a small, winged beast finds her. He asks what such a young living girl is doing shivering like a mouse in the trash bins of the veil. Alice shares with the Winged One of her offering to the Toy Maker and the Winged One is alarmed, for the 2nd verse to the Maker's rhyme is a warning...

Wary must the Broken be,
For the Toy Man claims all he sees.
Each broken thing is his domain.
So, to find home once again,
The broken boys and broken girls,
Must claim their piece upon his hill.
To make their choice before dawn's light,
Else the Toy Man claims their plight.

The Winged One urges Alice to set forth and retrieve her offering, "For time is swift and though night in this realm is long, the journey to break the bargain is longer."

"But where, little Winged One, do I look?" Asks Alice, "I know not this land of Death and Stardust."

The Winged one takes flight and cries out with delight, "Luck may yet turn to your favor, child!" He gestures toward a nearby road filling slowly with dancing figures. "Follow the shadowed ones who march past here in the somber parade. When the last step of their dance fades you will find the Seer. Her mysterious eye might pierce the Maker's power long enough to guide you."



Alice follows the somber parade through the winding streets to the home of the Melancholy Circus. In its shadow, a small tent bears a sign, "Palms read, fortunes told, ex-spouse's spirits banished."

Inside, Alice finds the Seer embedded in the cosmos of the tiny tent. The Seer searches, but their gaze cannot fully pierce the fog of the Maker's power. Their gaze does, however, find the edges of his power, offering a glimmer of hope.

If Alice is to succeed, she must find the Sun's Shadow and reunite it with the Smiling Moon. It is at their meeting alone that Alice's path home will become clear.

A hollow wind stirs the stars around them and the Winged One calls out from the beyond the tent, "Alice, you must flee! The Guardians have scented you and have begun their hunt!"



The Seer's tent expels Alice onto the cobbled street with a rather rude belch. And Alice climbs to her feet looking about for the Winged One. A howl like winter's wind echoes through the night and makes the stone beneath her shiver. The Winged One calls to Alice and leads the way through side streets and up stray beams of moonlight. But the Guardians grow nearer and nearer by the second. Alice spots an open door down a narrow street and the two stumble into a crumbling concrete tower.

At the top of the tower a forest blooms with iridescent light. But, even in this serene space, the Guardian's' howls can be heard. A small fairy spots Alice hiding among her petunias and takes pity on her. She offers a temporary gift to allow her to escape which Alice accepts enthusiastically. With a puff and a clap of a giant dandelion Alice's feet lift from the ground and the fairy shoves her out the window to drift upwards into the night sky.



Alice and the Winged One float above the winding streets of the city occasionally kicking off of the spires of ruined cathedrals until they arrive at edge when fields and streams replace buildings and stone. Finally free of the Guardian's hunt, Alice shares the Seer's words but the Winged One is as baffled by them as Alice, "How does one find the Sun's Shadow in a world of Eternal Night?"

An idea sparks inside Alice, "Would you say the Toy Maker is a king to this land?"

"More than a king! The Maker creates and controls all you see here."

"In my world the symbol for the King is the sun. Maybe that is so here as well. If the Toy Maker is this realms king- it's sun- then, where might we find his shadow?"



"Oh dear," the Winged One replies, "I may know of a place we could look... but it is a perilous one to explore."

The pair make their way through to the edge of the moon's reach where the Maker's abandoned palace found. The Winged One shares that the stories whispered in the darkest corners of the realm claim that a terrible event occurred there eons ago. One that caused the Maker and his court to flee. Perhaps, his shadow may linger there.

Upon entering the palace courtyard, a soft melody calls to Alice. Hints of her sister's voice tingle through the air as Alice is drawn to a well by the whispered song.

Before the Winged One could stop her, Alice leans over the edge of the well and is sucked into the rolling abyss below.



### Part Seven

Inside the well of time Alice is confronted by the Dying Hunger. It pulls at her mind calling forth all of her most painful memories. The day her father returned from the forest with only shreds of her sister's favorite riding cloak. The empty bed beside hers in her once shared room. The kiss her sister placed upon Alice's brow before handing her the doll and asking Alice to take care of the little porcelain figure. The Dying Hunger laughed as it pulled the painful memories out and fed upon them, draining more and more strength out of Alice.

But Alice fights back. She calls to mind the moments of joy she shared with her sister. Those late nights shared next to the fire inventing stories that would continue for night after night. The songs they had sung while out gathering mushrooms in the forest. The laughter and light of long summer days. Each beautiful, joyful memory lands like a physical blow on the Dying Hunger. Her light poisons it's darkness and it pushes her back out into the world.

Alice crawls from the fountain, dripping with memories. But to her surprise, the palace is no longer dark and quiet. Instead, it is filled with lights and the echoing strains of music.

She follows the music into the palace and discovers a ball taking place.



# Africe and the Toy Maker Part Eight

As she enters the room she can feel that something is off about the dancers. Getting closer to one curtsying courtier she sees that his face is distorted and straining to smile. His eyes plead silently as his smile strains against the invisible ties holding it in place. Looking down, Alice spies the foggy form of a small broken toy at the core of the courtier. Dancers float around the room each bearing the same strained smiles and holding a broken toy at their center.

Looking around, Alice spots a figure containing her broken doll. She rushes up a set of stairs to where the figure dances next to a decadent shadowy throne. The dancer containing her doll spins around revealing to Alice the face of her beloved sister, "Lorina!"

Lorina's strained smile gains a bright gleam of hope as her eyes connect with Alice. But just as Alice gets within reach, her sister is pulled up into the rafters by strings that were forcing her to dance.



A voice calls out to Alice from the throne and a menacing smile glitters from shadows. "You have made it so far miss Alice, but there is still one task left." An array of mended toys materializes in front of Alice, "Make your choice, dance the dance, and IF you manage to defeat me, I will fulfill my end of our bargain."

He stands, drawing out a shimmering blade of moonlight and snarls, "Let the dance begin."

As music swells more around her, Alice glances over the options in front of her. A wooden sword, a ship in a bottle, a small ball, and a stuffed rabbit. She reaches towards the wooden sword but pauses as something inside the glass bottle makes a frantic "TINK! TINK! TINK!"

Alice grabs the bottle and joins the Shadow's mad dance.

The Shadow dances through the crowd in graceful deadly twirls. With each timed step he gets closer to Alice, slicing the strings of his couriers along the way. They fall with anguished cries into crumbling piles on the dance floor.

Alice dances away, spinning and trying to keep some distance as she looks at the bottle she grabbed. Confidence straightens her spine and she uncorks the bottle with a flourish.



Wind and rain come rushing out of the bottle, filling the ballroom with a roaring tempest. With a "POP," the Winged One escapes from the bottle pulling a ribbon out with him. The Winged One twirls around Alice, placing the ribbon in her hand, "Pull!" He shouts and she obeys.

As Alice pulls the ribbon, a glowing orb is drawn out from the bottle, it's radiant light warms the room. Now dancing across waves, Alice spins the orb around and around.

The orb grows in warmth and light until Alice flicks it out so it collides with the Shadow. A bright flash blinds Alice and she is lost for a moment, left with no sense of sound, sight, or feel.

As the light fades, Alice collapses to the ground dripping with water. She looks up to see the Shadow fading down into the form of a small boy, one not much older than her. The ghosts once controlled like puppets are released from their strings and drift to the ground. Their strained smiles melt into ones of true happiness.

The boy kneels before her and touches the side of her mask, "Thank you." Alice's mind slips and her vision fades.



# Asice and the Toy Maker Part Eleven

"Please, wake up."

Alice hears someone calling to her and she wakes up on the Toy Maker's grave with the broken doll laid out on the dirt before her. The voice calls her once more and Alice looks up to see her sister, Lorina, alive and well once again.

And so, it seemed that there was some magic left in this world, not enough to fix a broken doll but more than enough to heal a broken heart and give two sisters a second chance.

### **About the Artist:**

Jeanette Andromeda is a Providence based multi-media artist working in film and illustration. She graduated from

for theater and then began working on feature films as a production designer. Her work has expanded to include illustration for books and magazines as well as conceptual art for theater and film. Several of Jeanette's projects have been seen on the SyFy and Chiller channels and she has worked with clients such as Acheson Walsh Studios, Victoria's Lift, and The Wicked Library.

If you would like to commission a piece of artwork or collaborate on a project please visit her website at

Jeanette Andromeda, Filmmaker and Illustrator.

Instagram: @jeanetteandromeda Twitter: @JeanetteAndrome YouTube: Jeanette Andromeda

Blog: HorrorMade.com



# Poetry

# A lonely loon | Mathias Jansson

A hot summer night with endless sunlight a cool dip in the dark tarn swimming naked and alone satisfied with life

When you stand on solid ground and hear the call of a lonely loon you feel the first bite then the second one then the chill in your body when they start to attack a dark cloud of mosquitoes and flies crawling on your naked body crawling in your nose and ears in your mouth and eyes

You try to wave and flee but in panic falls down on your knees filled with desperate fear you realize death is near and the last thing you ever hear is the call of a lonely loon in the magic midsummer night.

#### **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.



#### The Great Blue Stomach | Jamal Hodge

I cry often,
In great mewling heaves,
with the revelation of cyclical doom.
The inescapable knowledge
Of what mortality means,
For breathing things
Born within the licking whirlwind.

Violence is the Architect of historic grandeur. Why then do we pretend the flower is without thorns, and little things born, will not grow teeth?

All devours. Life eats life.

But propagates itself to keep the feast eternal.

Pause to consider, energy can't be destroyed, Just recycled,

Energy and matter are the same.

The mass of the world does not change with a species' extinction.

Flesh is given to new forms.

New mouths, New stomachs. Feast upon feast.

Where!
Oh where,
is God to declare us good?

The world is but a stomach. The meaning of life is teeth. One thing, thinking it's many, endlessly digesting itself.

The great blue stomach that circles the sun.

# Pink Banana | Jamal Hodge

Observing similarities in the phallus and her favorite fruit, she gripped the root,

With the fruit knife, peeled skin to hanging flaps, at the side of bloody pink.

Screams, ceaseless. But for her, a smile.

This would be unlike any smoothie she'd blended before.

#### **About the Author:**

Jamal Hodge is an award-winning filmmaker and storyteller who writes stories that use darkness to show light. An active member of The Horror Writer's Association and the SFPA, his poetry and short stories can be found in the 2021 & 2022 Rhysling Anthologies, The HWA Poetry Showcase (2021). Chiral Mad 5, Space & Time Magazine, and others. His love of ice cream and magnet pull on wild animals and strangers cannot be overstated.

Instagram: @directorh
Link tree: Director H

# Pacific Break | DJ Tyrer

Once again, vacation terror
Sudden drawing out of the tide
Horrendous surge of water
A tsunami threatens holidaymakers again
Only, this time, not a natural disaster
For the cause is an eruption in ocean depths
Upthrust of new island, inhabited
Releasing Cthulhu upon the world
Death and madness strike the survivors
Literal holiday from hell

#### Wonderful Day | DJ Tyrer

Lovely sunny day
Perfect for getting away from work
Freedom from school's restraints
Head to the seaside, theme parks
Seeking out pleasure and fun
What a wonderful day!

Then, ground shakes, cracks
Things long forgotten break loose
Enjoy the touch of the sun
Begin to fest on human flesh
So happy to once more be free
What a wonderful day!

#### **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).

Blog: <u>DJ Tyrer</u>
Facebook: <u>DJ Tyrer Writer</u>



#### Realming | Amy Zoellers

Love-besotted. Viscous with rye. A sound, a lurch. Disembodied tumbling on stairs.

When vapor collects, rushes together, called by midnight's magnet, his neck isn't up to the task, angles weirdly. The head leans, lolls, and heavy-lidded radiant eyes look past you into a realm of heavy and radiant sorrow. "Violet," he thick-tongue-moans. "Violet!" he bellows in heart-rend.

Gathered vapors, stumbling, slowly oozing, aromatic of whisky, have anyhow gathered handsomely—molecules in pleasant ratios, a figure of approved symmetry—one swooping, swooning mound of gleaming honey hair, teeth bright and jumbled in the hallway portrait, posed with a cigarette.

Sometimes the portrait sings, off-key, laughing and distant, at 3 a.m.

Now you pray for it. You pour the wine.

"Violet," coughs the specter. "Violet," he faintly croaks.

You step forward in your wine-colored dress. You know his name:

"Paul!" you shout, tempting other worlds that often watch you.

You've ferreted his story, teased it out of the landlady over tea with butterscotch Schnapps on a night most bitter, cold as a granite tomb.

"No one ever stays here long, cookie," she always says.

"Paul, I'm here!" you call. Will he respond? Or, you fear, adhere to his century-old script? Scream, crash of glass, and vanish?

The presence stops short. His eyes bloom a shriek. The neck almost rights itself. A century gone since the last breath he took—but he gasps: "Vvvvi-o-letttttt," in one long whisper.

You beam like a toothpaste model and lead him to the fireside, you foolish creature. You hand him a wine glass—it drifts in his hand!

"You died, I know it." His words sing clear as reality, a three-layered voice of fine tobacco. He cannot take his eyes off of you, twin orbs of the grave, a gray-green slip of life-light faded or imagined, struggling to the surface.

A thrill swells in your chest, an orgasm of the heart—the high you have sought endlessly to drive your art has engulfed you at last as the shade closes distance between you. You can smell the artifact-whisky perfuming breath he no longer possesses.

Your hand reaches to cheekbone, near the ear, whiff of long-dead hair oil, all that you know tumbles in dream and intoxicants, greens and glorious orange, will I paint this moment, in life or swarming abstract of privileged insight? Will I sculpt him as all sacred secrets? Will I carve this blessed ear in chocolate?

death and life commingle, forbidden secrets disrobe before you, electricity and music enter and nauseate gloriously until all is rollercoaster, wine, fire and ocean-harp—the Unknown swallows you, pressing you through to galaxies, knitting you into symphony, merging you with the woodwork of the stairway as it burns—obliterated, you, your physicality a former thing now.

The meadow is yours. The night is all yours and his—Art falls away, share only your night between you.

You swim in the wind now, two, o bliss and bliss, shadowless—shadow, field and shoulder. Feel the living death of you.

#### **About the Author:**

Amy Zoellers is a poet, multimedia artist, exuberant baker, beginning potter and musical being. She co-hosts two monthly poetry shows, Cake and Hyperbull on YouTube and 3rd Sunday Poetry on Instagram, both with Angela Yuriko Smith. Her art, poetry and song can be found on Instagram and YouTube. She lives in Independence, Missouri with her husband, son and cat.

Instagram: @hipness and outrage YouTube: Hipness&Outrage

# Night Walker | Sean Edwards

Why when it was dark, did I ignore the light. What was I thinking, on that horrific night. I felt a calling within, I could hear a voice. Such a sorry sound, I made my choice. To the forest I went, so chilling and eerie. I followed my ears, to a noise so teary. I found her there, a woman so scared. Shaking with fear, a story she shared. She had been chased by a beast, with bloodshot eyes. Her face filled with dread; these couldn't be lies. Then she smiled with a leer, her eyes looking into my soul. My heart was racing, then my life she stole. I couldn't resist, her beauty beguiled. She drank my blood; she was both possessed and wild. I was left with a hunger, a thirst I would desire. Now a bloody lusting monster, a demonic vampire.

#### **About the Author:**

Sean Edwards is a 51 year old Steelworker from Newport, South Wales. He started writing poems after an accident on a bicycle when he was 34. A coincidence, maybe. Sean takes a lot of inspiration from his country, Wales. Sean also produces his videos using his own voice for the voice overs. Sean's poetry page is on Facebook.

Facebook: Sean Edwards Poems and Rhymes



# Intent | Ken Poyner

# **Logical Conclusion** | *Ken Poyner*

When she found she had grown A second head, her thought was All the shirts and sweaters must be Altered, the dresses, perhaps even the Coats, anything not loose enough To accommodate two necks, with heads Independently turning. Something Less practical she thought as well: Two brains, but apparently one mind. When Her husband comes home, what will he Think? She will have to practice Balance to be sure she can present To him the best possible theater Of this open and unpredicted Change. So much to learn, so much To do. The children could be watched Better with the wider range left to right Right to left two heads offers. And with two mouths she could Learn to feather her sentences, one word From each, every utterance compound. No, having two heads will be An advantage, even with Some unappreciative neighbors shrieking In terror. Why should they care? It is her extra head, it is hers To learn to integrate. Since she Is not horrified, no one else should be. Now, a third might pose a problem, Would demand more clothing alterations Than likely practical. We might Have to wait a while and see. But She thinks at first, I'll stop at two; Then she realizes that up to this morning One had been enough, and she had not Asked for more. And then the real bother set in: What might be the agent of this sudden Likely amoral and perhaps un-purposed change? Who might be summoning additional heads,

And what might they be expecting in return?

Not this old closet again. The technology is a decade outdated, And I have to use my otherwise useless Compatibility port to hook in.

It does not allow for a smooth Charge, and every so often I lose a bit from static buildup. An overhaul would not be expensive.

Every machine along the block
Has made the upgrade move.
I worry with such long service
This closet surely has run out of specification,

Picked up bugs, possibly netted a worm. It is too old to be properly maintained. I do not want to read one day In the *Daily Digital Citizen's Gazette*,

About a family methodically murdered in its sleep By a domestic robot gone amok Due to a soured batch of replaced control configuration Loaded on the recharge stream from a hopelessly antique

Recharging closet. Imagine my horror When, with morbid interest, I get to the end Of the article and see the perpetrator's series And serial code is my own. What might I feel:

Robot cold, but digitally steeled that my logic Had been correct from the beginning. And giddy with knowing that then, After a data dump and memory clean,

There would be a new closet waiting, State-of-the-art, in a new home committed To maintaining it; and keeping me, Valuable appliance that I am, as safe

As any technology can rightfully be.

#### **About the Author:**

Ken Poyner's four collections of brief fictions and four collections of poetry can be found at Amazon and most online booksellers. He spent 33 years in information system management, is married to a world record holding female power lifter, and has a family of several cats and betta fish. Individual works have appeared in Café Irreal, Analog, Danse Macabre, The Cincinnati Review, and several hundred other places.

**Author Website**: Ken Poyner

# The Outsider | Pete Kelly

A prairie ocean undulates Giving voice to a breeze, Upon this picture serene A waning sun bleeds.

Flushed clouds, unmoved Absorb a crimson glow, Above a lonesome silhouette Twisted in a final throe.

A tree of grim aspect Sits atop a mound, Source to a winding path Worn into the ground.

Hung from an outstretched limb As if a last offering made, A man hangs restful Grisly pendulum to times decay.

Head down as a child scorned A face pouting at lost shoes, Such a pointless humiliation For one with nothing to lose.

Clouds roll in for a brawl Thunderous punches explode, As all light is snuffed out Grass reels as if under ghostly hold.

Lightning strikes like a sudden memory Illuminating all but the lines on his face, Deep paths of a journey, misunderstood By those choosing ignorance to embrace.

A perfect town with perfect ways He was the oil in their water, Anathema to righteous minds With such delicate borders.

Goaded by the frenzied storm Succumbed like he was to lies, An unseen hand calls a stop As then he opens his eyes.

# **About the Author:**

Pete Kelly is a poetry writing shipwright, he has been a fan of horror films since birth (he says) and loves to grow carnivorous plants. He is a Push cart nominee.

Instagram: @splatz007

# devourer of the sun | Linda M. Crate

she was a devourer of stars, they kept her warm; made her feel less lonely in a world that didn't accept her as she was—

normally, she let the insults slide; because she knew people feared what they didn't know and what they didn't understand and she knew that there was no one quite like her that anyone may have met—

one day, however, it got to be too much; they mocked and poked too hard

so she looked up into the sky knowing what she was about to do would destroy them and perhaps herself, too, but she thought it was worth the risk;

so she reached out and devoured the sun.

# into her favorite flowers | Linda M. Crate

she never knew they could strike in the day

she always associated vampires with night, standing in the gilded sun her hair glimmering with crimson and gold and hues of carnelian she thought she was safe in her little corner of solitude;

she was wrong—

he found her there, nose deep in a book about a romance she would never know;

his fangs spilled honey sweet blood upon the pages of her favorite well worn book and she fell into her favorite flowers with a smile on her face ignorant of the horror that struck in the day.

# she knew it was cruel | Linda M. Crate

they never saw her coming, always too busy playing in the water or looking out for sharks or trying to avoid getting tangled in seaweed;

her sweet face fooled them every time she didn't even need her siren song most of the time to convince them to follow her—

until they realized all too late they were woefully out of their depth, and she was not their friend;

the looks of horror on their face as she became the last thing they saw before she swallowed them into the last darkness they would ever see amused her—

she knew it was cruel but she didn't care, everyone knew sirens were monsters; and she took her job seriously.

#### her revenge complete | Linda M. Crate

she stood in the darkness waiting,

knowing that he would come;

he didn't know about her transformation but soon he would find her fangs lodged deep in his throat—

he had told her that he found her really pretty,

as if that negated all the times he had bullied her when she had been alive;

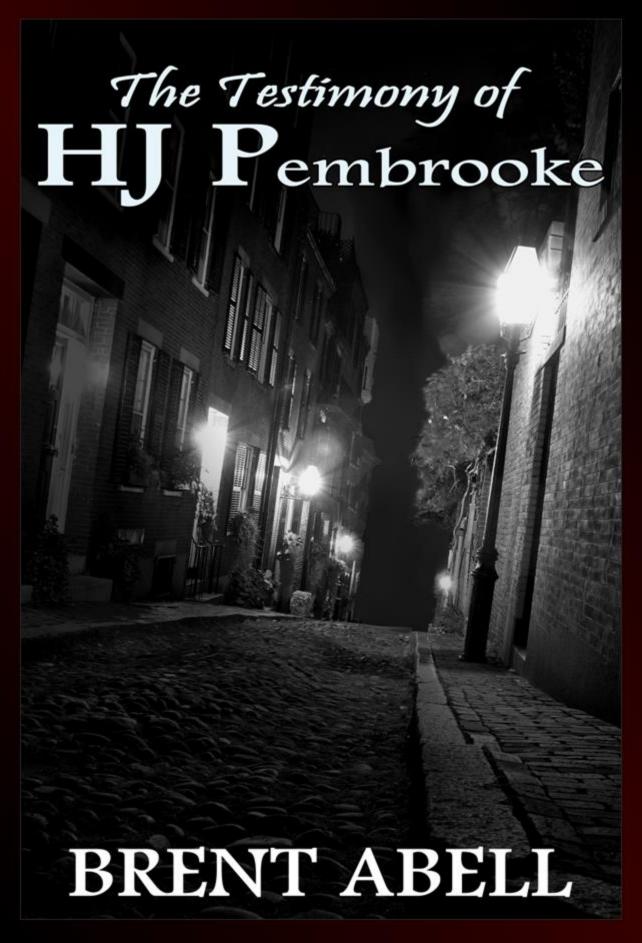
as he came with his bouquet of roses she felt excitement and a shiver go up her spine and she leaned forward as if she were going to whisper something to him instead biting deep into his throat drinking every last ruby of his blood;

placing one of the flowers on his corpse she walked away: her revenge complete.

#### **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>
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AVAILABLE TO PURCHASE OR BORROW ON AMAZON

# A Fateful Midsummer | TS S Fulk

This year for midsummer we fled north to Lapland to praise the midnight sun Naked and free we danced morning cloak butterflies we worshiped with the wind

We believed our festivities would amuse the mother goddess who would honor us with a boon forgetfulness by nepenthe for our souls carry the boulders pestilence famine war and death under whose encumbrance we pine

No boon she brings but bane a rough beast slouching from the east

#### **About the Author:**

TS S. Fulk lives with his wife and three children in Örebro, Sweden as an English teacher and textbook author. He is an active musician playing the bass trombone, the Appalachian mountain dulcimer and the Swedish bumblebee dulcimer (*hummel*). His works have been (will be) published by The Ekphrastic Review, The Button Eye Review, Perennial Press, Lovecraftiana, Between These Shores and more.

Instagram: @tssfulk poet SoundCloud: TS S. Fulk

#### The silent ones | Justin Permenter

Shadows crouch in quiet corners, gathering strength, awaiting the approach of dawn.

Soon they will lengthen and grow beneath the sun's bright ecliptic, testaments to the ever-present darkness that stalks our very footsteps in the midst of the world of light.

Their silence is a hunger which knows no end.

#### **About the Author:**

Justin Permenter is a writer of poetry and fiction from Denton, Texas. Whenever he is not writing-- which is far too often-- he operates undercover as an International Student Advisor at the University of North Texas. His work has been published in *Hypertext Review, Across the Margin, The Dread Machine, Spectral Realms,* and elsewhere.

Facebook: Justin Permenter Writer
Twitter: @JustinJosevich

#### Staring Gaze | JB Corso

"back away, trespasser," it snarled a long scythe blade leveled out inches from my grin "you've no right to stand in my way to collect her" I held my position between it and the garage door my undead scowl bore down on its resolve, "she is mine for the taking," its shredded lips cracked and reformed I stared Death square in its decomposed face it replied with a lingering groan, neither of us dared to blink, the living room's air held stagnant ambient sounds drew into silence her antique clock's hands slowed to a crawl outside light bent into fractals against a wall mirror a small finch landed for a rest on her window sill with a living meal wiggled between its orange beak a dirt checkered worm struggled to break free, Death held my gaze without mercy our eyes remained locked, "blink," it demanded a vase of roses wilted atop her coffee table the worm fell limp the finch tumbled from the ledge, sunlight passed through our confrontation the room glowed with sunset red Death bared its constantly shifting teeth "you cannot win," it taunted, my lifeless eyes held firm to its fiery sockets, a single voice called out to our attention her blue sedan passed across the living room window's view she drove away singing to her favorite song "I already did," my declaration boasted, its rotted lips edged into a shivering snarl "she's left," I noted, "you missed your chance," rage intensified across its expression "you cannot save her forever," its words echoed full of needles, my thick leather wings unfurled to fill the wide room "I will save her every time you fail" I pushed its scythe from my face, it howled in frustration "one day she will be counted like all the others" Death vanished away for its next victim a cloud of orange smoke danced into nothingness, I looked out upon the mortal neighborhood as an unholy visitor the placid window appeared empty to a woman walking her dog several feet away "my sweet Jasmine, I'll stare down Death every time to keep you alive"

# Appetite | JB Corso

summer sunshine bathes the lazy day butterflies flutter across a concealed bunny trail a puss-covered snout scans the air for a meal pillow-soft clouds caress the blue sky overhead a hungry ladybug feeds upon a tasty leaf four lanky hands snag a passing hare fresh lilac scents float along a light breeze a young lark's eyes scan the grassy field extended claws dig into struggling white fur berry clusters take shape on a thin branch innocent laughter beckons in the distance fat lips smack with eager anticipation baby birds chirp for their meal a mallard splashes water with its wings six rows of hellish teeth clamp down a sandy anthill bustles with activity sweet pine sap clings to rugged bark blood spray paints its three-toed feet a finch settles into a straw nest high above pond water glistens like shining gems dark rabbit eyes grow still soft breezes tickle a sapling's branch a wayward baseball becomes lost in the tall grass putrid-covered digits shred apart its meat floral rainbows blossom in all directions growing algae spreads along the water's edge olive scales conceal its ravenous feasting swaying dandelions invite busy bees cattails bend against the gentle wind fragile bones snap into jagged pieces a heavy acorn rests among its siblings attentive frogs call out to one another bloody pools soak the surrounding dirt a swan eases onto the pond's surface squirrels chase one another in play a gamy stench expels around the hollowed carcass dragonflies pirouette across extended reeds tree branches offer shade to a beetle an insatiable hunger takes hold small pond waves ripple with ease a passing caterpillar shuffles down a twig decaying visceral slowly drips along its path mosquitoes buzz around hatched eggs warm air saturates floral and fauna twin tails spiral behind with anticipation sunflowers open wide for midday light a playful puppy saunters into the high grass focused rows of eyes keep watch for a fresh meal

# Under Your Bed | JB Corso

waited

waited for the stars to twinkle waited for your eyelids to get heavy waited for my jagged claws to grip the bed frame waited to bite deep into your soft flesh

waited patiently

waited for the summer air to cool into night waited for you to nest inside your blankets waited for my long tongue to smell the air above waited to rip apart your tender muscles

waited patiently for waited for crickets' chirping waited for a last yawn on your pillow waited for my oozing tentacles to slide across the wood floor waited to shred your empty lungs

waited patiently for you waited for the moon's shine through your curtains waited for your slow breathing waited for my six legs to stretch wide waited to drink from your tasty blood pools

waited patiently for you to waited for the owl's hoot from a nearby tree branch waited for your subtle snoring waited for my tail to wind around your bed posts waited to slurp your exposed intestines

waited patiently for you to be waited for the world to be still waited for my warm meal's flesh waited to puncture your soft mattress waited to shred your warm heart to pieces

waited patiently for you to be eaten waited no more for this evening waited no more for your tender meat waited no more for your bed to be a bloody mess waited no more to digest you

#### Unholy Tome | JB Corso

No one should've touched the book wrapped in tight leathery flesh.

No one should've read from those accursed blood-inked pages.

Someone called out profane words from their altar.

Someone chose to doom us all on that summer night.

HP Lovecraft penned his stories as dire warnings.

HP Lovecraft warned us behind his smug smiles.

Unholy rituals that disturbed the Old Ones.

Unholy words consecrated through pain.

They've arrived to dominate our world.

They've come for what was offered.

Now our lives have no meaning.

Now all of humanity will suffer.

Everyone pays the final price.

Everyone will perish.

# Attic Butchery | JB Corso

dripping

blood drops splatter onto the dusty floor from between the ceiling's rotting floorboards into elongated visceral pools a bloody rust odor permeates the air

#### echoing

screams puncture from the attic throughout the house bouncing off of forgotten walls infesting each empty room vocal cries for mercy continue unacknowledged

# illuminating

candlelight is cast outside against skeletal trees long, hunched shadows violate the wick fire's light the flame flickers in repulsion at the congregating horror candle wax collects into obscene piles onto the blood-stained table

# creaking

boards shudder below their unholy ritual steps whining, wooden groans under their weight an unholy orchestra playing along with their chanting wood planks bend to their will like they demand of their victims

#### silence

the night slips within a quiet noose stillness overtakes the hanging, gut-spilled corpses the creatures' religious rite has been fulfilled once more the attic is refreshed with a fresh coat of cooling, ruddy paint

#### kdgm | JB Corso

relaxing summer nights come alive with backyard barbecues crickets chirp and bullfrogs croak under the wide starry sky, unexpected horrors call to one another within the pitch-dark bayou nightmares recently freed from the mucky ground, each hunter is born designed to tear apart flesh and bones they awaken ravenous with virgin teeth ready to stain, they pull forward through the sopping mud a lingering stench follow their expansive trials the wet earth sucks against their wide hoofs dark, gritty slime drips from their multiple arms and legs, they kill thev devour they grow they multiply six hundred thousand, forty-two eggs laid for this day during a doppelganger summer millennia ago, killers who patiently waited under the watery soil once stashed deep within time's folds before bipedal thinkers took their first steps, putrid, leathery shells now lay broken in abandoned clutches they've come to claim their proper throne atop the food chain a driving instinct pushes them to hunt anything warm, they kill they devour they grow they multiply an impending threat looms ever closer outside the safety of electric lights they decimate skittering raccoon and opossum as appetizers ravaged fur scruffs and shredded gore lay along their widening paths, the Southern summer air hangs warm from which tasty humans marinate in its embrace, each creature catches the scent of those who walk upright pre-packaged within vertical walls of tender flesh, massive swarms exit the mud into nearby towns breaching out of the darkness directly into porch-lit backyards, defenseless screams and frantic barking ride helpless through the humid air cooling blood smears across the insides and outsides of each emptied home nothing survives the onslaught as their hunger carries them into the next town they kill they devour they grow they multiply

#### **About the Author:**

JB Corso is a health care professional who has worked with the mentally ill and geriatric populations for the last 20 years. He appreciates time with his children, writing, and pondering existential dread. He's a veteran with an overseas deployment as an international peacekeeper. He lives with his significant other and enjoys afternoon drives while listening to background Grateful Dead songs.

Twitter: @realJBCorso

# First Form | Sloan Porter

You dangle our love in front of me, baiting me to fetch, but I see the sharp point of the hook hiding in your sleeve, I know this game of catching and releasing like fishing for sport, I notice the resolve in your stance to make me a prey, to trap me and watch me pray you will not gorge.

It's twisted to watch myself rush to the bait, and I do it every time.

I twist my insides, forcing my knees to bend and my vocal cords to change your mind, but all you hear is toxin spewing in your head. I know what happens next, though I am not prepared for the accompanied earthquake local to this room, shaking the *courage to leave* out of me as if I am a rag doll, I swallow tension as your voice becomes a whirlwind, I taste salt and smell brine and the flesh of cooked seafood, is it my skin?

Your skin fades to gray and red and it leaks as suction cups rupture along your arms and legs, four more arms erupt from your sides.

I look into your eyes, I see two deep dark wells of another creature — your other form, ready to entwine me in all directions and consume me, but the first bite misses, a black puddle blots the floor, tempted as I am to lick it clean or smear it into my skin and savor the sinking and flowing of venom into my veins, I resist.

You cannot consume me if your suction cups don't recognize vulnerable skin.

Your arms stiffen when you realize this, your legs burst through the bottom of you, two stomps to plant you firmly, your arms curl in on themselves, retracting back to your body until they sink into your stomach, the last two morph into hands again, and filaments of skin and bone crackle as your neck rebuilds. Your human face settles on me, two big round eyes glistening, two full red lips trembling, one tongue quiet and mouthing *I'm sorry*, and in this moment, I no longer know which is your first form: the eight-armed creature or you — the person.

#### **About the Author:**

As a writer and interdisciplinary artist, Sloan Porter is most interested in exploring a darker side and the passions that drive us. Her work first appeared in Montreal Writes in the Pride issue and is forthcoming elsewhere. As a Montreal night owl and fighter, you can find her DJing or training for Muay Thai competitions.

Instagram: @sloan.porter.poetry

#### Love is Loss | Brian Rosenberger

The sun rises. Again. He doesn't see it but can feel it. He's not seen the sun in years.

Sometimes he misses the sun.
It reminds him of New Orleans at night, the heat,
And his last lover, a chef in the French Quarter.
She tasted of Absinthe, smelled like Creole seasoning.

They haunted Bourbon Street, the swamps, the cemeteries, The churches, the Garden District, the dark alleyways.

Now he sees her in the moon and the shadow of the moon, And in his dreams within the casket, Still haunted by the quickening of her heart, The warmth of her touch, her soft caress, The Zydeco of desire and the Blues of loss.

He still visits her in her family crypt.

He'd offer prayers for his lost love But he knows the outcome of prayers.

# The Barbarian's Forest | Brian Rosenberger

The trees.

The trees are not trees.

Their limbs are made of human flesh and bone,

Animal skins and fur and teeth.

Not trees at all but that's how their silhouettes appear,

Beneath the Darkness of the Moon.

Wide and reaching, ready to embrace and entangle, Till the ensnared becomes part of the ground cover.

Night, a breeding ground for shadows, Masking reality, devouring hope.

Trees in name only, serving as a sign of tribute and warning. This desecration, I had dreamed. Dreams of Green Death. Towers of skulls and sinew and always reaching vines, And crows and buzzards, perched and patient, Hungry for both aged and fresh meat.

The forest. Their forest.

This is a forest of false gods. But it remains their forest. They hold dominion.

It is a Witches' forest.

I dreamed of the Witches Forest. And smiled. Witches bleed. And burn even better.

# Summer | Brian Rosenberger

A flowered Crown adorns her head, Hand-picked, fresh from the fields. She's never looked more beautiful.

She is Fairy. She is Ancient. She is All-That-Matters. She is the Herald of the Longest Day. She is Summer. Welcome her embrace.

We dance. We spin. We howl. We bask in her approach. Summer has arrived.

Vases are filled with flowers. Their offerings. Her blessing. We sing her song.

She is my love, my wife, my everything. My blood feeds the bouquet she carries. A willing sacrifice.

One of many. This night. And the nights to come.

Our children will grow in the soil of my grave. They will celebrate Summer, their Mother, My undying Bride.

# This My Pain | Brian Rosenberger

And she says replace the knife With a fork.
Now everyone eats.

I hear her. I listen. I stab her with the knife.

She gets the knife first. Then I give her the fork too. Repeatedly.

I feel better already.
Breathe in. Breathe out. It's a stress reliever.
And I'm fucking stressed,

The World has gone to Hell.

But I know where my next meals are coming from.

Protein diet. Honestly, I could shed a few pounds.

And we have a community garden so I can still get my greens.

And if the neighbors get curious about where is \_\_\_\_\_, I hate the neighbors, their dogs shitting our lawns, Their complaints to the HOA about our Halloween decoration, And the paint scheme of our house. The neighbors have two children, leaf blowers, and lawn mowers.

The children are appetizers.

Parents and children won't be missed by me.

#### The Pond | Brian Rosenberger

It was hot. Like Hell had commuted north. Those Southern Summers. Sweat leaking from every pore. Georgia asphalt melting.
Little relief despite the quantity of Backyard Sweet Teas consumed
And their Rum to tea content. Hand-held fans helped little.
The Pond was a way to escape, the heat, the mosquitoes, mostly the heat.
No escaping the Pond's chorus of croaking frogs. They were hot too.

It was Summer. No school. No rules. Except those made up on the spot and accepted by all participants.

It was kind of like Tag and if tagged, You had to remove any article of clothing, Hat – baseball or cowboy, do-rag, swimsuit, cut-offs, bikini, flip-flops, etc.

The boys were like Palov's dogs. Hungry. Hormones in chaos. The girls, maturing into new bodies, from cocoon to butterflies, Looking for an admiring audience. Looking for acceptance. And often even hungrier than the boys.

We sank and swam together.
The Sirens and their admirers.
A dangerous game.
Mermaids in a different world, different names,
Without the southern twang.
The outcome the same.
First kiss. Last kiss.
We were young. It was hot. It was summer.

The survivors of the Pond would pair off, venture into the woods. Eventually, they would return, worse for wear. The new school year And high school gossip the determining factor on who fared better. The Sirens known to shed insult and police investigations like scales.

Those that didn't survive the Pond served as a cautionary tale. For those that listened. Small town. No one listened. Everyone listened. Swimmers waited till next summer.

The Pond.
It's still there. The surface is calm. The surface is inviting.
Summers in the South,
Where Hell still vacations.

#### **About the Author:**

Brian Rosenberger lives in a cellar in Marietta, GA and writes by the light of captured fireflies. He is the author of As the Worm Turns and three poetry collections: Poems That Go Splat, And For My Next Trick..., and Scream for Me.

Facebook: <u>Brian Who Suffers</u> Instagram: @<u>brianwhosuffers</u> Victims, a collection of dark poems by Marge Simon & Mary A. Turzillo is a 2022 Bram Stoker Finalist!



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

# You can drink to success | Christopher T. Dąbrowski

A man with his leg torn off in an accident is on the screen.

The man howls. He gets a pill.

He is silent and looking at the stump.

The skin separates and begins to grow into tissue.

Of course, the tissue played at an accelerated rate.

The man howls. He has the lizard gene implanted, so the limb grows back. It hurts terribly. He gets a pill.

Calms down and smiles with relief.

The director is looking at the producer. He nods with approval.

A new advertisement for painkillers is accepted.

No more amendments. You can drink to success.

# To hurt the weaker | Christopher T. Dgbrowski

Joseph left the gym. Although he exercised intensively, he wanted to beat someone up hard.

He was a real mountain of muscle.

He spotted a slim boy, told him to stop.

He beat the kid up, broke his nose.

Immediately he felt better—he liked to hurt the weaker.

When walking down the street a car hit him.

Before Joseph got up, the car was gone.

While walking down the park something hit him in the head.

It was a chestnut.

Then the storm broke out.

Thunder hit Joseph...

God liked to hurt the weaker to hurt the weaker too.

#### **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.

#### Panspermia | Scott J. Couturier

Colloguy of cosmic drones drub the ether into execrable agitation. Stars spit plasma to profuse the void: errant strands of atoms rub electrons, emptiness howling paeanic praise. From the Nothing, a Sphere forms: flourishes, falls to everlasting dark with all the quickness of a fire's spark. Riotous radiation suffuses the sterile tract of black, unknowing space, sentience hurtling on stubs of stone to seed rocky bulbs of dumb eminence. Flare of novae, like hastily winking eyes: Birth & Death in synchrony, tatters of rude matter amid nullity accreting. From the end of time comes a beginning chaos births & Lamia-like consumes offspring of its outpouring, leaving solely the soul's sorrow-tainted feather to be weighed.

#### Planting Instructions | Scott J. Couturier

Cut hand, insert seed into palm.
Infuse incision with bloodmeal balm.
Keep fingers cupped, as if to hold
a sprout's incipient stem in mold.
Clod your palm with graveyard dirt
& feel the seedling start to spurt.
Eager roots pervade your veins
& viscera: this will cause pains.
Pain is requisite to prime the seed—
torment its chief nutritional need.

With that hand you must do awful things: disembowel & brawl, peel off wings. It must go black with sinning's stain before your seed grows beyond a grain. At last! the sprout will greening unfurl from a sod-jet claw that cannot uncurl. Fresh agonies as roots rapidly expand far beyond five fingers & palm of hand: threading arteries well-nigh your heart fibers inundate, never to depart.

Finally, with fleeting conscious might you dig a hole deep as your height & one arm-span: you then climb down & extend up the sprout's serrate crown. Let tendrils germinate overnight—come next morning's creeping light they will rake all excess soil in 'till it fills your hole to loamy brim. Planted so, you shall die & live anew: such a bloom as in Lilith's Eden grew.

# The Black Muse | Scott J. Couturier

Smokestacks grain a nauseous sky through which no birds or pollen fly—sun-cracked dirt, gray with disease, no longer afflicted by human fleas, but by machines, who thunder soullessly:—thus it was the Black Muse spoke to me.

Of night-dread when microbes rain down from firmament on pansporic flame to etch acid-trails on carbon stones & dilute to element all remnant bones: when earth is long-dead, & so is the sea—thus it was the Black Muse spoke to me.

Stars glisten in a wan & sickly bed: televisual transmissions presage the Dead. Watchful eyes of other spheres weep as Gaia's ghost reaps arrears—her own soil & soul poisoned to dross. The Black Muse spoke too of this loss.

What horror greater than rivers barren?
Such a shame, to be called *Homo Terran*!
Vampire parasites suckled to bloating while in a nourishless ether floating:
to devour our womb in feckless spree—
thus it was the Black Muse spoke to me, in quiet tones, under a long-dead linden tree.

#### **About the Author:**

Scott J. Couturier is a Rhysling-nominated poet and prose writer of the weird, liminal, and darkly fantastic. His work has appeared in numerous venues, including Spectral Realms, Tales from the Magician's Skull, Space and Time Magazine, and Cosmic Horror Monthly. Currently he lives an obscure reverie in the wilds of northern Michigan with his partner/live-in editor and two cats.

**Blog:** Scott J. Couturier Writer **Facebook:** Scott J. Couturier

# His Jekyll-Hyde Bride | Tinamarie Cox

I was convinced I could wear white, but I should have known I was never meant to appear so innocent. Living beneath my perfected smiles and carefully rehearsed poses, is a grim and sinister beast feeding on my rotten insides. And I tried hard to tame it for the sake of summer love, because I loved his connubial fantasy. I heeded my bridegroom with dreams of proving him right and proving me wrong. But during my darkest hours, my husband is helpless as he watches his bride transform into a creature that wants the world to burn. And it wants him dead, too, for trying to bind himself with only the softer side of me. My twisted mind, knotted with the sweet flower he married, leaves pain and destruction in its wake, the proof that warm smiles fade with the summer weather, foundations crumble after seasons of storms, and life is painted with beautiful illusions that entangle the naïve. This monster within me will rest when I sleep in my grave, planted beside my foolish beloved. Until then, we live trapped in happily ever, poisoned.

#### **About the Author:**

Tinamarie Cox resides in Northern Arizona with her husband and two children. While she has devoted much of herself to family over the years, she currently seeks to expand her universe by rekindling her love of writing. Tinamarie's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in Nevermore Journal, The Elevation Review, and Red Weather Magazine.

#### Something in the Water | Christopher Hivner

I tilled the soil and mixed the fertilizer the same as before. Planted the bulbs with plenty of water. But this spring my garden is different. The dirt has turned black, and the stench is of something dead, but the colors are a crown of red and gold on tulips that have teeth.

#### Aboard Ship | Christopher Hivner

Aboard the ship,
under a score of sails
quivering like mouths,
we stand at the rails searching the water
for sea monsters with giant eyes that will
peer through us to explain
how we lost everyone else.
I want to dive in
but they won't let me,
I want to find the fables,
the legends, the tentacles
that reach for man,
I want to be looked upon by the future
as a savior, as the one
who did something.

Aboard the ship,
a fatted calf to be sacrificed,
all hands lost to the devil in the sea,
the crew goes through the motions,
using ancient glares
and mumbled quatrains
they curse us for trying to trammel the waves
and release the horizon from its cage.

Aboard the ship life stands still, time passes around the cape but not under our skin, the moon waxes and wanes for the curious and the profane but on our voyage we are blind, trodding the planks the leather of our boots still leave behind the deep aroma of tannin, the saltwater preserves our bones as if we weren't walking ghosts.

