# The Sirens Call

Winter 2021 issue 56

A Dark Fiction

«L Horror Zine!

Short Stories, Flash Fiction, Poetry, and Artwork

Featured Antist: Dave Dick

Teatured Cartoonists D.S. Vllery Goulash

Teatured Authors
Mike Salt

Teatmed Book; The House on Harlan

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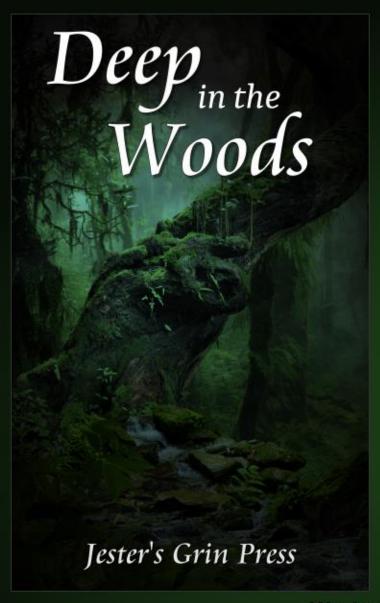
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## OPEN CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS



Be it day or night, the forest hides its secrets from our eyes. Whether you find yourself alone or with others, its innocence can be deceiving, and its inhabitants deadly. What horrors await within the wooded land where nature reigns supreme?

Be creative! Your story can be supernatural, otherworldly, creature-horror, or down-right evil.

Deep in the Woods hides a playground for your imagination!

Required theme:
All stories must take place in the woods/forest and must be horror or dark fiction.

### Word count:

Stories between 4,000 - 8,000 words will be considered for payment of \$25.00 USD. Stories between 2,000 - 3,000 words will be considered for payment of \$10.00 USD.

Submission deadline: January 31, 2022

All submissions MUST be sent to SUBMISSIONS@SIRENSCALLPUBLICATIONS.COM

\*\* NO REPRINTS WILL BE CONSIDERED \*\*

As per our publishing standards, stories containing pedophilia, bestiality, or graphic rape scenarios will not be considered.

Visit us at SirensCallPub.com for further details!

### The Shadow Children | Alyson Faye

Every night the shadow children slink into the abandoned playground, tucked at the ferny fringes of Shipston Wood, beneath the derelict tramway. The children swing their bony legs and arms, their limbs only the width of a pin and scissor the darkness with their cartwheels. Their skins, white as burnished bone, shine in the moonlight. Hunger gnaws at their retracted bellies, as they cup emaciated hands to drink the lunar rays.

They wear bark shoes, and clothes of leaves, stitched with strands of hair stolen from the night creatures' lairs. They know nothing of sunlight, or of fields rich with green grass, and rainbow flowers. They know nothing of a world where children run in the sunshine, swim in the sea or feast on burgers and chips.

Once in a while though these two worlds collide. The playground and the woods draw others in the night hours: the homeless, the dispossessed, the soon-to-be-vanished, the lost and sometimes just an unwary teen out roaming—alone. Isolated from the safety of their pack.

If they were local they would have heard the legend, deciphered the clues in the graffiti on the playground's surfaces—those tiny Sharpie-penned figures; stickmen dancing, hiding, chasing the others. If they were village-born and raised they'd know to never venture into the playground when the moon hung swollen-bellied. But, there are always some who do not know and worse, do not believe.

The teenage lad sits, legs dangling at the top of the slide, fags in hand, tins clinking in the orange carrier bag. He catches a flicker of movement from the corner of his eye, a flurry of movement, but there's no wind that night and so how can it be a shadow scurrying, when there is no sun?

"Is anyone there?" he calls. He nibbles at his fingernails and his nervous tic is copied by the unseen watchers.

The wind whistles and the swings creak, but no one answers him, yet. Instead the shadow children peek out at the flesh-made boy, smelling his sweat, tasting, through their milk-white fingertips, his fear and fake bravado.

"Is anyone there?" they echo, giggling at the strange sounds coming from the hole in the creature's face.

The lad stands up, oozing testosterone, which the shadow children eagerly suck in. "Come out and face me then!" He spins around, once, twice, but keeps his back to the slide.

He sees skinny figures slip between the railings, people the swings, fill the holes in the climbing frame and he hears a whisper, of many voices blending, "We want to play. Come and join us."

The moment stretches, the woods wait, and the moon watches his children. The creature of skin and blood eyes the gate, an escape route. He senses that beyond he will be safer. The curtained windows of the estate's houses see nothing. The bland brick boxes are so close, so tantalisingly near, yet he knows their inhabitants will not hear him or come out to help.

"C'mon, move," he tells himself. "They're not real, they can't hurt you." Sweat seeps from his pores, leaving his spoor on the air.

The moon goes behind a cloud.

Blind the lad freezes.

In that moment he has become—prey.

They come for him, skittering as one, a mass of quivering, fluxing blackness. The shadow children cloak him, choke him and consume the creature who is made of bone, blood and muscle. He tastes so much more delicious than moonlight. And the children are so very hungry.

The orange carrier bag hits the tarmac; the cans make a discordant melody in the night air. A curtain twitches over the road, but nothing else stirs.

### **About the Author:**

Alyson lives in the UK with her family and four rescue animals, and is often on the moor with her Borador, Roxy. She also swims, sings, tutors, edits for an indie press and watches a lot of films - horror to those from the Golden Age of Hollywood. She always wanted to dance with Fred Astaire and catch a train with Cary Grant.

Twitter: @AlysonFaye2



### El Gusano Verde | Miracle Austin

Can a monster control what he is or just his prey?

When he wanted something, he went after it, no matter what or who it could hurt. Someone else's possession could easily become his.

Regardless of all his extracurricular activities outside or inside our relationship, I always took him back, forgave him—too many times. He could tell me any lie, and I believed it.

I never wanted any of the plastic surgeries he recommended. He claimed how much sexier I would look for him, so I caved in. He never stayed with me for any of the procedures. A neighbor was kind enough to drive me home after each hospital visit. He refused to touch me, until I looked perfect to him. If there was something he didn't like about the surgeon's work, then he would schedule me another appointment with a different doctor.

My parents and old friends begged me to return home, in Texas, on several occasions. Yet, he convinced me to stay with him every time in New Hampshire. He told me that he couldn't survive without me, would be miserable, and probably off himself by jumping off Piscataqua River Bridge. So, I stayed with him and abandoned my family. He allowed me to call my mom and dad on their birthdays and holidays, if he was in a good mood.