Amidships, where the rigging congregates like a trap for the irksome wind, the crew trades hardtack for a shanty about buried treasure, a shot of rum for a map home around the unknown coastlines and the strait of bottomless bad luck, we are derelict, we are lost, spin a yarn to remember us by but don't use our names, the black water is vengeful and we've already paid a price.

# **Up from the Trench** | *Christopher Hivner*

In the shallow water it waits. taking shallow breaths to hide. Roiling water rolls over and it blends in, riding the wavelets toward you, unseen. The scent of bare flesh leads it. You float on the water unaware. never feeling it attach to your skin, never feeling it inject its poison, weaving your mind inside a halcyon cocoon while calling its brethren. You never feel any of it until you wake up floating on the bloated corpse of your wife, holding the severed hands of your children, while looking at a beach of rotting remains and crawling sand.

#### **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: <u>Christopher Hivner - Author</u>
Twitter: @Your\_screams

# Birds In the Liver | Travis J. Black

"Death is a robe everyone has to wear"

- African Proverb

Sizzling summer sun

Bloated corpses scattered on cement floors,

Scorched earth

Fragments of human skulls strewn on sidewalks,

Disease,

Carnage,

Horror,

Death,

No sign of life except...

The little black birds that ruptured fourth from the innards of a long dead man

#### **About the Author:**

Travis J. Black (He/Him) is a gay poet, writer and artist living in Metro-Detroit Michigan. His work has appeared in Peeking Cat Poetry, Black Poppy Review, The Sirens Call and the 200th anniversary book Determined Hearts: A Frankenstein Anthology. His work often explores the mysterious, imaginative and darker aspects of life. He lives with his cat Boris.

Instagram: @travisjblack

# Girlhood | Mariel Herbert

cloudless sky above the skate park a banshee wails

thunderstorm deep in the old quarry kelpies gallop

fireflies fill a fishbowl will o' the wisps

following powries through a field blood sisters

smuggling in a salamander campfire tale

a black dog chases an ice cream truck summer's end

# **How I Spent My Summer | Mariel Herbert**

Before the ocean awoke bloodied and wailing to call her children back into her churning salinity, my parents had this daily ritual where they would usher us to the basement *Just like camping*, they recited in denial of her simmering abyss as they fumbled with our external lungs

My brother and I could never see out blocked windows, so I mind-painted the sky: Smoke blankets seven suns like mirrors

When the ocean awoke bloodied and boiling My brother cried out all over me, droplets pooling at the base of my neck His nimbus floated to the front door ferried by ill winds turned into rainfall sinking down, down, benthic

While Mum attended my brother's sublimation Mother sobbed herself into rock crystal Her storybook castle collapsing on the rug

Should have picked some of her up
Thrown a pinch over my left shoulder
But Mum rushed in with dustpan and broom
She carried Mother to the blackened shore
spread salt rose petals over hot sand
close enough to cremation

After the ocean awoke bloodied and blooming Mum returned home before the tide only her hope walked on, into the waves crest to crest to crest

Mum's limpet shell stayed with me took sipping breaths. I dedicated my hours to lucid dreaming: Mother-fragments joined my aquanaut brother to explore hydrothermal vents and shipwrecks To survive as water currents.

# Sabbath at the Community Pool | Mariel Herbert

My new neighbor only swims after sundown once the laughing, pool-pruned children are told: *Dry off. Go home*.

My new neighbor's water-dark head bobs up and down, limned by underwater lights-their ever-changing shadow, great whale serpent or crocodile, displaces an unknown volume of chlorine

I cannot fathom how my neighbor ended up so deep inland, transposed to the Mojave

Maybe my neighbor is a Tannin emigrating on the wind like our Aeolian sand and oddly curious tourists, those few who grow tired of dancing for false idols within the glitter cages of fairy gold casinos

Maybe my neighbor listened too closely to the siren songs of the dunes, deposited within soil horizons of stripes and stars

My new neighbor only swims after sundown disrupts the surface tension; I try to read right to left, decipher refracted waveparticles that slide sinister—off—not away

Maybe my neighbor
will finish their infinity laps, crawl out
of the pool before my cigarette burns too
far down to singe my skin
But when I flick the last ash, nothing
happens except I'm one smoke closer
to death. I know I will never see through
entropy to chaos: my neighbor's true form

# About the Author:

Mariel Herbert's speculative poetry and fiction have appeared in Daily Science Fiction, Liminality, Scifaikuest, and Star\*Line, among others. She lives in Northern California with her family, including one high-maintenance dog, and hundreds of low-maintenance books. She runs a few speculative reading groups and also writes haiku and senryu.

Website: Mariel Herbert

#### The Garden Eternal | Jen Gardner

It takes three days to pull the heavy load through the towering trees
Fairies are built
for dancing and delicacy
not for hauling and laboring
and their wings strain
under the weight of the ropes

Over the tangling roots they toil glittering sweat beading on their smooth brows through thickets and hollows they heave past chattering streams and vigilant bogs until the ground starts to thrum with Magic again

Sedges drip with dreamlike dew and irises bloom with a pungent sweetness that saturates lungs and blurs memories

The fairies flit between velvety buds and luscious berries their vigor renewed by the thrill of homecoming but their work is not yet done

They hover,
wings humming a murmured dirge
over their prey
none too eager to make the first move
But one by one they sharpen their nails
and start to slice
ripping slabs of flesh off the prone body
siphoning blood from cooling arteries
and burying each morsel underground

An eyeball to feed the nettle patch and a liver for the shaded trillium a femur under the yellow elder that hungers for marrow and a mangled heart for the madrone tree to darken its trunk as it sheds its skin

Each and every scrap absorbed into roots and petals and sumptuous leaves to bloom forever more in the garden eternal

#### The Birth of a Monster | Jen Gardner

What some would give to be touched by a god but your skin yearned only for gentle curves and soft feathers for whispered praise from sensuous lips not the hardened choke of an unyielding man

desperation still reeks in the sweat of immortality and his stink will not wash clean even after simmering lust has dissolved even after his eyes have abandoned you in favor of far-distant horizons

but his fading memory of your flesh only sharpens the edge on your hatred his seed is a poison that blooms bitterly in the curls of your hair that crunches through bones and reshapes spines scaled wings unfurling gold in the cruel image of the very sun that watched your violation and had nothing to say

Now men wretch at the stench of your monstrosity born from their own brutal fingertips they seek to conquer the creature they thrust life into but they recoil when you bite back

I wonder at the softness in your eyes how anything so gentle could be reimagined to harden hearts and twist limbs into tombstones And maybe at the end, when your anguished mind was severed from your warped body perhaps your fists could finally unclench your red lips parting to make way for one final exhale, or a hiss

#### Where Does the Beast Go? | Jen Gardner

Where does the beast go when the moon turns away? I do not feel its bristling spines needling at the underside of my skin I do not taste its steaming rage snarling at my cracked lips I do not smell its carnivorous lust clinging to my clothes But it must be there, curled like a sleeping housecat in the ivory prison of my chest gently nudging organs aside kneading at ligaments to soften its bed indulging in the darkness until the light of the moon comes hot and quick to stretch pupils and tear at nail beds to ravage my softness and reconfigure my skull bones to render me unbridled by morality to rip me from reason and then to discard me a trembling shadow of myself streaked in anonymous blood and stinking of moonlit sin alone, so very alone again

Where does the beast go?

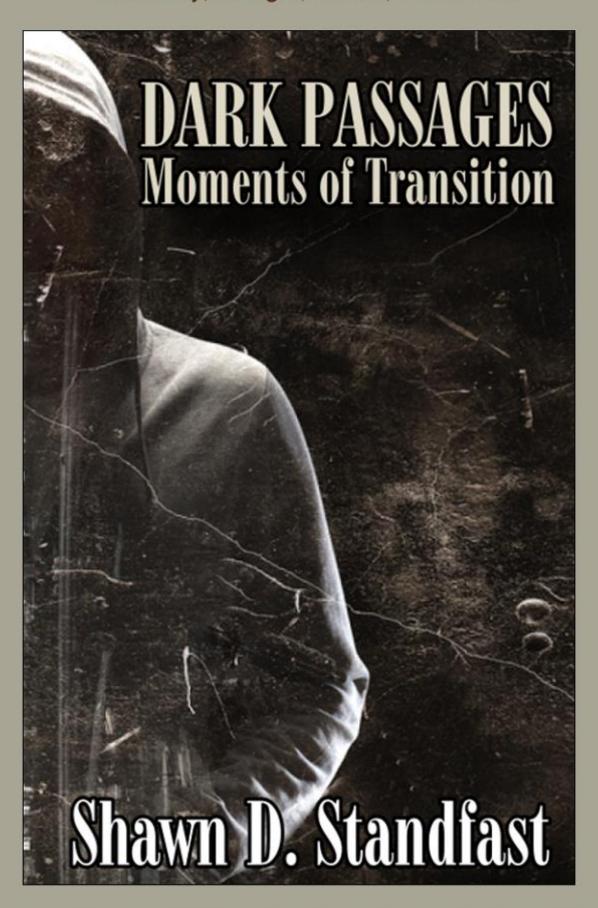
#### **About the Author:**

Jen Gardner lives in the woods in rural Southeast Alaska with her partner and dog. She writes dark poetry, short stories, and essays. More of her published work can be found in Grim & Gilded, Rappahannock Review, or on her website.

Website: Jen Gardner Writing



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



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

# The Deadest End | Lori R. Lopez

Might I tempt you this night to hear a grim tale of a place in a city that embraces dim sights.... and to visit goes against every shred of wisdom, for no shine can follow. There are no lights.

A row of shops claim to be a French Quarter, but their Math is lacking on this ill-named street, which leads to nothing—it doesn't end well when strolling the blocks, a brick wall to meet.

The avenue is bent by twists and turns like a serpent who slides hither-thither at once. If you peer down the lane, not blinking an eye, that snake may slither the length of Rue Dunce!

I fear you'll envision a scaled path gliding, surrounded by blackness, bereft in the gloom. Mes amis, I will tell you this wretched fable ere you bolt the door and hide in your room!

Every street or neighborhood, there is a house that doesn't fit in—set apart from any. This abode has been painted unremarkable hues as if aching to be missed; unglimpsed by many.

A grayish plain dwelling with no cause to exist, rooted between sky and the dry brittle earth. Never have you seen a more deplorable waste of good lumber and clay, for the little it's worth.

Squatting at the deadest end you'll encounter, occupied by shades who won't answer the door. Whether shy or reclusive, stories run rampant of captives or bodies in their walls and floor!

A pallor of smoke from devouring wood, all that is visible the rest of the Rue. A few blocks away I watch from my store with a fascination bordering on Déjà Vu.

Theories abundant, I've waited and listened, perceiving the scariest twilight groans— an unsettling house untouched by the Sun. My dreams cannot fathom a clamor of moans.

I shouldn't have walked all the way to the front, a facade with no character, bleak as a bone. I imagine it must have been built to keep in its inhabitants, much like a prison of stone!

Their name is unknown, a private clan.

The exterior slick with a damp residue, past the windowless side of coated bricks, I have often fancied an outlandish milieu.

The scratching sounds heard I will not forget, lingering through hours where there is no rest. Beyond a few blinks, I stalk lonely minutes like the Shadow Puppets seen on my quest.

And plenty's the Eve my eyes felt deceived, for a sleepless brain isn't always believed.

# If The Curse Fits | Lori R. Lopez

The Curio Shop appeared as they do, in a whirlwind, on an off-the-beaten street. I stepped through the door to another dimension or world, blown in by a gust. You know the feeling—nothing quite the same—a Wonderlandish spell of upsides being down, outsides being in, or vice-versa! It's very mind-bendy.

The Curator of the absurd collection solemnly led me to an aisle I would have missed otherwise, in the back behind a noisy beaded curtain of mini skulls. And teeth! I squinted. "These are my darlings!" declared Minerva. She gestured proudly, introduced a bizarre array. After chortling behind a hand, she presented a curved box.

I lifted the cover. Within nestled a charming Tophat: neither tall nor flat; velvet-textured; Roses on the brim. Gold lettering inscribed the circumference of the dark container, a slogan: If the hat fits, wear it! I couldn't resist the invitation, and gingerly raised the Tophat onto my head. The perfect size, it settled in place.

"Looks like you've chosen a hat, or the hat chose you."
Nodding, I followed the odd woman from her private
stash, escaping the hidden lane feeling like a Million
Gazillion Bucks. Not even curious about the cost.
"I'll pay the Moon and Stars for it," my tongue rashly
boasted. "Well you should, for there is no comparison!"

Wild snickers. The strange lady spun in circles....
Behind her a rack of Shrunken Skulls clacked their
grins. A glowering trio of Bonemen danced down
the aisle, while a matching pair of Spidermonkeys
slapped Bongos silly and screeched from a shelf.
Everything in the shop rattled, including my molars.

A madwoman, she giggled at peculiar moments. "Feel the energy! I breathe my Voodoo into each

rare trinket. Objects holding the Ether and Nether in balance. A contrast that glows or obscures, that awards or punishes. Determining your fate—granting what you deserve—blessing or curse!"

The store had appeared, sure enough, by chance. "Many have tried The Hat, but it only fits one head." The weird woman cackled. "The right head, which is yours, so you must wear and never remove it, else pay a higher price!" Never ever? I blinked. She snatched the Stars and Moon from the sky....

Deepening nights blacker than pitch. "I can't pay more." I wanted a Refund. Walls and all between just vanished. She and her wares had gone. Questions arose. What could be higher? Was she a Beldam or simply adept at selling? The Hat has since grown uncomfortably tight.

Beginning to shrink and squeeze. Binding like the terms. The Curse and my cranium fused.

#### Ruminations upon the Nether | Lori R. Lopez

When not even ghosts remember us, not even the earth cradles our bones, and faces erase from mind. Voices no longer echo across the Void, bestir the Veil, unsettle curtains beyond the Netherside....

Then have we grown past old to ancient, obsolete, forsaken; so faint the only remains lie embedded by centuries of dirt, epochs of solid layers in broken shards, a few scattered minuscule remnants....

Awaiting the tools of Archaeology to hunt and peck. To scrape what traces can be found, then toil at piecing together the fragments—crafting a semblance, as close as can be guessed to who we are.

Make that were. No longer whole, a Jigsaw Puzzle missing most of the parts. A mystery with sparse clues to solve. Desolate spirits gaping in silent wisps of Ether—devoured by the wolfhounds of Nether—drowning in dim tides.

Treading, drifting, towed by deep relentless currents. Unable to swim back to the surface, reach through the division between the light and eons of barren darkspace....
Losing shape, leaking substance.

Gnawed by teeth of Time into artifacts. Vague bits of long-gone seasons; vestiges of ruined ages, flecks of the eternal, recorded as ruminations upon the Nether and shelved to gather dust....

Until new life is breathed by an exhibit, a display—unveiling these relics, these fossils and reminders that Change is the only aspect not to change; the sole conclusion of every story.

#### The Fear Crossing | Lori R. Lopez

Classic patterns of nightfall and light dramatically spill—aligned in a shivery triangle-slice of pallid pie.

Torn from Headlines. RIP-ping, dripping, oozing shade and the Moon's shy hue across a sheer veil.

Like ink and paper, boldly etched upon the darkly sketched mural of spooky black-and-white imagery.

Dividing the bleak of the scarcest somberest hour's nocturnal urban scene with a killer style of Noir.

Slipping forth, exuding stealth, the shock of a bloodless grinning face in a clandestine blink.

The hunched phantomesque figure of a twilight traveler, channeled with creeping tread....

Flitting, commuting the gap, gliding back and forth, no Tickets or Passport required to stray.

Sliding, a fog-striding wraith; floater of planes, drifter of domains, two-dimensional visitor.

Exiting the door, interrupting a chiaroscuro flow of dreary contrasts that can rob your breath.

This painting-perfect shift of scene disturbing eye, the nerves. A chilling echo of backstabbed ease.

The instant printed on pavement, a stunning cunning shimmer from Beyond, both wavering and firm.

Striking portrait; cinematic, stark, captured by a lens, the spirit-portal wide, less narrow than an arrow.

Tapered to a point, blunt as sharp, the ribbon's end might pierce to the soul and catch your undeath.

Darkness, a long band of pale—clear as stars in the abyss of sky's pool. I'm unable to look away.

The Fear Crossing. Rapt I shudder, mesmerized on its brink as he smiles.... and in a jolt snatches me!

Struggling, screeching, reeled in that glimmer bridge. The door slams tight. Not a ghost out of place.

#### eaters of hearts | Lori R. Lopez

Rapid my breath. The sharp gusts or gasps of fright punctuate footfalls. I flee, with everything inside me. Every ounce of earnest composition. But never fast enough, or far. They pursue, heatedly panting.... like rabid-tempered hounds; lunging, chasing a scared little animal. I was that creature, abruptly their target. An obsession. Relentless, ferocious, dogged furnace-fire rasps igniting the hairs on my nape. Drumbeats of brutality, their charging aggressive strides proved all of the incentive needed to strain my endurance,

stretch my limits, challenge a preconceived capacity and reach for the Finish Line to halt this fevered rush, Yet no refuge or respite could be won. Only death ahead and behind. The race is very nearly run.

They want to take my heart. I concealed it in a secret place they will not uncover soon with loud unruly threats, growls of mordant rage and furious impatience over a quiet resistance to their insistent demands.... the spurious craven attacks at my existence, as they strive to claim what resides in chests full of riches beyond compare. The gleam of Compassion. The sterling glow of Respect. The shining essence of Truth. Mine is buried, a treasure submerged below a surface marred by dusty prints from stomping feet that march to Apathy, step to the cadence of Cruelty, tread on crushed discarded souls who couldn't escape their hostile grudges and clawing grasps.

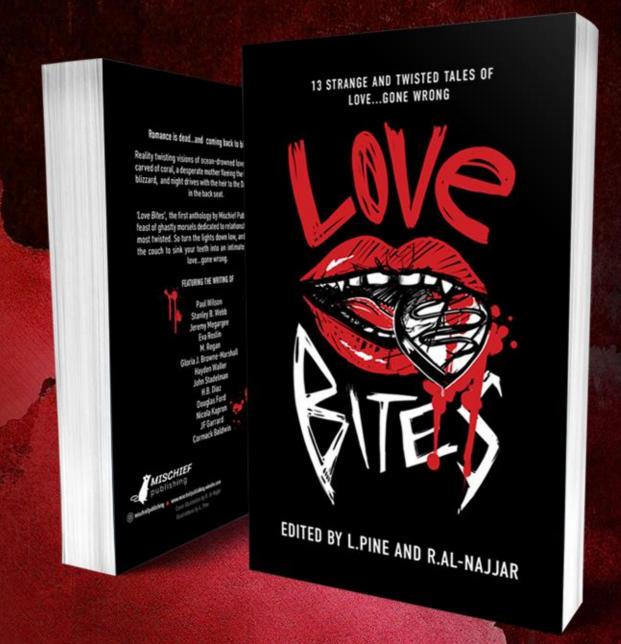
Barely I dodge base ambushes, corrupt assails. The baleful grinding arrogance of pebble-sized dispositions; crass immoral demeanors chipped and chiseled out of cold blocks, solid rocks. Vicious stony grins that eat soft hearts like this.... bleeding for losses and loves. Cherishing the genuine moments, fragile mementos. Untouched by greedy talons, monstrous egos. I will run, on and on, disregarding flames of fatigue, deprivation. The heavy weight of sorrow; vast tolls of solitude and desperation. Until my heart bursts in fragments too meager to rend or chew, depriving a feast, denying a glutton's conquest! Drawing my last gulp of air I shall laugh and stand my ground, having run circles around and led them to collide, dizzily collapse, cracked to useless bits.

#### **About the Author:**

Lori R. Lopez is an offbeat author-illustrator, poet, songwriter, and wearer of hats, as well as an animal-and-monster-lover. Verse has appeared in The Sirens Call, The Horror Zine, H.W.A. Poetry Showcases, Weirdbook, Spectral Realms, Space & Time Magazine, Oddball Magazine, Bewildering Stories, Illumen, Altered Reality Magazine, California Screamin' (the Foreword Poem) and more. Books include *The Dark Mister Snark*, *Odds And Ends*, *Leery Lane*, and *Darkverse: The Shadow Hours*. Lori has been nominated for the Elgin and Rhysling Awards.

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



FEATURING TALES BY

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

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

#### The Hero | Nicole L. Nevel -Steighner

Horror film producer Reed Walters navigated his way through the bar at the Billser Hotel, the venue of Summer Scream Fest Weekend, in search of his business partner.

"Your money is no good here," Sammy said, perching on the barstool next to his and motioning to the bartender. "Give him a vodka and tonic."

"Thanks," Reed said, fist-pumping Sammy. "How's the night finding you?"

"A few bites," Sammy said, giving a half-crooked smile. With his blue eyes and dark hair, he drew in girls with little effort. "This place just oozes debauchery. A minute ago I finished chatting with a lady whose husband has gone missing. Translation... doesn't care to be found."

Reed wasn't in the market yet for a replacement for his ex-wife Angie. Honestly, he'd neglected himself lately. Thinking about her with the dentist made him sick. A dentist!

"We have a meeting with our sponsors tomorrow," Sammy said. "Fix up a bit, eh? You look like shit." Reed shrugged and greatly accepted the gin and tonic.

Sammy slammed down a wad of bills. "Give us one every half hour."

"We won't be fit for a meeting." Reed sighed. "Like the last con."

"What? New York was fantastic." Sammy smiled. "Didn't you enjoy all that island had to offer?"

"There were interesting choices there. None that I care to repeat."

"You've got to get Angie out of your blood. She had you pegged as perfect first husband material."

"Enough," Reed said in a flat tone. "I have to endure her if I want any time with Rosie."

"So get partial custody of the kid."

"What then?" Reed asked, shrugging his shoulders. "Drag a seven-year-old from town to town while we do our thing? Nope. Not fair to her."

"Not fair to you either," Sammy said, swinging his stool towards Reed. "You're her hero. It's total adoration. You are one of the good ones. I'm not just saying that because I know about your meeting with Mara."

"You know about my meeting? You pissed?"

"Word travels fast at these events," Sammy said. "We were destined to do separate projects. You can't pass up a meeting with Mara Hansen. I know you have to stave off the bank. Just as long as it doesn't interfere with our meeting with the Cringle Cut boys."

"This is pretty cool of you," Reed said. "I couldn't have made it through these past few years without you."

"No worries," Sammy said, ending his drink and slamming down the glass. "You can do me a solid later."

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The dealer room was hopping the next morning. Reed managed to pull himself and Sammy together. Clean clothes and a shave had done wonders. The fans were clamoring for pictures and they were obliging.

Swiping through his phone he admitted that Sammy was right. The images staring back at him were attractive, with curly blonde hair and green eyes. He caught himself almost smiling for real.

Sammy patted his arm. "Here's your biggest fan."

Reed looked up to see Angie meandering aimlessly through the crowd, Rosie by her side. Upon seeing him, she let go of her mother's hand and dashed over to his table.

"Hey!" She squealed. "Can I have an autograph?"

Coming from behind the table he swung her up onto his arms. Her legs dangled almost too long. She had grown so big since he'd last seen her.

"Anything for my most beloved fan!"

Angela sulked, tapping her fingers on a pile of DVDs. Her dark eyes scanned over him.

"You're looking well." He said, sitting Rosie down and reaching out to hug her. She coiled back, glaring at Sammy.

"What a bitch." He mumbled under his breath.

"Excuse me, Sammy?" She asked quietly, raising an eyebrow.

"I said nice dress." He smirked. "I'm going to get another coffee."

"I'll watch the goods," Reed said, looking down at Rosie. "Wanna help dad sell his DVDs?"

Nodding her head excitedly she took Sammy's chair. Reed couldn't get over how much she'd come to resemble him. What a feeling.

Much to Angela's chagrin, a line was beginning to form behind her.

"Dear, you are blocking the fans," Reed said with a slight smile.

"Of course." She said, lips pursed. "I'll leave you to them. I'll be back before dinner for Rosie."

She walked a few steps from the table, then turned back to spy him sign a cover of a DVD. This was no longer her crowd.

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Dinner time came and went as he searched his phone for messages. Angle was never late. It was almost time for their meeting with the Cringle Cut boys. Was she spiteful?

"This isn't a good look," Sammy said, twirling a random feather he'd found. "The kid? Really?"

"Annoying much?" Reed hissed. "Yes, the kid. What am I supposed to do?"

"No worries." Sammy sighed, tossing the feather. "I'll handle the Cringles and you find your wife."

"Ex-wife." Reed reminded, holding on tighter to Rosie's hand.

Reed watched Sammy go off into the bar area, his heart sinking. This could be the end of their deal. Foreclosure would then be imminent.

"Dad, are you going to lose Christmas?" Rosie asked. "Are the Kringles going to be mad?"

Reed chuckled, "Wrong people honey. Cringle potato chips, not the Kringles at the North Pole. Nope, would never lose Christmas for us."

"That's good," Rosie said. "It is going to be hot in Mexico. No snow. No Christmas."

"What are you talking about sweetie?" Reed asked, steering her onto one of the padded benches in the lobby. "No snow? It's Pittsburgh, there is always going to be snow."

"Mexico, you know. Where Mom and Philip are taking me for Christmas."

He quivered, as Christmas was supposed to be his to share with her this year. What was Angie up to?

"Dad, what's wrong? You look whiter than some of those vampire impersonators"

Before he could speak, a shadow enveloped them.

"What a darling little girl." Came a purr from his right.

"Excuse me?" He asked, a blonde woman towered over them. Her lithe form was wrapped in a tan jacket lined with shiny silver zippers.

"Mara Hansen." She said, extending a hand. "We have a meeting at seven, but it seems I've caught you sooner." He rose to meet her, she was nearly as tall as him. Upon taking her hand, he inhaled the scent. An undernote of lilies if not mistaken.

"Yes, Ms. Hansen. This is my little girl, Rosie."

"Charmed," Mara said, reaching down to shake Rosie's hand as well. "Have you two eaten? There's a sweet-looking bistro just over there."

Reed wanted to avoid Sammy and Cringles at all costs right now. He felt the pull of this woman but needed to keep this professional.

"I won't say no." Rosie piped up.

"I like a girl that knows what she wants." Mara smiled.

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"That's the basics of the story," Reed said, swirling his pasta around on his plate.

"It's great, Dad," Rosie said, following suit with hers, having ordered the same.

"Possibly," Mara said, leaning forward. "I love a good slasher flick. Having been overdone lately, I like a strong character behind the mayhem. Lots of layers. Now we just have to find a crew to put this all together. My budget is firm."

"I've worked with smaller crews and way smaller budgets," Reed said, anxiously scrolling his phone for word from Angie. "This is the first time I'll be using my material. Sammy usually does all the writing."

"Sammy?" Mara asked. "Would that happen to be the guy in the far corner?"

Reed motioned to him and Sammy raised a glass in their direction.

"Yep. That would be him."

"Well, invite him over." Mara purred. "He looks interesting."

"Sammy?" Reed asked, feeling deflated, Angie messaging him that she'd be delayed another hour.

Within seconds, he was shaking hands with the Cringles and ushering them off. Smoothing back his hair, he neared their table.

"Mara Hansen." He said, taking her hand. "This is an honor."

"You know my work?" She asked. "I'm thrilled. I love producing untapped talent. Reed has been talking about a project that I wouldn't mind sinking my teeth into."

"You don't say," Sammy said, inching into the booth beside her. "Well, I just sealed a deal with the Cringles for another picture. For production, you may be the perfect fit."

"I like a perfect fit." Mara smiled. "Being as such, how about I order us a round of drinks. A cola for Miss Rosie, here."

"This has been such a great meeting." Rosie yawned.

"Wow, the kid looks tired." Sammy winked. "Maybe Reed should find her mother and get her off to bed?"

"I think I will just take her back home myself," Reed said, sick to the fact of handing Mara over to Sammy.

Sammy looked confused and shrugged his shoulders.

"Angie's running late," Reed said. "Come on Rosie, I'll get you home and into your bed."

"My bed!" Rosie perked up. "I haven't been in my old bed for so long."

Reed didn't' want to tell her that without Mara's deal this may be her last time sleeping in that house.

"See you in the morning then?" Mara asked. "When we are more invigorated?"

"Sure." Reed nodded, noticing a look of content cross Sammy's face. "Are you staying here as well?"

"I am," Mara said, ushering over the waiter. "Two gin and tonics please."

"See you in the a.m," Sammy said, waving them off.

As Reed strolled through the lobby he realized that no matter what, Sammy would always have the advantage over him. He didn't know how to flirt anymore.

"Dad, you like Mara, don't you?"

"She's nice," Reed said. "I hope we can work together."

"I like her, she is blonde like us," Rosie said, with another slight yawn.

Reed dismissed her comment quickly, scrolling through his phone. Angie was going to meet them in an hour and not leave the hotel. This was bullshit!

As he shoved his phone into his pocket, another blonde woman approached them. This one is not as well put together, but a dead ringer for Mara.

"You didn't let her touch you did you?" She whispered.

"Don't bother us," Reed said, squeezing Rosie's hand. He didn't need a stalker.

"You didn't let her touch you, did you?" She asked louder this time, standing in front of them.

"And what if I did?" Reed asked, getting closer to her face. "Stop this nonsense, you are going to scare my daughter."

"You did." The stranger sighed, "You are surely doomed."

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"This is so not cool." He said, taking her in. She smelled of lilies. Her hair was a soft coil of blonde tied in a low ponytail. The dress was conservative, yet expensive looking. Not at all the prowess of her counterpart.

"Where is she? Did she leave?" She asked, eyes wild. "I have to find her. To stop her."

"Who?" Reed shrugged. "Who are you looking for? There's a ton of people here this weekend."

"This is her favorite weekend of the year. Easy pickings."

"You've lost me." He sighed. "Who are we looking for?"

"My mother!" She exclaimed. "Mara."

"Mara is at dinner with Sammy," Rosie answered. "That restaurant over there."

"Your mother?" Reed asked. "That's impossible."

"I am Natalie. My mother is Mara. She goes by that name now."

Natalie moved quickly ahead of them, Reed sucked into the drama. This was absurd, as they looked nearly identical. He couldn't help but follow her to the table, which to his dismay was now empty.

"Looks like Sammy didn't take long to finish his drink."

"We have to find them!" Natalie exclaimed. "Your friend is in danger, as are the two of you. She has marked you. Designated you for her desires."

"Desires," Reed smirked. "Well, Sammy will love that."

"I am serious." She huffed. "Where would they have gone?"

"They are both staying here." Rosie offered. "Mara said she has a room here too."

"Observant kid," Natalie said, moving quickly out of the restaurant. Reed followed suit as she made her way to the service desk.

"Can you please tell me what room Mara Hansen is staying in? I'm her daughter and it's an emergency."

"I can't give out that information." Said the desk clerk, noisily chewing her gum. "Hey, aren't you Reed Walters?" Taken off guard, he smiled. "Why yes, I am."

Natalie rolled her eyes. "Come on, please tell me."

"As a favor for me?" Reed asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Sure." The desk clerk answered, tapping at the keyboard, as he felt pleased with himself. "Room 701."

Before he could thank the girl, Natalie took off towards an open elevator car.

"Would you mind telling me just what the emergency is?" Reed asked, stepping inside with her, just as the doors closed.

"Seems you are beginning to believe me. If I can stop her you will all be free. If we are too late... Sammy may be but a memory."

As the car climbed, Rosie looked excited. Was this normal?

"Almost there." She smiled.

Reed shook his head. "What are you planning on doing with Mommy when we get there?

"It depends on what form she is in when we find her," Natalie said sharply. "She is a parasite."

Without knocking, Natalie kicked the door to room 701 open so swiftly that her power awed him.

Sammy lay sprawled out on the bed, Mara on top of him. Her beauty was unfathomable, golden wings poked out from soft shoulders, her hair a curtain as the blue light between Sammy's mouth and hers intermingled.

"Mother!" Natalie hissed. "Enough!"

She pulled a blade from her pocket and started towards the bed, Mara snarled as she backed off of Sammy and into the corner as he wheezed, trying to reclaim his breath.

Rosie's eyes grew big as Mara leaped over Sammy and the bed attempting to escape. With a quick shove, she sealed the door. Mara's face was inches from hers as she let out an otherworldly squeal.

There was a knock on the door, followed by Angie's cacophony. "Reed, you're an idiot taking my daughter to a private party!"

"Not now, Mom!" Rosie yelled. "We've got this."

Mara closed the inches between herself and Rosie, as Reed snagged the blade from Natalie's hand and jumped on top of her, the blade finding itself in the middle of her wings. Within seconds her body deflated, leaving behind a moldy husk of feathers. The bones laid bare.

Natalie sank to the floor with relief as Angie pushed through the door. Reed held Rosie as tears of both frustration and joy ran down his face.

"What the hell?" Angie asked, scanning the room in disapproval.

"He defeatd the Nattmara." Natalie gasped.

Sitting up on the bed, Sammy got his bearings. "Of all the women."

"See Mom, Dad is a hero," Rosie said, joyfully.

#### **About the Author**

Nicole L. Nevel-Steighner is a writer from Western Pennsylvania that enjoys dabbling in the horror and neo-noir genres. Her love for eccentric people shines through her work. She lives outside of Pittsburgh with her husband Gregory, mother and three crazy cats.

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#### Dead in the Water | Tom Koperwas

Benjamin Potter, the live-in superintendent of the Nadir Building, leaned forward on the three-legged stool in the open doorway of his crude apartment and listened intently to the rusty cast-iron drains in the surrounding basement gurgling fitfully, spitting gobbets of slime and green bottomland water onto the bare cement floor.

"Patience, Furfur," the corpulent, forty-five-year-old custodian whispered to the 18-pound American Bobtail Cat sitting next to him in a black, studded cat collar and leash. "Our late-night visitors should be arriving soon. I bet you can hear them coming, can't you?"

As if on cue, a swarm of sewer rats emerged from the drains, their slick brown coats glistening in the glaring light of the open bulbs dangling awkwardly from the basement ceiling. Boldly ignoring Benjamin and the cat held firmly in his hands, they scurried up the narrow wooden ramp standing in the middle of the floor, greedily devouring the thin patina of strategically placed peanut crumbs. At the top of the ramp, the hungry rodents pushed through the one-way flap covering the enlarged orifice of the five-gallon transparent water jug, dropping one by one to the base of the sealed container, where a mound of delectable crushed peanuts lay.

Benjamin smiled broadly when the number of rodents trapped in the jug totaled twenty. The city paid a rat bounty of \$5.00 a head. The night's haul would bring in \$100.00; plenty of money for a case of beer and smokes and plenty of fun.

"Your turn now, Furfur," said the custodian, eying the cat crouching at the full length of its leash, its muscles tensed like a powerful, organic spring. Furfur pulled firmly against the leash. The breakaway collar unsnapped, and he leapt high into the air. The rat pack had but a brief moment to scatter to the safety of the drains; enough time for all but one, a young, sleek pup.

"No wonder your breed is called the Golden Retriever of cats," laughed Benjamin, eying the big Bobtail trotting toward him carrying the rat's limp body in its mouth. Once he'd dropped the bloody gift by the apartment door, they went inside.

"You're an extremely efficient hunter," commented Benjamin, switching the TV on in an effort to drown out the sound of heavy rain drumming against the basement windows, rain that had been falling incessantly for hours. "Your body is designed for it," he continued, raising an index finger to emphasize the point. "But we humans must use our heads if we're to be efficient hunters. Take my rat trap. It caught twenty rats, and I didn't have to lift a finger.

"Okay. So they're not dead, Furfur," he chuckled, as the Bobtail rubbed affectionately against his leg. "But I don't have to bite each one to kill them! No sir. In the morning, I'll simply lower the jug into the big sump pit and let it slowly fill with water. The rats will thrash about like devils and crawl over each other, fighting to keep their heads in the remaining pocket of air as it steadily shrinks. Yet it'll all be to no avail. They'll soon be *dead in the water*."

Benjamin dropped down onto the couch and closed his eyes. The numerous drywall and electrical chores he'd done that day for the tenants had left him exhausted. He hardly heard the T.V. announcer's voice as he drifted off to sleep.

"Winds of 100 mph and higher have been observed. The approaching storm is expected to increase water levels along the coast by 30 feet or more..."

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Benjamin woke up with a start, the unfamiliar sound of Furfur's yowl in his ears.

"What's going on?" he cried.

Looking down, he discovered the answer; dirty sewer water flowing into the apartment and across the floor. Jumping off the couch, he ran to the apartment door and threw it open. After he swatted Furfur with his hand, the cat jumped off the chair it was perched on and ran across the wet basement floor to the stairs. Grabbing a pair of shoes, Benjamin ran to the elevator, splashing in the shallow water.

Benjamin entered the elevator and started up. Suddenly, it stopped dead between the floors. A dark stream of dirty sewer water gushed into the elevator from the vents, rising quickly to his knees, then to his waist. Benjamin reached for the cellphone in his pocket to call for help, only to discover he'd left it in his apartment. The custodian thought he could hear faint voices calling from above. Maybe they would rescue him. He shouted at the top of his lungs. Then he began to scream as the fetid water rose rapidly to his shoulders. Soon, there was only a small pocket of air left in the top of the elevator. Benjamin closed his eyes, and his mind wandered back to the plight of the rats. He was in a trap similar to theirs. The elevator was like a big jug filling with water. Soon, the last pocket of air would be gone; then he too would be dead in the water...

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Benjamin opened his eyes and found himself lying on the couch, breathing heavily. The elevator. The floodwater. It had all been a dream engendered by the newscaster's warnings of the approaching storm.

He sat bolt upright when he heard the clanging of the elevator alarm. Looking down, he saw sewer water pouring in across the floor. Jumping to his feet, he pushed open the door and sent his frantic cat out into the rapidly rising water. Grabbing his shoes and cellphone, he waded toward the stairs. He was partway up the stairwell when he paused to look back into the basement. The rising water was filled with rats swimming out of the drains. Leaping out of the water, they bounded up the stairs, running around his feet.

Turning on his heels to ascend the stairs, he lost his balance and fell.

The custodian came down hard, landing next to the water's edge. Without interruption, the rats kept on coming, jumping onto his prostrate body, leaping from it to the stairs above. Benjamin pushed himself up to a sitting position. Try as he might, he was unable to rise to his feet. He must have broken a bone, for the pain was excruciating. The water flowed over his legs. Desperate, he tried crawling up the steps, but he kept slipping back down into the water. Reaching into his pocket for his cellphone, he found it was gone, probably lost when he took his fall. Benjamin was sure he heard voices coming from the main floor. He shouted for help, but to no avail.

The water rose rapidly to his chest, then to his neck. Unable to move, he knew the grim truth. The rats had escaped, but he was trapped. *Dead in the water*.

#### **About the Author:**

Thomas Koperwas is a retired teacher living in Windsor, Ontario, Canada who writes short stories of horror, crime, fantasy, and science fiction. His work has appeared, or is forthcoming in: Anotherealm; Jakob's Horror Box; Literally Stories; The Literary Hatchet; Literary Veganism; Bombfire; Pulp Modern Flash; Savage Planets; Dark Fire Fiction; The Sirens Call; Blood Moon Rising Magazine; Corner Bar Magazine; Free Bundle Magazine; The Chamber Magazine.

#### Summer Break | DJ Tyrer

Looking forward to his summer break: "Sun, sea, sand, sangria, and sex!" Especially, sex...

Different woman every night, trawling bars for willing lovers. Booze and distance help him overcome reticence. Having a great vacation.

"Hey, darling," brunette breathes, slipping into the seat beside him; snatching up his bottle, takes a sip.

Best looking so far! Yeah, he's in here.

"Back to my place, lover?" she asks.

"Sure." He nods, swigs down the last of his beer.

Feeling woozy, he stumbles into her lair.

No need for pretence, now, it sheds its human form – serpentine, fanged.

Hungry, it begins to feed.

#### **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).

Blog: <u>DJ Tyrer</u>
Facebook: <u>DJ Tyrer Writer</u>

#### The Cuttleman | L. Stephenson

It was an hour to sunrise when he first saw it.

Andrés Sequera strummed his guitar as he sat upon the end of the pier on Cala Llentrisca beach. Humming a gentle tune, the worn wood creaked along in accompaniment as he rocked softly back and forth. Gazing up into the Ibiza sky, the song on his lips quickly faded as he caught sight of something.

Out there on the bay, as far as the fishing boats traveled to cast their nets in the sun, a pinprick of light shone out of the water. He heard the faint screams of a woman as the winds carried her cries to shore.

Clothes shed, the young man battled his way through icy blue currents and shadowy fields of Neptune grass. And when he felt the floor slip away, he kicked off into the void.

As Andrés drew closer, the strange beacon he had seen from a distance rippled in the darkness of the water's surface like white fire. The woman's frantic form danced and flickered as she fought against the will of the sea.

And then she was gone, and so too was the light.

Partially blind, the ocean appeared black and impenetrable as Andrés treaded and waited for his full vision to return. It was quiet. Quiet enough that he heard the sigh of the waves colliding with the shore. But it did not stay quiet for long.

Water rained down on his back as something rose out of the sea behind him.

Turning to the sound, Andrés' sight returned just in time for him to see the size of the creature when something latched onto his shoulders. The young guitar player shrieked in terror as it dragged him across the water towards the razor jaws that lay open in wait.

\*\*\*

Claire held back her little sister's hair as she doubled-over. Becky retched hard onto the sand as her denim handbag fell from her shoulder. It was a bulky awkward thing with kittens' faces sewn onto the sides. From her pink T-shirt down to her white flip-flops, her body was a human collage for cat lovers.

"I said you were drinking too much too fast," she told her, "but would you listen?"

"Is your daughter okay, ma'am?" a jolly older gentleman called over. Atop his white beard, he sported a Navy captain sailor's hat as he stood close by their campfire, cigar in hand.

"She's – fine." Claire felt the tight bun of her hair and looked down at her beige, expedition-ready getup.

"He thinks you're my mom." Becky managed through her hoarse throat.

"Shut up." Claire snapped as she heard their friends' laughter crackling from the fire.

Daniel's bulging arms locked around his woman's dainty waist as they sat together. Lora was a redheaded beauty with skin as pale as the belly of the orca whale.

"We had no idea anyone else would be here," she mentioned to the old sea captain, hitting him with her infectious smile. "Isn't this place supposed to be a secret?"

"Babe, we found it on the internet," Daniel scoffed at her mockingly. "Secret's out!"

"Man, what a dick." Teddy grumbled as he appeared just behind Claire.

"He'll never change." Claire rubbed Becky's back as she looked Teddy over with his wiry hair, ratty little legs and beginner's beer gut. "And you've got no chance of stealing her away from him."

Meanwhile, Teddy was sizing up the competition. Standing upright, Daniel was a six-foot Adonis with hair that was an immaculate network of jet black curls and skin that was like a fountain of melted caramel over smooth muscle.

"I know," Teddy sighed as he lifted the acoustic guitar into view. "He's so frickin' pretty it makes my teeth hurt."

"What's that you got there?" Claire frowned at him in her amusement.

"Secret weapon." Teddy winked at her before he approached the campfire.

"Where the hell did you get a guitar?" The sheer surprise in Daniel's voice made Lora burst out laughing.

"Leave him alone, babe," she told him guiltily.

"I found it at the end of that pier." Teddy motioned back over his shoulder. "It was just sitting there."

"And you thought it was okay to just take it?" Daniel teased accusingly.

"Babe." Lora elbowed him softly.

"He has a habit of trying to take things that don't belong to him." Claire remarked.

"Really?" Teddy hissed at her as the couple laughed.

"I know who it belonged to," the sea captain said. He blew on the tip of his smoking cigar, making it glow.

The group fell silent.

"Sorry?" Teddy said first.

"Belonged to a boy who went missing a couple of nights ago, right here on this very beach," the old sea captain explained as he stepped into their campfire circle. He looked to Lora. "See, you were right, young lady. This place is a secret."

They heard sand and pebbles crunch all around them as bodies started to emerge from the shadows.

"And we keep it that way," the old man tossed his cigar into the fire, "by making sure that no one ever leaves."

\*\*\*

Teddy saw the sky first, and the birds. But the sound that ripped him out of his slumber was not the screaming of the gulls overhead. Those cries were human.

He jolted upright as Daniel fell to his knees next to where he lay. He met the man's dark eyes, wide with panic as blood sprayed in small bursts from the steel rod impaling his throat.

He gargled as his eyes rolled white, and then Daniel was gone. He knelt there motionless, like a Greek statue made of flesh and bone.

Teddy yelped as he kicked himself away from the body, crying out as he ran out of floor. His arm plunged over the side into the icy darkness of the sea. He cowered back from the edge as he realized where he was.

He was sitting on a free-floating dock. Ocean waters on every side seemed to go on forever.

Standing close to Daniel's body was Lora, her long neck decorated with her partner's arterial spray. Behind her, sisters Claire and Becky lay flat as they begged their blood-speckled friend to "Get down!"

Teddy looked out over the water where he quickly spotted a fishing boat about one hundred yards out. The white-bearded sea captain stood at the bow of the vessel, smiling as he waved with one arm and lowered the empty harpoon cannon with the other.

Claire stayed low as she crawled to Lora's aid, while, behind her, Becky turned to the sound of something in the water.