Whenever he thought I was gaining weight, he would do the grocery shopping. He always locked the food pantry and froze my credit cards, along with my bank account, until he was satisfied with the number on the scale.

Seven months ago, I suffered a miscarriage. My physician shared my labs results and told me that high concentrations of diclofenac had been found in my blood. I knew what he'd done—he switched out my iron pills. My hate for him was finally confirmed. I wanted to leave him, but I knew that was forbidden.

Honestly, I figured nothing would ever happen to him. He was untouchable for years. However, it's true what they say. You can have it good for a long time, until you no longer do—and that worked in my favor.

Playing spin the bottle that night changed Eddie's life forever...

One hour before the party, I placed a paper bag on top of the bathroom counter while he was shaving. He glanced at it. I hopped up and sat next to him, swinging my bare legs back and forth. I tucked my hand inside the waist of his towel and pulled him in between my legs.

Grabbing his blade, I finished shaving him. He bent down and pressed his wet mouth onto my caramel lips. He started massaging my lower back and ran his hands down my thighs.

"Slow down, cowboy, aren't you interested in what's inside the bag?" I asked, glancing over to where the bag was sitting.

"I would rather concentrate on what's right in front of me," he whispered, both of his hands hugging my hips.

"You might want to take a little peek inside the bag first," I replied and pried his hands off.

"Let me check out what you have over there," he said, stepping back from me. He rinsed his face and grabbed a towel to dry off. Then, he opened the bag wide and retrieved two foil-wrapped gifts with white bows. "Wow, Kat!" he said. "My birthday isn't until next Friday." He grinned.

"Yeah, I know. I came across them the other day at this little, hidden shop called Codona's Den of Secrets, when I was driving home one evening."

"Sounds kinky," he winked, sliding his tongue across his bottom lip.

"C'mon, Eddie, be serious for ten seconds," I begged.

"Okay, please continue."

"The shopkeeper told me that they were her last ones in stock and extremely unique. So, I couldn't resist. She promised me that you *deserved* them, after I told her all about you."

"Really? What did you tell her?" he asked with his eyes glued on mine.

I jumped off the counter and said, "Oh the usual. How much you love me... Go ahead, unwrap them."

We entered the bedroom. I lit two, raspberry-scented candles on my dresser and commanded Alexa to play my favorite playlist—*I Am* by Mary J. Blige, started playing. I grabbed his hand and guided him to sit down on the floor on top of the Persian multi-colored rug.

Facing each other, he unwrapped the gifts.

"I didn't expect these two things, Kat. I haven't played spin the bottle, since college. Our version was cheap—a broken chalk board with challenges scribbled on it. Plus, there was no full tequila bottle," he said, holding up the flat box and bottle above his head.

"This tequila is very rare," I replied, unfolding the game board—triangular divisions with bolded phrases written inside each slot.

"I've had plenty of tequila drinks. I'm sure this is no different," he said.

"This one is like no other, according to what the shop lady told me. If your spin lands on the bottle on the board, then the person who drinks from the bottle and consumes the worm will be given an *extraordinary* gift," I explained, as I placed the bottle in the middle of the board on its belly.

"Really, Kat? I've heard crazy stories like that before. I've eaten my share of worms, and I've never experienced any special Marvel or DC supernatural abilities. That old lady doesn't know what she's talking about. Let's get dressed, we're going to be late," he said, tapping his Rolex with his index finger.

I stretched out my arm to block him from getting up. "Just one quick game. You know we won't be the only ones running behind—we never are."

Eddie remained where he was. "Alright, just one. He extended his legs opposite of mine."

I spun the bottle first, and it landed on the truth or dare option.

"Truth," I blurted out.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "I could ask you something that you may not want to tell me." He stared at me.

"Yes, I'm good with you asking me whatever." I rolled up my denim sleeves over my arms.

"Alright...how many guys have you slept with since we've been together?"

I paused for less than a minute.

"None, only you, my love," I said, leaning over to run my hand down his smooth face and sliding it down to his chest. "Your turn."

He gripped my wrist, pressing his nails into my flesh, with his hand and threw it back into my face.

"Ouch!" I screamed out.

"I already knew that answer, but I wanted to hear it from your mouth, because you know that you belong to me, Kat."

Bending over the board, Eddie spun the bottle, and it went around several times before it also stopped on the truth or dare challenge.

"Dare," he said without any hesitation.

"Hmm... you didn't want to choose truth like me?" I asked, narrowing my amber eyes towards him, and blowing my curly bangs up.

"Nope, I'll stick with my dare."

"Your choice, right?"

"Yes. Dare me to do something," Eddie insisted.

"Are you sure?"

"You already know—I'm not afraid of anything."

"Okay, if you're sure."

"I am. Let me have it!" he yelled and laughed, pulling his legs up and crossing them.

"Let me think... I dare you to drink and eat the worm inside the bottle."

"Hey, that's really two dares."

"Well, if you're too afraid to take my dare on, then you'll automatically default to the other option, truth..."

"Listen, I'm not afraid of your little dares. I've done a lot worse." He smiled.

"I'm sure you have." I looked down and back up at him.

He stared down at the bottle and watched the green maggot-like worm float up and down in its liquid home. Then, he sat it upright. He was analyzing the worm, and it was a good thing he was doing so.

Although I've never eaten one, I've seen a few worms, but this worm looked different, compared to others I've seen. Its puffy, segmented body seemed to cast off a bright, lime bioluminescence. A twirly, red antenna was centered between its mandibles.

When he tapped on the glass, the liquid seemed to glow, as well.

"Hey, are you seeing this, Kat?" he asked.

Scooting closer to him, I said, "Yes, the lady told me that it may do that."

"I'm not sure if I should drink this, and I'm definitely not eating this thing," he gulped. "It could make me sick or something."

"Eddie, don't tell me you're afraid of a little worm bathing in some alcohol, but hey, if you are, then I totally understand. Hand the bottle over to me," I demanded with my hand stretched out. "Come on now, give it to me... I'll do it."

He shoved my hand away and said, "Whatever. I got this!" He started unscrewing the metal cap off the bottle and kept his eyes on the worm. He placed his nose near the opening and took in a deep whiff. The alcohol aroma pierced his nose and eyes, making them water. He sniffed and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

I watched him without blinking.

Wrapping his lips around the bottle, he tilted his head back to take a sip. "Hmm, tastes like sweet, crushed blueberries doused with sugar and a little lime juice. Not bad." He continued to drink it all, until the worm disappeared from the bottle into his mouth.

"So, how was it?" I asked.

"Tangy, cold, and gooey. The worm slipped right down my throat before I could chew it up. I've always loved to chew the worms, to savor their taste. Like I thought, no x-ray vision. Oh, well... Let's get ready."

We both started getting dressed.

"Make sure you wear the black dress tonight," he demanded with his cold eyes piercing through me.

"Hold on, I brought a new dress," I said as I pulled out a plum, ruffle backless dress with a plunging neckline out of my closet. "Isn't it beautiful?"

"Absolutely not! If I wanted to take a hooker for all my friends to gawk at to the party and pass her around later, then I would stop off at Enright Park and pick one up." He turned his back away from me and flipped his hand into the air. "Hurry up! You don't want to upset me tonight, Kat," he hissed, balling up his right fist.

Tears filled my eyes. I placed it back on the rack with my quivering hand and chose the black one that resembled nun attire.

Fifteen minutes past, and I was in the bathroom brushing blush onto my cheeks. I watched him in the mirror and saw Eddie sitting in the chair. He was bent down about to tie up his shoes.

"Damn it!" he yelped.

I dropped my brush on the floor and stepped out. I asked, "What's the matter?"

"My body feels funny, like cactus, thorn bullets are shooting inside of me. My hands feel numb." He rubbed them together and flexed out his hands. "Kat, something's wrong, I can't read the numbers on my watch. There's loud ringing in my ears, and my legs feel like Jell-O. Now, I can't feel my hands, fingers, or toes."

Eddie's eyes closed, and he collapsed on the floor. He rolled over onto his back.

When he opened his eyes and turned his head to the side, my golden heels were facing him. "Kat, my vision feels like it's returning."

I knelt next to him and rubbed both sides of his face with my hands.

"Oh, poor Eddie doesn't feel well."

"What did you give me?" He stuttered out in broken words.

Picking up the empty bottle, I dangled it in front of his face.

"You're about to get *everything* coming to you, Eddie Luciano," I said, pointing at the bottle. "I've known about your disloyalty for a long time and never said a word. Plus, you've been so cruel to me, since we've been together. I was searching for the perfect solution for you. Finding that little shop was it! I knew you would take the bait so easy."

Frowning at me, he screamed out, "What the hell did you give me!"

"Just a little gift that you can never give away."

"What are you talking about?"

"That little worm you ate is going to change you. You'll never cheat on me, or hurt anyone else again!"

His body began to shake, then his eyes rolled back.

"What's happening to me?" he begged in a shivering tone.

"Let me help you out. That little worm you consumed is called *El Gusano Verde*, The Green Worm—it's an assassin. They were specially designed for monsters like you—cheaters and heartbreakers. The curly antennae are called proboscis. They impaled one or more of your inner organs and injected a lethal venom inside you."

"I promise you, Kat, if I make it out of this, I'm going to kill you..." he said as foamy, bloody saliva flowed out the sides of his mouth.

"Stop talking, Eddie, you're not going to do anything to me. It's paralyzing you. Soon, it'll liquefy all your organs and slurp up its dinner. After that, it'll hike up your gastro tract, throat passage, and then crawl out of your mouth."

His body started twitching and his eyes rolled back again. He clenched his fists. A pale, greenish tone covered his face.

In a deep, gargled voice, Eddie spoke his final words, "You won't get away with this..."

"Yes, I will. The club always gets away with it. According to Mrs. Codona, the shop owner, your demise will be ruled a strange, allergic reaction with little to no explanation to why your insides dissolved. The evidence is going with me."

I carefully placed the wiggly, full *El Gusano Verde* in its padded case and slid it inside my purse to return back to Mrs. Codona to gift to a new member.

"By the way, Eddie, you remember Mrs. Codona, right? Prue's mom—she told me about you two, and how the police located Prue's car in another state, but never found her. It's been over five years, now. I know I would've been your next victim, but not after tonight."

He glared at me, until his eyes froze.

"Don't worry about the party. I'll let your friends know that you didn't feel well and needed to stay in. *Karma* is alive and well."

Blowing out the candles and exiting the scene in the plum dress I chose for me, I locked the door behind me, and descended the stairs. *Goodbye, Eddie*, I whispered to myself, as I sung, *I Am*, into the night air as snowflakes began to fall.

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

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

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Twitter: <a href="MiracleAustin7">@MiracleAustin7</a>

### Nature | Doug Hawley

"Hey babe, let's go camping this weekend. I want to get us all alone for a big surprise. It's a secret location, so don't tell anyone what we are doing."

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."

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". Her nails and toes turned into talons as he screamed.