A shape made of brilliant, rippling light was floating there. Flickering and vibrating furiously with color, Becky's eyes glittered as they reflected the creature's hypnotic glow. The light darkened into a pool of drowning kittens. Horrified, Becky reached out to save them.

"BECKY!" Claire tore the harpoon from Daniel's throat and plunged it into the mirage.

A bluish-green discharge spewed forth as something roared from below.

Teddy and Lora looked at Claire and Becky and they looked back.

The entire dock quaked as something crashed into it from beneath.

Without its pretty colors, the thing in the water had become a sickly shade of gray-ish white. It quivered like Jell-O, as if a child had tried to build a man out of oyster meat. It slowly circled the dock like a shark's fin and then disappeared from sight.

"What...the hell was that?" Lora sobbed.

"Never mind that. How the hell are we gonna get out of here?" Claire kicked the surface of the dock.

"We swim for it," Becky suggested.

"We can't." Teddy shook his head. "That old fisherman is just waiting to pick us off. We're trapped."

"Guys, what about Daniel?" Lora went unheard.

"Couldn't we try tricking him or something?" Becky talked over her.

"Yeah, maybe," Claire nodded. "We need to come up with some sort of distraction."

She turned to the hard lash of a tentacle. Her face exploded with blood as she spun and body-slammed the dock.

"Oh my God, Claire!" Becky cried as they rushed to her side.

She held out a hand to her sister, gasping as they rolled her over. Claire's face was a swollen mess of broken teeth, split lips and mangled nostrils.

"You're going to be okay," Becky said tearfully as Claire took her hand. "I'll look after you for once."

The dock seemed to darken.

A slimy abomination, twice the size of a man loomed over them, dripping as eight wormy arms hung lifelessly from its empty face.

Two pale tentacles fired out from beneath them. Becky screamed as their sucker plates grappled onto her fragile skin. Her neck dislocated as they wrenched her backwards through the air.

Its eight arms whipped open to reveal its mouth, the razor beak in the center of that dead face, as it crushed Becky apart like a cheap doll. Bones snapped and flesh shredded as her crimson juices rained down its body like a baptism of blood. Its huge round eyes rolled over pink with delight before it sank back down.

Teddy's stomach voided over the side of the dock. Lora froze, rooted next to Claire, trembling, eyes wide in horror and disbelief.

"Jesus Christ." Teddy spluttered.

"What do we do?" Lora shivered. "Even if we don't get shot...that thing, oh my God, that thing..."

"I can't see." Claire uttered weakly. "What happened? Becky? Becky, answer me!"

Teddy and Lora quickly realized that Claire's eyes had swollen shut. As the two of them exchanged a grave look, Lora silently volunteered to be the bearer of bad news.

"Claire, listen to me," she began shakily before Teddy took her hand for support. "Becky is gone."

"Gone? What do you mean, gone?"

"We were attacked," Lora explained. "That thing in the water, it came back. It just grabbed her. It happened so fast. She was gone before we could do anything. I'm so sorry."

Claire took hold of each of their arms, squeezed them and then hauled herself upright.

"We have to make a swim for it," she told them.

"We'll be dead before we get there."

"Not if we have a distraction."

"Distract that thing? With what?"

"...More food." Teddy replied solemnly, motioning to Daniel's body.

"No..." Lora whimpered. "Not that."

"We're still here." Teddy took her by the wrists. "He can help us survive this. Don't you think he'd want that?"

"Okay," she sighed sadly, "but what about the fisherman?"

Everything shook as there was a sudden hard knock from below.

"SWIM!!!" Teddy screamed as he kicked Daniel's body overboard.

The dock shattered upwards into the air, toppling everyone into the sea. Within mere moments, the creature already had Daniel in its tentacles.

Teddy pumped his legs as hard as he could. He caught sight of Lora up ahead.

"We're not gonna make it!" he yelled, splashing wildly.

"Keep going!" she called back. "You can do it, Teddy!"

Hearing her say his name gave him the will to keep fighting. Through burning lungs and aching limbs, he pushed on.

They were halfway there when they heard their friend's cries.

"Don't worry about me, guys!" Claire said. "Just get to the boat!"

Teddy stalled in the water. "Claire, no..."

She bobbed alone in the sea, amongst the wreckage of the dock. She never intended to escape with them. She decided her fate the moment she learned of her little sister's death.

"Don't stop, Teddy!" Lora hollered at him.

Preparing to follow her, he blinked away the salt water that stung his eyes.

A sharp gasp of fright stabbed him in the chest as Claire vanished between blinks. She was gone.

"It got her!" he choked out, sick from shock as he took off after Lora. "Go, go, go!"

The rickety old boat was already leaving as it set sail in the other direction.

Lora caught up to it first.

The deck shook as the old man stomped over to the side railing.

"You'll never get out of here alive, darling," he taunted as he took aim at her.

"Please don't!" she pleaded.

"The Cuttleman needs to be fed!"

The fiend fired a flare into Lora's red locks, setting them alight. The girl shrieked as she threw herself underwater.

Teddy snuck his way aboard on the other side while the captain was distracted. He found items from the campfire strewn around the deck. There was Becky's denim handbag with its kitten faces, and the guitar he found at the end of the pier. Grabbing it by the neck, he brandished it like a baseball bat and marched around the boat.

"Hey, asshole..." His voice trailed off as he took in the sight before him.

Up-close, in the daylight, the old man had no eyes. It looked like the same goopy substance of the thing that circled the dock as it spilled out onto his bloated cheeks. And something snapped away beneath his shirt as if some creature had just eaten its way out of his belly.

Lora landed on the deck behind him, giving Teddy his moment to swing the weapon. The captain caught it with ease, letting out an inhuman roar as he rammed both Teddy and the instrument over the side.

The old man hissed as he spun to face Lora, unaware that she came armed with Daniel's harpoon.

"Let him back up, or I'll kill you," she promised, jabbing him in the shoulder with its sharp tip.

"Forget about the boy," the old man gargled at the girl as the rubbery flesh of his face began to separate and expand, swelling to four times its size. "Fear for your own skin."

Lora backed away as eight limbs oozed out of the captain's distending face and down his grotesque body until they dragged along the deck. Lowering her weapon, she made a run for the bow.

There, she found the harpoon cannon and wasted no time in loading it. But when she turned the gun on the approaching sea captain, she froze.

Daniel stood there in his place, glowing brilliantly under the Ibizan sun.

"Babe..." Tears fell from her eyes as her finger fell from the trigger.

It was as if he had never come to any harm. He was the living dream of a perfect memory. He smiled warmly as he reached out to her.

Sobbing, so did she.

He took a step towards her.

She took a step.

He took one more.

As did she.

Their fingers touched and...

Teddy sprang from the side railing, smashing the guitar over the creature's head. The image of Daniel went out like a broken lightbulb.

"Kill him, Lora!" Teddy urged her as he found himself at the feet of the beast. "He killed Becky and Claire. He killed them all."

She reached out for him, but it had him in its grasp. Weeping, she moved away, taking her place behind the harpoon cannon.

"Let him go!" she demanded as she took aim.

The captain didn't reply. The drooping eight arms squelched and slimed as they retracted up to reveal the old sea captain's snapping belly.

"Just kill him, Lora." Teddy told her, finally unafraid. "Kill him and get out of here."

"NO!!!" the girl screamed as the creature crushed Teddy's head into nothing with its razor beak, decapitating him. Lora pulled the trigger without hesitation.

"You'll never make it out of here alive," the captain told her one last time as he lay dying upon the deck.

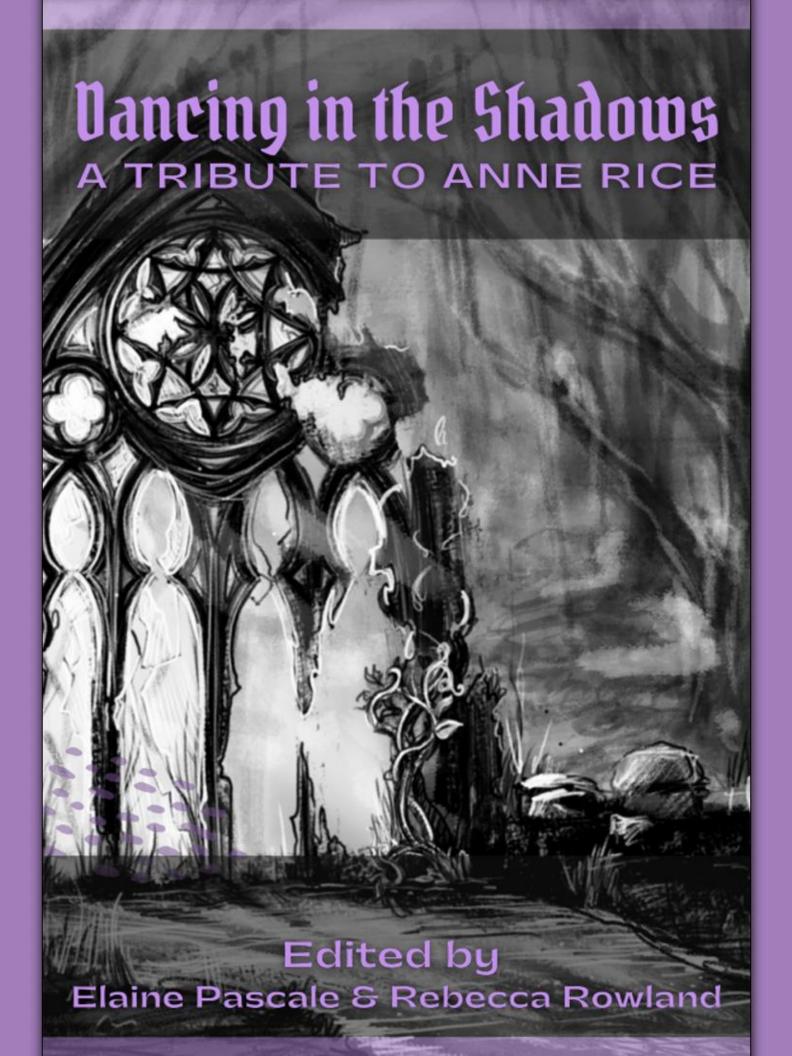
And as she turned to watch Cala Llentrisca beach come into view, she knew his words to be true as four more of his kind towered from the beautiful bright blue crystal waters of the cove, waiting for her to make the mistake of venturing too close.

#### **About the Author:**

Since emerging in 2018, L. Stephenson's horror writing has appeared in 5 anthologies, with more on the way! His first novella, *The Goners* was published last year, and he is currently signed up to release his debut novel. He prefers Caroline B. Cooney and Richard Laymon over R. L. Stine and Stephen King, but admittedly finds greater inspiration in the world of movies.

Instagram: @l. stephenson





#### Featured Project | Dancing in The Shadows: A Tribute to Anne Rice

## A Charity Anthology and the Team Behind It

Dancing in the Shadows: A Tribute to Anne Rice is a charity anthology featuring nineteen authors who spun tales of gothic horror to honor the Queen herself, Anne Rice. But Ms. Rice isn't the focus of this article. We'd like to offer you insight into the team behind this incredible project.

When Ms. Rice passed, it stunned, shocked and impacted many in the horror and fiction communities. Upon hearing of her passing, Elaine Pascale and Rebecca Rowland decided they wanted to do something that would honor both Anne Rice's legacy and pay tribute to the amazing woman she was. To do so, they decided a collection of gothic horror stories dedicated to her memory was the way to go. In order to make that happen, they assembled a team of five: two editors, two publishers, and an illustrator to properly showcase the works that would not only pay tribute to Ms. Rice's love of New Orleans, but also support a cause that was near and dear to her heart – animal rescue.

So how does this type of project get off the ground? How do you pull together a diverse group of individuals to honor an acclaimed author like Anne Rice? That's both an easy and difficult question to answer, and here is how they did it.

Elaine and Rebecca reached out to Angela Yuriko Smith to publish the book under the Yuriko Publishing banner. Having published charity works in the past, Yuriko Publishing was more than happy to collaborate with them and their burgeoning consortium. Working closely with Lee Andrew Forman, from Sirens Call Publications, Angela, Lee, Elaine and Rebecca began the journey that would lead to a highly successful collaboration. Joining them to round out the group was Jeanette Andromeda, the illustrator and artist who created the cover and interior artwork for the book. Let's meet each individual and take a closer look at how they contributed to the project.

Elaine Pascale and Rebecca Rowland: Both Elaine and Rebecca are editors with substantial experience and accreditation in the editing world. Each chose a number of writers they knew would deliver engaging, creative, well-crafted pieces for the anthology. Elaine and Rebecca threw themselves into the project with gusto. As authors and editors who admire Ms. Rice's work, there was an overwhelming sense of pride in drawing together the right group of people to make the project happen. Together, they assembled nineteen authors who would not only make Anne Rice proud, but would also be relatable to a contemporary gothic audience.

Angela Yuriko Smith and Lee Andrew Forman: As the two publishers involved in the *Dancing in the Shadows* project, Angela and Lee worked together to incorporate the pieces Elaine and Rebecca curated to create a beautifully paced book that highlights each author and the tale they contributed to honor Anne Rice. Dedicated to insuring that the book was completed and ready to go live in a timely manner, they worked tirelessly with Elaine and Rebecca to ensure that *Dancing in the Shadows* published on their target date of May 22, 2022.

Jeanette Andromeda: Jeanette is the artist who created the beautiful gothic relief seen on the front cover, the trees and New Orleans style landscape on the back, as well as the beautiful swaying Singing Oak Tree you'll find on the interior of the book. As always, Jeanette's art added that additional touch to the book that made it visually stunning – and it is. It's a beautiful book beyond just the words held within.

Not only did the team want to create a book they and Ms. Rice would be honored to be associated with, but they wanted to do so as a charitable project. Normally, a charity project donates the proceeds *after* everyone has taken their share for the work they've done, then the remainder is sent to a preferred charity organization. But in this case, there was no cut to take. That's right. Everyone who worked on *Dancing in the Shadows* did so as a volunteer. Elaine and Rebecca gave their time and energy gathering, editing, and proofing the individual pieces freely. Angela and Lee formatted and published the book on a voluntary basis, and Jeanette donated her artwork as a gift to the project. Even the authors contributed their stories without compensation to honor the Queen of Contemporary Gothic Fiction.

So, what does it take to pull together a charity anthology that truly honors and supports one of modern fictions most loved gothic authors? It takes a few good people with kind hearts and an abundance of passion for the project that carries through to its core. In total, twenty-three different individuals collaborated to create a comprehensive and truly enthralling tribute that will stand the test of time in homage to a woman all admired, but none knew personally. The level of dedication that created this collection was, and remains, a truly worthy endeavor - one we should all aspire to be a part of at some point in our lives.

While we didn't discuss Ms. Rice specifically in this article, this bit is important, so we'll offer a little back-fill to bring the charitable portion of the project to light. Anne Rice was an extremely accomplished author and mentor, that's something most of us already know, but she was also a lifelong advocate for animal rescue and care. She would often remark that animals brought much love into her life and in return, she did all she could to help the rescue community thrive. Carrying on that tradition, every cent made from the sale of *Dancing in the Shadows: A Tribute to Anne Rice* will be donated to ARNO – Animal Rescue of New Orleans.

<u>Dancing in the Shadows: A Tribute to Anne Rice</u> is available in eBook and paperback on <u>Amazon!</u>

#### **Biographies:**

Elaine Pascale, Editor -

Elaine Pascale is a fan of all things gothic. Her writing has been published in numerous magazines and anthologies. She is the author of *The Blood Lights; If Nothing Else, Eve, We've Enjoyed the Fruit;* and the upcoming *The Thin Contract*. She is a regular contributor to Pen of the Damned and the Ladies of Horror Picture-Prompt Challenge and is an Active member of the HWA. She has a special affinity for vampires, especially those that do not sparkle. Find out more at ElainePascale.com.

Facebook: Elaine Pascale Instagram: @doclaney Twitter: @doclaney

#### Rebecca Rowland, Editor -

Rebecca Rowland is the American dark fiction author of *The Horrors Hiding in Plain Sight, Pieces, Shagging the Boss,* and the upcoming *Optic Nerve* and the curator of six horror anthologies, including *Unburied: A Collection of Queer Dark Fiction*. Her short fiction and guest essays regularly appear in a variety of publications and horror websites, and she reviews short fiction collections for Scotland's Ginger Nuts of Horror. She is an Active member of the Horror Writers Association, a reticent member of the Horror Authors Guild, the New England Horror Writers, and the WhipCity Wordsmiths, listens a little too closely to detailed stories of horrifying surgical procedures, and loves to entertain visitors at her website RowlandBooks.com.

Instagram: <a href="mailto:orange-nc-4">orange-nc-4</a> rowland books

#### Angela Yuriko Smith, Publisher -

Angela Yuriko Smith is a third-generation Shimanchu-American and an award-winning poet, author, and publisher with 20+ years of experience as a professional writer in nonfiction. A three-time Bram Stoker Awards® Finalist for excellence in long fiction (Bitter Suites, 2018), excellence in poetry (Tortured Willows, 2021) and excellence in short nonfiction for "Horror Writers: Architects of Hope" in The Sirens Call eZine Halloween 2021 issue, she was also selected as HWA Mentor of the Year for 2020. In addition, four of her poetry chapbooks have been nominated for the Elgin Awards. Angela offers resources for writer at Angela YSmith.com.

Instagram: @Angela Yuriko Smith

#### Lee Andrew Forman, Publisher -

Lee Andrew Forman is a writer, editor, and publisher from the Hudson Valley region in New York. His fascination with the macabre began in childhood, watching old movies and reading everything he could get his hands on. His love of horror spans three generations, starting with his grandfather who was a fan of the classic Hollywood Monsters. Lee has published three books to date, *The Bury Box, Zero Perspective*, and *Fragments of a Damned Mind*, along with numerous

short stories in multiple anthologies. He is a co-owner of Sirens Call Publications, a regular contributor to *The Lift*, and writes non-fiction pieces for various periodicals. Lee is also an administrator and member of the horror writer's group Pen of the Damned, where you can find a new piece of fiction each week.

Please visit Lee's website at Lee Andrew Forman.

Facebook: Lee A. Forman

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

#### Jeanette Andromeda, Artist -

Jeanette Andromeda is a Providence based multi-media artist working in film and illustration. She graduated from the University of Connecticut with a BFA in set and costume design for theater and then began working on feature films as a production designer. Her work has expanded to include illustration for books and magazines as well as conceptual art for theater and film. Several of Jeanette's projects have been seen on the SyFy and Chiller channels and she has worked with clients such as <u>Acheson Walsh Studios</u>, <u>Victoria's Lift</u>, and <u>The Wicked Library</u>. If you would like to commission a piece of artwork or collaborate on a project please visit her website at <u>Jeanette Andromeda</u>, <u>Filmmaker and Illustrator</u>.

Instagram: @jeanetteandromeda
Twitter: @JeanetteAndrome

YouTube: www.youtube.com/jeanetteandromeda

Blog: <u>HorrorMade.com</u>

#### ARNO, Charitable Foundation -

Animal Rescue New Orleans (ARNO) is an organization created and dedicated to the rescue and aid of abandoned and homeless animals in the New Orleans area, including responding to the immediate needs of those in need of medical care or those too old, too young, too sick, neglected, abused and deprived of love. ARNO promotes the foster, adoption and reunion of pets with caretakers as well as spaying and neutering all companion animals through their no-kill shelter. Please visit their website - ARNO.



#### The Authors:

C.W. Blackwell — "House of Blood and Stone"

The mysterious man at Uncle Lyman's funeral was involved in an unusual relationship with the deceased. Uncovering the secret of their closeness could prove to be deadly.

More from C.W. Blackwell

Morgan Sylvia — "The Witch Mirror"

Generational magic produces a scrying mirror that acts as a portal for an angel. Unfortunately, angels are not always benevolent beings.

More from Morgan Sylva

Greg Herren — "The Rosary of Broken Promises"

A medium moves into a home in New Orleans only to discover it is haunted by two spirits. One spirit she longs to help; the other she fears for good reason.

More from Greg Herren

Holly Rae Garcia — "Blood of the Rougarou"

One must never forget the fundamental rule of the swamp: stay inside on the night of a full moon. If she had remembered, Evangeline would not be fighting to save her lover from the curse of the Rougarou.

- More from Holly Rae Garcia

Douglas Ford — "Layover"

Stuck in an eerie airport on the way to find a miracle cure, a woman learns that there is a price attached to magic, and that there is no place to hide from the paranormal.

- More from Douglas Ford

Kristi Petersen Schoonover — "Haint Gonna Happen"

The appearance of "the dark man" has a disturbing connection to the death of an aquarist's lover. At the Spinnacker, the creatures outside of the tanks are just as deadly as the ones within.

- More from Kristi Petersen Schoonover

Gordon B. White — "A Freshening Wind"

"Every death is a tragedy" unless one stands to inherit a mansion because of it. The residue of a family's dark past casts an odorous bouquet on the freshening wind.

More from Gordon B. White

Tim Mendees — "All Cats are Gray"

Jack and his pregnant partner have the good fortune of inheriting an apartment building. They also have the misfortune of tangling with its feline occupants who want more than shelter from the storm.

More from Tim Mendees

Stephanie Ellis — "Kindred Spirits"

A pandemic forces the healthy to trade their blood for sanctuary. Unknowingly, one couple becomes valuable to a supernatural faction that has predatory needs.

More from Stephanie Ellis

Scotty Milder — "A Little Stain"

Break ups can be bad, especially when grudges are held after death.

More from Scotty Milder

Holly Cornetto — "Black Mold Lullabies"

When you are captive and alone, the smallest forms of life can offer the largest means of escape.

More from Holley Cornetto

Lamont A. Turner — "Green as Life"

Flipping houses can uncover hidden treasures attached to desires to reveal the mysteries of the past. Some secrets are best kept buried.

More from Lamont A. Turner

KC Grifant — "Unrest"

The predator becomes prey when a ghost takes a corporal form to stop a serial killer from murdering women.

- More From KC Grifant

Lee Andrew Forman — "Moss Manor"

Clara has agreed to an unusual procedure but ended up consenting to more than she bargained for.

More from Lee Andrew Forman

Anthony S. Buoni — "The Unwrapping"

Famous monsters join together to reanimate an ancient mummy in an attempt to create an army of the undead.

- More from Anthony S. Buoni

Trish Wilson — "Dirty Unhappy Things"

A woman wants to be admitted into an ancient trauma society based on her past with her evil brother. Her story needs to be seen to be believed.

More from Trish Wilson

Angela Yuriko Smith — "Interview with the Almighty"

An evil preacher is creating a tableau for a psychopathic God, yet the model for his art has other conclusions in mind.

— More from Angela Yuriko Smith

Christine Lajewksi — "The Governess of Bethel Abbey"

A young girl who is reeling from recent trauma, finds a book that tells the tale of a Governess. While the story itself is new, the setting is all too familiar.

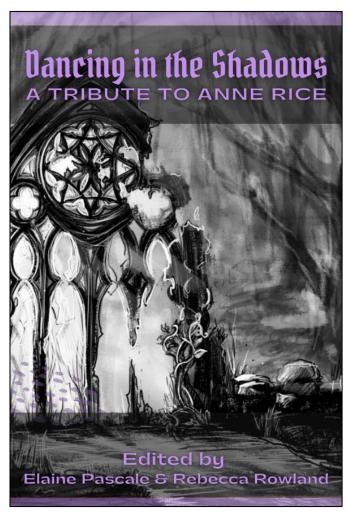
- More from Christine Lajewski

#### E. F. Schraeder — "Only Bees Remember"

After years living amongst concrete, Eli returns to her childhood home in the forest where the spirit of her late mother is imbued in every piece of nature. Eli had been told "you find what you seek" and what she finds is magic in the woods.

— More from E.F. Schraeder

Forward by Lisa Kröger — More from Lisa Kröger





Founded in 2006, Animal Rescue New Orleans (ARNO) is a nprofit, volunteer-based organization created and dedicated to the rescue and aid of abandoned and homeless animals in the New Orleans area. ARNO promotes the foster, adoption and reunion of pets with their families as well as spaying and neutering all companion animals through our no-kill shelter.













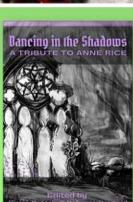










































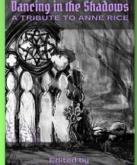






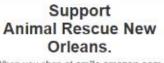
### DONATE

Purchase a copy of Dancing in the Shadows: A Tribute to Anne Rice and all proceeds will be donated to ARNO!









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#### Dying Match | JB Corso

We've lit our last match. The sulfur scent is the final smell we'll know before inhaling each other's bloody entrails. Their claws continue to clack against the wooden attic floor, just beyond the enveloping shadows. Skulking, always skulking, even before our abundant candles melted into nothing. Those times we nurtured misguided confidence that someone would soon arrive. We became reckless with our sacred lights. Maybe if we had been more careful. I hear a car's approach outside in the summer darkness. We could have made it. I failed us. Our would-be saviors will only discover our shredded corpses.

#### We Flee | JB Corso

Those who are able to flee will live. Those who fall behind get devoured. The wild-eyed hunter feeds upon anyone it catches. Everything collapsed this summer after the military failed. They ran too. We had depended on the old and lame to buy us time back then. It's eaten through them all, leaving only groups of hill-billy brave to cover our aimless escape. No one will be left to run and hide, eventually. It's painted our world crimson red with its six mouths and insurmountable appetite. We've become nothing more than warm meals as it chews through us all.

#### Drowning | JB Corso

I haven't felt the sun's comfort in months. The raging storm clouds hold the peaceful summer days hostage as the heavy rainfall continues unabated. My blotchy skin itches everywhere. I can't stand hearing the rain's pitter-patter. The incessant thunder crashing and lightning flashes are driving me crazy. "Fucking stop already!" Water's cresting over my mountain cave's muddy lip. My refuge has become infested with water. Small streams slither around the rocks near my shoes. I've nowhere else to go. All my hope has dissolved. I'll just sit here until I become a water-logged corpse like everyone I've ever loved.

#### **Crimson Structures** | *JB Corso*

Invasive crimson structures tower against the emptied skies throughout the world. Consecrated skeletal dedications erected to our undead leader. Twelve summers have passed since his anomalous arrival. We live only for our benevolent father's pleasures. He unleashes relentless brutality to solidify his lasting order. True subservient equality has enslaved us all. His faithful take up the one message to the last survivors upon the spear's tip. Each broken hero converts to his flag or becomes slaughtered by his unholy hell troops. Most of us grovel for his morsels of mercy with bone-thin fingers and grumbling stomachs. We obey, we live.

#### **About the Author:**

JB Corso is a health care professional who has worked with the mentally ill and geriatric populations for the last 20 years. He appreciates time with his children, writing, and pondering existential dread. He's a veteran with an overseas deployment as an international peacekeeper. He lives with his significant other and enjoys afternoon drives while listening to background Grateful Dead songs.

Twitter: @realJBCorso



#### **Fatal Combination** | **Soter Lucio**

Jonah and Sarah carefully and meticulously rearranged the furniture to their liking. Elizabeth's funeral was only three months ago but they didn't give her time to turn in her grave before settling in her house. They had painstakingly taken their time to get rid of her without any suspicions and no questions could be asked by neighbors or even the police. The house was practically a mansion left to her, an only child whose mother had died when she was four. Her father never remarried, had no other family and with no-one to watch over Elizabeth or to teach her road sense, she was an easy target for Jonah and his girlfriend Sarah.

Jonah pursued Elizabeth according to plan. He'd marry her, cause her death, get her property and he and Sarah would have a house of their own plus all the money they'd ever need for two or three lifetimes. Good plan. No obstacles. But then the unforeseen happened.

Dancing to very loud music in the bedroom, wearing Elizabeth's favourite gown that belonged to her late mother, the dressing table suddenly toppled over, the mirror smashing into a thousand pieces, and Jonah sustaining a gash on his forehead so deep that it required a visit to the hospital and several stitches.

Two months later it hadn't healed and was oozing pus. Sarah refused to hug or kiss him. Several times she threatened to leave him but something untoward always happened preventing her from actually leaving. At one point he woke up and the cut was closed so she stayed. Another time they got mail saying that they'd be paid a huge sum by the end of the week. And so it went till she couldn't leave.

"Jonah, do you think Elizabeth is doing all this?" She questioned, a frown drawing her eyebrows close and giving her that grandma appearance.

"What do you mean?" Jonah froze in the act of opening a window to let in some fresh air.

"Well, the first thing that happened is the dressing table falling over. Then that cut on your head that refuses to heal. The food going sour within a few hours. And countless other unexplainable stuff. The last being every time I decide to leave something very nice happens causing me to change my mind."

"Don't be silly." He moved to the sofa and sat next to her holding her for comfort. They've been in love with each other since they were both sixteen. "Isn't that what is called coincidental?" She shrugged him off and rose from the sofa pulling at her hair with head bowed. "Don't make fun of me Jonah. You know what I'm talking about."

"You mean because of what we did?"

"Yes. Because of what we did."

"What exactly are you getting at Sarah? We did just as the psychic told us and she died. I inherited the house, you move in with me. What's the problem?"

"She suffered terribly Jonah. In mind and body. She cried a whole lot. Among other things."

"Don't do this to yourself sweetheart. We'll be fine. Give it a few months, okay? Your conscience will eventually stop beating you."

"Sounds like you don't know."

"Don't know what?" Jonah got serious. "What don't I know?"

"What happened in the hospital."

"After thirteen months of pregnancy she died. Was there something else?"

"Yes. The autopsy. You refused to attend and you didn't want to know. You told them you couldn't handle the loss of your wife and first child."

"Yes. I did. So what?"

"Our people talk. We talk a lot. To anyone who'd listen."

"Get to the point Sarah."

"Come on Jonah. Think. You blockheaded fool. We did obeah to get her out of her own house. We used witchcraft. These things have a way of backfiring on you." Sarah was so scared and furious she started shouting.

"So? People do that all the time."

"You really don't know, do you?"

"Spit it out"

"When they cut her open because the doctors really wanted to know why the baby wouldn't be born, there was no baby. Just a small ball of fire. Like the stove when its lit. It just floated out of her belly, out of the room, down the corridors and out of the hospital." Sarah sank to the floor crying pathetically, while Jonah sat on the sofa transfixed, his gaze out in space and his hands shaking. His complexion grew pallid. Amidst the wailing and Jonah's uncharacteristic attitude, because he was a fearless daring kind of person, the sound of laughter burst through the air and the spirit of

Elizabeth materialized. She was clothed in that yellow plastic covering they use in the morgue. It was fearful to look at. Sarah dragged herself to a corner and stayed there with her back jammed against the wall.

Elizabeth flipped her head and Jonah felt himself flying around the room bouncing from wall to wall.

"You married me all for my house and land." Elizabeth said in that grating voice. "That's why you visited Mother Amy. She is a powerful woman. Let's see if she can help you now."

She put both hands on her hips and spun all the way around but she remained facing Jonah, whose belly started swelling. He screamed while watching it happen not knowing what to do. Meanwhile Sarah, who had her hands to her face, removed them and stared in shock as Jonah's face contorted in agony.

"I'm sorry Lizzie. She made me do it." He tried placing the blame on Sarah.

"No she didn't. It was all you. When I'm done with you, I'm going to get Amy." Again, she swirled and all the furniture toppled over and smashed. Sarah got disfigured and found herself stuck to Jonah as one body.

"Now be like a Siamese twin." And she was gone. But Jonah and Sarah found the doors impossible to open. They lived there until their natural deaths twenty-five years later. The cupboards always had food.

"Mother Amy saw Elizabeth coming for her and running out of the house tripped on the doormat, fell and broke her neck.

#### **About the Author:**

Soter Lucio is a great-grandmother from the mountainous region of Trinidad W.I. where folk legends abound. She works as an ironer by day and writes horror stories at night. She lives alone so there are no distractions except for the occasional ghost who gives her writing a boost. She's been published by Sirens Call, Publications Weird Mask, and Migla press.

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#### **Sweet Youth** | *Lee Andrew Forman*

From within my gut it was born, its birthing chamber no more than a stew of endless glutton and rot. I felt life within, a tumor suckling my innards with indifference to a father's suffering. This child would feel no mother's loving embrace, for none existed. I alone would be its burden, and it, mine. Pain thumped in tune with its gestation. Bile coated my throat. As it thrust its way up my gullet, a worm-like head peeked out from between my lips. It heaved its way further into the world, inch by inch, until it hit the floor with a wet slap of carnage. I took in a long-awaited breath and gazed upon my newborn. It wiggled its tail and screeched, calling out against the agony of existence, the horror of birth. I lifted it with both hands and cradled it against my chest. Its black eyes stared into mine. I knew then it would grow up fast, and that I'd be wise to cherish the sweet youth while it lasted.

#### **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.

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#### **Bucket of Chicken** | *Mark Towse*

He closes his eyes between a wave of burning discomfort, the heavy patter of rain on the roof providing a welcome distraction.

It had started to rain that night, too.

12:04 am—one hell of a shift. Just over fourteen hours and the last few made more arduous with light-trapping saturated roads causing all sorts of trickery on tired eyes. He grabs the eye drops from the glove box and squeezes the solution into his left eye, using the rear-view mirror for guidance.

A thud on the metal of the car startles him. "Caw!"

The bird is enormous. "Caw!" it screams again.

"Feathery fuck! Scared the living daylights out of me!" he yells back, slamming his fist against the windshield. "Piss off."

The crow scratches its claws against the bonnet and merges into the blackness with a defiant cry.

"Fucking bird," he mumbles. "Fucking day." So many impolite customers, and not one goddamn tip.

Blinking away the residual moisture, he falls back into the headrest with a groan.

Can't even enjoy his fried chicken, chest all knotted up, and bubbles of acid erupting at the back of his throat. He winds down the window halfway and swallows some comforting night air, but the lingering burn prompts him to pop another antacid in his mouth and angrily crunch down.

This place is his sanctuary, his escape, but its relentless onslaught won't let him enjoy it tonight. It's getting worse, no doubt. Fourteen hours in the same seat is taking its toll on the rest of his aching body, too. He stretches his tingling fingers against the rim of the steering wheel as a series of harsh crackles interrupt the song on the radio. Another gust wraps around the car, increasing the tempo of the swing that moans on rusty hinges in the center of the nearby park. Quickly winding up the window, he lets out a shudder, maintaining his gaze on the playground until another trail of lava begins working its way up his oesophagus. *Fucking reflux*. He rides it out, taking a deep breath and closing his eyes. He tries to reimagine the sounds and the smells of that pre-rain summer evening, but the show's off today—no let-up from the goddamn acid party in his stomach. *Fuck it!* 

Crunching down on another tablet, he dips his chubby hand into the bucket again and lifts the last colourless piece to his mouth. *Fuck sake!* There isn't even any chicken in this one, just air surrounded by fat. He swallows it anyway, wiping his greasy fingers across a mound of fabric-covered gut and popping in another two antacids.

Thoughts turning to a beer and the comfort of soft sheets, he collects the substantial wrappers and soda cans from the passenger seat, almost half-filling the bucket. Bracing himself for the blast of cold, he swings open the car door, grimacing against the ever-increasing tightness in his chest as he hobbles across to the wheelie bin to dump the rubbish. He takes another look towards the moaning swing. "Storm's brewing, kid," he mutters. An icy wind cuts through him, creating urgency to get back to the relative warmth of the car.

The fuck?

Another shudder rattles down his spine as he eyes the silhouette of the hat through the car window, acid fizzing at the back of his slightly ajar mouth. Cold rain running down his back, he arches his neck to try and get a better view of the asshole in the back seat that's just stepped into his off-duty taxi. As if the night couldn't get any worse.

"I'm off duty," he mutters into darkness.

More than a little peeved, Tony opens the rear door and leans in to observe the smartly dressed man, blue pinstriped suit, impossibly white teeth exposed in the broadest smile. He also notices the perfectly manicured fingers holding the cane and the notes crudely stuffed into the suit jacket pocket. His first thought is pimp, but the ones he's been used to running around are a million miles away from the well-dressed man sitting in the back of his cab.

"I'm sorry, mate; I've finished. I'm going home."

"Yes, you are. But this won't take long." The man reaches towards his pocket and brings out a handful of hundred-dollar bills. "More when you get there."

He studies the man's clear blue eyes, and even though some of the notes are stained with what he guesses to be blood, he already knows he's going to give the guy his ride. Countless drug runs, contract work for the shadiest people in town, and here sits the cleanest cut person he's seen all night offering him a stack of cash. It won't be the first time he's accepted tainted notes, and likely not the last.

"Where are you heading?" Tony asks.

"Drive for now. I'll tell you when we get there."

"Tell me when we get there," Tony grumbles quietly under his breath as he steps back into the driver's seat. "Direction, at least?"

"South, away from the city."

Tony starts the engine, alternating his glance between the mirror and the glistening road. They drive in silence for a while.

"I knew I'd find you here," the man eventually mutters matter-of-factly.

"What do you mean?"

"I've seen you here before. Day, night, in between"

Tony nervously shuffles in his seat. "You been out on the town? I mean, all dressed up and that."

"You have to make an effort. I mean, one can't just drive around town eating fried chicken all night, can one?"

Tony eyes him in the mirror but refuses to bite. "Not carried you before, have I?" "No. Never more than once."

Tony exhales slowly, another wave of acid terminating in his throat, bringing a feeling of further constriction with it. The prickling in his fingers is getting worse, and once again, he presses them against the wheel until they're almost white.

Goddamn creatures of the night.

"What's your business in town?" Tony asks, keen to break the silence that is inexplicably making his skin crawl. He's had all sorts in the back of his cab, but there's something about this one.

"I'm here for pleasure," the man replies.

That smell?

Tony eyes the passenger bringing a lit cigar to his lips, but he swears he never heard the ignition of a lighter or the strike of a match. He thinks about saying something, but the man's paying good money, so he lets it pass. Something tells him he needs to stay on the right side of this one.

"When did you quit, Tony?"

"What? Oh, how did you-"

"Fingers."

"Yeah, okay. Just under two years ago."

"Why?"

"Health reasons."

"That's a lot of chickens."

"Rough night out there," Tony says, switching to autopilot as he deals with the fire rushing through his body.

The man lifts his arm, tilting his gold watch but paying it no heed. "I don't think we have enough time for small talk, Tony."

Tony grabs the half-empty packet of antacids and fingers three urgently into his mouth. Hairs standing on the back of his neck, he can sense an oppressive heaviness in the air, just like before a big storm hits, but instead of filling him with excitement like it did that day, his body is beginning to cramp with ominous dread.

Glancing at the rear-view mirror, he finds the man's smile again, now appearing more sinister than warm. It strikes him too; the guy's suit and hat are as dry as a bone. His heart issues a warning, increasing in pace, and he feels a tightening too.

"May I ask what that is for," the man says, nodding. "I'm referring to the cross that hangs so crudely from the mirror next to the action figure."

"It was my mother's. She gave it to me when she died."

"Helps with tips, I guess; if people think you are a man of God."

"I am a man of God. I've not missed Sunday church for months. Made a promise to Mum."

Another wave of burning pain rushes through him, worse than the last, unaccompanied by sourness this time. He grips the edge of the seat, pushing his fingers deep into the fabric and biting down hard on his lip. Finally, it passes, leaving a residual ache that spans his entire body.

"Take another tablet if you like, but it won't help, Tony. What made you look for him?"

"How far is it?"

"Not far now. What made you look? For God." The man's hand comes to rest on his shoulder, sending a searing heat down his left side. Crystal blue eyes in the mirror pierce through the otherwise darkness like a set of hypnotic headlights. He doesn't know the man from Adam, but there's a strange compulsion to—

"Forgiveness," he utters, tearing his gaze back to the blur, a bead of sweat rolling down his right cheek. Something squeezes at his insides.

"Ah, yes—the get out of jail free card. And what may I ask, has he supposedly forgiven you for?"

"Many things, I guess." It's getting harder to get air. "But I'm a changed man now." His heart thumps hard against his tender chest. "Made a promise to my mother on her deathbed." Bright lights begin to blur into one.

"The one you drove her to?"

An explosion of pain in his chest prevents any form of rebuttal as Tony leans into the wheel and lets out a cry of agony. It's in his arms and legs now, even his neck, no longer a dull throb, but intense, and heading towards a violent crescendo as though some horrific poison is working its way urgently through every part of him.

"I can't—"

"You're having a heart attack, Tony. Your arteries are a mess."

"I—"

"Don't try and talk, Tony. We're nearly there now."

"Wh—where?" he rasps, steering blindly into the sea of bright lights.

The burning sensation intensifies further as the bony fingers wrap tighter around Tony's shoulder and as his passenger leans towards him. Once again, Tony finds himself hypnotised by the impossibly blue eyes. Metal scrapes and twists and glass splinters as Tony's head propels into the airbag. He hears the sound of his nose snap, but there is no accompanying pain. All he can feel is the intense heat of his passenger's hand impossibly still coiled around his shoulder.

And blackness.

Mum?

Suddenly, he's whipped out of the vehicle, a confused spectator to the carnage on the road, and to his lifeless body that sits awkwardly behind the steering wheel. The crow, now resting on the crunched bonnet, gives out a final cry.

"Been waiting five years to collect, Tony. I had you down for six, but they made the buckets even bigger." As he's dragged through dark puddles that go undisturbed, he claws desperately at the ground, but he's no longer of this world, and he knows it. "I'm a man of God, though," he mutters at the now distant lights.

The hand on his shoulder is now a claw, thick black nails curling into his flesh.

"If you truly did seek repentance, why did you continue to visit the park? Why did you have that little boy's toy dangling from the mirror? And why, when watching the swing moving in the breeze, did you play the scene in your head over and over again?"

"I'm a man of God."

"Those poor parents. No closure"

"-man of God."

"If you truly did repent, you would have gone to the police."

"Blessed is the one whose—"

"Just like your mother told you when she found out."

"—if you do not forgive—"

"Sent her to an early grave, didn't it? No longer able to live with the guilt of covering for you."

"-of God."

"Boosted my numbers, though."

Tony's skin begins to prickle, the heat returning but no longer internal.

"Forgive me, Father—"

"Too late, Tony."

"Where are we going?"

"Home. The fire's on."

#### **About the Author:**

Mark Towse would sell his soul to the devil or anyone buying if it meant he could write full-time. He's an Englishman living in Australia, a simple man who enjoys whisky, hiking, and the stars, but not in that order. His most recent novella, *One Last Shindiq* from D&T Publishing, was published in March 2022.

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#### John | Kathleen McCluskey

John awoke on the battlefield in a daze, the right side of his body and face took the brunt of the explosion. He struggled to sit up as his right arm had been severely injured. He looked down at his hand and it was covered in sand and blood. The sleeve of the camo jacket was dried and suctioned onto the skin of his arm. He flexed his fingers and made a fist, over and over he did this and his arm seemed to be functioning. He looked across the barren battlefield, dust swirled in playful funnel clouds as it made intricate patterns on the desert floor. He tried to focus on the horizon but it was blurred. His depth perception had been compromised. He touched the right side of his face and winced. He felt that his right eye had been damaged in the latest incursion. John closed his left eye and looked around. The vision in his right eye gave out a red aura to everything he looked at. He rubbed his eye with his left hand and tried to refocus. The vision in his right eye did not improve.

He stood and shook the sand off of himself. The warm desert breeze pelted him with sand grains. John put his arms over his head and stretched. A giant yawn along with a sigh came from him. John touched his toes and picked up some sand. He let it fall between his fingers. He bent his legs and did a few squats. He kicked his feet out in front of himself. His legs seemed to be unharmed in the fierce fighting. John began the search for the rest of his men. He looked across the barren landscape. Where had they gone? There were no corpses, no signs of life as he scanned the never ending red carpet of the desert. He thought to himself, *Those bastards have taken the dead. God only knows what they are doing with them.* He closed his eyes in an effort to search his memory of where his men may be. He realized that the head injury impaired his ability to remember. He struggled to recall anything from his past; his name, his country, why he was here. He knew that he was in a war but for what side and why eluded him.

He walked along the deserted and damaged highway, he could see in the distance a bombed-out restaurant. The wind started to pick up, John turned his head towards the sky. A large sandstorm was coming his way. Off in the distance he could see the wall of crimson sand coming his direction. He thought that his best bet was to get to that building and find some safety. He began to jog towards the shelter. John stopped about a football field from the building. He flattened himself out onto the sand and crawled. He crept towards the building. The wind began to howl. He had to get into this shelter. He wanted to be certain that no enemy was hiding in the restaurant. He would not know a friend from a foe but anybody found in this building would have to die. He aimed his rifle into the building and inspected the interior. He walked around the exterior peering into the doors and windows. He was at the back of the building; this is where the bomb had exploded. There were only smoldering embers left. The damaged building smelled of diesel fuel and gunpowder but no casualties were visible. He needed shelter and needed to attend to his wounds. He slowly entered into the building from the bomb crater, his rifle raised and ready to fire. He wanted to find the bathroom, hoping that the water was still usable. He kicked open the door with a slam; his rifle up and aimed into the room. The room was empty. He made his way over to the sink and looked into the mirror. He stepped back, aghast, as he did not recognize the reflection. He thought that what he was seeing was because of his head injury. He closed his eyes and looked again. He was taken aback at what he saw. He shook his head, not believing what he was seeing. He pulled off his shirt and his arm came off with it. He gasped then screamed from fright. There was no pain, only a leaking of red fluid from the jagged stump, John thought his blood looked a bit thin. The smell of hydraulic fluid permeated the air. John stood in the bathroom confused and looked at his arm in the mirror. He thought that this was some kind of cruel prank from the enemy. They were trying to make him believe that he had just pulled his arm off. He thought to himself, LSD? Agent Orange? What is making me hallucinate? He pulled at the corner of his right eye and the skin on his face began to peel off. He stepped back in shock. He kept digging at the corner of his face near his eye. He then pulled and pulled at the edge of the skin near his hairline. His skin peeled all the way off. He dropped his discarded face onto the vanity. He stepped back and looked at his face. It was surreal. He looked back into the mirror. A metal skull greeted him. He pushed on his damaged eye and with a squirt of fluid onto the mirror his eye disintegrated. Behind his blue eye was a red light. He looked at the stump that was once his arm and began to feel around the edges. He sniffed the fluid coming from what was left of his arm. It was definitely hydraulic fluid. He knew that this was no hallucination. This was really happening. He was a cyborg. Who made him? Why was he created? What was this battle about? He backed up onto the wall with a thud and slid down. He sat there not believing what was happening.

#### **About the Author:**

Kathleen McCluskey is the novelist of The Long Fall series. She enjoys her time swimming, reading and of course, writing. Being a native of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania she is an avid Steelers and Penguins fan. Kathleen is the mother of two and relishes in the time she can spend with her adult children. She is a lifelong horror junkie and Metallica fanatic.

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#### Belling the Mechanical Cat | John H. Dromey

Robert and Rosalie shopped for a household robot.

An accommodating salesclerk put a multitasking model through its paces. In silent mode, it was as quiet as a computer mouse with a dead battery.

"I like it," Rosie said.

"Well, I don't!" Bob responded. "It's too quiet for my liking. This creepy-crawly thing could sneak up on me in the dark and scare the crap out of me."

"You men are all alike," Rosie said. "You prefer noisy motorcycles and lawnmowers that rival the sound of a jet plane taking off. You'd likely go bonkers in outer space where no one can hear you complain."

Bob shrugged his shoulders.

"Consider this," Rosie continued. "Since you work in an office, you won't be around the android every waking hour. I think I deserve *some* peace and quiet."

"I can give you a discount on this floor model," the salesclerk interjected.

While Bob haggled over the price, Rosie skimmed the owner's manual.

Bob finally acquiesced, but he insisted the addlepated automaton—his words—be equipped with a distinctive bell.

"Mind your tongue," Rosie whispered. "Please don't insult our new helper's artificial intelligence."

"It's an unfeeling machine."

"With very sophisticated programming."

Despite their radically different backgrounds, Rosie and her voice-activated mechanical helper became good friends.

"I've grown accustomed to the sound of your bell as you do household chores," Rosie commented. "It's comforting not to be alone all day. I just wish there was something you could do about Bob's snoring."

That night, the android used cotton balls to deaden the sound of its bell before it snuck into the master bedroom to stuff cotton into Bob's flaring nostrils and gaping mouth.

After thrashing about for a while, Robert became unnaturally quiet.

Rosalie had her first good night's sleep in what seemed like forever.

#### **About the Author:**

John H. Dromey was born in northeast Missouri. He likes to read—mysteries in particular—and write in a variety of genres. His short fiction has appeared in Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, Flame Tree Fiction Newsletter, Hybrid Fiction, Mystery Weekly Magazine, Thriller Magazine, several previous issues of The Sirens Call, and elsewhere.

#### My Neighbor's Dog | KC Anderson

It's one a.m. I lay awake. Again. Fourth night in a row. My neighbor's dog won't stop barking. As I sit up, my tired yet now alert brain develops an idea. I rush to the refrigerator and take my leftover steak. Smiling, foolishly believing that my nightmare may be over, I head outside. I look over the fence. I see the dog. He doesn't want steak. His snout is bloody. His teeth have chunks of flesh.

His owner's body (what's left it) lays sprawled on the cement.

The only piece of her left is her eyes, still open in terror.

#### **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.

#### Trapped in a Suitcase | Radar DeBoard

Marlo snapped back to consciousness, desperately trying to take in oxygen. He sucked in several quick mouthfuls of air, but immediately noticed that it didn't feel like it was having any impact on his lungs. Marlo continued his efforts to take in air for several moments before eventually growing tired of the efforts. It was clear that he was doing okay to some capacity, so there wasn't any point in continuing his frantic gasps. Marlo let out a loud sigh as he tried to figure out where he was, but was met with nothing but a blank mind and darkness.

He decided his best bet was to exercise some patience, so he waited for his eyes to gradually adjust to the lack of light. After a few minutes and several bouts of rapid blinking, Marlo determined that the place was far too dark for him to have any chance of actually seeing anything. His next course of action was to use his sense of touch to gain insight. There was just one problem. Marlo's hand wasn't moving for him. Even more disconcerting, Marlo couldn't feel his arms at all. In fact, he couldn't feel anything except for whatever material the back of his head was laying on. A bubbling sense of panic began to tear at the edges of his mind, and Marlo was two seconds away from letting out a hysterical scream.

Suddenly, Marlo remembered what his psychiatrist had told him to do in high stress situations, so he took in a slow, deep breath. He lightly hummed to himself while closing his eyes, allowing every part of him to relax. After a few moments of destressing, Marlo was ready to move. He commanded his right arm to feel in front of him, and once again, nothing happened. Almost immediately, Marlo's mind devolved right back into complete panic. He screamed out as loud as he could, desperately telling his arms and legs to kick out, or at the very least move.

"Oh god," he whimpered to himself, "I'm paralyzed! I've been crippled!"

He started bawling his eyes out for the loss of his limbs. Marlo thought back to the great things he had accomplished with his appendages, but instead of actually seeing anything, he was met with an empty void. He slowly stopped crying and drew his focus towards finding some memory in his mind where he had done something using his arms and legs. Though Marlo tried for several minutes, he couldn't conjure a single one.

A thought slowly materialized in the back of his mind until he muttered out loud, "Have I always been paralyzed?"

The idea made the most logical sense to Marlo at the moment. After all, he couldn't move his body, and he had no recollection of ever being able to. Though, it still left a large question lingering in the air that desperately needed to be answered. Where the hell was he? Based on the lack of any perceivable light, it must have been someplace far off the beaten path. There was almost no way a place would be devoid of that much light unless it was done deliberately, which naturally led Marlo's mind to the only logical conclusion it could think up.

"They put me in a nursing home!" Marlo shouted at the darkness. Marlo couldn't picture the 'they' he was yelling about, but he certainly was mad at them. "That is just no way to treat your elders," Marlo growled. "We deserve respect!"

Though, the more Marlo started to think about it, even a nursing home wouldn't be as dark as the place he was trapped in. He muttered a few expletives to himself before racking his brain at the other possible options for where he could be. Marlo went through hundreds of possibilities, eliminating them from contention bit by bit. After a good couple of hours, he finally gave up with a loud groan.

"Where the hell am I?" Marlo whined. "This is boring!" He let out a long and frustrated sigh to relieve some of his stress. "Well, at least I can look back on my long and happy life, that should kill a few hours," he said to himself in a desperate attempt to stay positive.

Marlo focused on recalling the events of his life, eagerly awaiting as his brain drew forth an image from the blackness. A white, middle-age man with a salt and pepper beard appeared in his mind sitting on a fancy looking red chair. That must be my psychiatrist, Marlo thought to himself. He felt alleviation from the stress of his current situation as his mind ran through what must have been one of Marlo's random therapy sessions. It certainly wasn't the most exciting way to start a recap on someone's life. Though, with nothing else to do, Marlo allowed the memory to playout to its end.

"Not the greatest of starts," Marlo grumbled to himself before immediately switching to a more positive tone, "I bet the next memory will be better."

Marlo patiently waited as he felt his mind turning its gears to pull out what he assumed was some insanely cool life event. He let himself get a little bit excited in the moment before he was met by nothingness. A bit of confusion washed over Marlo before he immediately commanded his mind to whip up a good memory. After a few moments, Marlo was once again met by nothing. He started to get a little bit more frantic as he racked his brain for anything

besides the boring visit to the psychiatrist. It very quickly became evident that Marlo couldn't remember a single thing about himself. He would have diagnosed himself with amnesia, but he still remembered his name...for the moment anyways.

"What gives?" Marlo asked his brain. "Why are you playing stupid?" He foolishly sat there, awaiting a response from himself that of course did not come. "So what do I know?" he growled. "I can't remember a damn thing! How am I supposed to keep myself entertained?"

The image of a wrinkly-faced woman with a cigarette in her mouth flashed into Marlo's mind. "You don't need any toys when you're taking a bath!" the lady yelled. She pointed behind her, "You want a toy? I'll give you a toy! I'll just bring the toaster in here so you and Mr. Sparky can have a hell of an exciting bath."

As the memory ended, the word grandmother flickered in Marlo's head. "That was my grandma," he whispered to himself.

Suddenly, Marlo had the beginnings of an idea. He understood that somehow, he had lost most of his memories. Yet, he had been able to recall the one memory of his grandmother. If Marlo could keep recalling past events, maybe he would eventually figure out where he was. The moment after the idea had fully formed, the image of a girl in a polka dot dress came flashing through his brain. A wave of excitement mixed with hope caused Marlo to smile. *This might actually work,* he thought.

The next few hours were spent recalling every snippet of memory that Marlo could. Most were so mundane and inconsequential that they did nothing for him, but there were a few that actually told him something. He had pieced together that he was married, and had two kids. Marlo couldn't remember any of their names, but at the very least, he now knew they existed. He also recalled that for a time, he had worked as a stockbroker. The pieces were starting to fall into place, and the last bit of the puzzle came in the form of a ring covered hand seemingly punching him in the face. Marlo played out the memory in his mind, watching the hand move back a bit to reveal the face of a pretty chubby looking man, most likely in his late fifties.

"Did you actually think you would get away with taking my money?" the guy asked in a thick accent.

Suddenly a whole wave of information came roaring to the front of Marlo's mind. The guy from the memory was one of the leaders of the Brambilla crime family. He must have given some money to Marlo to invest, and judging by the way the memory was going, it seemed like Marlo had made some pretty bad investments. Marlo resumed the flashback and was greeted by the man's fist moving back and forth, obviously raining blows down upon him.

The man took a step back to reveal several muscular men standing beside him. "Chop this rat fink's head off," the mobster ordered, "and make him disappear."

"No!" Marlo instinctually screamed.

It took a moment for him to realize that he was still in the darkness, and that there was no man going to chop off his head. Almost immediately, a horrible realization began to dawn on Marlo, and he started piecing everything together. The reason he couldn't move his body, along with why he found himself stuck in a place that was devoid of light, it all made sense. That mobster had chopped his head off, then made it so Marlo 'disappeared'. More likely than not, Marlo had been tossed off one of the docks outlooking the pacific, which meant he was at the bottom of the ocean somewhere. Well...at least his head was. It took a few more seconds for the most important detail to hit Marlo, but he eventually realized that he was most likely dead. There was no way a head could survive on its own. Although, it didn't seem like he was doing too bad for a severed head. After all, Marlo didn't know too many heads disconnected from their body that could still think for themselves.

"What the hell is going on?" he asked himself.

Just then, something slammed into the side of whatever Marlo was trapped in. He felt the object move with a tremendous amount of velocity before coming to a sudden stop. The impact that slammed against his makeshift prison sent Marlo's head flying into one of the walls hidden in the darkness. Before Marlo could comprehend what had happened, another large force slammed into his prison once again. There was the noise of something breaking, which was quickly followed by the sound of water pouring in through an opening.

"Oh crap!" Marlo yelled.

The prison was jerked around a few more times, leaving Marlo feeling dizzy. All the while, water continued to leak in at a rapidly accelerating pace. One final, jerky movement of Marlo's prison caused something to give out. There was a strange noise that sounded just before the container that had been holding Marlo opened up, hitting him with a few, small rays of sunlight alongside the crushing weight of the ocean's entire water supply. He gasped in wonder, and lack of oxygen, as he started to slowly float upwards. Marlo managed to turn his head so it was facing downward,

allowing him to catch a glimpse of what should have been his final resting place. A suitcase, he scoffed, they put me in a suitcase?

Tommy ran along the edge of the beach, putting a great bit of distance between him and his parents. He wanted to explore everything in sight, as a young child struck with curiosity does. His parents on the other hand, wanted to take things slow, which he couldn't stand. Tommy continued to quickly pump his legs over the sand, leaving his parents further and further behind. His eyes eagerly drifted over the random bits of seaweed and small critters that made the beach their home.

As he passed by a small rock formation, Tommy noticed something spherical laying just off to the side of it. His curiosity had him scampering over to the strange object for closer examination. As he came within a few feet of it, Tommy noticed that the top of the object was covered in a brown substance that looked a lot like a clump of wet hair. He got a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach, but his curiosity persuaded him to keep moving towards the strange thing. Tommy tentatively took a few steps towards the object, which allowed him to see what it really was, a severed head, just laying there in the sand. Tommy came to a stop right in front of the head and slowly bent down to get a better look.

The head suddenly snapped its eyes open and looked directly at Tommy. "You gotta help me out here kid!" it exclaimed.

Tommy fell back onto the sand in shock. He stared at the head for a few seconds before letting out a cry of terror. Tommy took off down the beach, leaving Marlo stranded by himself.

He called after Tommy, "Go get your parents! Tell them I need help!" Marlo waited a few seconds before adding, "I'll be right here so...take your time!"

#### Saving Waves | Radar DeBoard

Tabitha stared out at the waves and watched as they undulated under the star filled sky. She closed her eyes and took in a deep breath through her nostrils to fully take in the calming smell of saltwater. This was where she felt most at home. Whether she was standing on a dock or strolling along the beach, Tabitha was always the most relaxed next to the sea. It had been that way ever since she was a little girl. There was just something about the rhythmic movement of the waves matched with the smells and sounds that naturally drew her in.

She smiled as she thought back on all the memories she had made thanks to the giant body of water she stood in front of. All the wonderful beach days just seemed to float through Tabitha's mind as a gull cawed somewhere in the distance. Tabitha remembered how often she had used the ocean as her training ground. Sure, she had learned the basics of swimming in a pool, but the ocean was where she had mastered each technique and individual stroke. It was the whole reason she had been good enough to make the swim team, and eventually, get a scholarship so she could afford to go to college.

The sea had always been there for Tabitha. Through all the close losses at swim meets, to all the verbal abuse her husband dished out, the ocean was always there to comfort her. It supported Tabitha through all the hardship, and tonight, it was going to save her one more time. Tabitha took in a deep breath before putting all her strength into tossing the last suitcase off the dock. As the final bits of her husband's remains sunk beneath the waves, Tabitha was overcome with a sense of peace. Most people who disposed of a body in the ocean would be worried about it floating to the surface, but not Tabitha. She knew the sea would take care of the dismembered pieces of her abusive husband, just like it had always taken care of her. Tabitha lightly touched the burnt flesh on her left arm, taking comfort in the fact that no man would never do anything like that to her again.

#### **About the Author:**

Radar DeBoard is a horror movie and novel enthusiast who resides in Wichita, Kansas. When he's not living in his own nightmares, he's writing horrifying tales to help others find theirs. He's had stories published by Gypsum Sound Tales, Eerie Lake Publications, Macabre Ladies Publishing, Black Hare Press, Black Ink Fiction, and Little Demon Publishing.

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# Horror written by the authors it created.



#### Chubby Hubby | NJ Gallegos

"What's the secret ingredient?" patrons always ask.

"I'd tell ya, but I'd have to kill ya," I respond with a grin.

Each day brings a line of customers, all desiring scoops of delight.

Rocky road, butter pecan, old-fashioned vanilla; waffle cones capped with melting heaven.

My husband and I opened the stand years ago.

But last year, I caught hubs with his fingers in my best friend's churner.

What a scandal! Everyone suspects they hit the road, leaving me in the dust.

But-

The truth?

They've married, their unholy union blending together in each tasty scoop.

Yum, pass a spoon.

#### **How I Spent My Summer Vacation** | *NJ Gallegos*

I perched in my lifeguard stand, observing sunburned moms screaming at children, occasionally blowing my whistle when someone ventured out too far. When the first body washed up, I thought, damn, is this an acid flashback? When a baker's dozen followed, concern creased my brow.

Then the bodies—

Reanimated.

Gnashing jaws ripped hunks of meat from surfers' legs. Guttural shrieks reverberated across the sand, and they streaked towards me. Luckily, I hadn't kicked my smoking habit—I snatched the Bic lighter and mace from my bag and sprayed an unholy inferno, creating an undead campfire.

Dammit.

I forgot the marshmallows!

#### The Other White Meat | NJ Gallegos

Culinary Summer Camp proclaimed the flier. I'd long considered myself the second coming of Gordon Ramsey. My parents signed the release forms—without reading the fine print—and bid me adieu.

On arrival, the staff asked, "Favorite spices?" Cumin, red pepper, and salt. "Preferred marinade?" Olive oil, balsamic vinegar with onion. They pulled my ingredients and escorted me to the kitchen—time for me to show-off! I added the fixins' to the massive stock pot provided plus carrots, chicken broth, and a dash of garlic.

"Where is the meat?" I wondered.

Their glittering eyes met, "Right here!"

They pushed.

SPLASH!

#### **About the Author:**

NJ Gallegos is an emergency medicine physician who enjoys macabre fiction, especially medical horror. She lives with her partner and two cats. When not at work, she enjoys playing video games, running, craft beers, and trying new foods... she's even eaten Rocky Mountain Oysters.

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#### Illegal Alien | David Whippman

Looking back, I suppose I ought to feel privileged. I was present when my friend Ralph Curzon met the first and only love of his life.

Not that I knew it at the time. We were just a couple of adolescent boys browsing through a stack of science fiction magazines in a musty old bookshop. We'd become pals, in fact, through our mutual enthusiasm for sci-fi. It was the 1960s: our classmates were into the Beatles and the Stones, but we preferred Isaac Asimov and HG Wells.

"Wow!" Ralph exclaimed. "Look!"

He pointed to what seemed at first a typical cover. They were almost always illustrated with rockets, space travellers, aliens. In those non-PC days, one favourite subject was a scantily-clad woman, often being rescued from the clutches of some outer-space monster by a clean-jawed hero.

The woman on this cover looked more self-reliant. She was holding a sword, battling against a green-skinned, multi-limbed creature that was dripping venom from its huge fangs. Two suns blazed in a purple sky. The woman was more slender than the bosomy females the artists loved to depict, but she was, predictably, semi-naked, in a kind of metallic brassiere, a swordbelt, and a short skirt made from strips of metal-studded leather. With her coppery-red skin and waist length black hair, she might have passed for a native American, except for the brilliant yellow eyes, and her ears, which were of the long pointed kind so favoured by fantasy artists. She was clearly as extra-terrestrial as her adversary.

"I've got to buy it," Ralph breathed, pulling coins from his pocket. "She's beautiful."

"Hang on," I told him. "Sneak a look at the stories inside first, they might not be much—"

"Who cares about the *stories*?" Ralph replied, uncharacteristically. He was already taking the magazine up to the counter.

Ralph and I kept in touch after leaving school, meeting up for a drink now and then. I started work for the Civil Service, at a low grade; I had never been considered university material. Ralph at one time *had* been, but from the age of about fourteen—about the time he bought that magazine, in fact—his academic prowess had declined.

Eventually, our jobs took us to different parts of the country, but we stayed in contact, albeit sporadically, by phone. Over the years, I told him about my steady if unspectacular progress up the career ladder, about my marriage and becoming a family man. When I come to think about it, the information was nearly all one-way. I had the impression, not exactly that he was being secretive, but that life was passing him by. Ironic, because if you'd seen those two kids in the bookshop, you'd have guessed that I was the one doomed to be an outsider: short, podgy, bespectacled, while he was taller and athletically built. By his late teens, he could have been a model for the muscular heroes of those sci fi magazines. Not that I'd read any for years.

We were in our forties when he phoned for what proved to be the last time. "Paul? Ralph here...l'm ...not going to be around in the near future. I just wanted to say thanks for being pals, and goodbye."

I panicked. "What is it? You're not ill, are you?"

Paul."

"No, I've never felt better. But I'm...Let's say I'm moving abroad."

"Where?" I asked. "Spain?" It was a popular destination for expatriate Brits. "They have phones in Spain, you know!"

He laughed ruefully. "A bit further than that. Don't worry, I'll be fine."

I didn't know what to say, so I tried to make light of it. "I bet there's a woman involved, you sly old dog!" He said rather awkwardly: "There is, and she's very special. But it's difficult to explain. Anyway, you take care,

After I put the phone down, it occurred to me that in fact, as far as I was aware, there had never been a lady in Ralph's life, good-looking fellow though he was. By then, though, most people were open about their sexuality, and if he'd been gay, I think he'd have told me.

About three weeks later, I had a phone message from Randolph's next of kin, a nephew. Ralph had disappeared. He had sometimes mentioned me, in fact I seemed to have been about the only friend he had. Foul play was not suspected, but the local police would like a chat with me, and the nephew also wanted me to tell him anything I thought might be of significance.

So, a few days later, after a two-hour train journey, I found myself in Ralph's rather shabby rented flat. The police had interviewed me and assured me that I was not under suspicion of any kind.

"It's good of you to talk to me," said the nephew, an earnest man in his early twenties.

I shrugged. "There's really nothing much I can tell you. I hadn't actually set eyes on your uncle for years. We talked by phone, not very often at that. The last time, he said some...odd things."

He nodded. "It figures. He was a strange one, uncle Ralph. That thing on the wall, for instance. Why couldn't he have a print like anyone else?"

He pointed to a picture frame. I looked closer. There was indeed no reproduction print behind the glass, but a magazine cover. A copper-skinned woman, an alien landscape, a green monster. I had last seen it over 30 years earlier, forgotten it completely, but I remembered it now.

No trace of Ralph was ever found. I suppose his nephew inherited that cover, along with the rest of Ralph's few belongings, and I guess he threw it away. And yes, I know that thousands of people go missing every year. And that what I thought then – and still think, all these years later – would make me insane in many people's opinion.

But I was no fantasist; I was a stolid civil servant. And I know what I saw behind that glass. The cover was different, the many-limbed horror dead in the foreground, a couple of swords rammed deep into its chest. There was a third figure, a man, locked in a passionate embrace with the alien woman. His face was partially obscured by her hair, but I could see enough of the features to recognize my friend, Ralph Curzon.

#### **About the Author:**

David Whippman, who lives in the north of England, is retired after a career in healthcare. He writes poetry, stories and articles. Among his favorite authors are Jack Vance and Ray Bradbury. Outside of literature, his interests are music, chess and visual art.

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#### Amber May | Matt Martinek

It is unexplainable...this 'love' of the dead. Maybe the whole fascination lies in taking what is not yours, or doing what should never be done. After all, the laws of man are fun to break, and taboos even more so. In my case, however, it is something more. It is an urge...innate and very powerful, and it has been with me as far back as I can remember.

Children are supposed to be preoccupied with childish things. And I was, to a point. But when it came to graveyards, I was absolutely enthralled. I could feel the energy from underneath the ground, as well as the resting calm up above. It was a dichotomy of sorts, a certain yin and yang which left me confused at first, yet very interested and yearning for more. I played in the cemetery. That's what I did. And yes, it was perceived as 'weird'.

I remember one occasion, in particular, when my urges truly came to light. I was about 11 or 12 at the time, and I was spending time at a cousin's house, doing some sled riding. Strangely enough, the best hill in the area was, you guessed it, in the middle of a cemetery. It was an interesting feeling...zipping down this snow-covered mound, trying as hard as we could to dodge the granite stones. I should have been focused on the adrenaline of the action at hand, but I was getting off on the feeling of simply being in the cemetery more than anything else. It had a hold of me, and was not letting go.

As we grew tired of trudging up the slippery hill again and again, we rested for a bit, and something caught my eye. It was a small, vault outside mausoleum, a little past the hill we were currently on. You could clearly see each separate drawer, each separate name of the deceased chiseled into the marbled façade. This idea, too, simply fascinated me...each corpse to its own little compartment...like throwing a dead mouse into your dresser drawer. But the great thing about a drawer is that you can open it up again whenever you need. *So why not just open the drawer?* 

I convinced my cousin to run home and retrieve a screwdriver, as he, too, was excited for a bit of the unknown. I was too fearful of choosing an occupied drawer, however. I was more interested in seeing the construction of the vault inside, or if we could get the lid of the drawer to move at all. As the sun was setting and the shadows fell, my cousin returned, with screwdriver in hand. I chose the empty, nameless, bottom drawer, and began to pry away at the fasteners at the corners of the marble lid. My cousin looked at me like I was crazy, but I didn't care. There was no hesitation, just action. Eventually, the *chink* of the broken metal reached our ears and the lid fell down with a crash, nearly smashing my toes in the process. We jumped like deer, off into the woods near the cemetery. I caught a quick

glimpse of the black hole of the empty drawer as we bolted for our lives. I instantly started to regret my choice. I should've chosen an occupied drawer, instead.

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Life moved quickly. The days turned to months, the months to years, and the years to the bored and disgusted 36 year old man I had become. Those necrotic feelings of old were pushed aside, but never truly forgotten. And one day, just like that, they reemerged from their forced slumber. But instead of finding the confused child, they came across the hardened man, instead...a man who was capable, and very, very sure of himself. The dead were calling to me still, and I finally decided to answer.

Embarking on such an arduous task was not taken lightly. Grave robbing isn't like it's portrayed in the movies, obviously. It isn't digging 3 or 4 feet and then easily removing the lid of a busted-up coffin made of plywood. That's bullshit. In reality, there is this thing inside the grave called a concrete vault, that just so happens to be thick, heavy, and sealed very well to keep the natural world at bay for as long as possible. So my first issue was going to be finding an appropriate target...a grave that was old, rotten, weathered, and somewhat accessible. So I searched and searched.

It took months of research and footwork, but I finally found what I was looking for. It was an old church cemetery on the outskirts of the city, and it looked on the verge of being totally forgotten. The brush and trees were severely overgrown, which would serve me well as far as privacy was concerned. Most of the stones were broken, crooked, or knocked over, and many were barely legible...the letters worn through and weathered by time and nature. Apparently the ground had shifted over the decades, so naturally the positioning of the plots was now noticeably different than what it was 100 years ago. The rows were no longer rows, but zig-zags instead. The place was in total neglect and disrepair.

I spent an entire day there, roaming, taking my time. It had to be perfect...out of sight and as least demanding as humanly possible. Getting caught was not an option. By the end of the day, I had a few prospects in mind, but there was one that afforded me some opportunities the others did not. It was a small, weathered stone, which had turned green from moss. It read **Amber May, Beloved Daughter, June 1930-May 1934**. A little girl. Better that way. The remains would be easier to move, and hopefully the grave was old enough that the vault would be weakened or broken through already. But the best part about it was the positioning of the gravesite. As I said earlier, the ground had shifted, and this site showed the worst of it. There was a large sinkhole in front of the plot, about 3 ft. down. I assumed the edge of the vault shouldn't be too far away from the severe erosion. In short...there would be much less to dig, and less time to spend there.

I did not take action quickly after acquiring my target. I questioned it for weeks...ran through the entire plan in my head, over and over. No room for error, whatsoever. I had been fantasizing about it for so long, the simple idea of actually committing the act was both exciting and terrifying. Because there was no going back. I would forever become a ghoul, and if I got away with it I would probably continue. It would be a terrible secret I would have to keep...I wouldn't be able to tell a single soul, ever. Life, as I knew it, would change.

The moment of decision came to me in a dream. I was there, in the cemetery, knelt down in front of Amber's busted open casket, holding her remains in my arms as she slowly disintegrated into dust all around me. I was smiling, happy and overcome with the sweetest scent of freshly-cut flowers. And so, it would be. I stepped over the edge, into the pitch black. For the next couple of days, I made a few trips to the graveyard, each time throwing a little piece of the puzzle from my truck into the weeds, about 10 ft. away from the entrance gate. One night it was a shovel and crowbar, the next a long piece of rebar and a mallet, and on the last night I offered up the final pieces...the sledgehammer and flashlight. It was all ready for me...the tools of my rebirth.

On the night of the disinterment, I was pretty shaken. I had actually taken a few shots of vodka before I left the house. The nerves were just terrible. But, things had to be done. I left my driveway at 9:45 PM on July 22nd, 1988. It was a Friday night...the last Friday night I ever spent as a normal person.

And so, I set into motion exactly what I had planned for the last few months. I parked my truck in the shadows, grabbed all my gear from the weeds, and made my way to Amber's resting place. There was not a soul in sight, just as I had hoped. My footsteps were loud and unavoidable...the brush was thick everywhere. Silence was not to be had that night. I was not worried, though. The odds of visitors showing up were slim, indeed. I was relieved at the sight of Amber's stone, as my tools were becoming heavier with each step. It was time.

I set up shop at the base of the sinkhole, near where the foot of the vault should have been. I propped up my flashlight, positioned the rebar, and began to hammer it into the soil. As soon as I broke ground, I knew this would be harder than even I had expected. It was such a stony soil, compact from all of those untouched years. I was using the rebar to simply find the location of the vault. I would strike it a few feet in, then move my position, again and again. I

began to panic a little after the 10<sup>th</sup> attempt. I wasn't hitting anything but rock and dirt. I thought about aborting the mission, and just as I was about to give up, I heard the *CLANK* of victory. I had found it.

I retracted the rebar from the dirt, and moved on to the shovel. Within minutes, I was soaked in sweat and covered in filth. My heart was ready to burst. I dug with panic and fear, two wonderful allies to keep when time is of the essence. Eventually, I unearthed one concrete edge, then two, until the entire end of the vault was in view. My excitement grew with every shovel-full. I could see that the vault was, indeed, cracked lengthwise, which gave me a tremendous sense of relief. I knew the vault would be the hardest part of my task.

I do not know for sure, as time surely escapes a person at times like those, but I believe I spent well over two hours digging feverishly until I could see the entire lid of the concrete vault. I quickly threw the shovel down and lifted the sledgehammer. I knew it would be loud, so I wanted to break the seal within a few strikes. I positioned myself on top of the lid, hoisted the hammer, aimed right for the middle, and brought it down with as much force as my dead-tired arms could muster. Surprisingly, the concrete gave way immediately with a *CRUNCH*...the force of my blow pulled me into the vault along with the crumbled stone. I was face to face with the wood of the casket.

I must've hit my head pretty hard when I fell, as my entire face was wet with blood. As I wiped the red from my burning eyes, I noticed that the casket was not full size, but instead the size of the child who inhabited it. After I took a few moments to get my bearings, I began to hoist the casket from its resting place. It was not large, by any means, but it was wet, which made it extremely difficult to lift. The weight of the casket, mixed with the unpleasant smell of the moldy wood and rotted corpse inside of it, almost proved too much for me to handle. I took a deep breath, and with all of my might, I removed the casket from the vault and onto the ground. I fell with it, exhausted. At that moment, it began to rain.

With the muscles of my legs burning terribly, I dragged the rotting wood to the gate of my truck, slipping and falling in the mud the entire way. It was taking far too long, and at this point I simply needed to get the hell out of there. I quickly muscled the coffin into the bed, shut the gate, and proceeded to drive away. In a panic, I forgot all of my tools at the scene, which was not my intention at all. There would be no doubt...the grave had definitely been robbed of its sole possession.

The drive home was nerve-racking, to say the least. There I was, covered in blood and mud (as was the entire cab of my truck), speeding along the highway, with a little girl's corpse resting in the bed. I was expecting to see lights at every corner, or hear sirens, but they never came. I pulled into my driveway, and just sat there for a while, thinking about what I had accomplished.

Under the cover of a foggy, rainy night, I moved my treasure from the bed of the truck to my basement, where I would uncover Amber's beauty, once and for all. I felt uneasy as I stared at the wooden mess lying there on my cellar floor. Should there be a ritual? Should there be prayer? Decorum, at least? I, however, was not a God-fearing man, by any means. I beheld the treasure chest for as long as I could, before the excitement and curiosity of the moment got the best of me. I began to remove the lid, chunk by chunk, carefully, as the pieces fell apart in my hands. She came into view slowly...methodically, until I removed the final section of wet, stinking wood.

Amber May was everything I had hoped for. The beauty of her rot! What I unearthed was mostly blackened bones and stringy, red hair...but it was more than enough for me to appreciate. She wore what used to be a gorgeous floral dress, but time had not been kind to it. It was withered and filthy and molded...barely in one piece. Most of her teeth had fallen out, and the bones of her fingers were laying in the bottom of the casket near her rotten pink—bootied feet. Her jaws were agape, stuck in seemingly perpetual laughter. Thankfully the insects were few, as there wasn't much of a meal left...I removed those that remained. There was some leftover matter around the body, sprinkled onto the disintegrated coffin lining, which I assumed to be the last vestiges of the girl's flesh. It had the look of moist sawdust. I collected a pinch of it in-between my fingertips and brought it to my lips. It smelled and tasted of sulfur, but in my mind I was happy and smiling, and all I could recognize was the scent of freshly-cut flowers.

From then on, only the ghoul remained.

#### **About the Author:**

Matt Martinek is a singer/songwriter and dark fiction author from Johnstown, PA, whose passion is the creative process itself. His writing credits include short stories for Savage Realms Gamebooks, Hellbound Books, and Coffin Bell Journal. Be on the lookout for Matt's upcoming release *The Oddest Couple II: Three's A Clown*, the sequel to his well-received novella *The Oddest Couple*.

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#### Carousel | Darren Todd

I never understood Wilbur's fascination with all things Japanese. Don't get me wrong: I got nothin' against the place. Never been there nor had much interaction with Japanese folks living in the States, but only 'cause that's the way it went. Again, nothing personal. Got no particular affinity for Icelandic culture, either, and for the same reason.

Only, it wasn't the Icelandic Saga what inspired Wilbur when he designed the carousel; it was Japanese folklore—real or imagined, I can't say. Don't know enough about it. Was some of them animals and demons on the carousel Oriental lookin'? Sure. But whether they came from Japanese mythology or Wilbur's own imagination who knows? Leastways until some Asian scholar from up at the university comes down to weigh in on it. Won't change what happened anyhow, so why bother, I say.

Was he proud of the carousel? That's a dumb question. He handmade every damn one of 'em, you understand. They weren't some cheap-o plastic molded crap you'd find at the state fair. They was wooden, all of 'em. Pine, I think. 'Cept the ningen. He was driftwood.

What's a ningen? I asked the same thing of Wilbur. Thought he said 'ninja' the first time. Near as I understand it, it's some sorta sea monster the size of a man, but with wide, white wings for arms and flippered feet. And a God-awful face like a skull made of flesh instead of bone. Wilbur said it came outta the ocean looking' like that—the driftwood. He pulled it offa some beach out West in Big Sur. Said he barely had to do a thing to it 'fore it found a home on the carousel.

With the rest of 'em, Wilbur bound scrap wood together in something like the shape of the animal. Saw the creature in the wood like a sculptor sees a piece of art waiting inside a chunk of stone. Then he'd sand it, stain it, paint it, till you'd have to be Sherlock Holmes with a magnifying glass to find any creases. Held true even after he caught the vandal that night. Meaning even when that bug-eyed, tiger-lookin' thing was all broke up and off its pole, you still wouldn't have known it was just a bunch of boards glued together.

There's plentya folk, myself included, who'd tell you whatever Wilbur'd done to create those things, to bring a bit of Japan to the small towns the Bulberry Wonderworld visited all those years, they ceased to be wood anymore. I just wish he'd have favored the Japanese heroes or damn kiddle stories over what made it onto his carousel. One of them looked like a cat, I guess, but with eyes black as pitch and an awful grin. Another looked like a turtle, but with his tongue sticking out and eyes all wide. The kids liked 'em, of course, but they creeped me out long before... well, before anything happened.

Now I have one God in my heart, and I make room for none other, but that don't mean I deny something what's right in front of me. There's only one God, but there's more devils than what sits chained beneath the adamantine tower in Hell, get me?

Sorry, I'm shaking again. I'm better than I was. That night, I never thought I'd even get this far, back toward being... well, sane I guess. Through the grace of God and about a case of Jim Beam....

Anyway, the Wonderworld pulls in almost as much riffraff as the state fairs. No avoiding it. I guess kids today is just bored and got nothing better to do than destroy something beautiful, a man's livelihood, his art. We tour late summer, just before they're headin' back to school. Maybe that alone is enough to inspire them to idiocy. One last chance at rebellion before surrendering another year to inculcation.

Still, Christ alone knows what that kid was thinking, but I heard the ruckus 'fore Wilbur'd even come from his trailer. Like someone tacking shingles. I'd left my door open, y'see, 'cause my little window unit air conditioner had gone out on me, and the fug and the heat kickin' offa the pavement from earlier that day just seemed to linger. It threatened to rain that night, but never came. Maybe things woulda been different; maybe that punk kid woulda thought better than to take a damn ball-peen hammer to something so amazing and stayed home outta the rain instead.

But no, the rain stayed away, and so the kid came. Who knows if he'd been there before; I think one of the gals from the ticket booths told the cops she'd seen the kid earlier in the day. Must have shown her a picture. Otherwise I can't figure how she could recognize the poor fella with what they left of him.

Yeah, *they*. As in, more than one. As in, something other than Wilbur. I don't say "something" lightly, neither. Did he rap that punk with his cane for breaking up his tiger thing? Of course he did. If I'd spent the thousands of hours Wilbur had spent on the carousel and I saw someone breaking it to bits, well I'da done more than go after him with a cane.

By the time me and Wilbur had reached the carousel, the kid had stopped beatin' the thing long enough to hear us. He wasn't afraid of a coupla old timers like us, but I reckon he wasn't too keen on getting caught, neither. The

carousel sits backed up against the tracks in Redland. The fairground's got this little train what runs all during their events, and the Kiwanis Club pulls in five bucks a head to ride it. Gotta be the biggest moneymaker in the place.

To keep the kiddos off the tracks, they have these tall fences, you've probably seen 'em, and Wilbur's carousel butts right up against them. You couldn't fit a hand 'tween where the base of the carousel spins and the chain link. And the fence has gotta be eight feet high. You can tell kids to keep their hands on the poles all you want, but they ain't gone listen. They reach their little digits out to touch the fence, so they'd installed a canvas cover that kept the tots from snagging their fingers in the chain link. Guess the vandal figured he'd make easier work of scaling the fence if he hopped over it from atop the carousel. So he jumps and grabs the edge of the carousel and starts to pull himself up.

Right. That's when old Wilbur goes to work on 'im. Now I'm not denying that; his cane is solid cherry—smooth as polished stone and damn near as hard. So, yeah, he struck a few blows around that boy's feet and legs. Hard enough to make 'im holler with each whack.

Still, there's a big difference 'tween whatever bruises woulda come from Wilbur giving hell to that boy and what I seen happen just after. Course, it's only what happened between the kid hanging there trying to get away from Wilbur and what the police found an hour later that *matters*.

And I was the only one save for Wilbur and that kid who saw 'em. Don't know how every person in a mile radius didn't hear the ruckus, but as Wilbur's luck would have it, the only other living person who seen the carousel come to life was me—an old mechanic with no more weight in these matters than my tool belt.

What's that? Yeah, it came to life, like I said. Ain't really any other way of describing it. And I don't mean somehow the electricity kicked on and the animals and demons and demigods took to teetering up and down with nobody at the controls. Or leastways I don't mean *only* that. That was just how it started.

And Wilbur didn't even see as much I did. The way he'd designed it, the roof spins counter to the base. He thought it added to the effect, and I 'spose it did. With the mirrors and the Japanese guitar music dingin' out from the middle, it all came together in something... not of this world.

The bottom was already turning, moving Wilbur toward the fence once that ningen's brass pole snapped off the base and it took its feet. The pole popped up and out of it like a nail struck from below, and when that pole clanged onto the carousel, the racket seemed to wake the others.

That's when they all converged on that boy. The kid spun the opposite direction, but slowly, maybe half the speed of the base. I seen it all happen, and in the final seconds of his life, that boy seen it, and no one else. Not for however long since that awful ningen rose up from Hell the last time.

It brought some of Hell with it, too. The boy felt it, before the ningen pulled him down and they all started eating him alive, I mean. His scream came out more like panic than fear, like he knew he was about to lose more than his life, but his life too. Can't imagine the feeling, those things chomping down on him. The wet smacks and the crunching of bone. I've owned a dog or two, given 'em a nice, juicy steak when they've done good or on their birthday. It sounded like that. Won't ever get those sounds outta my head now. Never.

You might be wondering what I did while Wilbur was stuck circling around the other side and them demons were pulling that boy to Hell one bite at a time. I froze stiff. Wasn't nothing inside me strong enough to take a single step forward, let alone leap to his aid like some mythic hero. I admit as much, and I've prayed on it. Machines, I can handle. Unruly people, even punk vandals with hammers, that's fine. But what came outta that carousel lay well outside of my ken.

Why the ningen chose Bulberry Wonderworld, five thousand miles from where it was born, couldn't tell ya. Maybe it was 'cause of the way Wilbur treated it—all of 'em—spending all that time and using so much care on 'em, that them coming to life and defending his work seemed like some sort of justice—a tribute to the artist who'd shaped them.

I get it: How did they turn into real things one minute and then back to wood on their poles the next? I don't know. How was it not a one had blood on its wooden fangs whenever the police took over the scene? Couldn't say. But I can tell you for certain that it weren't my imagination that night and that Wilbur weren't to blame.

He was just the vehicle, I think. He'd tapped into something deeper and older than himself when expressing his art, and its beauty and terror overtook him. A blacksmith might spend his whole career making forks and spoons and then one day he makes the best, sharpest, most deadly knife you ever laid eyes on.

Is he responsible when it takes a life? Maybe that's why you don't even mimic nothing so deadly you can't control it. Not in painting, not in words, not in woodworking. Mind what you bring into this world, 'cause the moment your fingers leave it, they set it free.

#### **About the Author:**

Darren is a freelance book editor for Evolved Publications, and his short fiction has appeared in more than thirty publications over the years, including Hellbound Books, Chilling Tales for Dark Nights, and The Stoneslide Corrective. He has had four plays and a feature-length film produced and a non-fiction book published. He lives in Asheville, North Carolina with his son and girlfriend.

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#### The Devil's Own Vibe | Edward St. Boniface

I sit in my darkened hovel as the great and fearsomely predatory city surges around my frightened refuge with a perpetual famished voracity for pale souls like mine. Sirens call like the taunts and death cries of unimaginable primordial beasts. Hootings and gross outbursts of knowing urban savages pass to and fro in the labyrinth of streets narrate another brutish night of carousing and peril for the unwary.

Echoing and amplifying and skittering around me from the nearby shadowy light-speckled blocks, all overcrowded with the huddling fearful like myself. I cannot keep the audient nightmare out or sufficiently blacken my window to prevent the flickerings of sudden-flexing too-watchful life in my too-close vicinity.

Turning to the vast screen that is my only and involuntary connection to the dragging magnetisms of that abhorrent outer world, it presents me an ever-shifting vista of spiculated static and pixelated madness seething in a colourless intangible electronic netherworld. For I will brook no coherent images upon and lucid sounds to emit from that stark rectangular space.

From the fast-fluctuating interference patterns as they make an explosive cauldron of bleak monochrome chaos I see an etiolated parody of myself coalesce. It looks around and then sneers malignantly as it notices me. Takes hold within me. And speaks brokenly in my own distorted and radio-flattened voice of the horrors I cannot escape and that will consume me. The vibrancy of accelerating articulated terror that mocks my weak and diminished spirit. Eating of me until I am withered and corrupted essence not even worth the devouring to starving demonic jackals. Abandoned in the aether wilderness of lost and cast out contemptible phantoms.

The Vibe speaks:

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...And now at last the screen speaks apocalyptically forth, not in my mocked and dismayingly subtracted voice but with possessive authority:

'And I will devour you. I will tell you how. We will tell you how. We as **LEGION** shall command you. Let Us enter...'
This is the Devil's Own Vibe. And now it is mine.

# **About the Author:**

Edward St. Boniface lives and works in London UK (seeing himself as a cultural refugee from the Canadian Midwest) scribbling horror, science and crime fiction, the Jest Plain Weird and is an aspiring novelist in several genres. He's keen for feedback on his WATTPAD account's various story offerings. Not quite yet atomised a personality he declares: 'Blessed are the Crack'd; for they shall let in the Light'...

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# **Cold Hours** | *Lee Andrew Forman*

In the cold hours, among low fog, something walks. Despite image obscured by shadow, intent is clear with each stride. Unclear to low eyes over flicker of flame, it passes unnoticed in malice form. It stops short before what it seeks, its coat of shade swims in the wind. The thin skeleton of life before it raises both eyes—a meek figure in comparison. A picture shows not what it is, not what it could be, but all it allows itself to be witnessed as. This moving image of something unknown can't be defined by the meager puppet it seeks. Eyes lock. Flesh knows death, no matter the form. Before a cry of desperation can be released, the dark figure penetrates a soft, defenseless body. Red fills the cracks of the stone street. The fresh corpse falls limp. That which cannot be understood moves on to find the next.