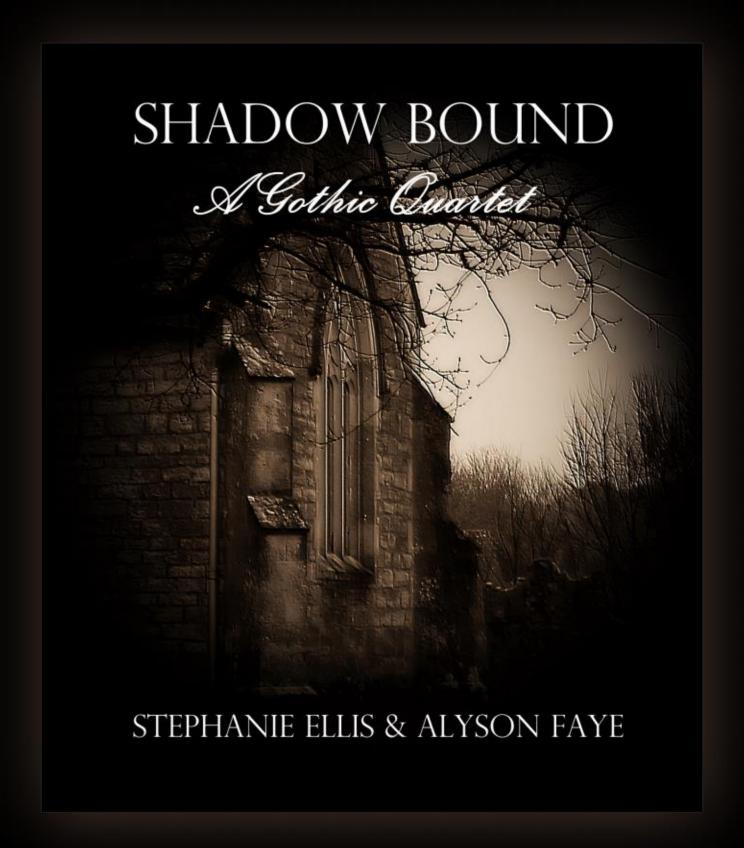
### **About the Author:**

Doug Hawley is a former math professor and actuary who now strings words together, hikes, collects music, volunteers at a charitable bookstore (Booktique) and as a park steward in a couple of parks. He lives with editor Sharon and cat Kitzhaber in Lake Oswego Oregon. Both humans were recently named Outstanding State Park Volunteers. Writing details are in his blog and website.

Blog: <a href="https://doug.car.blog">https://doug.car.blog</a>
Twitter: <a href="mailto:@DougHawley8">@DougHawley8</a>



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



### AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

### The Perfect Crime | R D Doan

"Damn, you look like you've just seen a ghost. You sure you're up for this, rook?" Mike asked as he started to change into his jumpsuit. "You've done plenty of time jumps. Don't look so worried. You'll be fine."

But I know this girl, Dave thought. He said nothing and only nodded.

Mike had been time jumping for the Detroit Police Department's CSI team for decades. Today would be Dave's first outside of training, meaning it was his first real death scene to investigate. He'd done several mock scenes and time jumped a few times for training, but never to a real death scene. He figured he'd be nervous for his first real jump, but he hadn't expected all the extra emotions that came with knowing the victim. It was obvious the department had no idea that he knew the girl, or they never would've let this be his first jump.

When Mike finished getting dressed, he sat next to Dave and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Look, I know you're probably a little nervous about seeing your first murder. Just trust your training, and remember, it already happened. Just tell yourself 'That girl is already dead.' If you can do that, it'll be like watching a murder on VR; it'll look real and sound real, but it ain't real in the moment, because it 'already happened.' Got it?"

Dave nodded as he ran through the expected scenario in his head. "So, we just time jump to the scene of the murder, wait in hiding, witness the murder, and time jump back to report what we saw and arrest the killer," he said more as a statement instead of a question.

"That's right, just like in training. Easy, peasy."

"What if we intervene or spook off the killer or something? I mean, I know the protocol. We're not allowed to intervene or change the course of time in any way, but what if we do by mistake? What if something happens to one of us while we're back there?" Dave asked, getting a little flush in the cheeks.

Mike sighed. "Just do what you're told and following your training, and everything will go as planned. Trust me. I've done this about a million times. Have there ever been slip ups or interactions with people back then? Sure. Has it changed the future? Hell if I know. All I know is I've always done my job and the bad guys have been put away for the crimes they've committed."

"But has anything ever happened to an agent? Like, has anyone not come back?"

Mike looked at his watch. "You're gonna be fine. We ain't got time for this, rook. We jump soon. Let's get moving before the jump team gets too testy."

\*\*\*

Dave thought he was pretty lucky to be paired with Mike DeGrow. Mike wasn't like the other CSI jumpers. He wasn't so 'by the book.' He was one of the oldest and most experienced jumpers, and if any other jumper had been paired with him for this jump, he wouldn't be as comfortable with what he had to do. Mike was planning to retire soon, or at least that's what Dave had heard from the other jumpers; and if that were true, he was glad to have the chance to do this jump with him.

The prep for the jump was just like in training. Their bladders and bowels were emptied, and they were given IV Phenergan to help with nausea and stimulants to prepare the brain for time travel. Even though he'd done this a half dozen times before, Dave was nervously excited to make the jump. The rush of adrenaline and the feeling of power that came with time travel was addicting. Dave couldn't fathom why Mike would ever want to retire from a job that let you feel this way and get paid for it! He supposed witnessing all those murders probably had something to do with it.

When the time came, the jump went off without a hitch. One moment, Dave could hear the jump team count down from five; then, in an instant, he found himself on his hands and knees with his heart pounding in his chest. Every hair on his body felt as if they were vibrating. After a few seconds, nausea took over as the high of the time jump wore off.

"You all right, rook?" Mike asked. "If you're gonna hurl, use a puke bag. Remember, you must carry out whatever you bring in. Don't fuck up my crime scene."

As his head cleared, Dave looked around and recognized his surroundings. They were in the victim's bedroom. The room matched the crime scene report exactly, except there were no body or blood patterns yet. They had arrived before the victim was in the room. He checked his watch on his right wrist, the one set to the time they traveled to, and noted it was 10:22 pm. The time for the jump was determined based on the last known moment she was seen alive. A bartender three blocks from her home noted that she left the bar around 10:20 with a man in his mid-to-late twenties. The jump team determined that it would have taken her about ten minutes to walk home from the bar, giving Mike and Dave just enough time to take cover to witness the crime. Forensics estimated the time of death to be somewhere between 10:40 and 11 pm. If all went well, the time jump would be quick.

Dave couldn't help but think back to the night he met the victim. She was just his type, a stunner. She was fit, but not too muscular and had short, shoulder-length blonde hair. He remembered she was wearing a red, sleeveless dress. He'd just gotten off duty and saw her walking alone. He didn't want her to run into some crazy person, so he decided to be a gentleman and provide her with some protective company.

As he approached her, he waved and showed her his badge to let her know he was safe to talk to. As they walked toward her home, she told him she and her husband were out to dinner to celebrate their first anniversary, but she had felt nauseated the whole time she was there. She wasn't in a celebrating mood as she had just caught him cheating a few days prior. She was going to tell him the marriage was over but couldn't find the courage. Instead, she told him she needed to use the restroom and left.

At some point on their walk, they came upon a small bar and went in for some drinks. From there on, Dave's memories were a little fuzzy.

He wasn't sure how he got to her house, but he remembers what happened in the bedroom. Things were about to get tricky.

\*\*\*

"You keep checking your watch because you got someplace to be? We'll be back to the station exactly ten seconds after we left, just like every other jump. Stop checking your watch and stay still. You're driving me nuts," Mike said. "Our perp will be here any second now. Don't blow our cover."