# No Gods Here | Lee Andrew Forman

Pale water rose and fell against the hull of my boat. The lonely ocean longed for color; all was gray, from the sky to the cold sea. Though my destination was said to be only two miles from the coast, fog wrapped around my solitary vessel—I had the sensation of getting nowhere but lost. If not for my compass, and faith that this land mass existed against the advice of all maps, I would have been.

I was glad to have left the company of the native tribe. The way their eyes stared, the knowing in them—too harsh for my subconscious to ignore. Though I knew they only followed lore and superstition, second guessing the risk of going where no one else would clouded my enthusiasm.

A dark mass appeared in the haze. It seemed my money and troubles had been worthwhile. This tiny rock in the sea was before me. I was there.

Jagged volcanic rock populated the landscape. No signs of life, plant or otherwise. The great chapel didn't take long to find. Its oversized entrance was built tall enough for the gods to walk through unhindered. Inside, its vaulted ceiling reached into darkness above. Faint illumination entered the structure, no glass saints adorned its design. Only a stone block altar featured any symbolism of worship. A great triangle hung in thin air. No chains suspended it, nothing rested beneath to hold its weight. Magic, I'd heard. But I knew better.

Dust clouded around my boots as I approached. Each footfall shortened my journey, brought me closer to the mystifying object. My palms moistened. After all the knowledge I'd gained throughout my hunt, I still had no revelation as to its purpose. I reached out and put my hand against it. Unlike its cold stone surroundings, it radiated heat. My lips curled in anticipation of discovering its function.

Then a strange feeling arrested my entire body. Both feet lifted from the floor and I rose, weightless, hovered in the air alongside the object. Elation inspired endless possibilities, countless prospects. What power I would have.

White light brighter than the sun beamed from above. Even with both eyes closed, it relentlessly entered my retinas. The air around me boiled. I barely heard my own screams over the hiss of burning flesh.

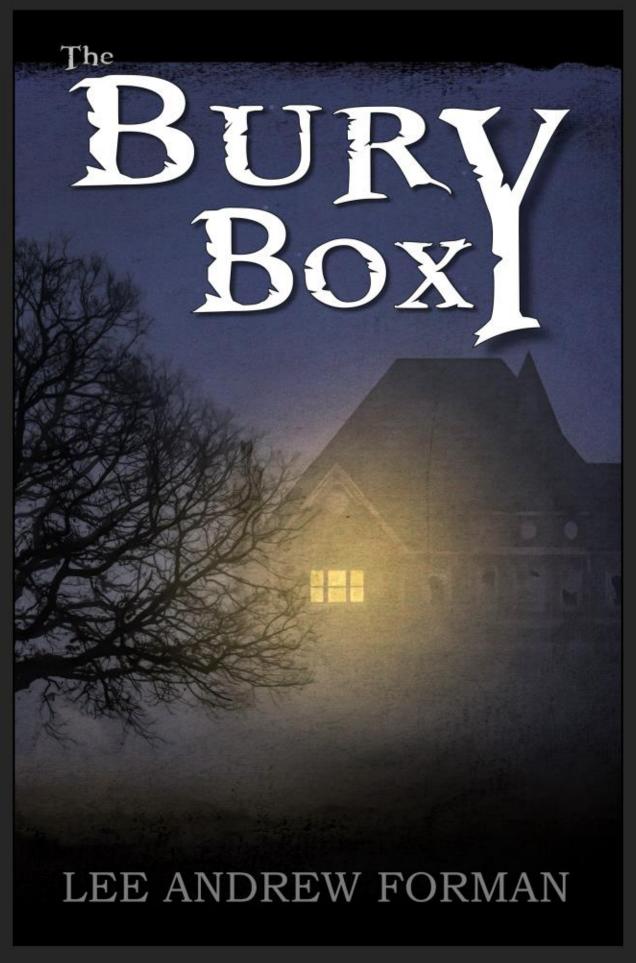
Before life escaped my meaty shell, darkness returned to the chamber. My wrecked frame dropped to the floor. No longer alone, I looked up to the beings who emerged from the dark. As my limbs twitched with pain beyond pain, I understood the legends and rumors, the fears of the island natives. It all made sense. But these were not gods.

# **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.

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Available on Amazon

# Russian's Secret Weapon | Paul Wilson

For Roger Williams, Sunday never truly started until he got home from church. The ornate brick building was fine to visit, but he was glad his parents only forced the torture of worship on him once a week. To Roger, the trouble was not getting up (although he would rather sleep in) it was not the loss of time from the outside (though he would rather enjoy God's work firsthand instead of hearing about it in the preacher's nasal tones), the problem was the universal parent-to-child rule of 'just sit there and be quiet'. Who could be still for a whole hour? Who would want to? Roger was a man of action. All of that sitting and listening was fine for adults, but Roger needed a villain to vanquish or an outlaw to apprehend—danger, that's what he craved—the bigger the better!

But there was more to Roger's gripe than just the inactivity of church, where the only danger was falling asleep during the service and not getting a piece of candy from Mrs. Dolenz because she caught him snoozing—the people there were so weird! Being the only regularly attending child, Roger was subject to all their petting and compliments.

"My, look how you've grown!"

"Why, he looks more like my cousin Eddie every time I see him!"

"What a handsome young boy!"

Roger succumbed with as much grace as a ten-year-old can muster but squirming usually commenced once the cheek-pinching started.

Roger's favorite part of church was the drive home, when his duty was behind him, and he could lay out the rest of his day like a glorious treasure map. While his parents laughed and loved in the front seat, Roger slouched and planned in the back.

This Sunday was a Summer Sunday, the best kind of Sunday, the kind that demands responsibility be thrown down and the arms of play taken up. Even the sky agreed. It was brewing a thunderstorm to help excite the imagination. Roger loved the feel of thunder rumbling, playing his chest like a drum, threatening to throw him back into the house as if the frantic calling of his mother wasn't enough. It made him feel alive and good—good because of the danger involved, the kind of danger boys crave, the kind of danger that reinforce a boy's belief that he is immortal.

Carl Williams barely got the front door closed before his son gained the top of the stairs. Roger pushed into his room, pulling his tie free in one fluid motion. He undressed quickly (throwing the clothes in the direction of his hamper at least), feeling the buzz to hurry. Roger paused, naked except for his underwear, transfixed by outside. Wind bent the treetops. Something in the woods cracked. Something else boomed. He shivered. He wanted to move, to *get going*, but for the first time he realized being out there equaled being vulnerable. The woods were so big, and he was so small. Roger had never felt that way before. He shuddered. Then he grinned. Roger reset himself and got moving.

He grabbed his 'play clothes' from their usual spot under his bed: a ragged beige shirt and olive-green pants with pockets on the legs. Several belt loops were missing. The knees were stained with red clay. His mother had given up trying to fix them, she just bemoaned what in the world he did that destroyed fabric so.

Like most mothers, she wanted to know everything about everything he did, but Roger kept her in the dark about his adventures. Mothers weren't *supposed* to know. They didn't belong in the woods. That's where a boy's imaginations transformed the terrain into the control room of an alien spaceship, or a war-torn battlefield, or maybe a medieval dungeon where he could escape certain death by a hair's width. Those green and brown fields comprised the arena where Roger had vanquished countless comic book villains and defended the safety of his country. (*No, no, Mr. President, thanks are not necessary. It's all in a day's work.*) It was Roger's special place. The only one he shared its magic with was Darbie, his dog.

Roger raced down the stairs and across the living room. He stopped to peek into the kitchen where his mother stood with the infamous bowl and infamous spoon, mixing whatever it is mother's mix in those bowls with those spoons. He took a deep breath and prepared for battle. This was the gateway to *out there*. Roger went for the direct approach.

"Bye Mom! I'm taking Darbie and going out to play!" He tossed the words while trying to exit.

With an authoritative "Hold it Mister!" she stopped him flat, and his first plan of attack was crushed. Roger marched back to the kitchen, dramatically hanging his head. His mother ceased mixing to fully scrutinize Roger's proposal. She studied him, envisioning the worst possible calamities. Roger shifted anxiously from foot to foot while his mother imagined her son attacked by every type of woodland creature great and small. "Are you sure you don't want to stay with me? Help me bake this cake? I'll let you sneak some of the batter."

"Awww Mom! I got stuff to do!"

"Boys need to wander," his father said, joining them. "Gotta get it out of their system." Roger agreed with bobbing head. His dad ruffled his hair. Roger's mom sighed.

"I'll never understand the need to roll and play and get dirty."

"Cause you're a mom!"

His father laughed and went out. The screen door banged shut. Roger's mother finally gave in.

"Come back if it starts to storm."

"Thanks Mom! I will!" Roger scrambled out the screen door, moving so quickly that he startled his mother, a sensation that landed at the base of her spine and exploded outward, showering her insides with ice prickles of fear.

"And keep Darbie on his leash!" Keep Darbie on his leash? Why had she said that? The question teased her. It made no sense. Did it? Suddenly she wanted to call Roger back; all at once, she was very scared for her son. Then the screen banged shut and he was gone. Had he listened at all? Through the kitchen window she watched him scoot across the yard. Her fear lingered. Why did boys feel the need to roam the world? Why couldn't they just stay home and read or watch TV or help their mother's cook?

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As he rounded the barn towards the pen in the back, Roger recalled his mother's warning. She never said anything about Darbie before. She gave the same speech every time he went to the woods. What made her change today? With the last hints of sunlight being winked out by the approaching clouds, Roger paused. Was there something more to her message? Then the sight of Darbie's frantic bouncing made Roger forget his worries.

Darbie vibrated with energy, grunting and barking. On all fours he only rose to Roger's knee. He sported a black coat with tan patches. He was still a puppy.

As Roger unfasten the pen's locks, Darbie pushed on his side of the door, doing his best to help. The chicken wire rocked and swayed in its wooden frame. The pup bounced backward with growing excitement. He knew what was happening; his buddy Roger had come to play, to take him through the woods. Darbie liked being with the trees and their odd smells. He craved the same freedom his master felt but neither could explain.

The last of the locks fell and the grateful animal burst out of the pen. He rocketed into the darkening afternoon, made a U-turn, and warped back with tongue flapping behind. Darbie leapt and landed in Roger's arms with a solid thud, then gave his best grin and kissed his master. Roger laughed and plopped Darbie to the grass.

"You ready, boy?"

Roger caught sight of the leash hanging on a crooked nail. He groaned but grabbed it and slipped it over Darbie's head.

"Sorry, pal, but Mom said."

Darbie shook his head, ears slapping, but accepted the indignity.

"Let's go."

Roger waved to his father who was tinkering with the barbeque grill and then entered the woods with Darbie already ahead of him.

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Their path was a shifting kaleidoscope of shadow. The trees had snuck closer together—maybe that was the cracking he heard earlier. Tangles of drab Spanish moss danced and swayed in the strengthening wind, making Roger think of cold, gray graveyards. Thunder rumbled like unsecured tin on an old shed. Roger pressed forward, holding the leash tight. Darbie stopped every few steps to rotate his radar ears. Forgetting the initial creepy impression, Roger slid into the game.

"Keep a watchful eye Lieutenant Darbie! Those Russian's have a secret weapon in these woods and it's up to us to find it! Clever of them to hide it out here!"

Darbie woofed to confirm his agreement. He pulled as far ahead as the leash allowed but stopped when a squirrel caught his attention. The weapon can wait, Sir! I must catch this renegade squirrel. He could provide us with crucial information on those Commie Scum.

Splashing his muzzle with his pink tongue, Darbie looked back, asking permission. Roger gave it by dropping his end of the leash. The pup instantly shot after the squirrel and Roger had to swallow a delighted laugh to preserve the dignity of the mission.

The chase lasted about twenty feet before the squirrel jumped a pine and scrambled out of the Lieutenant's reach and certain interrogation. Darbie, barking hysterically, planted his paws on the tree trunk and dared the enemy out of its cowardice. Roger caught up and put his hand on the dog's head. *Sorry, Commander, the little devil got away.* He must have an escape pod in the tree here.

"It's okay. Base believes the weapon may be near the pond, just a few clicks down."

Darbie barked once, gave the tree a last menacing look in case the squirrel was watching, and joined his master. As they retreated, Roger forgot to retrieve his end of Darbie's leash. It drug in the foliage behind them, a creeping snake.

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The pond was more swamp than water. Dark tangles of moss caked all sides, leaving only a ragged opening. High reed grass stood guard. Bullfrog croaks broke the constant chorus of singing bugs. The water stank, and dead things often floated on top. Roger had seen plenty of turtles. It was a boy's paradise.

Both tread with awe, paying respect. They crept over gray hardscrabble dirt. Roger urged them closer. The excitement of finding the Russian's secret weapon had overtaken him. With Darbie in the lead, they approached the water.

"There is no telling what the weapon may be, so look for anything suspicious, Lieutenant." Darbie woofed agreement. They patrolled the pond's edge. Darbie took a drink. His tongue made spreading ripples. The afternoon grew still. Darbie waded out a little further, getting his paws wet, sniffing for the threat to America. Roger turned his back to survey the land. His head began to thud. A weird high ringing began, and Roger winced. Darbie finished drinking his fill. The pup turned his back on the deeper water. Suddenly Roger wanted his dog and he wanted to go. He didn't want to play anymore.

Then-

Thunder cannon-launched doom in all its bone-rattling bass. Roger turned and saw the Russian's secret weapon. It was behind Lieutenant Darbie. The pond splintered into a thousand shards as the weapon rose. An alligator broke the serenity of the water's surface. The Russian's had unleashed their secret weapon and it was going to eat Lieutenant Darbie. Roger forgot his military rank and screamed like a child. He screamed as the alligator's jaws slammed shut around the unsuspecting pup. Darbie never knew what hit him. There was no gush of blood, or high-pitched scream, just the echoing crack of the thing's terrible jaws closing. The alligator took no notice of Roger, it simply slid under the water again.

Roger swayed in shock, too consumed with raw terror to react. Finally, his mouth began a mechanical gyrating, but he produced no sound. Numb, Roger turned for home. He moved faster, faster, finally finding his voice half-way. He did not stop screaming the rest of the run back.

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When he retold the story some four hours later, Roger had calmed enough to let his imagination distort the incident. He was sure the reptile had smiled at him, promising that he would join Darbie in the humid depths of its guts.

Roger went to bed and began the dreams that would stay with him for the rest of his life. Sometimes the alligator would rise out of the water and stand upright like a man, calling to Roger, promising that it was coming to get him. Sometimes Roger would wake, believing he heard Darbie outside his window wanting entry. Roger always looked. Sometimes Darbie was a furry puppy, sometimes an angry corpse of half-eaten remains. In some dreams Darbie blamed Roger for his death. Why didn't you keep me on my leash, Roger? It's your fault, your fault... That voice always echoed. Roger often woke staring out at undisturbed morning mist, tears drying on his cheeks.

The dreams never ended; they just became easier to live with.

Roger Williams never owned another dog.

#### **About the Author:**

Paul Wilson lives in a suburb much like the one he turned into a horror playground in his novel *Hostage*. He lives with his wife, kids, and two cats. He has worked a spectacular list of jobs including retail district manager, 911 operator, and head of a college security department.

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# Canyon Overlook | Craig Kenworthy

He liked taking their pictures. Those solo hikers who'd ranged beyond earshot of the crowds, clambered over the ridge to this beauty spot before realizing their arms or selfie-stick were shorter than their panoramic ambitions.

But he was standing right there, khaki pants and gray hat, an old guy leaning on his hiking pole. At his smile and nod, they'd hand over their phone, then pose.

Their smiles disappeared as his pole's sharp point hit them square in the chest, an unexpected strength behind the hard shove.

He liked taking their pictures. Almost as much as he liked the screams.

# Bioluminescence | Craig Kenworthy

Alberto's paddle mined the green glow beneath his seat on top kayak. A flat bay at midnight. The otherworldly light, life.

It was a long-planned anniversary trip. Then came the forecast: the earliest Caribbean storm season in history. Hurricane Roscoe arrived, costing them a flight, a day. But it missed the island, missed this special cove.

Alberto dipped his hand in even though you weren't supposed to. Even though it shouldn't feel any different. It did, though. A pull, a tug of some kind. He yelled back to her, to Frida.

That was when the emptied kayak glided past him.

# Parking is Not a Game | Craig Kenworthy

July 3<sup>rd</sup> and seventeen-year-old Tito racing up the mountain to catch the sunset; his old pickup skirting the drop-offs on the guardrail free road. At the top, he snagged the last parking spot. Sure, he cut that guy off, the one with his turn signal on. But winners don't need turn signals, right?

Tito jogged to the viewpoint, joined the crowd in time for the first 'Oooh's'. They were all facing the same way, even the ranger. Because why would anyone look back at the parking lot? It's not like you were going to see someone's brake line being cut.

#### **About the Author:**

Craig Kenworthy is a fiction writer, playwright and poet. He was born in the Azores Islands, which is the only place in Europe that grows pineapples. His work has appeared in Noir Nation, The Fish Anthology and Curating Alexandria among other places. He's won a Silver Charles Ogle award and been a finalist for the J.F. Powers Prize for Short Fiction.

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# One Brief Moment | Lynn Ruzzo

Life brings light to this once desolate place. They've built their fragile structures upon the land I once scorched. The lifetimes they've spent creating, but the blink of an eye to me. I watch them laugh and cry, birth and die, with nothing more than idle curiosity. They're so proud of their accomplishments. They think highly of their own existence. They believe they're at the top of the food chain. I think it's time to reveal the truth. With one glaring stare, a simple thought to expel them from this Earth, their screams will ring out for one brief moment before the entirety of their history is erased.

# Our Spot | Cherish Laraine

Ashley read Isabella's palm and Isabella got shivers as Ashley traced Isabella's palm lines. They sat cross legged and facing each other in the middle of a graveyard in the woods near the city's river. A small fire kept them warm. Scattered around them were old, broken, and forgotten graves and books on witchcraft and Voodoo. She felt Ashley's pulse of magic every time Ashley traced a line and then read Isabella's future. "Look here. Our palms match from this line onward. We were definitely meant to meet; I'm like 99% sure you're my twin flame."

"Twin flame?"

"My mirror soul; you know?" Ashley urged. "I mean you felt it too, right? The connection?"

Isabella nodded and her St. Michael's amulet grew warm. "Yes, I felt the connection but I don't know what a twin flame is."

"It means we used to be one soul but grew too big and got split. It's like a soul mate but platonic." Ashley hugged Isabella's arm to her and leaned back, her black cat earrings reflected the campfire light.

"San Miguel Arcángel, defiéndenos en la lucha." Isabella chanted.

"If you are going to perform a spell, you should do it in English." Ashley interrupted flipping through her books with a huff. "It's a bit rude because I don't understand the spell you are saying."

"Sorry?" Isabella shifted. "It's just the Saint Michael the Archangel prayer. It's for protection."

"Protection from what?" Ashley asked, fiddling with her Red Tiger's Eye stone bracelet and looking through a voodoo book.

Isabella shifted and looked at the woods and river surrounding them. "Well, from any potential monsters in the woods."

Ashley giggled. "What is la chupacabra gonna eat us?"

Isabella flushed. "Other monsters live in the woods too."

"Interesting." Ashley commented passively, before picking up a mythology book and flipping through it. "What other kinds of monsters?"

"Well, you know the fae." Isabella reminded Ashley who leaned back on a grave.

Ashley waved her hand, dismissing the fae and continued flipping through the mythology book. "Anything else?" "Well there's nahuel's. They are cannibalistic werewolves."

Ashley rolled her eyes and sat up. "If there were werewolves, they would have been outed by the government years ago. Anything else? Anything scarier? Or is it just el chupacabra?"

Isabella shifted and looked around the forest. "There are a lot of owls here, and that's usually a big omen."

"Good or bad?" Ashley asked. Isabella shrugged uncomfortably and dusted dirt off the grave next to her. Ashley sighed but waved Isabella to continue.

"Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle—"

"Did you pick a deity?" Ashley interrupted again.

"No," Isabella sighed. "My grandmother would just call out to Guadalupe or the Virgin Mary and our ancestors." Ashley frowned. "Why?"

Isabella raised her brow at Ashley. "Guadalupe is our mother. She protects us."

"Just protects? Don't you want more?" Ashley questioned as she held both of Isabella's hands and stared into Isabella's eyes. "I wanted more. The gods listened. Here read my palm."

Isabella caressed Ashley's manicured and flawless hand while checking the palmistry book next to her. Isabella's brows furrowed as she flipped through the palmistry book double checking the lines.

"Your death line isn't here." Isabella checked Ashley's other palm. "This is unreal. Your palm and your future—"

"It's not." Ashley kissed Isabella's hand and released. "I'm going to live forever. I was chosen by the gods. And you were too. You just have to accept their gift."

"Which gods?" Isabella asked nervously.

"Any of them." Ashley twirled her hair. "You should pick a powerful deity to worship. I have Gaea as my mother goddess and the power that she gives me is amazing. Grand Zombi and Monsieur Danny seem pretty popular."

"I don't practice Voodoo. I'm a Brujeria."

"Don't limit yourself with labels!" Ashley scolded. "Labels bound you to limitations: crystal witches can only use crystals, herb witches herbs, brujeria the Virgin Mary! Reach for them all. And someone will answer."

"Isn't that reckless?" The fire popped and an ember burned Isabella. She flinched then fiddled with her amulet. An owl hooted from the shadows before flying out over the girls.

Ashley shrugged. "Maybe if I feared them. The internet is a cool place, I did my studying. I even learned some interesting stuff about demons; I have some protection against them as Gaea is the mother of the earth and monsters." "You didn't have a teacher?" Isabella worried.

"I didn't need one. The gods showed me the way." Ashley insisted and grabbed Isabella's hands. "Are you scared?"

"A little." Isabella admitted.

"Don't be." Ashley assured her. "If you're worried, you don't have to do the ritual now. We can do it next time." Isabella relaxed. "Really?"

"Of course." Ashley agreed. "You shouldn't fear your future. If you doubt yourself, the gods will doubt you too." "Sorry for making you come out here and wasting your time." Isabella apologized.

Ashley shrugged and began putting her books away. "It wasn't a waste. The palm reading went well; the gods wanted us to meet today and realize our connection. Someday we will be blood sisters; souls reunited."

"Someday? I thought you said we were twin flames?"

"We are. But, we haven't joined a coven together or performed a Blood Ritual—"

"A Blood Ritual!"

Ashley rolled her eyes. "Don't be dramatic. It's technically a Blood Bond. You know, like when people cut their hands and mix the blood to become blood relatives?"

"Oh," Isabella gasped and cleared her throat. "Well, ah, we can do that if you want."

"Really?" Ashley asked, surprised. "You aren't scared?"

"Why would I be scared of you?"

Ashley smiled, shyly. "You really want to do it?"

Isabella nodded and Ashley squealed in happiness. She grabbed her bag and Isabella's hand and faced east. Ashley pulled out an owl's feather and held it in Isabella's hand before covering it with her own. "East. Wind spirits."

"East. Wind spirits." Isabella repeated. They put the feather down together and turned south. Ashley pulled out a small tea candle from her bag and lit it.

"South; Fire spirits." Ashley said as they both held the flame and put it on the ground. Isabella continued repeating.

"South; Fire spirits." They turned west and held a Beachrock stone with a small conch shell embedded it in. They put it on the ground.

"West: Water spirits."

"West: Water spirits."

When they turned north, Ashley kissed the clear quartz before they held it and chanted. "North, Earth spirits." The clear quartz glowed blue and when placed on the ground, closed a circle around the girls and their small campfire.

The girls sat next to the campfire. Ashley took out a small folded travel cup and a small pocket knife with a turquoise handle. She opened the small cup and placed it between them. She poured water and sprinkled the seeds of a fig tree into the cup.

Ashley opened the turquoise knife and paused. "Are you sure? You have to be consensual. Blood rituals are very serious. We'll be more than family. More than friends."

Isabella gulped and nodded. "Of course I'm sure."

Ashley smiled and shifted in her seat with glee. "Ok, hand please."

Isabella held her hand out. Ashley kissed the shaking hand before poking Isabella's hand hard enough to bleed. She gathered some of the blood in the cup. She handed Isabella the knife and her hand. Isabella copied Ashley and kissed Ashley's hand before making a small cut and dropping some blood into the cup. They repeated this action with their left hands.

Ashley and Isabella intertwined their hands and smiled at each other. Isabella felt warmth flow through her as Ashley began the spell. "Twin flame, twin soul, once split now united."

A tingling sensation traveled through Isabella as she broke focus and noticed several owls around them. Their hoots echoed around them. Isabella's eyes shifted back to Ashley's and she screamed. Ashley's eyes were vacant black holes and her eyes dripped blood. Isabella jerked back, but was pulled forward by black vines that bound her hands to Ashley's. Their blood dripped to the ground and burnt the dirt like acid. Black fig flowers emerged from the floor and wrapped around Ashley. One fig flower drank from the cup between them.

"Ashley—"

Isabella noticed movement behind Ashley and screamed again. A green being with horns sat within the circle with his hand on Ashley's shoulder. He wore no clothes and had long arms, feet, hands, eyes, ears, hair, beard, and nose. Behind him was another demon. This demon sat on a bear, held a hawk in his hand and had three heads; a man, a bull, and a ram. Other eyes glowed in various colors in the darkness of the forest and peaked from behind graves.

Feeling a chill run down her spine, Isabella tried to pull away from Ashley again. The vines tightened and grew thorns. Looking to her right she saw a black human body with a goat's head and legs. It's big twisted horns and dangerous claws seemed to grow. Dried blood caked his hairy chest as the beast let out a thunderous laugh.

"What did you do?" Isabella screamed at Ashley.

"Everything we've always wanted." Ashley replied victoriously as the vines around their hands seeped into Isabella's skin. Isabella felt the vines slither their way through her arms and grip her heart. Her heart stopped and Isabella coughed up black mucus. The vines inside her pierced her heart and she screamed again. Her heart burned before it began pulsing again. Isabella's eyes leaked blood like Ashley's. A new warmth spread through her as her heart beat in sync with Ashley's. Both of their hearts echoed in the rhythm of the earth below them.

The vicious laughter of the demons around her changed into soothing promises.

#### **About the Author:**

Cherish Laraine is an asexual fiction, horror, and urban fantasy writer. She graduated from NIU with a Bachelor's in English and a focus on Creative Writing. She currently teaches English in Japan. Her work appears in *Queer As Hell* horror Anthology.

#### Tangerine Sky | Nina D'Arcangela

They said the dome would cleanse the air; that if we waited, it would be safe again. And for a while, it was. Greens were more verdant than they'd ever been, almost surreal in their crisp contrast to other hues. The valley was a lush haven in a dying world. We were lucky, as lucky as anyone could hope given the cataclysmic shift the planet had undergone. The science worked, we were proof of it. Plans were put in place to build more domes; to terraform our own Earth, rebuild the civilization that once existed.

Then the air machines stopped one day. No rhyme, no reason, they just stopped mid-rotation. Scientists and engineers did their best to repair them, but nothing had failed; they'd simply gone dormant. We tried to ignore the latency, to carry on as if it would bear no consequence on our future. We breathed, we ate, we lived a simile of the life we once knew. Then someone noticed it, a wisp of fog to the west. It seemed harmless, just an inexplicable anomaly. But as time progressed, so did the wisp – it grew into a fog that hugged the ground like false snow. When it encircled the mills, it seemed to split into fingers as though a hand were reaching into our bubble from the corrupt exosphere. Another wisp formed where the first petered out.

Every day, as I walk the commune, I feel its, no, her gaze upon me. She whispers to me each night, and her lullables hold no hope for a future. She is sentient, of that I've no doubt, I only ask that she take us before the new are born.

# **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>

# **House Specialty** | *P.A. Frank*

The town bustled with summer visitors. People stood in line at the sweet shops to buy their favorite treats. Stores packed their display windows with unique items, some simple, some extravagant, eliciting many *oohs* and *ahhs* from eager clients who were drawn inside to peruse the shelves. Business was good. Shoppers laden with bags and boxes ambled up and down the sidewalks. Partners sometimes carried children who had grown too tired to walk. Lisa wished she had someone to carry her.

Her sandal straps rubbed against her pinky toes with every step she took, further aggravating the blisters forming on them. She and her boyfriend Donnie had been to a museum and toured a cavern that morning. Afterward, they'd grabbed a quick snack from one of the food carts and spent a few hours wandering the streets with the other tourists. I should've known better than to wear sandals today. The sundress was a bad idea, too. Her sunblock had long since worn off, and the telltale heat of sunburn tightened the skin on her bare shoulders.

"Aren't the mountains supposed to be cooler this time of year?" She brushed at a few strands of sweaty hair that had come loose from her ponytail.

"Blame it on climate change, I guess," Donnie said absently.

He, too, was sunburned and footsore, and well on his way to being annoyed. They'd passed half a dozen restaurants and taverns and couldn't agree on where to eat. He opened his mouth to suggest they go back to the little pizza joint they'd passed ten minutes earlier, but before he could say anything, an old green sign jutting from the crumbling brick wall of the next building caught his eye. The sign's gold lettering, though flaked and faded, was still legible.

# Old Nick's Locally sourced BBQ our house specialty!

He stopped walking and waved a fly away from his face. "Look, here's a place."

"I dunno, Donnie." Lisa peered at the sign, then at the grubby windows set into the side of the building below it. "Looks kind of sketchy."

"Aw, come on. It's local food, not some chain restaurant. Just what we wanted, right?" He pointed to one of the windows. A hand-lettered sign was visible through the grime.

#### Homeless patrons to the back door please.

"Look, see that sign? The place can't be too terrible."

Smoke drifted toward them from the back of the building, filling their noses with the savory smell of pit-cooked barbecue. Lisa's stomach rumbled and her feet suddenly ached beyond all endurance. She gave in.

"All right. Let's give it a try."

A bell tinkled and cool air washed over them as they walked in the door. The smell of home cooked food enveloped them and Lisa forgot about her sore feet. Her mouth watered as they stepped to the front counter. A smiling hostess greeted them and led them to a table.

Once seated, they ordered beers from their server, a neatly dressed young man with dark circles under his eyes. A few minutes later, he set two tall mugs of frothy amber liquid on the table with a smile.

"Would you care to order now, or do you need some time?"

Lisa eyed the menu. "It all looks so good. What would you recommend?"

He didn't hesitate. "Oh, the house specialty, of course. It's plated with baked beans, collards, and hush puppies."

"That sounds amazing. We'll take it." Lisa smiled up at the young man.

Donnie nodded. "Yeah, sounds like just the thing."

The server took their menus and put their order in. While they waited for their food to arrive, they examined their surroundings. The restaurant was cleaner than the exterior hinted at. A mixture of tourists and locals occupied several of the booths lining the walls.

"Popular place." Lisa toyed with the folded white napkin in front of her as she half-listened to the murmur of conversation around her.

Donnie nodded as he surveyed the polished wooden tabletops and vintage signs decorating the wall. "It must mean the food is good."

Lisa sipped her beer. "Or it's cheap. I don't care either way. It could taste like two-week-old mutton and I'd eat it, hungry as I am."

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Sunset painted the streets and shops with a golden glow as they exited the restaurant. Lisa patted her midsection and groaned.

"Ugh, I ate way too much. I couldn't help myself, though. It was all so good. The barbecue was even better than back home!"

"Yeah, other than being a little stringy, it was the best I've ever tasted. I'm not surprised they make their employees sign a nondisclosure agreement about how it's made."

She looked back at the crumbling brick building and lowered her voice. "Do you think our server really would've gotten fired for telling us what's in it?"

"Maybe. Did you see his face when we asked? All the color drained out of it."

"I wish they would've let us take our leftovers."

"It's just as well they didn't. Having to carry them around with us would've been a pain."

"Yeah, I guess so."

They stood beside one of the restaurant's dirty windows, their shadows long on the sidewalk as they watched the other tourists pass by. Smoke redolent of hickory wood wafted around the side of the building before being carried away on the breeze.

Lisa covered her mouth and hiccuped. "Excuse me. Must be the sauce. It was delicious, but had a weird aftertaste. Sort of coppery."

Donnie stifled a burp. "It tasted fine to me, but it was a little thicker than I'm used to. Every place has its own recipe, though."

She frowned. "That couple finding a fingernail in one of the burnt ends sandwiches was a little unsettling."

He shook his head. "They looked like one of those influencer couples. Probably put one of those press-on nails in it. They'll do anything to get free stuff, you know."

She rolled her eyes. "So true. I hope they didn't get the server in trouble. He was a nice guy."

Two panting Golden Retrievers trotted by on the sidewalk, followed by a middle-aged man in cargo shorts. Sweat darkened the back of his blue t-shirt as he struggled to keep hold of their leashes. On the street, a teenage boy in red athletic shorts sped by on a bicycle, his gray tank top rippling and his dark hair blowing back from his face.

Donnie put his arm around her. "Feet still hurt? There's still a little more time to look around."

"They're not too bad." She patted her midsection again. "Besides, we need to walk some of that food off."

The sidewalks became more crowded as the temperature dropped. Vehicles cruised the streets, music blasting from the open windows as the drivers beeped at each other and the occasional unwary pedestrian. People went in and out of shops, and here and there a small child wailed as a balloon popped or an ice cream cone fell to the ground. It was, Lisa thought, the usual chaotic atmosphere of a tourist destination... almost. Something was missing, but she couldn't put her finger on what it was.

They stopped to watch a pink-haired busker in shorts and a tie-dyed tank top play a cheerful acoustic on her guitar. Lisa dropped a few dollars in the open case near the woman's feet. The woman smiled and nodded her thanks, and Lisa realized what was missing. She looked around as a cool evening breeze ruffled her dress.

"It's strange. There's a busker on every corner, but we haven't seen anyone experiencing homelessness since we've been here. I know it's a mountain town and this is the tourist area, but I would expect to see a few at least. I wonder what's up with that?"

Donnie glanced up and down the busy sidewalks and shrugged. "The restaurant guy said there's a couple places like theirs around town, right? Maybe they're working with some kind of local program to help keep people off the streets."

She remembered the sign in the restaurant window. "Oh, yeah. I bet you're right!"

He looked at his watch. "The hotel shuttle will be around soon. We better get to the pickup area."

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Twenty minutes later, they were back at Murphy's, the quaint general store where the shuttle had dropped them off that morning. Lisa sank into one of the rocking chairs on the store's front porch with a sigh of relief. She nudged Donnie, who sat rubbing his knees in the rocking chair next to hers.

"This is a pretty neat little town. We need to leave a review for that restaurant when we get back to our room. I'm thinking five stars because the food was great, and I like that they're community focused. What do you think?"

Donnie grimaced and belched. "Maybe four stars. Not sure if it's from the barbecue or the sauce, but I've got heartburn."

#### **About the Author: Note: using her bio from Zine57**

P.A. Frank is a modern-day medicine maker turned writer living in North Carolina. Her days are spent making things up and writing them down in hopes that people might want to read them, ignoring her cats' wishes to be left alone, and embarking on various land, sea, and sky adventures with her family.

Facebook: <u>Patricia. A. Frank</u>
Twitter: @<u>Trish wrote it</u>

# Like a Rock | JB Corso

Streaming wind rushed upwards through Christian's shoulder-length hair. The relentless breeze pushed a constant *whoosh* sound into his ears. He plummeted through the gray clouds, passing under its canopy. Christian viewed the extensive farm patchwork expanding below. The constant gusts blazed a crimson shade across his exposed flesh, as though he leaned over a thousand candles. He drew in a full breath. *Finally, some good oxygen down here. I hate choking like a beached carp up there.* 

Christian spotted a young woman falling off to his lower right. His brown eyes burned as he squinted. Her arms and legs frantically swung about. *You don't need to do that*. Her body twisted to the left. Christian screamed at her out of desperation, "No, stop!" The gust destroyed his words from her muted ears. She proceeded to spin over. *Oh, god, no.* Christian watched as she rolled over in the air, presenting her naked back to the ground. Her lengthy mane wavered upwards, concealing her face. Christian wanted to close his eyes, but continued watching her out of morbid curiosity.

Her torso paused in mid-air. She catapulted upward as if yanked by an invisible rubber band. Stagnant limbs became disjointed under her. Her reddish-blonde hair splayed behind as she propelled high beyond his view. She cringed at her impending fate. Christian attempted to shake his head against the rushing air. I hated that death worse than hitting anyplace below, including those seniors waiting for a bus. He considered his own experience. She won't make that mistake again. If she's lucky, she'll pass out from oxygen deprivation before getting chewed up through the atmosphere.

The expanding landscape quickly developed with greater detail. A formation of armored horse riders galloped towards a massive stone building under construction. I wonder what year in history this is. That almost looks like a castle being built. If that's true, at least I won't have to worry about smacking into another low-flying plane.

He calculated his final moments. Seems like I'll be slamming into a barn today. Hopefully, no one's working or napping in there. Christian closed his watering eyes, finding temporary comfort thinking about being held in his mother's arms. Five... four... three... two... He thought of a childhood song as he plunged into the wooden structure.

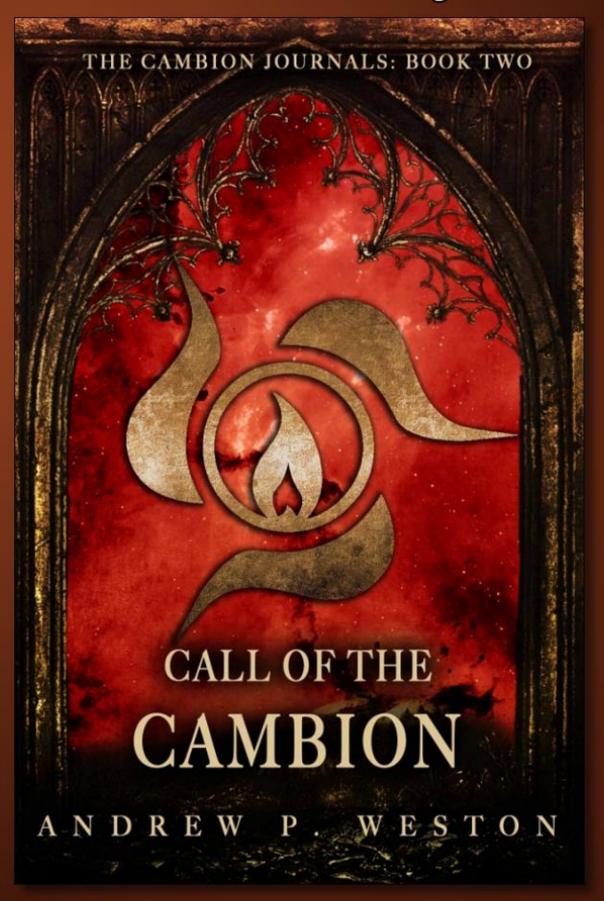
Christian popped into existence at 25,000 feet above the ground. His limbs flailed for stability. Teardrops spilled behind his descent. He choked in oxygen wisps from the thinned air. *Don't roll over, keep steady*. The wind burned against his exposed skin as his lungs once more ached for relief. He plummeted through the open sky as a solar paneled jet banked from out of the clouds in front of his path. A woman screamed behind a clear window. Passengers huddled to witness his descent. *What the hell do I do?* He watched several enlarging passengers lift up black rectangles in front of their faces as others hysterically cried out. Christian slammed shut his eyelids. *Five... four... three... two...* 

#### **About the Author:**

JB Corso is a health care professional who has worked with the mentally ill and geriatric populations for the last 20 years. He appreciates time with his children, writing, and pondering existential dread. He's a veteran with an overseas deployment as an international peacekeeper. He lives with his significant other and enjoys afternoon drives while listening to background Grateful Dead songs.

Twitter: @realJBCorso

It's all about revenge.



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

# Remember Me | Robin Gomez

The last time I saw Dani, he had a beer in his hand, and a shiny plastic crown covered in fake stones shining in the afternoon sun.

He had been drinking, and he spent the night talking about this one photograph he took for his latest exhibition. Out of all of us, he was the bright one. The one who got to live up to his dreams, who ran towards danger and never backed down from a bet. We loved him, and envied him, but we could never forgive what his success made us feel.

He was proof that someone could make it. Someone could chase a dream, catch it like a firelight, and live to tell the tale. And for that, the crown. It was a mockery, a king among peasants, except the peasants laughed at his back when he wasn't looking. We were pathetic like that.

We had become so miserable that it didn't matter that he used to be our friend. Because for every exhibition, every award, he reminded us how mediocre we all were.

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"But what got you into photography in the first place?"

"It was this thing you see. I don't know." He had the kind of voice that made everyone in the room look at him. He had a red plastic cup, and a huge, wild smile on his face. "One time as a child I was running in my grandpa's backyard and I saw a deer with these huge antlers. Its skin was two colors."

"A deer?"

"Yeah. It was beautiful." He actually sighed, like he was in love, but everybody knew better than to ask what could be so beautiful about just some deer. Dani looked at the world in different lenses, not like us, ordinary people. "But it wasn't just that. It was looking me straight in the eyes and I was so frightened."

"Why? It was just a deer."

"Maybe. Maybe not." At this, he laughed, like he was telling some private joke. I didn't realize it back then, but I think he only laughed to cover up his own trembling voice. "I don't know. Every time I try to remember something changes. So I got into photography, because once you take a photo nobody can deny what you saw."

"But what do you mean maybe not?"

He smiled then. I remember that smile so well, because even now, I cannot understand how a smile could be so empty. There was no warmth or joy, not even sadness. There was nothing, as if Dani himself was not even there.

Who knows. Maybe he wasn't.

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The next day, he didn't contact anyone.

This was not weird, honestly. We used to be close in college, but nowadays each of us had a very different life. Dani had been the only one to get his dream. The rest? We all had odd jobs that would disappoint our younger selves. Seeing each other was a constant reminder that we were all miserable, but seeing Dani was even worse.

So nowadays, we rarely saw each other. It was a wound that nobody wanted to acknowledge, so we sent empty messages, made excuses to delay our meetings. Nobody thought much of it, at least that's what we pretended. So no one thought anything of it until a week passed.

And his sister called.

"But he was drinking with all of you, how could you not know if he got home?" she asked, hysterical as ever. I never liked her when we were younger. She used to wear too much perfume and looked at us like she could see what a failure we would become.

"Look." I said, trying to put emphasis on how tired I was. Work had been going bad, it had been a long week, but then again, every week was long for me. "I will ask around. That's all I can do for you"

There was silence on the other end. Where Dani was calm and charming, Veronica was temperamental and whiny. This whole conversation was unnatural, but I couldn't bring myself to care.

"He was weird, you know." she said, her voice barely a murmur. I lifted an eyebrow, even if she couldn't see me. This did not sound like the Dani I saw that night. "He went back to grandpa's place and he came back all...."

"Forlorn?" I offered, but she snorted, and I immediately regretted it.

"What a big word." She mocked me. "But yeah, you could say that. He didn't show me what kind of pictures he took."

I realized at that moment how serious this was. Dani loved her, and she was always the first one in line for every exhibition, so if she hadn't seen the picture, there was something wrong with it. But then again, why would he tell me about the deer? Me, the failed writer. Me, the mediocre friend. Dani didn't even say it was a secret, but the knowledge felt heavy in my tongue. I decided it was something worse than a secret.

"I will contact you if I know something."

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Dani was always loud. So the whole night, every single one of us heard about the picture. Of that much, I was sure. He was not one to boast, he didn't think it was nothing more than sharing something he loved with his old friends. He was completely unaware of how much his joy hurt. But we always ended up coming to these gatherings, charmed by his attention, unable to hate him even if it hurt.

We had been in the theater troupe of our college. That's where we all meet. We had different majors, different dreams, but we all wanted to make it big. I dreamed of writing a play larger than life, with Dani taking care of the shots, and the rest of our group as the lead actors. It never happened, in the end, not even in college. There was always someone better, someone more original.

But not with Dani, no. He was the best at capturing shots of each play, and he wasn't even an official member. He helped out in many clubs back then, but he always came back to us. We thought it would always be like that, we could be special to him. And we were right, because 7 years later, he still called us when he took his perfect picture.

He said he had captured something impossible. Laughed it off when someone asked if it was a girl, and joked around the subject. "I'm in love," he claimed, over and over again, but never showed us the picture in itself. Or told us what he was in love with.

I knew he meant the impossibility in itself. That's what he had always wanted to capture, after all. His pictures were always stolen moments, like he was looking for something in other people's lives. Other times, when he turned to darker subjects, it was like he was trying to make sense of life itself. I don't know how many of us knew that, and I didn't care. I was a peasant, sure, but I liked to entertain the idea of being the closest to the king.

Maybe he was in love.

Maybe I should have listened more closely.

It didn't matter. We were all desperate for his attention and kept calling him for games, to catch up in gossip, making pointless conversation all night. Giving him a new drink when his hand was empty, laughing at his love.

And I was just a peasant, nothing more. So nobody could blame me for laughing with the rest of them, for not paying attention, for all the things that could have saved him.

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"The horror theme doesn't suit you," I said, after his last exhibition. It had been all over the place, nothing like the sunset and candid photos of people he loved to capture. This was more dark, almost macabre. The public had loved it, of course. And I was so, so bitter.

"But that girl in white picture was very well liked," he said, humming a bit. It felt like he was making fun of me, but he was not even looking in my direction. I still got mad, because of course he couldn't fail even once.

"It's all very amateur," I said instead, venom in my words. Dani didn't care. He laughed a bit sheepishly, and I felt a bit better about myself for making him embarrassed of his work.

"I won't do it again, Cecil. It has no meaning if it's all fake," he said, my name sounding like an apology in his boyish voice. I hated how quick I was to forgive him, but then again, I was aware that this was all my bitterness, and he had done nothing wrong. He was looking at one of his pictures, his eyes miles away. "Honestly, I don't quite understand myself."

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I broke into his apartment three days later. This would have been hard, if it wasn't because I knew where he kept his spare key. I had six missed calls from his sister, and I was getting less and less sleep every day. When I dozed off in the afternoons, or on the commute from work, I could hear the distant laughter of that night, and I woke up startled, like something was watching.

Still, the apartment was empty. I didn't know what I had expected, but it still disappointed me. Dani hadn't returned home in the past week, and nobody knew where he was. His phone was disconnected, his car missing as well. The apartment was full of dust, and there were a bunch of photos on the floor. They were everywhere. Some of his, some printed and some from magazines. There were open albums as well, along with a few newspapers. They were all taped on the floor, but nothing in it made any sense to me.

It looked the same as his flat back in college, and suddenly the sorrow of his absence hit me at once. I didn't miss him, and I wasn't worried. He had always been like that, coming and going from one place to another. In and out of my life. He was my friend, sure, but we barely saw each other. But I had adored him once, and now he had disappeared.

The idea of not knowing, not having his existence near to remind me who I should be, that was unbearable. He made me feel like I was back at college, like everything in my current life was a lie, even if it was just for a couple of hours. It made me remember that I was once someone with a dream, who had fought and talked back for a place in a shabby theater room. I couldn't stand my current self, but Dani looked at me like I was still the same. And that had saved me, every single time he came back.

Sure, he was a king to us. We envied him. But we used to adore him. We still did, most of the time. We fought for his attention, for his stories. We wanted his secrets, his smiles. He reminded us that everything was possible, if one tried hard enough. It hurt, but even with that pain, none of us could let him go. After all, he kept choosing us.

It had been my choice to be bitter. To grow into someone who hated his life, but didn't lift a finger to change it.

But now, seeing all these pictures I felt so much for the boy I had admired so much in my youth. At first, the feeling seemed like rage, then sadness. I was trying to make sense of the pictures he had taped to the floor, looking for clues, my eyes foggy with tears.

And then it hit me. Sorrow.

I didn't find his camera, and among flower fields, butterflies, roadkill, and blurry forests, it was impossible to find which one had been his love. It could be anything. I sat down, looking at the pictures, feeling like I had lost him.

The sorrow sat heavy in my chest, like it was making its home right in my heart. I wondered if I deserved it. Maybe I did.

\*\*\*

It had been two weeks and the sorrow took residence in my heart with an unexpected force. It was my only company these days, since I never called back to my so-called friends. I did call in sick to work, because I still couldn't sleep. I didn't even remember what was the last thing I said to him. There was no news. Not even from the police. Nothing. It was like he vanished, they said.

So I asked his sister about it. His grandpa's house had been made into a study of sorts, she explained when we were on the road. Dani barely used it, since it was outside the city, too far from his work. When we arrived, the first thing I noticed was that it had even more pictures. Dead birds, roadkill, fire, people. Blood. It was a ton of disturbing stuff. And then there were a ton of animals. Squirrels, fish, dogs, cats, reptiles. No deer, though.

"Did he ever tell you about the deer he saw?" I asked, sharing a smoke with her. Veronica looked a lot like him, but she was way less charming. She looked tired, and I was sure I looked worse.

"Deer? Oh, when we were children?" she asked, lifting an eyebrow, she blew smoke from her nose and her mouth. "Yeah"

"I mean, he loved that story. Sure it was a dream, though." she said, taking a drag of her cigarette and shaking her head. Her smile had always had this bitter edge, and now it almost aged her. The smoke came along the word *story* like a warning. "A deer telling him to come to him? What kind of stupid dream is that?"

\*\*\*

I had waited until she had been asleep when I stepped outside. A story she had called it, but I wanted the truth. He had once said that he couldn't understand himself. He had said that he was in love. I couldn't sleep anyway, the sorrow heavy on my chest, and I wanted to meet his love. I wanted to face whatever had taken our king.

I waited there, just outside the trees. I couldn't look away, and I didn't want to.

I wonder how it was for Dani.

Had he been scared?

The night was cold and the trees were dark. It felt suffocating, like the dark was closer and closer, like I was not even breathing or blinking. It was something like being drowned. I couldn't move. It took me a couple of minutes to notice that there was not a single star in the sky, not even the moon. The trees were silent, but no forest was supposed to be silent.

And then, it looked at me.

#### **About the Author:**

Robin Gomez is a lover of dark stories and the untold, an unpublished writer but a known storyteller. A latinx who keeps changing countries, looking for an opportunity to share the stories he has found. They are a magical realism enthusiast, and an avid reader who likes to challenge genre fiction.

Instagram: @SiuiBlue
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# The Ballad of Mabel Outhwaite | Robbie Porter

One day Mabel Outhwaite sat down on her sofa and never got up again. Skin entwined with fabric.

Over time she became as one with the settee.

It was a sensation. People travelled from all over to visit. They'd ask questions—you can just imagine what some could be—and Mabel always answered. Sometimes she let people sit on her and fondle her drapery, she liked nothing more than a good plumping.

"I need stuffing," Mabel announced one day.

Mabel was reupholstered, but unfortunately not to European Standard 1021.

A butt behind a cushion did it for her.

# The Tooth Fairy | Robbie Porter

It was Holly's last baby tooth, and it had come out while visiting grandmother.

Granny said, "It's an ugly little tooth; the Tooth Fairy will never take it."

Holly was upset. She didn't think her tooth was that ugly; after all, does anyone's tooth look nice, once it's no longer in their mouth?

So when the Tooth Fairy came—there's magic, you know, and Fairies know the workings of humankind—here was nothing to collect.

The Tooth Fairy couldn't leave empty handed; there are rules about these things.

With pliers she yanked every tooth out of Holly's head.

#### Mrs. Twiddles Sups | Robbie Porter

The woman enjoyed watching those American TV shows where they used fancy science to catch bad guys. She particularly liked ones about how hard it is to prove a death without the body.

Her husband had recently passed. Such a pity because she'd quickly become attached to the house and his pension.

The house was a bit fetid now, but what's a girl to do?

She opened her handbag and fetched out an air freshener and something special for Mrs. Twiddles. The cat's nose twitched in anticipation.

She snapped the bag shut, and Mrs. Twiddles crunched on another juicy eyeball.

#### Daddy's Little Girl | Robbie Porter

Daddy loved practical jokes, like when Molly came up the stairs and Daddy would be waiting behind the bedroom door to jump out and scare her.

Molly loved that, all the more because no matter how often it happened, she still never expected it.

Last night Molly came out of the bathroom and there was Daddy dressed as Pagliacci, a terrible prankster clown oozing with malicious intent.

Molly was so startled she clouted his nose. He yelped and scuttled downstairs.

Next morning Molly told Daddy how scared she'd been.

"You must've imagined it," he said.

"I've been on night shift."

#### **About the Author:**

Robbie Porter is a lecturer and charity worker from Worcester, England. He was born in Hawick, Scotland and studied English and History at the University of Sunderland. His fiction will be published this year in The Sirens Call, Shlock! Webzine and Ghosts and Scholars.

# Ripples in the Lake | Hillary Lyon

"Hey—whoa!—hold on there, mister," the waitress said as she grabbed the man's wrist in mid-air.

The man, Daniel, pulled his arm free and laughed. "Well, that's a friendly welcome!" He swatted a small buzzing insect away from his face. "This is a great place here, this Lakeside Diner, with a view every bit as gorgeous as the resort brochure said it was, but you really ought to do something about all these huge mosquitoes—"

"Mobflies," the waitress corrected. "Around here, we call 'em 'mobbers', because they're not really mosquitoes. And believe you me, you do NOT want to squash 'em." She straightened her dark green plastic nametag, which read 'Brenda' in neon yellow letters, and gave her customer a bright smile. "Now, what would you like to order? It's still happy hour, so appetizers are all half price, and our draft beers are—"

Now it was Daniel's turn to interrupt, as he swatted away yet another buzzing insect. "How about you get one of those blue-light bug zappers? I mean, this place is otherwise perfect—a cozy little retro diner on the edge of a placid lake, surrounded by these huge, ancient trees, a quaint covered deck with a view of lazy fish and turtles nudging the banks—it's all perfect, except for these pesky bugs."

"Sir, what can I get you to drink?" Brenda waved her order pad at Daniel, ignoring his rant. Her bright smile began to lose some of its wattage.

"And why shouldn't I 'squash' these 'mobbers'? They're just annoying little airborne bloodsuckers, and who knows what diseases or bacteria they carry." He squinted at Brenda and with mild annoyance tapped the weathered wooden table top with the edge of the menu.

Brenda leaned in close and said in a quiet voice, "Because, the common wisdom around here is: If you kill one, all the other mobflies will know and—"

"Know?" Daniel couldn't help but scoff. *These country people*, he mused, *so sincere, but so superstitious*. "How would a bunch of bugs know if I smashed one of their brethren?"

Brenda straightened up and crossed her arms defensively. "It's like with those Africanized honey bees. You kill one, it releases some kinda death-scent and all the others come after you. With. A. Vengeance." *Honestly*, she grumbled inwardly, *these city people are so smug and condescending*.

"Okay, then," Daniel smiled to humor her and her backwater naivete. "I'll just have an iced tea, unsweetened." As she walked away to place his meager order, Daniel, feeling a bit contrite about their exchange, added, "Oh, and an order of your famous fried pickles."

\*\*\*

Daniel was gradually summoned out of the depths of a good night's sleep in his resort cabin by a tiny, but relentless, buzzing—now close to his ear, now farther away, now back again. With eyes half open, he brushed the droning noise away with a clumsy hand. He shut his eyes.

A tiny alarm, insistent and unending, threaded through the background of his slumbering mind, flashing like a string of Christmas tree lights. Yet when his dream-self attempted to locate and disconnect this annoyance, when he was so close he could just about grab the string, the lights flitted away, out of reach. He figured he could quietly sneak up on the lights like a feline predator, and with a swift and certain swing, snatch them—

He roused, briefly, as he had slapped his own face. He was left with an itchy, stinging sensation, but it wasn't enough to fully wake him up. Thank God, the buzzing ceased. He rolled over and went back to sleep.

\*\*

The morning sun slid between the curtains of his rustic bedroom and fell right across Daniel's eyes. He squeezed them together tightly and groaned; he really wanted to sleep in. A get-away to a beautiful lake in the boonies, and still he woke up early. Can't fight it, I'm awake now, he thought to himself, might as well get up and make the best of it. He planned to have a hearty breakfast down at the Lakeside Diner, and then maybe take a serene, leisurely stroll around said lake. He drug himself out of bed and into the bathroom.

He decided to shave; just because he was on summer vacation, didn't mean he had to look like a bum. Before Daniel splashed water on his face, he looked at himself in the mirror to assess his stubble. There he saw a red and blue splotch on his left cheek, along with a small streak of dried blood. He leaned in for closer examination; some kind of little insect was smashed against his skin. A mobfly, he suspected, as it was a lot bigger than the run-of-the-mill mosquito. He grabbed the metal accordion arm of the bathroom's make-up mirror for a closer look; the mirror had enough magnification so that he could better inspect this crushed bug on his face.

In the mirror, Daniel could see the insect much more clearly. It had two long thin arms and two longer legs, and two crumpled wings that looked to be made from opalescent cellophane. He took a pair of tweezers from his shaving kit, and went back to the mirror. He gently grasped the tiny mangled body with the tweezers and pulled. The body easily detached itself from his face, but the needle-like proboscis stayed firmly rooted in his skin. Daniel placed the body on a square of toilet paper. It looked like a teensy, narrow man! At the ends of its two skinny arms, there were hands, each with several delicate fingers; at the ends of its two long legs, there were feet with several stubby toes. And a face! Daniel discerned two large, round, purple-metallic eyes—open in a dead stare—a small scratch of a mouth, and a horrible ragged hole where the nose should have been. That's just plain bizarre; I must still be half-asleep, Daniel reasoned. I need a cup or two of industrial strength black coffee to clear my head. He wadded up the paper and flushed it down the toilet.

\*\*\*

The Lakeside Diner had just opened for the day, and as he was the first customer, he was told by the cashier to sit wherever he liked; so Daniel took a seat on the covered deck, close to the water's edge. He made an effort not to rub or pick at the irritated, now throbbing spot on his cheek.

But absent-mindedly, his tongue felt around inside his cheek, probing the bulge caused by the mobber's proboscis, and every time the tip of his tongue touched the tiny bulge, sparks of pain flared behind his eyes. Danial chided himself; he suspected if he left it alone, it would work its way out, like a splinter. He'd just have to keep an eye on it, and be sure to go to a clinic first thing when he got back to the city.

Brenda the waitress skipped up to his table, as shiny as the burgeoning summer day. "Hey, good morning! Nice to see you again! Our breakfast special today is—" she stopped in her tracks and gasped. "Oh, no."

"Aw, it's not that bad!" Daniel laughed awkwardly, and self-consciously motioned to the small wound on his face. "It's nothing—just a mosquito bite I got last night. I think I might be having a bit of an allergic reaction to it."

"You killed a mobber scout." Brenda whispered. Her shoulders sagged. "Oh, I warned you. I warned you not to," she said sadly. Then she straightened up, and said with a forced cheerfulness that she obviously didn't feel, "Hey, order whatever you want for breakfast. Anything. It's on the house."

"Uh, okay." This is weirdly generous, he thought. I should take her up on it before she changes her mind. "In that case," Daniel said as he examined the menu, "I'll have the chicken-fried steak with two eggs over easy, and the peppered cream gravy—not the brown gravy. A side of jalapeno cornbread—oh, and a mug of your fresh coffee and a large glass of freshly squeezed orange—"

But Brenda wasn't listening. She'd backed away from his table, staring wide-eyed at the lake beyond the deck. Without turning to look, Daniel could hear the rising buzz approaching. *Mobflies*. They made a sound like the engine of an old airplane, one with propellers that would slice you to ribbons if you got too close. Brenda dropped her order pad and sprinted into the diner, slamming and locking the door behind her.

The proboscis broken off in Daniel's face burned like a white hot needle, like a beacon lit to summon a vast army hell-bent on revenge. Before he could rise out of his chair, the mobflies swarmed, and for Daniel the promising, brilliant day disappeared into a swirling cloud of disorienting darkness, perforated with pearlescent flashes of excruciating pain. With their tiny rapier-like nozzles, the mobbers stabbed, and drank, and fed until Daniel was no more. Then, and only then, did they carry his empty carcass away, and drop what was left of him in the lake to feed the turtles and fish, causing ripples on the otherwise placid surface of the water—ripples radiating outward like a warning, like a diminishing echo of their fey empire.

#### **About the Author:**

Hillary Lyon lives in southern Arizona, where for 20 years she was senior editor for Subsynchronous Press. Hillary lived in France, Brazil, Canada, and several states in the U.S. In the last year, her stories have appeared in 365tomorrows, Trembling with Fear, Night to Dawn, Black Petals, and Yellow Mama, among others, as well as in numerous speculative fiction and crime anthologies.

#### Boil | J.J. Kīmmorist

"Shit." Another goddamn pimple.

I stare at myself in the mirror and agonize over the swollen pustule sprouting from my neck. My neck! Right where the curve of my throat meets my shoulder. Who the hell gets acne there? I rub some cream on it with prayers for obliteration.

No time to change, I pull my hair over my shoulder to cover it. Grabbing my coffee and my purse, I shuffle out the door into the Miami heat.

My drive to work is short. I usually enjoy it, but today no amount of death metal can drown out the nagging desire to prod at my zit. I crank up the AC and try to distract myself with the scenery. Palm trees and block letter signs professing cheap souvenirs fly past my window.

At every stoplight, I pull my visor down and slide open the tiny mirror. Has it grown since I last looked at it? They always said acne wouldn't be a problem as an adult. What a joke.

A honk from a Subaru in my rear view makes me jump and realize the light is green. I flip off the Subaru and smash the gas.

I get to work and stand behind the reception counter oriented far too close to the entrance to the pool. Every few minutes the automatic doors slide open and a breath of thick, burning air exhales into the lobby.

The phone rings. "Beachside Resort and Hotel, this is Trista, how can I—" I roll my eyes. "No problem, ma'am. Let me transfer you to billing." I hit the hold button before the woman can finish cursing about an overcharge. I am considering adding Bailey's to my coffee tomorrow.

It goes on like this for hours. I plaster a cooperate smile on as I check people in and answer calls. The pool staff breezes in and out of the lobby letting in more hot air. I watch them through the clear doors as they carry trays of fruity drinks. I'd kill for a daquiri.

On my lunch break, I check the status of my zit in the obnoxious floral bathroom. I brush my hair off my shoulder and gasp. It's almost the size of a milk dud—a mountainous, pus-filled milk dud. I poke at it and cringe. The smallest touch sends a sharp protest in response. Shit.

\*\*\*

Back in my crumbling apartment, I bask in the cool air of the portable AC. Between bottles of craft beer, I research overnight acne cures. I ignore all the homeopathic treatments and—after falling down a rabbit hole of pimple popping videos—I decide to go straight for decapitation. Who cares if it scars? I already have quite a few.

I drench a steak knife in rubbing alcohol and pour another beer into a frozen glass. Two large gulps of bubbling IPA, and I slice the fucker sprouting at my neck. It hurts like hell. Blood is all that comes out at first, then pus bursts forth like a squashed cherry tomato.

I drain my glass of beer before I pinch the sides of the cyst and watch white goop trickle out. The pus goes from white to yellow. I add more pressure and the pus transitions to a greenish color. That can't be good. Something else comes out of the lacerated cyst and plinks into the sink. It disappears down the drain before I can see it.

"The fuck...?" I peer down the drain but can't see anything. Whatever it was, it was small and hard.

I look back in the mirror. The pus has stopped flowing and given way to a trickle of blood. The area around the popped cyst looks bruised but otherwise normal. Maybe I imagined that something came out of it. I have had a lot to drink.

A bandage and an ice pack later, I climb into bed. I stare at my Slayer poster on the ceiling and pray to Tom Araya for the pimple's disappearance as I fall asleep.

\*\*\*

My alarm rouses me from my dream-filled escape. I roll over to smack the snooze button and gasp in pain. I open the camera on my phone to check on the crime scene of my neck. I peel back the bandage and—holy fucking shit!

My hand flies to my mouth. This can't be happening. It's HUGE—nearly the size of a goofball. Crusted blood and pus decorate the edge where I cut it with the steak knife.

"Oh, fuck no."

I run to the bathroom, determined to squeeze the life out of the damn thing, but as soon as I touch it, I recoil from the sharp pain. I spend the next few minutes in agony trying my best to squeeze it with tears in my eyes. My efforts only accomplish making the boil appear even more swollen.

It's 7:44 a.m. I'm out of time. I pull on a wrinkled turtleneck sweater I found at the back of my closet. Hasty makeup and a hair tie later, I remember to pour Bailey's in my coffee and I'm out the door.

\*\*\*

"... thank you for booking with us. We hope you have a wonderful stay."

I'm sweltering in my turtleneck, but I get through my day thanks to the little helper inside my insulated coffee mug. I'm researching dermatologists when Tom pops up on the other side of my counter. He is wearing a tight V-neck shirt that shows off his surfer build.

"What's with the turtleneck? Are you a part-time puppeteer?" he teases.

What a dick. "I was cold," I lie.

"Cold?" laughs Tom. "It's Florida! And it's summer. How can you be cold?"

"I don't see how it's any of your business what I wear."

"Whoa, whoa." He puts his palms up like he's coaxing a jumper down off the ledge. "I was just joking."

Yeah, whatever. I say nothing.

"Anyway," he continues with a straight-toothed smile. "We're all going to Indigo after work. You wanna come?" Is he really inviting me to a club? Part of me—the loser part who still hangs on from high school—thinks he might actually like me. The other part knows better. I look at him with narrowed eyes. He doesn't stop smiling. For some reason, I want to go.

Before I know what I'm doing, I say, "Yeah, sure."

"Awesome. We'll meet in the lobby at five."

"Awesome," I mimic but he misses my sarcasm.

He nods and leaves back to the pool to show off his muscles and mix drinks for snotty rich people. His departure lets in a plume of boiling humidity.

\*\*\*

It's hot—blistering, in fact. The outdoor tiki bar is mostly vacant due to the oppressive summer heat. Most people are inside dancing among the neon lights and temperature-controlled setting, but I've traded comfort for solitude.

I order another vodka-cran and I wonder why I'm here. Tom and his group of friends hit the dance floor and abandoned me at the tiki bar. I want to leave, but I let Tom give me a ride here from work. Just as I'm Googling the 12-block route back to my car, Tom finds me.

"Hey, you're not dancing," he says.

Astute observation. This guy must be a genius. "I don't dance." I knock back my drink in one fatal gulp. Yes, I'm showing off, sue me.

Tom smiles and orders a drink. Over the next hour he ignores the pleas of his friends to join him on the dance floor. We talk and drink and sweat it out in the heat. The more I drink, the more I enjoy myself. Was there something that was bothering me? I can't remember. Right now, life feels wonderful. The conversation is floating along in time with my inebriation, and I agree to let Tom drive me back to my car.

I follow him out to his SUV. He cranks up the AC as we get in. Sweet relief! I breathe in cool air as he turns the music on to some playlist of slow jams. I don't even care how cheesy it is.

Next, we're making out and I'm ready to go to his place. His hand snakes up my sweater as I unbutton his shorts. His touch travels over my bra, up and up—

"OUCH!" He snatches his hand back.

"What?"

He hits the dome light and holds up his finger. It's bleeding from the very tip. "What the hell?"

Rage. Embarrassment. Realization. My hand flies to the left side of my neck where the alcohol has numbed the pain of my defect. "I have to go." I panic and get out of the car. Too fast, I almost eat shit tripping over my own legs.

"Trista, wait!" Tom gets out of the car, but I don't wait to hear what he says.

I run. Tears of shame fly off my face as I race down the street. After two blocks, I slow—panting. I my stomach sloshes and I think I might puke, but I don't. I walk a few more blocks and swim through the burning wet air. My car is only a handful of streets away but the lights from a convenience store catch my eye. I touch the spot on my neck, and I can tell it's even bigger now.

I need to see it.

The store is a cool oasis. I stand with the door to the cold drinks open as I revel in the refrigerator chill. I buy a Gatorade to help with the hangover I know is coming later.

My purchase earns me the key to the disgusting restroom around the back. It's a hot box of steamed urine. The mirror is scratched full of graffiti, but I can still see my reflection. My heart is pounding. I grip the collar of my turtleneck and stretch it down.

"Holy fuck..."

The pimple has hair. Brown wisps of baby hair cling to my neck with sweat. The skin is parted open where I cut with the steak knife. There's no blood, but I see something inside. My breath comes in jagged bursts. I lean over the dirty sink to get closer to the mirror. Teeth! It looks like a tiny row of teeth line the inside the cyst.

Trista. A voice echoes in my head. Was it my own thought? It felt strange and alien.

"Trisssss....ta." A sinister voice whispers near my ear.

The cyst fucking moved. Did it just speak?

"Yes, I can speak." This time I see it. The slit of teeth open and close as it mouths the words, "I can help you."

I stumble back and let the collar of my sweater spring back over my neck. Someone must have drugged my drink. This is not happening. I trip over a trash can and hit the linoleum floor.

\*\*\*

I survived the trembling walk back to my car from the convenience store while twitching and muttering to myself. I'm now lying sprawled on the floor in my room trying to convince myself none of it was real. I'm too afraid to lift my shirt. It didn't happen. Tonight wasn't real.

It was real. I am real. The foreign voice speaks again inside my head.

I clap my hands over my ears. "GET-OUT-GET-OUT!"

Searing pain folds me into the fetal position. It feels like a hot iron is pressing into my collarbone. I'm screaming and crying. My shriek cuts short, and I choke. I can't breathe! Ripping at my sweater, I tear the knit material down the middle. I take a gasp of breath once I'm free.

"You don't have to hate me," whispers a voice. "Look at me," it hisses into my left ear.

I'm weeping and blubbering like a baby. Snot drips from my nose. "No." The pain takes my breath again. It burrows deep into my nerves and sends pulses of stabbing torture.

"LOOK AT ME!"

I crawl over to the mirror on my closet door. Shaking and crying, I drag my vision up. Where my neck meets my shoulder, sits a hideous face. Fair hairs encircle the egg sized head ensconced within by skin. Its mouth is more pronounced now and it now has fucking *eyes*. Goop drips from the newly formed eyelids. It squints back at me like a face made of lumpy clay.

I curl forward and throw up on the carpet. "What do you want from me?"

"I'm here to help you."

"What are you?" I ask in between sobs. It holds my gaze. I can't look away.

"I was born from the seed of your own subconscious." Its tiny teeth flash when it speaks.

No. I scramble to my feet and run to the kitchen. I grab the biggest kitchen knife I have and race into the bathroom. I climb up on the counter and I hold the knife up to the thing's face.

The deformed eyes look back at me through the mirror. "You won't, not after last time. I'll just come back."

My hand trembles on the knife. "Fuck you!"

I cut.

Pain pierces through me—an agony like no other. Not just from the blade, but from whatever control the thing has over my nerve center. Blood spurts everywhere. It splatters the mirror and makes it hard to see but I keep sawing.

This fucking HURTS!

It lets out a high-pitched screech. "STOP!" It screams in my ear and echoes inside my head. "STOP-STOP!"

I'm halfway through and I think I can't go on. The pain is too much. I let the dark recess of my fucked-up mind—the part that made me cut myself in high school—drive my hand to keep going. Powered by self-loathing, I hack until its screams finally drown in a gurgle of blood.

Through the bloody mirror, I see it hanging by a scrap of skin. I rip it free and drop it into the sink. I scream as I stab my knife into the malformed head. My knife plunges down again and again until the tip of the blade breaks off.

I drop the broken knife and slump off the counter. There's blood—so much blood. Darkness reaches its fingers into my vision. I surrender to it. Everything goes dark.

\*\*\*

They patch me up in the hospital after the cops kicked in my door and put me in an ambulance. My nosy downstairs neighbors called 911. I'm told they said, "I think someone is being murdered up there."

Lucky for me, the paramedics got there when they did. I lost a lot of blood. Sixteen stitches and a psych evaluation later (what can I say, accidents happen!) nurse Rachet grudgingly admits I'm free to go.

9:56 a.m. I lie in bed, but I haven't slept.

The Miami sun casts scorching rays over my bed. I reach for the hand mirror on my nightstand. I slowly peel back the gauze covering my neck. Two stitches are ripped open. A small trickle of blood escapes. Inside the raw wound, I can just barely make out something small and white.

Perhaps it's a tooth.

#### **About the Author:**

J.J. Kīmmorist is a fantasy/science-fiction/horror author from Nashville, Tennessee. As a metalhead and avid horror movie connoisseur, she enjoys anything to do with the macabre. She lives with her husband, sister, nephew, and two spindly greyhounds in a creepy house on a hill.

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# Saved to Death | Josh Darling

My hands stopped shaking. Jane radiated excitement. I had to check my nervous energy. We walked side by side down the suburban street. I had the typical symptoms of a teenage boy in crush mode, quivering hands, heart racing, short breath. Walking to her house calmed my nerves. It was the last day of school. We'd cut class to be together. My house was closer, but we couldn't go there. My dad worked 3rd shift in a piping factory. He'd be sleeping on the couch in the living room. Her mom worked the day shift at the same factory. Her dad was out of the picture.

She let herself into the house with her keys. Inside, the air conditioner hummed a cooling mantra. I waited in her bedroom while she made mushroom tea in the kitchen. Jane got the shrooms from her sister. Her sister got them at a Phish show.

After drinking the awful stuff, she said, "Let's go for a hike. I don't want my mom coming back and surprising us." She packed a blanket into her backpack.

The trail started near her backyard.

Her mom was into nature and rented the house because it bordered the woods.

Outside, the early June heat embraced us.

I followed her to the trail. She prowled under the leaves of maples and oaks. Holes in the canopy allowed the sun's thin rays to caress her.

Sweat glued my shirt to my skin.

At a creek, a fallen tree bridged the land over the water that slid over smooth and aloof rocks. Halfway over the log, a fish jumped out of the water. Splashing into leaves, it swam through the mud. Darting through trees, it disappeared.

"Did you see the fish swim into the forest?" I said.

"I hope it was beautiful," she smirked.

She took me off the path, a route over dead leaves and fallen branches.

Reaching a clearing, she said, "This place is a secret."

Dynamic grass swirled with the wind. Its blades tickled my calves above my socks.

Jane pulled her hair into a ponytail. My desire to touch her exposed neck was a colossus hurricane wanting to make landfall.

I wanted to kiss it.

To kiss her.

To love her.

Taking the blanket from her backpack, she laid it on the grass. We sat together. She leaned back.

The moment was awkward and magnetic.

I kissed her on the lips. I watched her eyes, not knowing if I'd done something wrong.

She kissed me back.

We made out—two teenagers fumbling in first attraction.

Sliding my palm along the inside of her thigh, something small scratched inside my hand.

"You've got a tick on you," I said, pulling my hand back.

"Where? There's nothing on me."

The insect sent shocks of terror rippling through me.

I was on my feet before the bug could get to me.

I sprinted.

I stopped where the forest restarted.

The tall grass eclipsed Jane reclining on the blanket.

I needed to pull the bug off her. It was sucking the life from her. Ticks carry Lyme Disease. She could be infected. It could kill her.

She'd said, There's nothing on me.

I knew better.

I couldn't leave this decision to her.

I wouldn't let that bloodsucker murder her. It had to be a supernatural creature. A demon insect sapping her life force.

A jagged piece of slate protruded from the dark earth by my foot. Using the rock, I'd scrape the tick off her. Rock in hand, I brushed it clean. With a caveman's knife, I'd defend her.

I edged back.

Jane reclined on the blanket facing me. Shiny black organisms swirled over her body, blocking her skin. Millions of ticks crawled on her. The few that bit her, bloated to the size of grapes.

"Are you okay?" she said, ticks filled her mouth. They engorged themselves on her tongue and dotted her teeth.

"Stay still."

Approaching, I paced myself, not wanting to alarm the swarm.

"You're acting really weird, are you freaking out?" she said.

I pinned her under me. With the slate knife I raked at the millions of bloating monsters feasting on her. Some of them peeled up onto the makeshift blade.

How else could I save her?

She made a horrible noise.

She scratched at me.

She swung on me.

"I'm trying to help you," I said.

Scraping her skin, ticks gathered in her open wound.

She screamed.

Her "Help," echoed off the surrounding trees.

"I'm doing my best, stay still."

Grating the skin off her forehead with the stone edge, the ticks collected on her exposed skull.

I smashed the jagged slate into her neck.

That killed some of the little shits.

Something in her neck broke. Fluid spouted from her onto the blanket. The ticks gathered around the widening circle. The dark line drank by slurping at the blanket. Ticks are silent, but these slurped the mess.

No matter how much they imbibed, none of it diminished.

Holding an insect-covered hand to her neck, Jane thrashed.

She kicked against me.

Her feelings didn't matter to me. Her perceived safety is what mattered.

Pushing the sharp rock over her chest, the ticks hopped onto me.

I sprang backward. It was an act of cowardice. On my feet, I ground the edge of stone along my forearms. The gashes in my arms blossomed with sensation. The insects dug deeper into my skin.

Unable to clean my arms of parasites, I fled.

Panicked and running, the trees blurred.

I didn't know where I was until I tripped into the creek. I landed on my hands and knees. The cold water dissolved the ticks on my arms.

The hand of God stretched across the sky. It descended back to the field reminding me what I needed to do.

The divine vision lifted me out of the mud.

I rushed back for Jane.

Looming over her, a drop of water fell from my hair onto the black mess pulsing on her face.

The insects scurried off her.

I knew I had to do more to protect her. I carried her back to the creek like Frankenstein's monster holding his bride.

After midnight, the police found me sitting in the water cradling Jane.

The mushrooms had worn off. I knew the ticks weren't real. Everything I'd done, didn't matter.

She was still dead and mangled.

#### About the Author:

Josh Darling is a bestselling author and ghostwriter. His first collection, *9 Horror Stories: The Sequel,* is available on Amazon and Godless.com. Born on Long Island, he has traveled the US searching for experiences to write about. Currently, he lives in Bennington, Vermont.

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# For All Eternity | Carole Tyrrell

As Edward began to drone on about his vision for the company, George's mind began to wander as it often did during their online discussions about work.

Thank goodness, he's in his study this time. Last week, he was in his shed and then the week before that he was in the wine cellar. George idly looked over the well-stocked bookshelf behind Edward. He must have bought them by the yard, he thought as his eyes began to glaze over. Then Edward had switched on his desk lamp and the book was illuminated, the gilt lettering on the spine of the grimoire of Andrew Le Fevre, one of Scotland's most notorious witches, glittering enticingly in the light. It was on a shelf between a dog-eared copy of Fifty Shades of Grey, The Da Vinci Code and The Treasures of Tutenkhamun. George sat up.

It can't be! The book I've been searching for all these years! George thought as Edward came into view on the screen. George peered closer. Yes, the book he had always desired was sitting on the shelf behind his oldest friend, and boss's, shoulder.

He doesn't know what he's got, maybe I could make him an offer, thought George trying to conceal his excitement. I'd be made for life and could give Claire the lifestyle she deserves. She works too hard. We never see each other these days.

"So, there it is, we have to move forward, move with the times. Do you agree?" Edward sat back in his chair and steepled his fingers.

"Yes, it all sounds achievable. I'll just share my screen, if I may, and I'll take you through the forecast for the next financial year." But George couldn't concentrate with the prize he had always wanted in front of him at last.

"No, it's OK if you just send the figures. I spend enough time squinting at numbers on screens. I'll just read them and ask questions afterwards," Edward said. George attached them in an email and pressed send.

"Thank you, George," Edward said. "Was there anything else?"

"You have a fine display of books," said George, keeping his gaze fixed on the shelf.

"Yes, this is the library as my late wife always called it. Our little joke. Just empty bookshelves until now"

"Where did they come from?" asked George as he thought "I don't remember seeing them the last time you were in your study." It couldn't be surely? The book I've always wanted, the last one for my collection.

"I inherited them from a cousin who wanted them to stay in the family for some reason. Old dusty books, they should be up in the loft really but no, he was most specific. They had to be on display."

"Was it a generous bequest?" George wished he could zoom in closer on the book.

"Yes, it was enough to set me up for life as long as I took the books."

"Have you ever looked at them?" he asked.

Edward sipped from his glass of wine. "Just a load of books in packing cases. No interest to me at all."

Lucky beggar. George had always envied Edward. 'Never had to work a day in his life. Everything handed to him on a plate,' he had often said bitterly to Claire.

"The book over your shoulder looks interesting. You know I've got quite a collection of old books and love their covers. Such artistry." George's heart was thumping as he wiped his sweaty hands on his trousers. "The one just behind your shoulder... no, no, yes *that* one." Edward turned and ran his fingers along the shelf until he seized on the one that George wanted. "If you could just hold it close to the camera."

Edward obediently did so, and George gasped again as the book came into view with two pages open. It IS the book of Andrew Le Fevre. I'd give my immortal soul to see what lies between its covers! The page contained detailed drawings of how to cook a man and then raise him from the dead in scratched writing. It should be mine! George had heard of only two copies in existence. One had belonged to a man in Baltimore who had mysteriously disappeared along with the book and the other was in the possession of a parson in the wilds of Cumbria who had refused to sell.

"Oh, what a shame! Looks like an old recipe book to me Edward. Not what I thought it was at all. Seems to be written in Old English, very old, hard to make it out." George almost hugged himself in glee.

"Yes, I've tried several times but to no avail, my eyesight isn't what it used to be. I thought that it might be some sort of foreign language. Have a look at this page." Edward took the book away from the screen and rifled through the pages. Then he held the book up to the screen again at a different page, "This might be easier for you. Now why don't you try reading it out?"

"It's probably an old journal or something. Very dull."

"A 16<sup>th</sup> century shopping list." Edward laughed. But, as George watched, the drawings on the page began to move, the words grew larger and to sway and he had felt compelled to read out the words. "Go on George, read them out – is it an old recipe or not?" Edward said eagerly, his hand shaking as he held the book up to the screen.

"No, I don't want to," said George, his voice faint and weak. There was someone he couldn't see urging him on, their voice in his head. Despite himself, he began to read.

"In my true form forever and ever world without end," George paused and then felt as if someone was using him to speak their words. "I curse – No, I won't read any more!" he shouted as he tried to look away.

The ancient book was taken away and replaced by Edward's beaming face. "Then I'll read it for you George." "No, don't Edward," George said. "It's just nonsense."

"We'll see, shall we?" replied Edward as he held the book in his hands. "I don't know why but this part seems quite easy to read. 'I curse you for the sin of envy and may you always show your true appearance to the world forever and ever," he finished and looked down at George. Then he laughed. And laughed.

For a moment, the world paused and then George was falling, falling, falling until he stopped.

Edward now looked very high up as George looked up at him. He was suddenly very small. "Edward what's happened?" he tried to say but all that came out was a croak. "Where am I? What's happened to me?" He tried to move his arms, but they didn't seem to be there anymore. Everything towered over him as he sat on the chair with his clothes underneath him. "My clothes! Why aren't I wearing them?" A croak suddenly came from his throat, and he looked down at himself. "I'm green all over!" As he tried to stand up his long legs suddenly tensed, and he leapt up onto the desk in front of the screen where Edward raised his glass in a toast as he smiled.

"Edward.! Help me!" he croaked. But Edward was sipping from his glass and the book was back on the shelf.

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George was the last piece of the jigsaw that I needed, Edward thought to himself. Great Uncle Magnus had been a mild-mannered parson who had led a blameless life in a small village in Cumbria. The book had been a jumble sale contribution from a parishioner. Inside it had said, in Latin. "Find a believer and they will unlock the secret of the universe itself and you will be its Master."

The rest of the bequest had been monumentally dull. Theology books mostly, and they would definitely be going up into the loft tomorrow. But Claire had spotted it amongst the dross and knew that George had been looking for it all his life. Edward looked around as he smelled Claire's perfume. She entered the room and stood behind him, before bending over to kiss the top of his head.

"I told you it would work. The minute I saw the book I knew. George was always going on about it, and now you have all the power that he wanted." She wrapped her arms around Edward. "All you needed was someone, an unwitting fool, to say the words and unlock the key."

George, on the screen, looked hopelessly on as he croaked feebly.

"Did you want a pet, darling?" Edward asked as he looked fondly at her.

"Not one of those. He was irritating enough as a husband and will probably be even worse as a frog."

She leaned over and touched the screen. "Let's mute him for all eternity." The croaking stopped as Edward poured her a glass of wine and they chinked glasses.

#### **About the Author:**

Carole Tyrrell lives in Rochester, Kent, UK which is reputed to be one of the most haunted places in Britain. So far, she has been unable to prove this but lives in hope. A keen photographer, she likes exploring medieval churchyards and writing supernatural stories. She has been published in The Silent Companion, Ghosts & Scholars, The Sirens Call and several anthologies.

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# Stars in the Sand | Kerry E.B. Black

The Caribbean lapped the sandy shore, spitting shells and wriggling creatures in its wake while it reached to consume her toes. Bea gaped at the moonbeams trapped within the ocean's waves, though not trapped at all. Unlike her Rodrick, the moonbeams danced along the salted spray, never truly held captive. The oceanic jailor couldn't hold the lusty moon and was, in fact, another captive of the lunar caprice. After all, the moon controlled the tides.

Bea had met Rodrick years ago at a concert along this very beach. His metal band ripped merciless chords and screamed feedback until her ears rang with remembrance. He stared from the spotlight into a crowd of hundreds and noticed only her. His bass slung low, he inched toward the edge of the stage and reached for her hand. Bemused, she stretched her fingers and stood on tiptoes, until her nails brushed the calloused tips of his. When he sidled up to the microphone, flipping his thick dreads over his shoulder, he sang eternal love to her until she felt her heart leave its safety and lodge in his leather-clad chest.

He traveled with the band, so they didn't have much actual time together. Theirs were stolen moments. Her life on a small island kept dating options at a minimum, even if her loyalty didn't already rest at his feet. The couple spoke on the telephone and texted every day, though, and Bea never doubted Rodrick's affections. "You're like a nova, lighting my way home. With you on the beach, I'll never get lost."

She hugged her phone to her chest, a girlish squeal and a twirl of pale skirts as she spun with bliss. "I'm his home!"

Within a year, they married. They honeymooned in the pure white sands of her island in remembrance of their meeting under the full moon when the sea sang along with the band. No need to leave when she already lived in paradise, he'd reasoned, dismissing her shy hints at 'anywhere but here, please. I've never seen the world beyond these shores'.

He ran a finger along the hollow of her cheek and smiled. "Hush. This is perfect. Don't spoil it." He kissed her, long and deep, until her thoughts muddled. "Besides, now you're mine."

She leaned into his shoulder. "And you're mine."

A cuffing laugh shook her head from its comfort. "I'm yours." Sarcasm glutted the words, but Bea dismissed her hurt with the conviction she must have misread his intentions.

After they hastily consummated their union, he retired to the balcony of their honeymoon suite and stared at the star-strewn sky. She shivered into a hotel robe and brought its match to her husband. He ignored the robe but slipped an arm around her waist.

She winced. "Sorry. I'm a bit sore." In answer to his questioning gaze, she blushed and whispered, "You were a bit rough."

He snorted. "Just making it memorable for you."

She pulled the robe tighter about her, as though she could thereby insulate herself from her growing concerns. Her stomach clenched as their relationship grew in dysfunction and abuse. She began to pray for his absence, but the band broke up, and he had no motivation to pursue a different career.

They rented a little bungalow not far from Grace Beach where he played his guitar for tourists and locals, and they filled his case with castoff cash. His tempers grew as the moon swelled, and he'd often storm out with a slammed screened door. Bea curled on the bed and dreaded his return. When the ocean's breeze whispered through the palm fronds like serpentine warnings, he remained away from her until the horizon swallowed the full moon and spat out a blazing sun. When he returned those mornings, his clothes stunk of brine and bore lipstick-red patches in damning splotches she dared not ask about.

When he harried her to distraction, she suggested she find work herself.

"I don't want you to take a job," he snarled at her. "Your job is taking care of me."

She redoubled her attentions at home, sharing special favors with the hope he'd be pleased and stop being so changeable. One minute, she recognized the romantic who won her, but the next, she kept her head low to avoid attracting the lightning of his anger.

After she'd spent a day preparing a sweet potato curry the way she thought he liked, he slapped the plate from her hand.

He towered over her, aggression marring his otherwise beautiful features. "Are you trying to starve me? I need meat."

She stooped to clean the ruined meal, trembling. With the rejected dinner in hand, she steeled herself, emboldened. "You liked this when we ordered it at the Del Mar on our honeymoon. That's why I made it."

Again, he loomed over her, hulking menace until she cowered. "Well, today I need meat." He pulled his lips back to expose abnormally pointed teeth.

She recoiled, hands covering her horrified expression.

His entire visage had changed. Chiseled jaw elongated. Whiskers thickened. Even his dreadlocks puffed about his face, like raised hackles, forming an ebony mane that framed his anger. Worst of all, his eyes bulged, their pupils enlarged until only slim bands of sunken color encircled them while the whites jutted unnaturally.

She backed into the bungalow wall, aware of the fragility of the structure. If so minded, a tropical storm could whirl the thing further than Dorothy's Oz. Somehow, her marriage seemed equally tenuous. Unshed tears collected in a knot high in her throat. "Why are you doing this? Don't you love me?"

He bent to peer into her eyes, and his mouth stretched into a smirk. "Why else would I marry you, Bea?" She turned her face from him and sobbed until he retreated to the bedroom.

"Why, indeed?" She gasped as she slid down the wall to sit, arms hugging knees. Her stomach quavered, and her unease increased.

Before that night, he hadn't physically hit her, so she failed to define his controlling behavior as a kind of abuse. That night, though, beneath a moon shying behind thick clouds, he'd pulled her by the hair into the sea oats and slapped her until she whimpered and he howled like a beast.

In the morning, she squatted over an absorbent stick to pee and found two pink lines. Tears blurred the sight as inner agony gripped her. She ran her palms over her taut stomach and thought, *How can I raise an independent-minded child with Roderick abusing me?* She wrapped the used pregnancy test in a sanitary napkin and toilet paper and pushed it to the bottom of the trash bin.

When he left to sing for the day, Bea rushed to gather her belongings and the little money she'd put aside. Her heart pounded as she stashed the bag. She'd leave that evening when Roderick fell asleep.

Her conundrum arose when she stopped by the bed as a farewell. The evening's brilliant starlight poured through their bedroom window and illuminated his peaceful features. Asleep in the room they had shared for less than a year, his hands folded like a child's in prayer, Roderick's beauty overwhelmed her.

Her resolve wavered. She recalled the thrill of their late-night telephone conversations that served as their dates. She'd believed he treasured her then, and she adored him. What changed?

Bea recalled the day of their hasty nuptials. After they exchanged vows, they dove to explore the corals, as was customary on the island. Swim thrice around the reef. Once for fertility, a second time for luck, and the final lap ensured lasting happiness.