Dave was trying to think of a way to keep Mike from seeing who was about to come through the door. He was running out of time. He'd have to knock him out, but it'd have to look like an accident. He didn't want to do something that would lead to questions later. He could hit him over the head, but that could spell disaster if he didn't wake up. The only solution he could think of was to use his sedative spray. It was only for emergency use, but if it had 'accidentally' gone off and sedated Mike, he'd be in the clear. There'd be questions, but nothing too difficult to get out of, being a nervous rookie and all. It would have to do.

Dave started fidgeting with his watch on his right wrist.

"Hey Mike, let me see your watch. Mine doesn't seem to be working right."

Mike absently held his right arm over to Dave while keeping his gaze on the bedroom door.

Dave took a cursory glance at the time and said, "See? Yours is messed up too. It hasn't changed in like ten minutes."

Mike broke his gaze from the door and looked to the watch which gave Dave a chance to spray the sedative in his face. Mike hit the floor seconds later, sound asleep.

Dave watched the door open and the girl in the red dress walked in. Behind her, he saw himself. It was surreal, like he was having an out of body experience. They kissed and she slipped out of her dress, revealing matching black lace bra and panties. She sat on the edge of the bed and summoned her companion to come to her.

Dave watched as he saw himself ask the girl to hold out her hands and close her eyes. He saw himself take out his handgun and shoot her in the head. Brain and blood exploded from the back of her skull. Her body shuddered momentarily before it fell listlessly back to the bed. He saw himself shoot her in the chest a half dozen times. Blood pooled around her lifeless body and soaked the sheets.

He watched as his past self took a tissue from his pocket and wiped the doorknob on his way out.

The room was eerily quiet after the ringing in his ears cleared. Mike was still out cold.

Dave knew he had to jump back to the future soon, but he needed Mike to wake first. But for his plan to work, he'd need Mike to sleep a few more minutes. He gave Mike an extra spray for good measure.

When the victim's husband came home, Dave was waiting for him behind the bedroom door. He had to wait for the husband to call 911. When he hung up the phone, Dave stealthily walked up behind the man and shot him in the temple.

\*\*\*

Mike was still a little dazed when they arrived back at the station. He looked confused and disoriented, which wasn't too far off from what would be expected after a prolonged time jump.

"What the hell took so long to get back?" asked the jump team captain.

"We had a mishap with some sedative spray," Dave replied. "I accidentally sprayed Mike with it. He missed the whole thing. Don't worry though, I saw what happened."

"Save it for the briefing room. Captain Brinker is waiting."

\*\*\*

When Mike and Dave entered the briefing room, Dave did most of the talking. Mike was still acting a little confused.

"So, you're sure the husband murdered her then shot himself? The reports indicated possibly another perp in the room. Did you see anyone else?" Captain Brinker asked.

"Just us and the couple, I swear. Maybe I accidentally contaminated the room? I could provide a DNA sample if you'd like. If they find any of me in there, it might mean I messed up or something. It was tough doing it alone. Mike was out the whole time."

"I heard," Captain Brinker said, looking concerned. "Sedative spray mishap, huh? That's a shame. It can cause some strange side effects if you don't recover completely before time jumping." He looked to Mike. "You okay Mike?"

Mike only looked at him with confusion.

"We'd better get him off to medical."

"Hey Cap, if the case is a murder suicide, does that mean it's a closed case?"

"Don't see any reason why not. Looks like your first jump was an easy one."

"Yeah, I suppose it was. Wouldn't mind having another just like it."

### **About the Author:**

R D Doan enjoys writing dark fiction when not working his day job as a Physician Assistant. His recent work can be found in the anthologies Marisa's Recuring Nightmares & Nobody Goes Out Anymore. He's had stories appear in Sirens Call Publications eZine as well. He writes his stories in West Michigan where he lives with his lovely wife, two boys and dogs.

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### The Ice Witch | Michael Slagle

From across the bleak winter landscape, the Ice Witch calls to him again, her eerie song splintering the crisp evening air as he chops wood for tonight's fire. Sensing his weakening resolve, her plea is more forceful now, demands his surrender into her icy arms. He nearly gives in this time to her desire. But this may be the night Natalie returns.

To muffle the cry of the Ice Witch, he intensifies his focus on splitting the logs. It is strenuous work. He foolishly lost his good axe three days ago when he trailed Natalie into the forest as she fled the jealous threats of the Ice Witch. He must now attack the logs with a hatchet. The slower progress requires more frequent breaks, each rest allowing the frigid air to numb his exposed face and coat his beard with a thin layer of hoar. Worse, each pause also amplifies the Ice Witch's song. With Natalie out of the way, she senses her prey within easy reach, making her song more seductive now, more dangerous. He quickly gathers an armful of split logs and escapes into the cabin.

Inside, he places new logs over the glowing ashes, pokes at them until the dying fire resurrects and begins to cut the chill from the room. He draws water for tea from the pump at the sink and places the kettle on the grate above the fire. He sets his teacup on the scarred oak table in the center of the room. When, as an afterthought, he adds a second cup to the table, a sudden gust pounds violently against the windowpanes. Their rattling drowns a prolonged wrenching screech outside

But he is confident of the cabin's protective sturdiness and settles onto the worn cushioned chair near the fire to await Natalie's ghost. If she (it?) returns, perhaps she will bring his good axe with her. If so, he wonders, will her blood still be on it?

### **About the Author:**

An Indiana native, Michael Slagle now writes from south Florida. In lieu of travel, dining out and other pre-pandemic enjoyments, he's revisited nearly five decades of his notebooks for new story ideas. His most recent flash pieces have appeared in City.River.Tree. and 101 Words.

Facebook: Michael Slagle

### Unlucky Moon | Angela Yuriko Smith

"How am I always unlucky?"

The question was rhetorical. Topi was the one who wandered too far away. She hadn't kept an eye on the sun. Now she better find shelter fast before the bacteria began to drift in the fertile dark.

Frank Sinatra's voice crooned about flying to the moon from a deserted shop front. No one knew what powered the music behind the boards, but it had played the same tunes since as long as she had been here. She stopped and looked up at the night sky. A full moon would help a little but it had not yet risen.