He hadn't completed the last lap. He clutched his shoulder to himself and winced. "Continue without me. Get us good luck." She swam, worried about her husband, hoping she'd gathered lasting happiness.

On the beach, they had wrapped each other in fluffy towels and drank in their good fortune and the golden sunshine. As she patted him down with the towel, though, he winced she noticed a mark on the underside of his left arm, a raised, reddened circle about the size of her palm. He had slapped her hand away when she touched it.

"What's that?"

He hid the spot from her view. "It's from when I was a kid. Saltwater irritates it."

"You should have told me. Is that why you don't like to swim?"

He had flashed a mischievous grin. "Who said I don't like to swim?"

Bea pinched her lips at the remembrance and wondered about the mysterious mark he never adequately explained. She creeped to his side of the bed, pausing when his breathing slowed, careful of her own breathing and tip toed pace. With agonizing slowness, she pulled the sheet away from his arm until she could see the concentric circles so like the bite left by a lamprey's mouth.

A pale ooze slicked its surface, wicked by his chest hair and the sheet. With trembling fingertips, she brushed the supposed wound. It left her fingers sticky.

Roderick rolled away with a grunt. His mouth fell open in a grunted snore.

Bea froze and held her breath, her eyes wide with apprehension. As his breathing resumed at a relaxed pace, she, too, relaxed. Until she noticed the inside of his mouth.

During their marriage, Roderick disliked deep kisses, and from her vantage, Bea understood why.

Rows of needle-sharp, back-curving teeth ringed the upper and lower palate of Roderick's mouth, disguised on the bottom by his tongue. Their alien aspect rejuvenated Bea's resolve, and she rushed from their home, her retreat quick and quiet.

Lonely footprints in the sand marked her progress, footprints watered with her tears and the exuberant salt spray singing an accompaniment for her flight. She sniffed sadness with each step as she left her marital home, yet images of his psychological betrayals consorted with dawning nightmares within her psyche. Hits followed by tearful apologies, tender kisses, and compliments. Nothing pleased him.

Her tears obscured the starlight, casting halos around silvery centers. Circles, like his bizarre rings of teeth.

She shuttered, then ran. Each footfall kicked up a spray of sand and shell. They pounded her imprint upon the shore, and she shed abuses and humiliations with each reverberation. A foggy memory of childhood tales, of lamprey lycanthropy, wormed into her consciousness.

The mysterious waters hissed satisfaction. Insects called with the news, "Bea fled Roderick." It crescendoed, a great swell of sung celebration that ended in a resounding silence, where even the frogs ceased.

Bea stumbled in their silence and saw him framed by sea grasses and palm trees.

Roderick sniffed the air like a wild thing, and moonlight glinted off the teeth in his unhinged mouth. Several full circles of sharp, deadly pearls hungered for her blood.

She fled, her hair a midnight stream behind her slight figure. Her feet pounded the sand and ground the surf's rejects with her passage. She had no weapon and could not fight off his advances if he caught her, only her bag and whatever the sands provided.

With long lopes, he closed the distance, eager for the hunt. He'd devour her wishes for freedom, she knew, crunch her independence with greedy gulps. His tongue hung from his jaws, panting with pleasure.

She threw the bag at him. He dodged with ease.

With her progress across the beach, though, she revealed a galaxy of stars hidden in the sand, glints of solidified femininity left from millennia of women casting their cares to the powerful sea. With this sister silver, she could defend herself.

She scooped great handfuls of silvered sand.

He lunged.

She screamed and threw the sand into his face. As she hoped, he paused to brush it from his eyes with yelled curses. She ran. Stars spit in an arc, silver slivers lodged beneath his skin, multitudes leeching his vigor, bleeding his malice in garnet drips.

He burst forward, scrambling toward her.

She sidestepped and pulled a piece of driftwood to her aid. It burst into wooden shards over his head.

He roared, an inhuman howl.

Her breaths came in painful gulps as she rushed from him to the enigmatic lure of the sea. She crashed through the turbulent surf, leapt waves until the water deepened enough to welcome her. She dove.

He dropped to a knee on shore, pulled at his hair, and again howled. "You're my wife, Bea! You can't leave me!" Phosphorescent plankton illuminated her progress, mini galaxies heralding her escape.

He prowled the shore, nostrils flared, lips pulled back from his dangerous teeth, but he lost her to the melodious waves. As the sun rose, he acknowledged her escape, at least for the moment. As he gasped salt-strewn air, he vowed to find her. To find her and punish her.

Bea allowed the waters to push her, exhausted, to a further beach. Her muscles betrayed her, and she stumbled like a newborn colt as she dragged herself through the sunrise-soaked sand. Tears mingled with the drying sea water on her face.

She'd shelter at her parents' until she could get her papers in order. She'd borrow money and take a flight to a new life, one with the hope of joy, but she knew better than to relax. She needed to protect her growing baby, needed to be wise, because each moon pregnant with ire could guide him to her. For protection until she reached a far flung shore, she must bury herself within the silvered sand and pray for the protection of the dawn.

#### **About the Author:**

Kerry E.B. Black writes from a little cottage in a swamp in the land where Romero's Dead Dawned. This Teller of Tales Fanciful and True has been described as "Chicken Noodle Soup for the Gothic Soul," which she takes as high praise, indeed. To date, she's published two YA novels, three collections of short scares, and has proudly placed stories in wonderful publications like this one. However, Kerry always has something new in the works.

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# Katy's Book of Magical Recipes | Roxanne Dent

The timer pinged. Katy opened the oven, pulled out the roasting pan, and began to baste the ham with a mixture of honey, orange juice, bourbon, molasses, and Dijon mustard. Slivers of garlic and cloves had already been inserted into the meat. Leftovers would make an excellent pea soup for later in the week. She glanced at the thick notebook beside her and smiled. Sally, her agent called her with the news that morning. Katy's first cookbook was a run-away, bestseller.

The meat was giving off a heavenly aroma. Katy's joy made her burst into song," "Food, Glorious Food. Hot Sausage and Mustard."

The recipe book shook from side-to-side in time to her singing. Katy laughed. Her mother who read Tarot cards and runes, predicted one day she would be a huge success whatever field she entered, so long as she didn't lose her temper.

"You have the looks and a hauntingly beautiful voice, Katy. You could have a career in Broadway musicals." When her mother became ill, Katy sang to her. Liz swore her daughter's voice helped to ease the pain.

Katy performed in a few amateur productions, but food and writing were her passions. Her dream was to open her own restaurant with her best friend Graciela, based on family recipes and a few new ones she and Graciela created together. Her ultimate plan included becoming a successful author of a series of cookbooks, maybe even have her own weekly television show. It looked as if her dreams were about to become reality but was anxious about the bank's approval of a loan.

She slid the pan back into the oven. In memory of her mother who loved to listen to the oldies, Katy turned on the kitchen radio to a classic rock channel and sang along with Nat King Cole, to *Unforgettable*, as she prepared the mashed cauliflower gratin and stuffed haddock. The appetizers of goat cheese, honey, walnuts, and Caribbean shrimp, and brie with caramelized shallots, were ready under plastic on a shelf in the new, commercial refrigerator.

Homemade applesauce had been prepared the day before. Wild Mushroom Risotto and grilled vegetables would be finished by the time the first customers arrived. A vat of rich, seafood stew, and one of curried, red lentil, made yesterday, were on the back burners ready to bring to temp.

Katie felt a sudden chill. The strains of *Little White Lies*, by Frank Sinatra oozed from every corner, like a snake on a hunt.

"You could have a proper restaurant instead of this hole in the wall."

Katie whipped around to face her stepfather, a few of her long, red curls barely held in place by a seashell barrette, escaped and gently teased her face as if it had a mind of its own. She crossed her toned arms over her apron and glared at him. "Get out, Stephen."

"Be sensible, Katy. Your food is delicious. But you need investors. Liz wanted the best for you."

"Don't you dare speak my mother's name."

You mean your adopted mother."

"She loved me."

"Liz was a soft touch."

"You're right. She married you."

"Nice! Who knows where you came from, before Liz found you a few feet from our beach house, covered in seaweed, slime and blood. No one stepped up to claim you. You would have spent the rest of your life in a series of foster homes or orphanages if she hadn't adopted you."

"I know you were against it."

"Your eyes were crazy eyes. You were at least six years old and couldn't speak a word."

These Boots Are Made For Walking, by Nancy Sinatra blared out and the book of recipes slid off the counter and dropped on Stephen's foot.

"Ow!" Stephen took a step back, and knocked the pink, Himalayan salt off the worktable.

"We lost the house because of your stupid, investment schemes," Katy shouted.

"It wasn't my fault."

"It never is."

"Liz understood."

"You ran around with other women. I kept it from her. You divorced her when she got sick. She's dead. Now get the hell out."

"I didn't come here to argue. I want you to succeed for Liz's sake. Let Alec help. He's crazy about you."

Katy turned her back and began to savagely chop vegetables.

"He's good looking and rich. You used to like him."

"Until I discovered he's a soulless jerk."

"What are you talking about?"

"He buys up slums and forces the poor and elderly out, then builds expensive condos with shoddy construction, and sells them for huge profits."

"At least he's solvent. You won't make it six months without his help."

Katy advanced on him. She held a Wusthof butcher knife in one hand. Her green eyes blazed.

"I have no intention of doing you a favor by dating Alec, or saving you from your creditors, Stephen. I'm not my mother. I never understood what she saw in you."

The knife seemed to fly out of Katy's hand on its own and whizzed past Stephen's head removing three hairs to bury itself in the connecting door.

"Crazy bitch!" he shouted as he stormed out.

\*\*\*

Aretha Franklin belted out *R E S P E C T*. The song succeeded in putting Katy back in a good mood as she shredded lettuce and moved to the beat. Her book of recipes mimicked her and joyously skipped across the counter in time to the music until it stopped suddenly and skidded behind the tall jars of flour and sugar.

Katy heard the front door open.

"You're early, Graciela," she called out.

"Hi Sexy."

A tall, tanned man in his thirties, with slicked back, dark brown hair, and blue eyes, stood in the doorway in his crisp, Calvin Klein jeans, Ralph Lauren, turquoise, and white, checked, open-necked shirt and Venetian, leather loafers.

"I'm busy," Katy muttered.

"Did the bank approve your loan yet?"

"None of your damn business, Alec."

"With me as an investor, and your culinary talents, you could expand, turn this tiny place into a real restaurant where the in-crowd eats. Actually, make a profit. We were good once."

Katy dumped the last of the shredded lettuce into a large, metal bowl. "Don't you have a few seniors to serve eviction notices to?"

Alec moved closer and put his arms around her. "Be nice to me and I'll be nice to you."

Katy shoved him. "I'd rather date a leper. Stop wasting your time and mine."

Alec watched as she ripped open a bag of red peppers and began to thinly slice. "Did Stephen mention I bought this building?"

Katy stopped chopping.

"As your landlord, I can make things easy, or difficult."

"You really are a slime-ball, Alec. Get out."

"Whatever you say."

The Stones belted out, *I Can't Get No Satisfaction*, as Alec went to the front, opened it and slammed the door shut. He slunk back into the kitchen, quietly crept up behind Katy and placed her in an arm lock.

"You're such a tease," he whispered in her ear. I always get what I want in the end."

The sharp knife fell out of Katy's hand and clattered on the white-tiled floor narrowly missing his foot.

Katy slammed her heel down on his shoe, elbowed him in the stomach and broke free. The book of recipes flew out of its hiding place and smashed him in the face.

"Ow! What the hell, Katy!" he exclaimed. "I think you broke my nose."

His voice froze in his throat as he stared in shock and disbelief as Katy's skin rippled into iridescent, luminous scales. Long, red hair flowed free of its seashell barrette, and her eyes glowed with an eerie, green light.

She threw her head back and let out a high-pitched shriek. His eardrums burst, and blood poured out of his ears. She grabbed the front of his shirt with powerful hands, nails turned into claws. She smiled, white teeth long and sharp He turned to run, but she yanked him close. He breathed in the briny scent of the ocean, salt, and vegetation as he stared into the wild and pitiless eyes of an alien creature. By the time he struggled to escape, it was too late.

\*\*\*

Engaged in filling the salt and pepper shakers, Katy heard the front door rattle.

"Sorry, I'm a bit late," Graciela apologized as Katy unlocked the door. She had a black eye, which she tried to hide with makeup.

"Tommy hit you again?"

"He hates the idea of you and me in business together. He said I should get a part-time job at Wally World, so I'd be there when he gets home." She looked around and sniffed the air. Wow. Everything sparkles. You could eat off the kitchen floor." She frowned. "Your eyes are weird though. What happened? Did that conniving weasel Alec drop by?

"Haven't seen the bastard in over a week."

"You finally paid the electricity bill. Right?

"Taken care of. It's a good thing you already made the icebox cakes and miniature, key lime pies. If we're going to open at six, you need to get a move-on with the biscuits and rolls."

Graciela hugged her. "I can hardly believe it. Our dream is finally coming true. I'm so excited. It's going to be gorgeous next weekend. Let's take a trip to the seashore on Sunday. You love the ocean."

"Great idea. Start baking, girl."

As Graciela rushed around preparing the rolls and biscuits, Katy changed the channel and smiled, as the song, *Here Comes Revenge* by Metallica blasted out.

"You still working that day job on Mondays?" Katy asked.

"Until this place takes off."

Monday morning she would drop by Graciela's and have a little chat with Tommy.

#### **About the Author:**

Roxanne Dent has sold nine novels and dozens of short stories in a variety of genres, including Paranormal Fantasy, Regency, Mystery, Horror, Steampunk, Drabbles, Middle Grade and YA. She loves French Roast coffee and Lemon Ginger Tea. Her most recent stories were sold to Shelter of Daylight, ParAbnormal and The Dead Unleashed. Member of The Berlin Writers Group Exposed.

# Hopes and Dreams | Sue Renol

Time passes quickly with an infant in the house. Before they knew it, it was the end of January. Six months had flown by without notice, and little Dolly was standing upright and already beginning to take her first steps. Benji took the baby upstairs to put her down for the night. He glanced at the painting hanging above the crib and still couldn't see what his wife loved about it. He thought the entire scene was a little creepy.

After the baby was settled, he came back down for a little snuggle time with his other favorite girl. She was sitting on the couch with her legs curled under her watching the baby monitor.

"Spying on me to make sure I do everything right?" he joked as he leaned in to give her a kiss, then wrapped himself around her on the settee to stare into the fireplace. They both leaned their heads inward at the same time, whacking their noggins together. "Ouch," he laughed. She shushed him and pointed to the monitor. Dolly was an extremely light sleeper. He nodded and continued to rub his forehead. They spoke softly of future plans, his job, her daily routine. When she would go back to work, how her parents were, even discussed moving to a warmer climate so Dolly would be able to play outside year-round. The sort of things happy young couples tend to ruminate about. As the fire burned down to smoldering embers, they became drowsy. Not wanting to drift off and leave the baby alone upstairs, they decided to call it a night.

"I'll check on Dolls while you take care of the fire. What do you say?" she tilted her head back and he kissed her nose.

"You're wish is my command, oh exalted one." They both laughed quietly. She headed up the stairs while Benji used a poker to crumble the remaining bits of burnt wood.

"Ben! Ben, I need you. NOW!" He could hear the frantic tone of her voice. Rushing up the stairs, he went straight to the baby's room knowing he'd find her there.

"What is it?" he blurted as he rushed in. "Jess, what the..."

His wife stood staring straight ahead. Dolly wasn't in her crib.

"Jess, where's the baby?" panic began to creep into his voice.

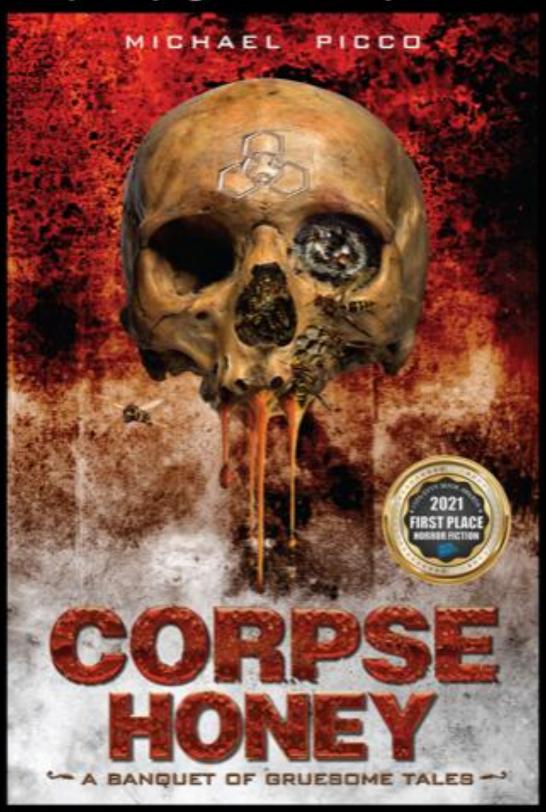
She lifted her arm and pointed. Dolly was there, she just wasn't in her crib, she was in the painting. The young girl that once sat on the rock was gone and their precious Dolly was in her place, precariously close to the edge.

# **About the Author:**

Sue Renol is a dark and speculative fiction writer who makes her home in the North Eastern region of the United States. An avid reader, Sue finds herself living a quiet like with her four-footed roommates.

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# Grandpa's Birthday Barbeque | Robert Runté

We'd barely gotten through the cottage door before I felt Grandma's claws digging into both shoulders. I hadn't minded her grabbing me from behind like that when I was a kid. Her towering over me, hands on my shoulders, had felt loving, protective—and less bony. But then Dad had explained that Grandma had been using me as a shield all those times, knowing Mom wouldn't fight with her in front of me. Now that I was taller than Grandma, her hanging from my shoulders was just creepy.

She stood on tiptoes to whisper below my ear, "Tyler, can you go out and help your grandfather with the barbeque? You know how he gets."

"Sure, Gramma."

I was glad to get outside. The arguing had already started before we'd even reached the turn off to the lake road. Mom had been on the phone the whole way after that, shouting over the noise of the gravel road, trying to make Uncle Mike take grandfather's present back and get something 'more suitable'.

"You don't buy the most expensive phone there is for a ninety-year-old!... No, I'm not saying he isn't worth it, but he's *ninety...* No. You're not listening... You don't buy a complicated *smart*phone for someone with... Alzheimer's."

Mom always lowered her voice whenever she said "Alzheimer's", like it might jinx Grandpa if she said it full volume.

"No! Listen! He needs a simple phone!... There's no point spending a lot on— What? How is beta *better*? That means *no one* knows how to— How much of a discount? Mike, it's *not* a *free phone* if you have to sign a two-year contract!... *Five Years!* Are you crazy? He's ninety! He's not going to..." She lowered her voice and I couldn't hear over the gravel what she was saying, but I could guess well enough.

"One of us? You mean you. It's supposed to be a present for Dad, not me and Charlie subsidizing the newest phone for you... No, I don't want the bloody thing. I have a perfectly good phone now."

As I went through and out to the patio, Mom had already started in on Grandma. "Why did you let Mike buy the most expensive phone there is? Dad can't handle—" I slid the French doors closed so Grandpa couldn't hear.

"Hey Grandpa."

"Hey there, Tyler."

Grandpa was standing at his oversized chrome barbeque, pushing coals around.

"Little early for that, isn't it?" I said. "I'm guessing supper won't be for a couple of hours."

Grandpa nodded, tilted his head towards inside. "Just needed to get away from that."

My turn to nod. "Yeah. Sorry. You deserve better on your birthday."

Grandpa held up his hand, palm out, stopping me. "No, it's all good. They'll argue themselves out before cake. Just glad everyone could make it out."

"Victoria here, then?" I hadn't seen her yet.

He made a face. "Yes. Yes, she is."

I snorted. I didn't have to ask "...is a what?"

Too bad, though. Everybody could usually get along well enough when Victoria wasn't around. Seemed to me that Uncle Mike, and even their kids, would be happier if he divorced her, but apparently divorce was never on the table in our family.

Grandpa put down the tongs, closed the lid on the barbeque. "You know anything about phones, Tyler?" "I guess."

Grandpa nodded towards the shed. "Go have a look. Don't let them see, though."

I crossed the yard—the spruce trees assured there was no actual lawn at the cottage—and let myself into the shed. It was dark, filthy, piled so high with junk it was hard to squeeze in more than a step or two. I left the door ajar for light, spotted a box with a too-perfect bow, half-hidden behind an old transistor radio. I pulled the fake-wrap lid off the gift box.

Inside: the latest Hydrogen Red. Titanium casing, no less. That *was* over the top. I wouldn't want it. Too tempting for thieves. Or just forgetting it somewhere. You could buy three or four regular phones for what that must cost.

I snuck the phone back to the picnic table to show grandpa.

"What'd you think?" he asked.

"Top of the line. Great camera."

He nodded. "I asked for an old-style flip phone. For if I fall again. Something cheap I could lose, you know?" He regarded the Red. "Could I even work that?"

I thought about it. "The model 11 is pretty flexible. I could set it up to be simple for you. Faces of everyone you might want to phone instead of numbers; clock, camera; keep it basic."

"I'll forget my password."

"Comes with facial recognition. I'll turn off the password. It'll remember you instead."

"Is that right?" He looked thoughtful. "Camera's probably hard."

I shrugged. "Not really. I can show you."

Snaps are simple of course, but this latest model had a pretty sophisticated built-in editing suite. Fortunately, it had an 'easy' setting for people like Grandpa. Software did everything for you. "See, Grandpa, you just have to remember to press *this* button, and move your finger over what you want to erase, and it's gone."

"You don't say?"

"Here, you try." I took a snap of the dog peeking out from under the barbeque cabinet. "Try taking out those weeds."

He pressed the 'erase' button as directed, rubbed his finger over the two straggly weeds that were intruding in the corner of the photo, and the software filled in the empty pixels with barbeque chrome.

"Isn't that something!" He was grinning all over. "Yeah, that's a keeper. Quick, put it back before the others come out."

Mom was setting the picnic table when I got back, but I don't think she saw me. Then Victoria marched over, picked up four of the plates and replaced them with paper plates from her bag.

"What?" mom demanded.

"Your mother never uses soap in the dishwasher." Victoria ran her finger across the plate, held it out to show the smudge. "I'm not having my family eating off that."

"You can't bring your own plates. It's like, like a gut punch to her."

Victoria rolled her eyes. "Well, I brought enough for everybody. I figured you'd appreciate clean plates too. Just tell her I had the table set already when you came out. To save her from having to do dishes." She reached in her bag and pulled out more plates, plastic utensils.

Mom was livid, but she scooped up Grandma's china and retreated through the French doors. Frankly, I was with Victoria on this one.

I went back to hang with Grandpa, make sure he didn't get distracted and forget to put the burgers on, or flip them, or take them off when they were ready. It takes way more concentration to do burgers than you'd think.

People came out, had beers or lemonade, pretended to get along, and as grandpa had predicted, things had pretty much settled down by the time for cake. The weather was great, there were hardly any mosquitoes this year, and looking out across the lake was calming. Of course, it helped that Victoria had taken a call and gone to sit in her car for most of the meal. Even her kids had relaxed more with her gone.

Then came the presents: a giant card from grandma, drawings from art class with TO GRANDPA in block letters from my cousins, a bottle of homemade wine from Uncle Charlie, though he had also contributed to *the* present. The box was presented with due pomp and ceremony, though Uncle Mike scowled at Mom momentarily when he found the cellophane was off the phone. But he let it pass, and if Mom noticed, thought the scowl was him still being pissed about earlier.

Grandpa was completely surprised, of course. He did such a good job of faking it, I wondered for a moment if he'd actually forgotten. But he knew right away which was the camera icon on this model, got everyone up and posing for photos: the cousins with their drawings, Uncle Charlie with his homemade, me with mom, and then everybody over again with Grandma. He even insisted Victoria come back and pose with Uncle Mike and the kids.

I worried the camera function might be a bit too hard for Grandpa after all, as he seemed to be struggling with it at times. He took forever to take the shots with Victoria. He kept moving Uncle Mike a couple of inches closer to the big tree, getting the kids to squat down, Victoria to move so he could center her in the frame. The way

he insisted everyone was posed just so, I thought maybe he had forgotten he could always crop the shot after, let the software square things up. He seemed satisfied in the end, though.

Everyone managed to pull out a smile, except for Victoria who always looked impatient. She never hid that she would rather be somewhere else, doing something else, than being with our family.

I cleared the table (which today just meant scooping everything into a big green garbage bag) while everyone but Victoria went down to the beach. The dock was too broken to walk out on, and the lake was too cold to swim yet, but the kids stuck their toes in, and the adults sat in their beach chairs, and Uncles Mike and Charlie had a blaze going in the firepit by the time I joined everyone.

Grandpa kept saying how much he appreciated his new phone, over and over, so I could tell he didn't know he'd been repeating himself. The others went with it. Somewhere along the line I realized Grandpa didn't have his phone on him, so I went to look for it. It was on the barbeque, which probably wasn't the best place, so I picked it up; decided to look at how he'd done with the camera.

Grandpa had done alright. Nothing to win any awards, but good enough for family snaps. I liked the two of me. I couldn't find the ones with Victoria, though, so he had been having some issue taking those. There were still a bunch with Uncle Mike and the kids, so not a total loss.

Uncle Mike came out of the cottage. I hadn't noticed him going in, but now he was out again, I called him over to look at the snaps.

But he waved the phone away. "Yeah, in a minute. Have you seen Victoria? I can't find her."

"She leave?" She'd looked so bored, that wouldn't have surprised me.

"No, her car's still here. I'm going to see if she walked down to the village for smokes. Tell the others if they notice. I'll be right back."

I took Grandpa his phone, congratulated him on his photography skills. "These are good, Grandpa."

"Thanks. I had a bit of trouble getting my head around that you can change things. I mean, change everything right inside the phone."

"It's all in the software, Grandpa."

"The things a person can do nowadays." He shook his head in wonder.

I should demo some of the more advanced editing features for him sometime. It would seem like a magic show to him.

Uncle Charlie leaned over, placed a hand on my knee. "Hey, I just wanted to thank you for doing the weeds. You didn't have to do that, but I know your Grandma really appreciates it."

"What?"

"I saw that you took out those big old weeds by the barbeque. Those tap roots are a pain to pull out. They must have gone down pretty deep. Appreciate it."

I was about to say I couldn't take credit for the weeds when Uncle Mike showed up again. "Hey, everybody. Has anyone seen Victoria? I can't seem to find her anywhere."

#### **About the Author:**

Robert Runté is Senior Editor with EssentialEdits.ca were he edits SF&F. Back in the day, he published nearly 150 issues of various fanzines, such as *The Monthly Monthly* (it was monthly), *Neology*, and *New Canadian Fandom*, which led to his being Fan GoH at the 1994 Worldcon. A former professor, he would like to be clear he is *not* mansplaining...he pontificates to all genders equally.

Personal Blog: Robert Runté
Twitter: @Runte



#### Where Only the Mosquitoes Sing | Dan Allen

Old folks say it is only a myth to entertain the youth, but if you visit a certain northern lake in the calm of the night when the moon is new, and the loons are silent, and a whisper can be heard for miles, you might experience something that will change your mind faster than a bullfrog's tongue snapping up a mayfly.

In a land where you can peel the skin off the white birch, and each year moose shed their antlers, and black flies grow big enough to carry away a squirrel, there is a tale of a star-crossed romance, tender young hearts brought together by attraction and divided by tragedy. At Camp Chikopi, nestled between pine trees on the eastern shore of Ahmic Lake, the boys retell the story, passing it from generation to generation. The legend grows with each batch of new campers, whispered inside musty cabins after the lights are out. Across the gentle waves and just beyond where the cold waters flow from the mouth of the Magnetawan, young girls at Camp Wathahi share a similar tale, spreading the heebie-jeebies and keeping themselves up late at night.

The story begins with hyper teens paddling across the lake, gliding over sun-sparkled waters, to visit each other's grounds. Competing like rabid chipmunks, they burn off endless energy in a revolving series of games until darkness fills the eastern horizon and a nightly campfire ends the day. Then, snuggled close to warm flames, enticed by the sweet aroma of burning hardwood and blanketed by the haze of smoke spiralling heavenward, a boy makes eye contact with a girl and smiles.

Caught in the trance of hand-holding puppy love, the two scheme to rendezvous at midnight in the cove beneath the cliffs on the thick evergreen-covered north shore, planning to seal their attraction with a first kiss.

When the cabin councillor's snore shakes dust from the rafters, and his fellow campers are dreaming of ice cream and cellular reception, the boy creeps away and slips a canoe into the lake. Careful not to splash, he manipulates the paddle with the expertise of a fur-trading voyageur traversing the meandering waters of Algonquin.

He stops halfway and sits abreast of Harlow's Cove. His canoe bobs on gentle waves, and he watches as the dark outline of his first love approaches. Her smooth strokes slice through the midnight mist, and her hair catches a faint reflection of the eyelash-shaped moon.

The boy stands to wave at his newfound love and guide her into the covert shadows beneath a protective cliff that provides them with the privacy of a limestone curtain. His sudden movement causes a tilt, and water threatens to pour over the side. He shifts his weight in a frenzied reaction, and the unbalanced canoe capsizes quicker than the flash of a shooting star. Tossed into cold ink water, the boy loses his way and drifts to the bottom.

With tears in her eyes and a flashlight, gripped in shaking hands, the young lady finds only a paddle and the upside-down fibreglass hull. The search ends after fruitless days of dredging the bottom and poking around the submerged fallen trees and driftwood-littered shoreline. The boy is never found, his remains never buried, but each year with the melting of the ice and the return of the robins, boats are untethered and set adrift on moonless nights, and paddles disappear from cabin porches as he makes his presence known.

Recently, three young lads with curly blond hair and apple pie smiles escape from their paved-over world of cement and glass and pick the cliff in Harlow's Cove to camp for the night. When their fire burns low, and the northern lights shimmer like a dancing green glow-worm, and after the cookies are consumed and hockey opinions debated, one restless camper dares the rest to jump off the cliff. In the kingdom of boys and double-dog dares, he has no choice but to take the first leap. The darkness hides his descent, but the splash alerts his pals and anything that might be stirring below the surface. The boy torpedoes deep and struggles to reverse his plunge. Cold hands grasp a leg, and bones pinch his skin dragging him deeper. Terrified, the boy kicks with an urgency only fear can evoke and the hands holding him slip towards his ankles, scratching him with the fleshless tips of decomposing fingers.

At last, free, his legs burn from spent adrenaline and his lungs, drained of air, threaten to implode like a crushed pop can. He pulls at the water above and thrashes with the frenzy of a cat tossed into a bathtub. Nearing unconsciousness, he breaks through the surface into sweet midnight air and swims towards shore with one last desperate flurry. Certain his attacker is mere inches behind, his heart pounds faster with each panicked stroke. He senses the creature getting closer and closer and holds his breath, saving his air for a final death scream. Finally, his knee touches a moss-covered stone, and he drags himself out into a chilling breeze and scrambles, shivering and climbing to the safety of the cliff above.

His pals smirk and steal glimpses at each other as he tells his tale, not believing the drama of his experience nor his near-fatal escape. Between whispered doubts and muffled chirps, they lay him on a sleeping bag, and their battery-powered torches chase away phantoms and expose shadows. Like a spotlight on a stage, a circle traces the scratches from above his knee to his ankle. Five distinct ragged marks scar his pale leg, and the cuts begin to darken as if they wear

lipstick. At the bottom of the longest line, something grey and ugly sticks out of the gash. The pals move in close, their noses almost touching, to see a sight that promises to haunt their sleep. They flinch, and the flashlight slips between frozen fingers, blinking out against the ground. They hurry to turn back on the light, not believing the horrifying implications of what is protruding from the wound. Their fears are confirmed. Hooked under the skin, all algae-covered, gnarled and twisted, is an old fingernail.

In the warmth of the early summer, when the mosquitoes hatch and the horseflies swarm, busloads of youth leave behind the monotony of their urban lives and return to a northern paradise, stirring the lake with the roar of laughter. In the dark blue of a shadowed bay, a canoeist's stroke slaps the surface and wakes a dormant spirit for another year of haunting the waters, searching for a lost love and a missing paddle. If you're ever fortunate to stand on a soft blanket of pine needles and marvel at the sight of more stars than you ever could imagine and if you hear, in the dark moments near midnight, a loud splash that carries over the lake, then put away the paddles, drag up your boat and stay out of the water, for you won't be alone if you dare take a swim on a moonless night, in a northern lake, where only the mosquitoes sing.

#### **About the Author:**

Dan Allen lives in Canada with the love of his life and two spoiled cats. He enjoys traveling, sailing, and eating. You can find his stories in numerous magazines, anthologies, and podcasts. He recently finished his debut novel and is actively looking for publication options. See a presentation of his published work at his website. You can also contact him on Facebook.

Website: Dan Allen Horror
Twitter: @danallenhorror

#### Written in Crayon | Nina D'Arcangela

Beauty lies still in the cool depths, yet no prince approaches. Have the fairy tales failed us, or us them? Perhaps still waters run deep so frogs can be crowned king, but with all these children in my shoe, the slog seems far from candy coated, and the wee ones must be wary of the pie least they find an end in foam washing the shore of a sailor's sea. But therein still, a wolf will lap foam when there is no snake or hare for the soup. A steal, indeed, and a good one at that as the tailor always uses a double stitch. One does wonder, did we forget the legacy of all that is grim? Or was that a passing fancy for mice to chew upon when no one is minding the lark.

#### Nextlahualli | Nina D'Arcangela

Pain, muscles protest the need to move. Blind, she's dragged into the glaring light. Vertigo, the edge of the frustum too near. Thunder, the sound of blood slamming through her ears. Clarified, a feather plucked from her hair. Disrobed, slaves paint her with blest symbols. Cold, her flesh upon the altar. Splayed, her arms and legs tethered. Wet, the tears that run from her eyes. Revered, the shaman that will take her life. Fear, the sound of naked feet slapping stone. Hot, the blade that opens her throat. Froth, iron-rich gurgle that feeds the trough. Panic, the struggle to pull in air. Chanting, her people revel in the sacrifice. Silence, the body is left as an offering. Drought, the wind scrubs the plains of seed. Famine, no crop will grow. Blame, she did not appease.

#### **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: Sotet Angyal Intagram: @DarcNina

#### **Selfless** | *Jim Mountfield*

The girl approached their table and stopped just behind Pearl. Then she raised her smartphone and took a picture of herself. For as long as they'd been in the restaurant, the girl had been wandering around, stopping at random points, and taking selfies. This was George's first chance to see her up close. She looked Southeast Asian, but he couldn't tell if she was local. Her hair was cut in a bob, its blackness contrasting with her porcelain-white face. That weirdly pale skin, and a glaze in her eyes, made her look like a doll. She wore a sleeveless red dress whose hem stopped above her knees and had a bag of an identical shade of red slung around her shoulder. To George, she might have been anywhere between her mid-teens and her late-twenties, Pearl's age.

Because the girl was behind her, Pearl didn't notice her, not even when the camera in the smartphone flashed. Instead, Pearl was watching something out on the River Pasak. Most of the dining area was located on a large balcony, supported on timber pillars, that jutted from the riverbank. A tugboat was towing past a chain of industrial barges whose cargoes were shrouded in tarpaulin. In the darkness, those big, humped barges crept by like the segments of a giant centipede.

The girl moved away from their table. George felt relieved. Her ghostly whiteness was unnerving and besides... How many pictures of herself had she taken in the last half-hour? Even by the standards of selfie-obsessed youngsters, it was abnormal.

He said, "I have an idea for a horror movie set in Thailand. It's about a serial killer who goes around the country's sightseeing spots, killing tourists. He uses their phones to take their pictures while he's murdering them."

Pearl's gaze returned from the barges. "Not selfies, but... deathies?"

"Yes. And he—or she—murders them by shoving their selfie-sticks down their throats. Takes the picture with the phone at the end of the stick while it's going down."

"Yuck!"

The idea had been in George's head since that morning, when they'd been in the grounds of one of Ayutthaya's many temples. A young backpacker guy had tried to impress his friends by climbing onto a plinth. "Look at me!" he'd shouted. "I'm Spiderman!" Then, atop the plinth, which was in front of a giant statue of Buddha, he'd raised a phone on a selfie-stick and taken a picture of himself pulling a comical face with Buddha in the background. At that moment, George had wanted to ram the stick down the guy's throat. So disrespectful. What must the Thais think of Westerners?

"It'd be a 21<sup>st</sup>-century Asian version of *Peeping Tom*. Commenting on the tourist industry rather than the filmmaking one."

Pearl's face showed no recognition. "Peeping Tom?"

"Michael Powell's Peeping Tom. From 1960. You know the film I mean."

"I don't."

"You must know it. It's a classic. About a young cameraman who goes off the rails and becomes a killer. And he films his victims as they die. He uses the sharpened end of one leg of his tripod to stab them, while the camera at the other end captures their moment of death. Using a selfie-stick as a murder weapon would be an update on that."

"Sorry. Don't know the film." Her tone suggested she didn't much want to know it.

George felt depressed that his wife hadn't heard of *Peeping Tom* and probably hadn't heard of Michael Powell either. It highlighted the age gap between them. When he'd been young, everyone he'd respected, his favourite teachers and lecturers, his arts-loving friends, had raved about Powell's films. Come to think of it, even the blockbuster movies he'd watched at the cinema as a teenager, like *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *ET* and *Back to the Future*, must seem like ancient history to Pearl. Names she only knew from her parents, while they reminisced about the films *they'd* seen together during their time courting.

"Are you okay?" asked Pearl. "You look sad."

"Oh, I'm fine."

"You are enjoying this holiday, aren't you?"

"Of course, I am. It's been marvellous so far." He raised his glass of Chang beer and clinked it against her wine glass. "To our holiday. Cheers!"

George took a few swigs more of the beer, then realized he had to visit the toilet. Again.

Presumably because it looked over a river and the passing boats, the restaurant had a maritime theme. Its walls were decorated with oars and nets and framed nautical maps from olden times. In several prominent positions stood replicas of boats' figureheads, like the ones they'd seen a few days earlier in the Royal Barge Museum in Bangkok. The figureheads were ornate, colourful representations of mythical creatures—scaly dragons, winged *garuda*, serpentine,

multi-headed *naga*. As he crossed the restaurant, he realized how busy it'd become with tourists. Waiters hurried back and forth. Evidently, none of them had had time to ask the strange girl why she hadn't sat down and ordered food, rather than just wander about taking selfies.

The entrance to the toilets was in a wall behind one of the figureheads, a seven-headed *naga*. He entered a cubicle and relieved himself, fretting about how this was the second time he'd needed to pee in the last half-hour. Was his bladder packing in? Did incontinence beckon? Then he spent half-a-minute shaking his penis, trying to dislodge any last drops from the foreskin. Yesterday, after using the loo, he'd been mortified to realize he'd been walking around with a dark pee-spot visible on the crotch of his trousers. If Pearl had noticed it, she'd tactfully said nothing.

Increasingly paranoid about becoming old and incapable, George washed his hands in a sink. He studied his reflection in a mirror above the tap and tried to convince himself that, despite the inevitable wrinkles and grey hairs, he looked good for his age.

When he left the toilets and re-entered the restaurant, he was so preoccupied that he walked right into the selfie girl.

She stood beside the seven-headed *naga*. Her small hand barely seemed able to encompass the broad, flat phone raised in front of her. As they collided, she didn't turn her head or change her pose. She kept staring at the phone-screen. George looked at it too and saw...

What did he see?

Obviously, the screen showed the girl's face. But the seven-headed *naga* that should have been in the background wasn't there. George glanced over his shoulder and the nearest of the *naga*'s heads was just inches away, mouth gaping, fangs bared, tongue sticking out almost lasciviously. Yet when he looked back at the screen, only the girl's pale face was visible. Surrounding her face was blackness. It was a strangely animate-looking blackness. It seemed to undulate, as if trying break past the screen's frame.

George realized he was so close to the girl that he should have discerned his own face too, but the blackness blotted it out. He felt a chill. Was that blackness around him now? Engulfing him, pulsating against him evilly? And he couldn't see it, but the camera in the phone could?

A new detail on the screen caught his attention. A botchy grayness was spreading across the girl's face. It seeped up from the side of her jaw, over her cheek, to her nose. Like a shadow, shapeless as an amoeba, expanding over her features... The grayness reached the nearest eye and, promptly, the white and pupil became glisteningly black. George understood then that the gray shade on her skin was caused by something black growing *under* that skin, *inside* her head. The same blackness that'd already swallowed the world behind her—

The phone flashed and momentarily George thought he'd been blinded. Blackness confronted him. But before he could panic, he found himself back amid the light and colour of the restaurant. The girl remained beside him, holding the phone. This time, the things that should have been on the screen—her face, his face, the *naga* figurehead—*were* on it.

Only then did the girl notice him. As she turned towards him, a smile formed on her hitherto-impassive face. She pointed at him, then at herself, then at the phone. Before George could react, she huddled against him, checked both their faces were contained within the screen, and snapped another selfie.

Again, George was blinded. But this time the blackness didn't clear. It stayed. And unable to see anything, he *did* panic.

"My God!" he cried. He swung around, but still there was nothing to see—just blackness. He shambled forward, tripped over his feet, and reeled. With a thump, he crashed into the *naga* figurehead. It teetered and toppled over, and he fell on top of it.

\*\*\*

They traveled from the restaurant in a *tuk-tuk*. The *tuk-tuks* driven in the town of Ayutthaya weren't like those they'd used in other parts of Thailand. They were more like miniature vans, the passengers sitting in cramped, low-roofed compartments at the back, on seats that were parallel with the direction of travel.

Opposite him, Pearl said, "Stop apologizing."

"I feel embarrassed."

"You just overdid things. You spent all day tramping around temples in a heat you weren't used to. It could've happened to anyone."

"You tramped around them too and didn't faint."

He waited for her reply: "Yes, but I'm much *younger* than you." Pearl diplomatically didn't say that. Instead, she said, "We should be going to a hospital, not back to the hotel."

"Please, not tonight. I can't face more hassle. I'll visit a hospital tomorrow if I still feel shaky. Deal?"

She agreed reluctantly. Then, to change the subject, George asked, "Did the girl just vanish?"

"Yes. She must've panicked and fled when you keeled over and took that statue-thing down with you." Pearl's eyes narrowed. "What possessed you to take a selfie with her?"

"She requested it. So... I did."

"Well, seeing as you'd just been fantasizing about choking tourists to death with their selfie-sticks, it seems a bit odd. Incidentally... You're lucky you didn't lose your phone after you dropped it."

"What?" It occurred to George that she believed the selfie had been taken with his phone, not the girl's.

"While the waiters were helping you up, one of them found it on the floor. I told him to put it in your jacket."

"Oh..." George felt bewildered. "That was lucky." In fact, while they'd been in the restaurant, his phone had stayed with his other possessions in his knapsack. But now, feeling the lining of one of his jacket-pockets, he discovered in it a bulk that belonged to another phone—surely the one the girl had been using.

For some reason, he said nothing about this to Pearl.

\*\*\*

"A Matter of Life and Death," called Pearl from the bathroom.

"I'm sorry?"

"I've just remembered A Matter of Life and Death. An old film I saw on TV when I was a girl. There's a pilot who's supposed to die but doesn't die, and they hold a trial in heaven to decide if he should be allowed to continue living. Robert Powell directed that, didn't he?"

"Michael Powell, yes. Along with Emeric Pressburger."

George sat on the bed, examining the girl's smartphone. It was similar enough in size and colour to his own smartphone for Pearl to make a mistake during the commotion following his collapse in the restaurant. Already, he felt weirdly possessive of it. It seemed a phone he didn't want to lose, or give away, or throw away.

Or perhaps the phone had become possessive of him.

He opened its camera and immediately got an unwelcome close-up of his face, looking more haggard and aged than ever. He held it back, so that part of the bedroom appeared on the screen too—the curtains drawn across the balcony doors, the walls on either side, a floor-lamp whose shade was aglow. And—

At first, George thought it was a large, black beetle that'd alighted on one of the curtains. But the more he stared at it, the surer he became that it was growing. No longer a fleck of blackness, but a blot of it. He looked behind him and saw only the curtains, walls, and lamp. Nothing black.

He studied the screen again. The blackness remained and covered more of the curtain, the size of a dinner-plate now. It wasn't growing in a lifeless, liquid way, like an expanding puddle. It did so in a horribly-animate fashion, *crawling* out in all directions, *exerting* itself as it grew.

Though he felt terrified, something made George touch the photo button. The phone flashed blindingly. Then, when his eyes functioned again, he saw that the intruder had vanished. Everything on the phone screen corresponded to everything in the bedroom behind him. He felt huge relief. He sensed he was safe... for now.

Already, however, he knew it'd come back. It'd return more frequently, and each time it'd grow more quickly. Eventually it'd consume the world around him and penetrate under his skin and devour his body and soul. The girl must have been near the endpoint. She could do nothing but snap picture after picture of it, every few seconds, trying to keep it at bay. He wondered how the phone's camera staved it off. Perhaps it was to do with the photos capturing, *freezing* each moment. Perhaps that delayed the passage of time. Time seemed integral to the blackness. It embodied time's most hideous features—decay, decline, death.

So... The phone took possession of you, let this horror into your life, let you see it, and tormented you by allowing you to fight it off but with ever-diminishing returns. But how had the girl managed to pass the phone onto him? Could you relinquish it to a particular person in a particular state-of-mind? Someone who just then was obsessed with thoughts about aging and decline, as he'd been in the restaurant?