Frank was out of touch. His song didn't age well, she thought. No one would want to fly to a landfill. She scratched her forehead and one of her sensors snagged under a nail and came off.

She studied it in the dim light. A ruby red gem winked in the electric glow, like a drop of clear blood on her fingertip. She flicked it into the shop front. Frank could fly to the moon on that.

The sensor landed on the curb near a flower wrapped in lace and tissue paper. It was tied with a thin silver ribbon that would make a nice gift for her baby sister. Topi had never seen a rose except for illos on old signs. Roses were for the second-tier rich—too poor for Mars evac, but rich enough for the greenhouses. They never came out to risk the pollutions, let alone drop their roses. Yet here was a rose.

I should back off, run away... this is danger.

Topi thought of her baby sister carefully unfolding the fancy paper to find an even fancier ribbon. It would be the loveliest thing any of them had ever owned. Carefully, she moved toward the deserted flower. A sweetness in the air overcame the scent of asphalt and sick. It was like magic. Topi crouched, fingers inches away, undecided.

It was too suspicious to find a rose in the Squallys. Frank's voice crooned through the shadows. "...in other words, please be true. In other words, I love you." She could be lucky for once. She could believe in a miracle. Topi picked the rose up and held the silky petals to her skin, inhaling.

"I'm sorry..." The whisper came from a bundle of trash piled up against a broken guardrail. There was a woman sitting there, near buried in the refuse. She was hiding, but Topi could see her fancy gown shimmering white through the pile of greyed, collapsing cardboard.

"You're rich—how are you here?" Topi clenched her fist around the flower. "This is your rose." The petals were soft against her lips and she imagined how it must be in the greenhouses. She didn't want to give it back.

"The filters failed," said the woman. "We could smell the stink coming in. I panicked." Her skin was dotted with pearl gems, each a glass drop of milk, defying gravity.

Topi stepped back in shock. "You're sick! Your gems are white!" She threw the perfect rose at the woman in disgust and wiped her hands on the street. Grime was better than what this woman had. "Go back to your glass city!"

The woman vanished back into the pile of refuse, pulling a sheet of newsprint over her head. "We can't. The filters failed.... trapped." She said no more, only closed her eyes. Tears shimmered silver in the dim light...

Topi turned and ran, rubbing her hands raw against the brick and concrete she passed. She stopped at every puddle and plunged her hands in, wiping her face. Then she realized... She couldn't go home. Not to the children, not to her mother. Not until she knew if she had caught it.

She examined her wet and bleeding hands under a blinking street lamp. Most of the sensors had been scraped off during her panicked flight, but the few left winked up at her in reassuring hues of sapphire, ruby and jade.

She sighed in relief. She could stay away until dawn. The sun would burn away any bacteria drift she carried. If her gems stayed bright she could return home. She would never do anything so stupid again.

Then, against her knuckle, a pearlescent drop of glass and photoelectrics. It was milky and pale, colorless. Her hand shook. Her life was draining from her, each of her jewels would now wink out until she followed. "Please just be the moon's reflection..."

She sat where she was, back against the wall and gazed upwards to the sky. There was no moon to be seen. "How am I always unlucky?..." Topi put her hands over her face, pushing her fingers into her eyes to stop the tears. There was no sense mourning the facts.

"I should have known better," Topi felt calmer. "It was too lovely to be safe." She inhaled as much air as her lungs could hold, leaned her head back and closed her eyes. A delicate wind brushed her skin, carrying remnants of

Frank Sinatra with it, still crooning. Topi let her breath out and re-imagined the heady scent of rose. She wanted to carry it with her into the next world while her last breath escaped into this one. The rose may have even been worth this.

Overhead and unseen by the girl dying below, the moon finally rose.

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

Angela Yuriko Smith is a third-generation Uchinanchu-American and an award-winning poet, author, and publisher with over 20 years of experience in newspaper journalism. Publisher of Space & Time magazine (est. 1966), a Bram Stoker Awards® Finalist and HWA Mentor of the Year for 2020.

Author Website: Angela Yuriko Smith

### The Dreamer | Miriam H. Harrison

Two hours later, she's dead.

As I watch the ambulance take her away, I don't feel anything. I didn't know her, and besides, it happens all the time. It's not always two hours, mind you. Once it took a full three weeks, but that's the longest so far.

The shortest was about thirty seconds. That time, I had dozed off on the bus when the dream—or whatever it was—came: a woman, a squeal of cars tires, no more woman. I jolted awake in time to see her. The bus had stopped to let her cross, but the driver in the next lane wasn't feeling so courteous. The screech of brakes was muted by the bus windows and replaced with the screams of passengers. Everyone was moving about, trying to see what had happened, trying to make their voice heard in the mayhem. Shocked faces all around.

I didn't move. I didn't need to. I had seen it already: the body crushed between the car and the petunias. It was a stone flower bed, one of those decorative ones that divide the lanes of traffic. It later made its way into social media: the crack in the stone, the mess left by her head, the blood-stained flowers.

That time it was a stranger. I prefer it that way. If I didn't even know they existed, it's easier to watch them die. Twice. It's much harder when it's someone you know. Someone you love.

I had tried to tell my mother once, at my dad's funeral. The dream I had had about the boating trip, the accident, the details I wasn't supposed to know. I wanted to tell her all about it, but I stopped when she didn't understand. When you're young, you don't want your mommy to be afraid of you. I didn't even tell her when I saw her death coming. It was a heart attack, and by then I was seventeen and already supporting myself. The doctors were sympathetic: "We know it's a shock—no one could have seen this coming."

I didn't bother to correct them.

The woman and the ambulance are gone now. One dream done, one more to go. I step away from the window, back to my kitchen, and add my coffee mug to the dirty dishes in the sink. I have never had a dreamless night, but last night was different. A double feature, with a twist I never saw coming. Lost in my thoughts, I start to fill the sink with soap and water before stopping myself. I almost laugh. Why bother?

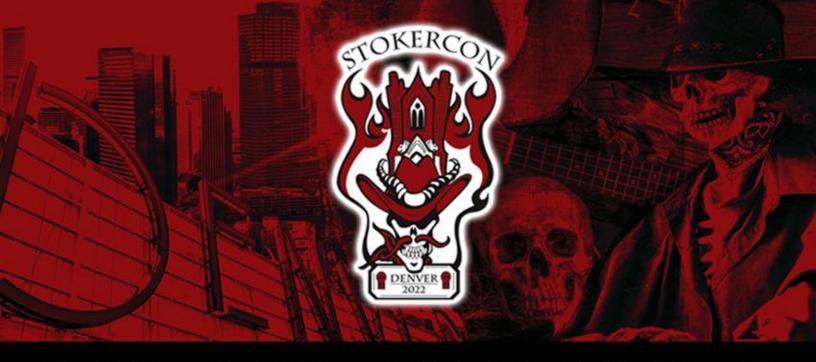
The headache begins then. I feel my balance start to go and lower myself to the floor, my right side numbing. I stretch out there in the kitchen, but only one arm moves. My vision starts to go, and so I close my eyes, embrace the darkness.

I don't know what to expect of death, but I hope it's dreamless.

### **About the Author:**

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

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### Camelia | Alina Măciucă

Legend has it Mademoiselle Zed's veil covers this mini black hole that replaces her head. The clairvoyant mothers never look straight at her; always keep their faces down when she bosses them around.

Her shoes almost bump into each other when she parades the garden. She takes small steps, but moves rapidly among dozens of young women, all aligned in symmetrical rows. I stand in the second.

"Do you think it's the smell?" Camelia turns her head my way. She catches her fedora before it hits the ground. Our parents go to church together.

"Might be. It'd make it a lot easier if we knew, wouldn't it?" We'd just die and skip the unnecessary ceremonies, spend these hours saying goodbye to what we might have to leave behind in case the Mademoiselle needs us.

Instead of warning us seventy-two hours in advance, the alarm rang for this morning. So, we just bathed and walked out the door, some of us lucky enough to stumble upon our loved ones on the way. They couldn't predict the Mademoiselle rising so soon, the first time the clairvoyant mothers got it wrong. It's all over the news.

I sneeze. Violets do that to me. I don't want to grab her attention. Some of us want to live, and I find myself among them.

She layered several pairs of lace gloves on her hands. Some say her skin has a greenish tint, others swear it shines like black opal. As the woodman strolls through his forest looking for a tree to chop, the Mademoiselle walks on. My arms relax, and then my leg muscles unwind. My back almost stops hurting. She could always come back to me, though, and I try to stay alert. But my body won't listen.

Mademoiselle Zed glues her body to Camelia's. She rests her head on her bosom and listens to her heartbeat. The clairvoyant mothers circle the two in a dance, holding hands. But Mademoiselle could still reject her. It happened before.

But she doesn't. A tentacle-tongue emerges from the Mademoiselle's head and splits it in two. The cracking noises give me goosebumps. I gag. A viscous saliva like substance drips on the asphalt.

The tentacle-tongue fondles Camelia. She stands still. I would have fainted.

It dissolves her face, and then twirls in the air. What's left of Camelia falls to the ground. Her arms and legs jolt, and pee blends with blood in a stream. I've never stood so close to someone chosen by Mademoiselle Zed.

She throws herself to the ground on all fours and gorges on the body. All dressed in black, from a distance she must look like a starved Rottweiler. But I only get to watch until she chews up the lungs, for the clairvoyant mothers blow the horns, meaning we need to go back.

Last time I got home in one piece, my folks didn't look too happy about it. Bet it disappointed them that their daughter didn't end up devoured by the god they chose to worship. Now they'll go on and on about how Camelia made her parents proud, and happy, and about how they'll get to sit closer to the altar. Too bad they'll have to live with it for the next year, as well.

### **About the Author:**

Alina Măciucă loves buying odd trinkets, and taking photos of beautifully decaying buildings. She has published her first short story *And I Have Served* in Space and Time Magazine, issue #140 and her poems, *Taxidermia* and *A Lot of Us*, were featured in The Sirens Call eZine, Issue #54. She lives in Bucharest, Romania with her very supportive boyfriend, their two cats, and an ever-expanding vinyl and book collection.

Facebook: Alina Măciucă Instagram: @avezuha



### Unraveled | Briant Laslo

Carol ran the short distance from her Uber to the front door of the ATL building, quickly sliding her ID card through the security slot. The door opened and she stepped inside with a sigh of relief. She had made it before the storm hit.

"Working late tonight, Doctor Tripps?" The security guard at the welcome desk was as friendly as always.

It was her night off, but nightmares had made sleep impossible. Her dreams had recently become the home of some malevolent feeling: a force that lived on pain and fed on terror.

"Hey Eddie," Carol yawned, allowing the identification card to zip back to its place at her hip. "Yeah, you know the exciting life of a physicist! Decompile that program, defragment this computer... It's a nonstop party really!"

Eddie laughed as Carol stepped up to the desk.

"Have you seen Kimmy? She's not answering her cell."

He swiped through the tablet in front of him, "She's up there. I show her checking in six hours ago at 4:32 PM. Might be these electrical storms, they've been playing havoc with the cell phones and intercoms all day."

Carol nodded, taking the tablet as he offered it to her and signing her name.

"Well, regardless, I'm sure she'll appreciate the company." Carol returned the device. "It's potentially groundbreaking work, but it can mess with your head when you're all alone!"

"What exactly are you all doing up there?"

"Oh, we are unraveling the mysteries of the universe," Carol smiled, stepping away from the desk.

"Have a good night, Doc. I'm here until five if you need anything."

"Thanks Eddie," Carol got on the elevator and hit the button for floor 23.

As the door closed, she took a deep breath. In truth, she was a little concerned about Kim.

For the past week they had been running a decompiling program on the research computers. They were searching for solid evidence on the existence of dark matter while reviewing the universal background noise left over from the Big Bang.

Carol thought about some of the anomalous results the program had been spitting out over the last few days. There were certain tonal qualities in some of the galactic static recordings that sounded almost vocal, all of which seemed to carry negative connotations. Kimmy had pointed out several segments where she was convinced she could make out the words 'stop' and 'do not'

While not as certain, Carol did agree that there were some inconsistencies in parts of the audio. However, she felt it was much more likely that they were the result of some nearby pulsar that had yet to be detected.

Still, they had clearly influenced her own dreams. And those dreams influenced her state of mind. Add to that the fact that Kim was not answering her phone when they were both aware that the decompiling program had to be manually checked every 90 minutes, and Carol knew that she had to check in and make sure Kimmy was okay.

Just a few more floors and she would be there.