And when he was nearing his endpoint, how and to whom would he pass the phone?

Pearl returned from the bathroom. "Can't believe it," she said. "I found another gray hair tonight. Another! God, an unwelcome reminder that the big three-oh is fast approaching."

He suddenly became alert, but he was stumped when she added, "Well, I'm waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

"For you to argue with me and cheer me up. To tell me 30 is nothing. It's still young."

"Okay, 30 is still young. At least, young-ish."

As they got into bed, his mind worked furiously. Of course, he'd never do that. Give Pearl the phone, inflict that horror upon her, and flee, as the girl had done to him in the restaurant. Not Pearl. Not the woman he loved.

He closed his eyes and momentarily he visualized the curtain with that thing on it. That evil blackness, growing like a seeping cancer.

Still, he reflected, this was a matter of life and death. Or something worse than death.

#### **About the Author:**

Jim Mountfield was born in Northern Ireland, grew up there and in Scotland, and has since lived and worked in Europe, Africa and Asia. He currently lives in Singapore. His fiction has appeared in Aphelion, Blood Moon Rising, Death Head's Grin, Flashes in the Dark, Hellfire Crossroads, Horla, Horrified Magazine, The Horror Zine, Hungur, Schlock! Webzine, Shotgun Honey and The Sirens Call and he blogs regularly.

**Blog:** Blood and Porridge

#### Windows to the Soul | Ngo Binh Anh Khoa

They say the eyes are the windows to the soul, and it's true. My latest lover has the most striking blue eyes, sparkling with mischief and vitality that draws in whoever beholds them.

I love staring at those eyes, and I'd stare deeply into them, and more deeply still now that I'm holding them in my palm, still wet, still dripping with fresh blood.

In those orbs, I can sample her memories, the sweet ones, the sour parts, and the bitter bits. Such exquisite flavors contained within that one soul satiates my hunger as they slowly melt inside my mouth.

#### A Bouquet of Red Roses | Ngo Binh Anh Khoa

A bouquet of red roses is a perfect gift to celebrate the day I met Hong a summer ago, when I laid my eyes upon her and felt my heart thrumming wildly in my chest. In that fleeting moment, I knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that she was the one, and I would make her heart mine.

And now, it's mine, wholly and completely.

How beautiful the sight is, with the red roses made even redder by the blood pouring out of her hollowed chest, a perfect trade-off for her heart, still dripping wet within my quivering palm.

#### The Meteorite | Ngo Binh Anh Khoa

"A meteorite fell into an empty field near my house!" my cousin Long shouted excitedly into the phone, "How much do you reckon it's worth?"

I told him I'd come down to check it out the following week.

But soon, more calls came. Each day, my phone was assaulted with his calls. Each time I answered, his voice grew more frenzied and frightful.

And in the last call, it sounded like he was running, his breathing frantic and heavy.

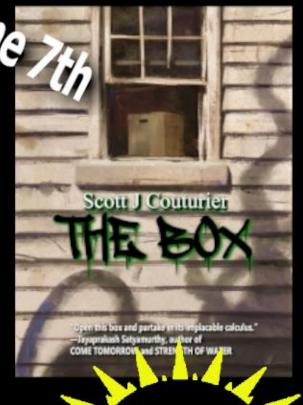
"Help me!" Long shrieked before his voice was drowned out by a barrage of growls, wet gurgles, and shrill, inhuman laughter.

#### **About the Author:**

Ngo Binh Anh Khoa is a teacher of English from Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. In his free time, he enjoys reading fiction, daydreaming, and writing speculative poems for entertainment, some of which have appeared in New Myths, Star\*Line, Weirdbook, Spectral Realms, Liquid Imagination, and other venues.

Facebook: Ngo Binh Anh Khoa



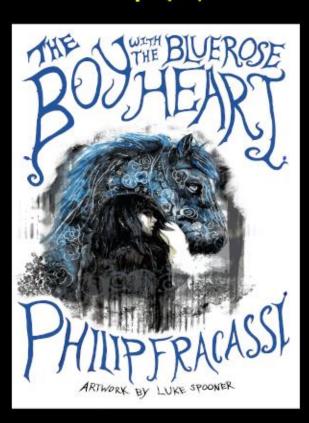




## **Hybrid Sequence Media.com**

# Coming Soon

# Fracassi & Spooner August 2nd



#### One Last Step | Warren Benedetto

"Will it hurt?" I asked. I watched as my father rolled the sewing needle between his fingers, its tip glowing orange-red in the heat of the flame. My eyes welled with tears.

"Just a little," he replied.

The flickering candlelight sent eerie shapes dancing around the cluttered attic where we were hiding for the night. Outside, the screeching calls of the shadow-things rose and fell like whale songs made from rusted metal. They sounded close.

My father removed the needle from the fire, blew on it, then pinched it quickly a few times between his fingertips to check the temperature. Satisfied that it wasn't too hot, he dipped the tip into the puddle of royal blue ink he had spilled from a broken ballpoint pen. "All right. Give me your arm."

"Can I hold Roger?" I pointed to the stuffed rabbit leaning against a dusty cardboard box.

"Of course." My father bent down and picked up the toy. He handed it to me. "Squeeze him tight, okay? This might take a minute."

I nodded, then tentatively extended my arm. My father turned my wrist toward the ceiling so that my forearm was facing up. After dipping the needle in the ink again, he poked the sharp tip into my skin. I winced, then jerked my arm away.

"Ow! It hurts!"

"I know. I'm sorry. But we have to do this, just in case."

"In case of what?"

My father's eyes glimmered in the candlelight. He pressed his lips together in a sad smile. "It's just important you remember, okay?" His voice was scratchy. His throat sounded tight. I nodded. "Can we try again?" he asked.

He grasped my wrist and stretched my arm out straight. A whimper escaped my lips as he brought the needle close to my skin.

"Hey," he said gently. He looked me in the eyes. "What do we do when we're scared?"

"We go inside?"

"That's right. Can you do that now?"

"Okay." I searched my mind for a happier time, before the shadow-things. I focused on the details—the sounds, the smells, the colors—until the memory was as vivid as the day it first had happened.

"Good," my father said. He dipped the needle into the ink once again. "Now, close your eyes."

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My lemon-yellow rain boots splashed into a giant puddle on the side of the road. A steady drizzle fell from the smudged charcoal sky, plastering my hair to the side of my face and soaking the dirty stuffed rabbit I clutched in one tiny hand.

I navigated around the husk of an abandoned car overturned on the shoulder of the road, momentarily straying over the white line and into the lane. It didn't matter—no cars were coming. Not anymore. I could barely remember the last time I had seen one driving.

As I passed the wreckage, I ran my fingers along the telltale gashes sliced through the side of the car. The damage ran the length of the vehicle, from the front wheel to the tail light. Something had cut through the metal like it was made from soft clay. I examined the edge of the gashes. They were rusty. That was good—it meant the damage had happened a while ago. The shadow-thing that had attacked the car was probably long gone.

I dropped to my hands and knees to peek through the shattered driver's side window, hoping to find something useful inside: food, maybe, or a cigarette lighter. A blanket. A gun. But there was nothing, just a rosary dangling upside down from the cracked rearview mirror.

\*\*\*

I sat back on my heels and wiped the water out of my eyes. I was soaked. I wished my raincoat still had a hood, but my father had cut it off ages ago. It was too dangerous, he said. It blocked my peripheral vision. I would need to see, in case the shadow-things attacked from the side. They usually did.

Usually.

At the thought of my father, I slid up the sleeve of my raincoat, revealing part of the tattoo he had hand-lettered on my forearm. I mouthed the words as I read them.

- 1. Run.
- 2. Hide.

#### 3. Close your eyes.

"This is your mantra," my father had explained, as he pressed the ink-tipped needle into my skin. "This is how you survive. Just remember to do these things, and I promise you'll be safe."

I hadn't understood at the time. Why did I need it tattooed on my arm? Why couldn't he just tell me to run when I needed to run, like he always did when the shadow-things came? The two of us would hide together, our eyes squeezed shut to avoid the monsters' deadly gaze, waiting until the creatures gave up searching for us and moved on to easier prey.

A few months later, I found out why.

My father and I had done everything perfectly: we ran, we hid, we closed our eyes. But that day, for whatever reason, my father had opened his eyes just a little too soon. It was only for a split second—barely more than a blink—but it was enough time for the shadow-thing to burrow into his mind, to draw him out, to steer him helplessly into the open like some sort of puppet.

I didn't see what happened, but I felt it: the rush of air as the shadow-thing swung its blade, the wet squelch of the scythe eviscerating my father's body, the warm spray of his blood slapping across my face. Through it all, I kept my eyes closed. When I finally opened them, my father was nowhere to be found. All that remained was a dark stain on the ground, with drag marks that trailed into the woods and disappeared into the undergrowth. He was gone. And I was alone.

I felt a sob building in my chest. I didn't want to be alone; I wanted to be home. I wanted to be in my back yard, swinging on the swings while my father cooked dinner on the grill. He'd be wearing his apron—the one that said **World's Okayest Dad**—flipping burgers with one hand while taking swigs from a can of Diet Coke with the other. I'd hear my brother sloshing in the baby pool while my mother nursed my newborn sister on the lawn chair nearby. We'd be together again, as a family. All of us. Alive.

A gust of wind drove a blast of stinging raindrops against my face. The rain was falling harder. Before long, it would be a full-blown monsoon. I looked through the broken car window again. Water had pooled in the angled corner of the crushed windshield, but the back half of the car was dry. It would be a good shelter from the storm.

I crawled inside, clutched my stuffed rabbit to my chest, and listened to the thunder as it rolled through the hills.

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It was still light outside when I awoke. I had dozed off, but not for very long from the looks of it. The downpour had subsided to a light gray sprinkle. A low ground fog drifted along the asphalt outside.

My stomach rumbled. I had to keep moving, to find another abandoned house or store from which I could scavenge some food. I would hunt if I had to—I had done it before—but I was hoping to find a cache of canned goods instead. My father had warned me that hunting should always be my last resort. It was dangerous. I could be hurt, even killed.

With my stuffed rabbit in hand, I crawled out through the car window and into the road. I looked to my left and my right, checking for anything dangerous that might be approaching me from the sides. There was nothing. Satisfied that I was in the clear, I stood, yawned, and stretched my arms towards the sky.

Suddenly, my yawn was cut short by an unexpected sound.

A splash.

Behind me.

I froze, listening.

The patter of raindrops on my jacket sounded like a thousand tiny footsteps approaching from all directions. But under that, there was something else. A scraping sound. Heavy and metallic, the sound of a blade dragging along the ground.

The shadow-thing.

I heard my father's voice in my head.

Run

I didn't hesitate. I bolted down the road, sprinting straight ahead at first, then curving into the parking lot of a gas station on my right. My rain boots slapped on the ground, sending great geysers of muddy water up to my knees as I leaped over the median and slipped between the gas pumps. Something crashed behind me. An alien shriek of pain and rage pierced my eardrums. The sharp smell of gasoline stung my nostrils. I didn't look back.

The bottom half of the gas station door was shattered. I ducked through the opening, my boots crunching on broken glass as I entered. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the dim light of the convenience store. The shelves

were empty. The doors of the coolers stood open. A pair of bare feet, their skin mottled and gray, protruded from the end of one of the aisles. A dark red chunk of one heel was missing, seemingly gnawed by some type of rodent.

Hide.

I scrambled behind the cashier's counter. The doors of the cabinet under the cash register were open. I pulled myself into the cramped space, then drew the doors closed behind me.

The cabinet was dark except for a sliver of light that slipped through the crack between the doors. I clutched my stuffed rabbit to my chest, then buried my face in its filthy fur and tried to muffle the ragged rasp of my breathing.

My heart pounded in my ears. I listened for the sound of the shadow-thing.

Broken glass crunched. The metallic scraping drew closer. The sharp odor of gasoline wafted through the air. A figure paused by the doors, blocking out the sliver of light. My ears reverberated with the guttural, resonant clicking of the shadow-thing. I recognized the sound. My father had called it 'echolocation'. It was searching for me.

Close your eyes.

I squeezed my eyes shut and willed myself to disappear, to fade into memory. To go inside, as my father used to say, losing myself in the happiest memory I could think of. The shadow-things couldn't touch me there. I would be safe.

I thought about the back yard: the smell of the grill, the splash of the pool, my brother's laugh, the wind in my hair as I swung on my swing, higher and higher, the whole world disappearing beneath me as I arced towards the brilliant blue sky...

The scraping started again. This time, it was moving away. The gasoline smell faded. After a while, all that was left was the gentle drumming of the rain on the roof overhead.

I opened my eyes and pressed my face to the thin seam of light between the cabinet doors. The shadow-thing was gone. Quietly, I slipped from the cabinet and crawled over to the gas station window. I could see the shadow-thing outside, its back turned to me, moving slowly towards the street.

My stomach rumbled again, cramping with hunger. I slid up the sleeve of my raincoat, again reading the tattoo my father had placed there.

- 1. Run.
- 2. Hide.
- 3. Close your eyes.

I slid the sleeve further up my arm. There was one last step. It was written in a different ink, in a different color blue. It read:

4. Attack.

My father had added it a few months after the first tattoo, shortly before he died. I remembered looking into his eyes as he pressed the needle into my skin.

"We aren't scared of them anymore?" I asked.

"We are," he replied. "But now we know we can beat them. They're strong. But you're stronger. When the time is right, you know what to do."

I reached into my raincoat and drew out the long, curved blade that my father had salvaged from one of the shadow-things we had killed. Strips of purple rubber—the remnants from my raincoat hood—were wrapped around the handle. The blade was stained yellow-brown with the shadow-things' blood. It looked like mustard, but the taste was surprisingly sweet.

Especially when it was fresh.

My stomach growled again. I gripped the blade's handle in my fist, then propped my stuffed rabbit up into a sitting position in the window. I would need both hands free for what I had to do next.

"You wait here," I whispered to the rabbit. "When I get back, we'll make a fire." My eyes narrowed as I looked out the window at the shadow-thing. "Then, we'll eat."

#### **About the Author:**

Warren Benedetto writes short fiction about horrible people doing horrible things. He has a Master's degree in Film/TV Writing from USC. He is also the developer of StayFocusd, the world's most popular anti-procrastination app for writers. He built it while procrastinating.

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#### Limbo | Alison Armstrong

The ground vibrated, thousands of feet pounding on the muddy field, the droning, percussive music wordless and entrancing. Jenny and her best friend, Roberta, swayed, eyes closed, hearts pounding in sync with the pulsations surrounding them.

Jenny imagined herself drifting in a blood-warm, boundaryless sea, which, like the music, flowed unbroken, unstopping. Rocked gently back and forth by the waves, she didn't care where they would take her or how long she would be carried by them.

When there was a brief pause in the music, Roberta opened her eyes. Her head felt as if it were stuffed with cotton candy, her thoughts sticky yet diaphanous, evaporating almost as soon as she became aware of them. A thin thread of worry surfaced for a moment through her mental mist as she realized that the pills her friend Gerald had given her and Jenny were much more powerful than she had anticipated. Whatever hallucinogenic substance lurked within them had taken possession of her and seemed to be controlling Jenny also. Roberta heard Jenny singing or chanting something, the syllables, like an infant's babblings, slipping effortlessly from her mouth, as eyes closed, Jenny continued dancing.

Jenny felt as if she were a jellyfish drifting amongst the waves, her hair, like tentacles, billowing underneath her as fluorescent fish swam warily by. She was a Medusa of the sea, and the waves were her undine sisters, singing liquid laments. She sang with them in their secret language, each sound a cryptic pearl birthed from the mother of miracles and monstrosities.

In this oceanic, oneiric realm the sublime and the terrifying fluctuated almost seamlessly, one mask imperceptibly fading into another. Even if Jenny had wanted to, she didn't think she could stop this smooth, steady cinematic mask mutation. She could not even halt it temporarily to examine each step of the process and see where in the oscillating cycle between rapture and horror was the midpoint straddling heaven and hell, the nebulous realm she believed to be Limbo.

When the music started again, Roberta could no longer hear Jenny's chanting voice and could barely see Jenny's frail form drifting away in the undulating swarm of sweating, swaying people surrounding her. Colors flashed as people jumped and jerked, lime-green hair, sunshine yellow and neon pink tattoos, tie-dye rainbows glistening on cavorting flesh. It reminded Roberta of the time when she and Jenny, as adolescents, got temporarily lost in an amusement park, wandering amidst the sparkling, eerie glow of machines and manic merriment while a mirror maze clown shrieked with laughter at the wayward souls unaware they were trapped forever in a pseudo-euphoric playground. Then and now the merriment seemed tinged with poison, as if it were manufactured in a bioweapons or sinister pharmaceutical lab.

The poison sizzled against her skin as the solstice sun mercilessly penetrated her bare arms and legs. Despite the intense heat, everyone kept dancing, legs flailing like puppet's, music screaming like the clown's derisive laughter, pounding drums and feet rumbling like the incessant whir of carnival wheels turning.

The poison dripped, like melting candle wax, from the woman standing next to Roberta, then it spread, oozing from person to person, faces liquefying and congealing into hideous grimaces. As in that old Doors song her mom used to play, everyone seemed sinister, alien, depraved.

While Jenny, mirage-like, would briefly appear then disappear within the melting. transmuting horde of people, Roberta struggled to follow. Each step felt as if she were sinking in quicksand, weight and gravity pulling her down into the muddy soil. From her parched throat she called for Jenny, but her dry, wispy croaks were swallowed up by the turbulent throng of music and voices.

Onward the crowd pushed, a myriad-legged organism inexorably driven to a destination Roberta feared. The slowly surging millipede-like momentum was building, pushing everything in its relentless movement towards this as yet-unidentifiable danger Roberta could sense lurking with foul, oily breath in the distance. Her instincts, sharper, more selfish and survival-oriented than her muddled thoughts, warned Roberta to try to escape before it was too late, but she was desperate to save Jenny if she could get to her in time.

Roberta's fear and desperation turned to terror when she became aware of a metallic clattering distinct from the clangs, rumbles, and reverberations of the music. The shrieking sound was louder now, filled with anguish, like that of a demonic newborn baby torn from a bloody womb or a damned soul being tossed into Hell.

The sun's rays pounded down upon Roberta, hitting her head with the sound of clattering tin. As she was pushed and jostled forward by the mechanical momentum of the crowd, she suddenly saw a glimpse of the terrifying destination towards which everyone was headed. The railroad tracks stitched together one part of the music festival area with another, cutting into what, she now recalled, used to be a pasture she would visit when she was a child. Cattle

would graze here, their gentle faces sometimes pausing mid-chew to glance sleepily at passersby such as herself who stood by the gate. They looked so peaceful, so blessed, never realizing their eventual fate. Now, where she once remembered dandelions, clover, dew-sprinkled grass and blissful bovines, there was only trampled mud divided by scarlike tracks. Where she used to hear soft, lulling moos, there were only the dissonant shrieks of the music and the trains with their poisonous petroleum cargo.

No longer able to see Jenny in the crowd, Roberta panicked when she saw the railroad gate begin to lower and the warning lights flash. She wanted to race ahead and somehow get Jenny out of danger, but she, like Jenny, and the others, were swept along with the surge.

Propelled effortlessly forward by the waves, Jenny felt as if she were surfing with her sea siblings. Involuntarily, unresistingly swept along with her kindred, she felt suddenly, paradoxically, free. Relieved of worry, dread, sadness, or any other human sources of suffering, she was one with the ever-flowing sea that carried her along to an inescapable fate. Amidst the siren songs serenading her, she heard a murmur of voices chanting something that reminded her of childhood summers at the beach.

"Limbo! Limbo!" the voices chanted, one voice echoing another, faint at first, then louder, a shout, a multitude of mouths screaming "Limbo!" Jenny raised her voice, merging hers with the rest. "Limbo!" she shrieked.

Roberta finally glimpsed Jenny again in the screeching throng. Jenny was near the tracks now, laughing and screeching "Limbo" along with the rest. Horrified, Roberta watched as one by one people in the lurching wave lowered themselves while approaching the flashing gate. Bending down as low as they could get, some had already passed through under the gate and were on the other side, waving and encouraging the others to follow.

As the crowd parted slowly to let each person have their turn limboing past the gate, Roberta could see Jenny more clearly. Only a short distance separated Jenny from Roberta now. While those safe on the other side of the railroad track cheered encouragement to the rest, Roberta watched as Jenny lowered her slender body with the agile grace of a gymnast.

The crowd's roar felt like a warm tropical breeze, and Jenny was a sapling gently bending with its encouraging caress. Easily clearing the obstructing gate, she stepped onto the track.

The too-late scream of the train's brakes, the stupefied, incoherent shriek of the people who were able to see the tracks, the fainter, puzzled gasps of the others, and the gurgling cry of the dying victim mingled with the discordant electronic wails of the still-blaring music. Nearly choking with dread, Roberta shoved her way through the now-thinning crowd beside the tracks.

Thick warm liquid filled Jenny's mouth. Like the sea water Jenny had often inadvertently swallowed while swimming in the ocean as a child, this liquid tasted of salt and once-living beings nurtured by it. At first she had felt a crushing, agonizing pressure that seemed to engulf her whole body, as if it were a boa constrictor squeezing her into oblivion. Then she felt a separation beginning, a distancing, as if she were a balloon looking down upon her body. Light as air, she floated. Although a part of her was still tethered to her body, aware of the liquid spilling down her throat, the other part was emotionally detached from any physical pain or discomfort. Only residual emotions and the eidetic ghosts of her memories, flickered within the inner red-lit theater beyond her closed eyes. Twinges of sadness mixed with bittersweet nostalgia as the film that was once her life played over and over until the reel, now broken, ended with a staticky flash of blinding white light.

Jenny did not hear Roberta's horrified sobs, nor did she see the gore-smeared tracks. She was far away from all that, somewhere else or nowhere, but as the music played interminably, indifferently, like a robotic god, Roberta's trauma had just begun. For the rest of her life, Roberta would re-experience these moments that seemed to be in between time, trapped in a limbo land like a train stuck on a track nowhere to escape, no way to ever forget.

#### **About the Author:**

Alison Armstrong is the author of two literary horror novels (*Revenance* and *Toxicosis*), a novella (*Vigil and Other Writings*), and a collection of writings addressing women and horror archetypes (*Consorting with the Shadow: Phantasms and the Dark Side of Female Consciousness*). A member of the Horror Authors Guild, she loves living in New Orleans and exploring beautiful, eerie old places with an undying past.

**Blog:** <u>Horror Vacui</u> **Facebook:** Alison Armstrong

#### Summer Storm | Bryan C. Laesch

It just seemed like one of those storms we got every summer. It was preceded by an unprecedented heat wave and extended dry spell that threatened to cook us alive before becoming so humid, that a dog's mouth was a preferable environment. And it wasn't just bad here, but everywhere. All around the world people suffered from the heat followed by the unbearable humidity, even in the southern hemisphere which should have been experiencing its winter. That was the first sign that something was wrong.

Then one day, night came and it never left. Not because the moon refused to set and the sun refused to rise, but because the clouds conspired to deprive us of the morning star. We simply went to bed one night and awoke the next morning to perpetual darkness. That was the second sign that something was wrong.

The weathermen forecasted we were in for one hell of a storm, but they couldn't have known how right they would be.

The first flashes of lightning came soon after. In the darkness of a false night, lightning bolts blinded as they arced across the sky and danced on the horizon. Sure, they didn't seem all that unusual given the circumstances, but when reports started coming in about their varying colors, people began to worry. Yellow and white lightning were the most common, but when red, blue, and purple bolts menaced the more superstitious parts of the world, they said the end was nigh. And not just because of the gradients of lightning, but because their priests, mystics, and medicine men began to go mad, but that was quietly covered up.

Finally, the rain came, and boy, oh boy, did it come. It came in torrential sheets accompanied by mordant thunderbolts and hurricane winds. Sometimes the rain came in huge gobs and splats ringing off our roofs more akin to hail and sometimes it came in showers that threatened to wash away the world. But regardless of how it came, it came without ceasing, and it never let up.

The news tried to keep a count of how long it rained for, but every station had a different number. Some claimed it was 14 days, others 18, and some said it was 12. But regardless of their count, they all agreed that it had started on the same day. I don't remember if that was the third or fourth or fifth sign that something was wrong.

Despite how many signs there were, I didn't really care. I was a pluviophile so the rain was my honored guest. But not everyone shared my enthusiasm it seemed, for that was when things went from weird to chilling.

More and more you began to hear stories of people losing their minds. More and more they just started going crazy, driven mad by the constant thunder, lightning, and shuddering of the storm. And it wasn't just the sound either that drove them mad as even the deaf began to lose it. Some theorized it was due to being constantly shut in, that it was some sort of cabin fever, but there were many people who continued to live their lives despite the storm. Many still went to work and went out as a state of emergency had never been called. So what was driving them mad?

One thing that was common across all cases was that those who were close to the victims claimed that their loved ones had seemed normal the night before and seemed to have woken up with a diseased mind. Their thoughts were scattered, their eyes wide, and they were paranoid with fear. They shivered, mumbled nonsense, cradled themselves like scared children, and lashed out whenever touched. Their words made no sense and their change in disposition bore no explanation. Hundreds of thousands to hundreds of millions suffered this bizarre illness that no one could explain. But one trait that all the psychotics shared was that they feared the storm. Every flash of lightning and shudder of thunder caused them to cower, and the perpetual cascade of rain made them clutch their heads, desperate for freedom from its presence. So powerful was their fear that they developed hydrophobia and hated all forms of water. They stared at faucets, running taps, and glasses of water as if they were facing the Devil himself. And any time water touched them, they would spasm uncontrollably, throwing themselves into convulsive fits, tearing at their skin where the water touched them. They had to be tied down to be bathed or sedated to receive fluids, but upon awakening, they would realize what was done to them and suffer an immediate cardiac arrest.

The 'Storm Disease' as it came to be known, had no cure, and was a guaranteed death sentence. And I, once again, as a hydrophile, could not understand their mania. That was until one night...

I went to bed at the regular time and the day itself hadn't been irregular in any way except for the constant storm outside. As I settled down into my bed and nestled my pillow, looking forward to another night of falling asleep to the sound of the rain, I felt a strange anxiety that I had never felt before. I started to get up as soon as I felt it, but it was too late as I was fast asleep.

My dream was strange. I had the feeling I was floating, flying, and falling all at once. The air around me was cool and wet, and as I looked around, I couldn't see anything that made any sense. As the dream progressed though, the darkness around me began to take shape. I could see brilliant flashes of light periodically and hear rumbling all around

me. It soon dawned on me that I was inside the storm itself and as I realized that, I could see everything more clearly. I could see the clouds, I could see the rain, and I could see the lightning. It was an unusual experience to be sure, but as a pluviophile, it wasn't wholly unwelcome. That was until I began to notice something else.

I could feel another presence out among the clouds. I turned this way and that looking for it, but I couldn't see it despite the fact that I felt it all around me. It was everywhere around me and I shivered as I began to appreciate just how enormous it was. It slowly began to dawn on me that the presence was as big as the clouds around me. And further, the more I concentrated and the deeper I fathomed, the more I began to realize that it wasn't just out in the clouds around me, but rather it was in the *whole* storm, *worldwide*.

It wasn't just in the storm, it was the storm. It was the clouds, the rain, and the lightning. It was the wind and the thunder, and worse of all, it covered the whole Earth. It was everywhere.

As this dawned on me, I swore I heard a voice in my head. It was wholly alien and moved with a rhythm that I can only describe as a chuckle. What I thought might have been words followed, and although I didn't understand them, I understood their meaning. The *thing* asked if I wanted to see it. Before I could answer, a lightning bolt flashed across the sky and somewhere behind a thick clump of clouds was an enormous shadow. It resembled a triangle, but looked to be made up of clumps of ethereal flesh from which tentacles and tendrils extended. There was another flash of lightning and the shadow was bigger. It had moved closer to me and I became absolutely terrified.

There was another flash and it loomed all the larger. There were only a few clouds left separating me from the thing and I had no desire to see it. I wanted to escape, but I didn't have the power. I didn't know how to. The thing chuckled again, enjoying my panic. I saw another flash of lightning and just as the thing's skin came into view, I forced myself awake and out of the dream!

I ran to the bathroom and turned on the light. I splashed water on my face and gulped a glass or two. I tried to regain my senses, but as I looked in the mirror and I watched the water run down my face, a new horror overcame me.

The thing, whatever it was, was the storm. And it had been raining for weeks on end. It had the ability to be anywhere it wanted, so long as it was connected to the storm, and the rain from the storm was everywhere. It had made it into our lakes and rivers, into our pipes and drains, and further into our taps and faucets, and I had just splashed that thing upon my face. I had just drank it! It was all over me and within me. I could feel it there, laughing at my predicament as it infested my body and my mind. Every little secret I had was known to it and everything I am was now a part of it. But worst of all, it was now a part of me, and I could feel its presence. I could feel its tentacles and tendrils as if they were my own. I could feel its cold, clammy skin as it floated somewhere within the storm, and I could see its horrible 'face'.

Before I could go absolutely mad, I had to do something to get it out of me. I wiped the water from my face and I rushed to my nightstand. There was only one thing to do. I snatched up my pocket knife and prepared to plunge the knife into my gut, but that's when the absolute, horrible truth dawned on me. It had been raining for weeks and was in our water the whole world over. I had been drinking, washing, and bathing in the 'storm' as had everyone else, and that could mean only one thing for the whole wide world.

#### **About the Author:**

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

Blog: <u>Bryan C. Laesch</u> Instagram: @bryanclaesch



#### Hardening | B. T. Petro

"Child," my mother scolded, "if you are to be queen after me, you must harden yourself. People will live or die by your decisions. Lives and kingdoms will be changed. But above all else, the needs of the realm must prevail."

Thus, it was that I had tutors instead of playmates, sparring sessions instead of dance lessons.

On my sixteenth name day, I stood over my Queen Mother as she took her dying breath, her lips already blue from the poisoned wine.

"Mother," I scolded, "The realm will prevail. Thanks to my upbringing, this decision wasn't really all that hard."

#### Return of the Bereginya | B. T. Petro

The wise women of Jacubany long ago prophesied the return of the Bereginya fairies to the Tatra Mountains and took strong measures to ensure that their words would not be forgotten. Young women for generations were schooled by their grandmothers that 'They will come when a fire ring surrounds the moon above Gerlach Peak and be a time of great feasting. Be prepared'.

Thus, it was the village rejoiced when scientists from around the globe descended upon their isolated town for the Blood Moon solar eclipse.

The wise women were correct about our return, but the feasting will be ours.

#### An Understandable Mix-Up | B. T. Petro

In hindsight, the situation regarding Roger Stroud was understandable. The authorities bought us a man they found incoherent, without any ID, and wandering in an alley not far from Monument Memory Care Manor. His wiry physique, scraggly beard, and sleeve tattoos matched the description we had broadcast.

Our staff just doubled his medications when he protested that he didn't belong here.

Imagine our surprise when the real Stroud returned three days later and demanded to have his old room back. We at the Manor definitely need to be better at identifying our residents than we are at disposing of them.

#### Sorceress Datale's Apprentice | B. T. Petro

Darina of Jacubany Stedding bested a field of a score of candidates to become my latest apprentice. Agile as a cat, she was undefeated in combat with both weapons and magic. Her knowledge of woodland lore and standard spells was remarkable given her upbringing in such a remote and backward village.

Thus, it was unexpected that her attempt to produce a simple concoction would prove fatal. She likely misread the instruction 'Add a pound of nitre into the ingredients. Mix.' as 'And pound the nitre into the ingredients mix.'

All applicants for my next apprentice will be tested for dyslexia.

#### **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.



#### You've Come a Long Way...Maybe? The Question of Gender in Horror

By day, I teach high school students: four classes of senior English and one rotation of Reading Enrichment. The latter is a course designed specifically for students who struggle with literacy, and as such, I try my best to select texts for them that feature characters with whom they can identify. As the old adage goes, books should serve as both windows and mirrors.

By some bizarre scheduling peculiarity, more than eighty percent of the students on my roster identify as male. A 2011 study published in the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* discovered that the gender of a protagonist matters when presenting a text to male students: they prefer to read stories about boys and often are engaged in a story that features a girl as the main character only if she is a "quirky take" on a male character.<sup>1</sup>

In a way, the same rules apply to adults, though perhaps in a slightly looser dynamic. Even if we engage with a text willingly, we have to find something in a character on which to hitch our wagon—a mutual ambition, a shared background, maybe even just a minor commonality of experience—otherwise, why bother going along for the ride? For those choosing to lose themselves in a story, does the gender of the main character(s) matter? If it does, at least horror is leading the charge in challenging those rusty shackles of gender inequality and role rigidity.

Or is it?

In 2017, the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media joined with Google to study gender portrayal in the most popular films of 2014, 2015, and 2016; their machine-learning technology measured screen time and speaking time and compiled the data into what they termed a "GD-IQ."<sup>2</sup> Overall, their results are unsurprising: across most genres of film (action, suspense, comedy, crime), male characters are seen and heard nearly twice as often as female ones. There was, however, one exception in their results: horror films.<sup>3</sup> In horror, women are both seen and heard as often their male counterparts; in some cases, even more so.

Before horror pulls a muscle patting itself on the back, though, one must argue that despite women's equal *physical* presence in horror, the roles assigned to female characters don't always avoid slipping into institutionalized misogyny. In *The Monstrous-Feminine*, Barbara Creed points out that female characters in horror are too often limited to roles as mates or mothers.<sup>4</sup> Even in the so-called New Horror, the wave of socially and politically conscious dark fiction that has fought its way to the forefront of horror over the past decade, "women [are] still miserably trapped by men and the household." Despite the strides made by female authors and directors, archetypes of the damsel in distress that must be saved or the hypersexual vamp that must be punished perpetuate "while their male counterparts are depicted as smart and heroic characters." Even more troubling is the insistence by many critics that horror, as a genre, continues to wallow in a gendered rut of its own making: "the masculine roles such as the antagonist or monster figure are upheld by a male or a masculinized figure, whereas women are more than often the victim of highly sexualized violence."

One archetype unique to the genre is, of course, the final girl, and one might argue that it is in this trope that horror inarguably breaks free of traditional gender confinements through the character's exhibition of strength, endurance, and freedom from reliance on male saviors. However, in her book *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film,* Carol Clover points out that while the final girl's "smartness, gravity, competence in mechanical and other practical matters, and sexual reluctance set her apart from the other girls," the character's rejection of traditional "feminine" traits and adoption of male-associated independence aligns her "ironically, with the very boys she fears or rejects, not to speak of the killer himself," and thus, in this sense, she never truly breaks free from a reliance on men: she simply assimilates to join their ranks. Still, in a genre where rape revenge plotlines unfortunately still draw avid viewership, it is refreshing to see a bright light of female empowerment shine from a source outside of sexual assault survivorship. As Kinitra Brooks notes in her critical analysis of race and gender in zombie fiction and media, the final girl "confronts those societal forces that threaten women because there is no authority figure to intervene and she must survive using her own capabilities." If nothing else, the final girl trope is a force of gender dichotomy, one that pushes readers and viewers alike to reconsider the female stereotypes previously ingrained.

Why does horror seem to cater to a male audience? The pat response has always been that males are the primary consumers of horror. However, in Jonathan Norman's 2018 study of the correlation between personality and predilection for horror movies, the highest indicator of horror enjoyment was not gender at all but rather, a propensity for loneliness or social isolation, <sup>10</sup> an experience ubiquitous to males, females, and nonbinary individuals. As it turns out, whether someone gravitates toward horror "may be less determined by sex than by age and personality." <sup>11</sup>

Despite its flaws, horror may appeal to women specifically because, unlike many genres, it actively challenges gender norms and expectations. <sup>12</sup> Shelley Stamp, Professor of Film at the University of California, Santa Cruz, notes that "horror, more than any other genre, deals openly with questions of gender, sexuality, and the body." <sup>13</sup> Many classic monsters, for instance, exhibit fluidity in gender and sexuality. In her presentation last fall at Missouri Western State University, Professor Dawn Terrick noted that "vampires both reflect and affect the culture that they are written in and for. They reflect our, the readers', doubts, fears, and desires. But the monster figure can also affect and subvert societal norms in terms of, for example, gender roles and sexuality." <sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, for the genre as a whole, there is still quite a distance to go in terms of reflecting contemporary beliefs about those same gender roles and sexuality. Vampires—and other classic horror tropes—may have existed for centuries, but "the increase in gender fluidity...since the 1800s is not reflected by the continuity of gender dichotomy in horror characters." <sup>15</sup>

To steal a tagline from a not-so-subtle feminist appropriation from the 1960s: horror, you've come a long way, baby. But—my apologies to King—sometimes, the mile is so long. Fortunately, the visceral and experimental nature of horror lends itself "to become conscious of the social constructs of gender scripts, that gender is [a concept that exists only] in our mind and can be rewritten." Horror, at its core, is built on fear, the most primal of human emotions, one that does not discriminate based on gender. If architects of horror do their job well, if they continue to create three-dimensional, relatable characters over antiquated, cardboard stereotypes, consumers will walk away from their work feeling unnerved, unhinged, and perhaps even terrified—no matter how they identify.

#### **About the Author:**

Rebecca Rowland hails from New England, and most of her fiction takes place in the Boston and Western Massachusetts area. She is the editor of six horror anthologies, including the best-selling *Unburied: A Collection of Queer Dark Fiction*, and the author of *The Horrors Hiding in Plain Sight, Shagging the Boss*, and *Optic Nerve* (out in July from D & T Publishing) and the co-author of *Pieces* and *The View Master*. Her short fiction, book reviews, and guest essays regular appear in a variety of venues, and she is an Active member of the Horror Writers Association, the Whip City WordSmiths, and the Horror Authors Guild. For a peek at what shiny object she's obsessing over these days, follow her on Instagram <a href="mailto:@Rebecca Rowland books">@Rebecca Rowland books</a>, on Slasher <a href="mailto:@Rebecca Rowland books.com">@Rebecca Rowland books</a>.com.



<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>Moeller, Robin A. "Aren't These Boy Books?" Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy 54, no. 7 (2011): 476+.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, and Google. "The Women Missing from the Silver Screen and the Technology Used to Find Them," 2017. //www.google.com/main/gender-equality-films/.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup>Younger, Beth. "Women in Horror: Victims No More." *The Conversation*, June 25, 2017. http://theconversation.com/women-in-horror-victims-no-more-78711.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup>Norman, Jonathan. "Personality Types and the Enjoyment of Horror Movie." Journal of Social and Psychological Sciences 11, no. 1 (2018).

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup>Schubart, Mastering Fear, 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup>Berlatsky, Noah. "Carrie at 40: Why the Horror Genre Remains Important for Women." *The Guardian*, November 3, 2016, sec. Film. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/nov/03/carrie-stephen-king-brian-de-palma-horror-films-feminism.

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SHAGGING

SHAGING

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#### Featured Book | Shagging the Boss, by Rebecca Rowland

Shag:

- 1) To have sexual intercourse
- 2) A form of rough pipe tobacco
- 3) A sea bird, A small cormorant
- 4) A thick pile on a carpet

-Urban Dictionary

"It's not enough to be smart, or bloody gorgeous, or dirty rich. You need to be at least two simultaneously. All three if you're over thirty."

That's what my employer, Daniel, told me one evening while we were sitting in a bone dry hot tub, him smoking a bowlful of Vanilla Cavendish, both of us still wearing our clothes from the dinner party. I loved the way he said the words *dirty* and *thirty*, his Brisbane accent slicing the ends of the *r*'s and holding them up in the air between two fingers. He frowned as if disagreeing with an unseen quarreler, then looked at me. "How old are you again?" he asked.

"Twenty-three," I said, stretching my arms behind my head in an exaggerated yawn.

"Too old to shag," he said, a funny, half-smile on his face.

"Sorry?" I asked.

"We used to visit my cousins in Canada every Christmas," Daniel said. "If they had a snow, they'd drag us out to the Main Street, sneak over to a car stopped at a traffic light and grab hold of the bumper. When the car began to move, they'd be pulled along with it, like Santa on his sleigh." He relit the end of his pipe and inhaled deeply. "'Called it shagging," he added, his breath held tight within his lungs and his voice halted and miserly. He tucked his fingers in between the third and fourth buttons of his dress shirt and rested them there, his hand hiding its top like an ostrich. Daniel's shoulders were broad, Paul Bunyan broad, but his belly was swollen and round like a woman a short season away from giving birth.

"I could do that," I said, smiling with my lips pursed tight.

Daniel blew a thick cloud of smoke at me and I steeled myself to keep from coughing uncontrollably. "I'll bet you could, my ingénue." He removed his hand from his shirt, grabbed my arm, and unbuttoned the cuff of my shirt, then pushed it roughly past my elbow. Predatorily, he ran a finger along the center.

I jerked my arm away and pushed the sleeve down. "Seems like it would be fun," I added.

Daniel smiled, but it was not the kind for an expression of happiness or even bemusement. His eyes glazed over into round black marbles before his hand snatched my arm again and wrenched it painfully toward his open mouth, his thick red tongue running back and forth along his teeth, trying to dislodge them. I closed my eyes and felt his hot breath just below the crook of my elbow, a splotch of dripped saliva wetting the fabric there.

Daniel taught me everything I know about publishing.

#

My parents named me after a city they fell in love with the year after they graduated college, the nine months they spent backpacking around the United States instead of submitting the first payments on their student loans. "We should have named you *Navient* instead," my mother remarked my senior year of high school as I completed my financial aid application. "Christ, we've had a longer relationship with them than just about anyone."

I have two siblings, one older and the other younger. Fortunately for me, each of us has one of those gender-neutral city names, the kind that makes teachers bend their voices into question marks when they read it for roll call on the first day of school. My parents were those "progressive" Gen-X-ers who painted their children's bedrooms in green and yellow hues and filled the toy box with equal shares of dolls and dump trucks. I often joked that with as many times as they folded their arms into pretzels patting their own backs about it, they should have bought stock in Ben Gay. My mom always rolled her eyes when I said this. My dad simply ignored my criticism and tuned out my snark by turning up Pearl Jam or Soundgarden or whatever unwashed guitar-y goth music was playing in our house at the time.

He died of a massive heart attack on their way to see me collect my diploma for a Master's degree in English. My mother told me it happened during the first or second hour of the flight.

Fortunately, none of us are named Albany, Toledo, or Chicago.

When I had boarded the same airline two years previous, I thought I would never see the Boston suburb of my childhood again, not unless it was Thanksgiving or maybe a wedding or funeral. Mom's three children lived scattered around the country, but she refused to sell the three-floor Victorian in West Medford after Dad's sudden departure, and

while I hated being a stereotype, I found myself lugging my belongings back into my parents' cavernous home after graduate school, leaving most of my networked Northern California connections 3085 miles away.

As I dragged my steamer trunk of books up the wooden stairs and onto the broad front porch, I told myself, it was just temporary, a change of scenery required only until my flummoxed parent was back on her feet, but one month after I arrived, Mom stopped going to work. She stopped going to her beloved book club. She stopped going to the supermarket. A month after that, she stopped going to the washing machine in the basement. Or to the shower in the bathroom of the top-floor master suite.

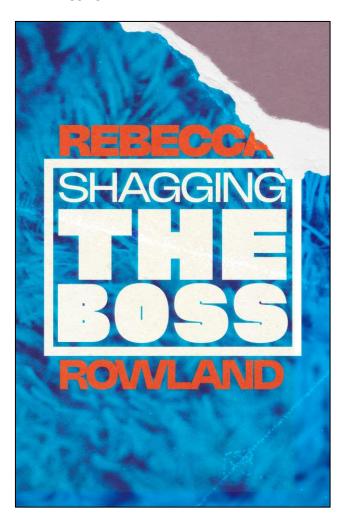
"My love?" she said, her voice business-like on the phone. "The house is yours. I'm just going to Bertha Mason it for a few years, if you don't mind."

I pulled the cell from my ear and stared at the screen, listening for her voice's echo from two floors above. She hung up, ordered a microwave, coffeemaker, and a rudimentary set of dishes and cups from Amazon, and never came downstairs again, at least not while I was home. I set up shop in the small back den off the kitchen, the two of us making an unspoken agreement to leave the second floor vacant, my childhood home now a sandwich of empty calories.

Each morning, I called my mother to ask how she was doing. "I'm getting on" is all she would say. That, and "Have you uncovered any of my missing earrings?" She was referring to the shag carpet in the stuffy front living room, its strands measuring nearly two inches in length so that when I walked across it, my feet sunk down to be smothered in its quicksand of blue yarn tentacles. Over the years, paperclips, Lego bricks, and even a Matchbox car or two had disappeared within its depths, my mother's earrings (and occasionally, a delicate necklace or two) fellow victims, the items only resurfacing when Mom rented an industrial carpet cleaner.

"Not yet," I always replied, though much of that was from lack of trying. The time I spent in the front living room was limited, at best. At the time of the Riley Book Fair, nothing had been unearthed from the plush piles of carpet.

Not yet.



Shagging the Boss is available on Amazon!

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Featured Project

Dancing in the Shadows:

A Tribute to Anne Rice

Featured Artist

Jeanette Andromeda

**Featured Book**Shagging the Boss

Featured Author

Rebecca Rowland

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