\*\*\*

Carol's ID card snapped back to its place as she stepped into the computer lab.

"Kim, you here?"

Carol reached for the light switch and flicked it. Nothing happened. She stood there waiting for her eyes to adjust, flicking the switch a few more times.

"Damn storms," she mumbled.

Carol looked around as the room came into focus. The two windows along the far wall were uncovered, allowing lights from the city to illuminate the room a bit. The sky flashed periodically with electricity, casting shadows into the room.

She could see all 24 computers still had power. The desks were aligned as usual, in four rows of six computers with each of them facing a center hub, like spokes on a wheel.

A Nikro 55 gallon industrial-strength vacuum cleaner was positioned between the two windows, indicating that the janitorial staff was working on this floor.

Carol moved to one of the computers closest to the center hub and sat down, facing the door back out to the hallway. This was her favorite row of computers as she preferred to sit facing the primary entry to a room.

She moved the mouse, deactivating the screensaver and read the screen:

decompile in progress - segmentation 226% complete

The last two rotations had failed to segment properly.

"Dammit Kim, where are you?"

Carol was startled as a sound popped behind her. She spun in her chair, but she was the only person in the room. The noise had reminded her of metal unwarping, like when a can is dented and the metal pops back into place.

Slowly, she turned back to the computer, beginning the process of manually resetting the segmentation process. She felt goosebumps rising on the back of her neck as she shivered. The computer lab was always kept on the cold side, but it seemed more frigid than normal tonight.

The sky flashed behind her momentarily, causing her reflection to become visible in the computer screen.

She considered pulling the blinds shut, but she wanted to finish this process as quickly as possible. She was starting to get genuinely worried about Kim.

Another flash and Carol's heart leapt. This time, the reflection in the computer screen revealed a figure directly behind her. Too large to be Kim.

She gasped and spun, pushing herself away from the windows at the same time.

Nothing was there.

Carol stood up, feeling the pounding in her chest. She looked around the room almost frantically. It *felt* like someone was there with her!

Again, the metallic pong-like sound.

Carol's eyes shot to the vacuum cleaner. That was where the sound was coming from, she was sure of it.

She moved over to the Nikro unit, listening carefully.

It felt as if her heart was attempting to escape through her throat as she heard a soft brushing against metal inside the container.

Without even thinking, she quickly pulled the release handle on the 55-gallon drum, unlocking the lid. "Oh Jesus..." She said softly.

Inside the barrel was Kim. Her legs had been impossibly folded up in front of her torso, and her arms had been removed and placed behind her. There was a long vertical slash down the front of her throat where her vocal cords used to be. Her mouth was sewn tightly shut, but her eyes were wide open.

Carol's mind froze. She didn't know what to do. Help her? Scream? Run?

The sky flashed again and, out of nowhere, there stood the figure of a man. He was covered in deep, symmetric cuts forming a grid pattern over his entire exposed body, continuing all the way up to his face. The wounds appeared fresh, many of them still oozing blood.

Carol stumbled backwards towards the door to the hallway, trying to grasp her ID card as the figure spread its arms out to its side as if welcoming her.

"Fear not," the voice was abnormally deep, but perfectly smooth. "This is the natural culmination of things. You investigate hidden corners... You will find things that are meant to stay hidden."

Carol screamed and turned to run for the door.

"Nonsense, child," a hand gripped her shoulder like a vice, just as she was opening the door. She felt ligaments tear and bones crack as she heard that familiar sound of her identification card, whizzing back to its place at her hip.

"Your kind stumbles out into the blackness, ignoring warnings, blind to the true sensibilities of the cosmos." She cried out as she was steadily dragged across the floor.

"You use numbers, and formulas, and technology, to try and discern the nature of this reality."

The figure easily pressed her back against the vacuum cleaner, lowering down to one knee in the process, his face inches from hers.

Pieces of bone were visible at the center of some of those deep gashes. The eyelids were gone, and yet it was not insanity that she saw in those eyes. It was emptiness. Hungry, cold, and unyielding.

"You want to understand the true nature of the universe, child?"

Carol was too terrified to make a sound. And yet, at that moment, she accepted her fate. She knew that she was about to die and that, in some way, it was the universe itself doing it.

The figure in front of her moved so quickly she wasn't sure if it had snapped her neck or compressed her skull, but darkness was everywhere.

She felt a spiraling sensation, pieces of herself peeling away and spinning off into the black. She became aware of the breathless immensity of all that was and sensed for the first time that there was... more.

And then, out of that blackness, the voice of the figure.

"You are but one, small thing in an infinity of existences. Your desire to understand and explain overwhelms your ability to feel anything other than pain. You suffer because you seek solutions and answers that do not exist. You see, child, the truth is, you do not unravel the mysteries of the universe... You... are unraveled... by them."

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

Briant Laslo has been defying the odds for a long time. Born with a form of Muscular Dystrophy, his parents were told he would be dead before he was five. He turned five in 1977 and, despite the wheelchair and limited use of his arms, has driven cross country four times with his friend and believes in experiencing as much of this life as possible.

Facebook: Briant Laslo
Amazon Author Page: Briant Laslo

### Small Game | Scarlett McQuillan

It's the perfect place to trap rabbits, here at the riverside, where the grass grows especially lush. Where the earth crumbles inward, soft and sandy. They should know better, skittish little hoppers that they are, but they've always been a soft animal. Soft in the head, soft in the flesh.

I try to make it a nice experience really, all peaceful birdsong and buzzing flies. They barely even notice when the coil tightens round their neck, the river lapping a gentle *shush*...*shush* when I kneel beside them.

My poor, sweet hoppers tend to panic then. I'm proud to be the one that helps them rediscover their hackles, hair raised atop their frantic pulse, neck held in place so their eyes have to roll up to meet mine; all shallow breaths and panicked scrabbling. I tend to keep a firm grip of their legs; they have a powerful kick my rabbits do.

It's an ancient process stripping skin from flesh, flesh from bone, and it was my mother who taught me all those years ago. How to admire the glazing eyes, grope in the warmth of soft insides. How to catch them, soothe them, kill them, undress them; once you master a rabbit the others come easily enough. Dull flesh, they all become poor hoppers eventually.

Up close you can see the many different coloured hairs; damp edged and curling away from the unearthed flesh. I take pride in the meticulous precision of peeling back the various patinas of gold and brown, beige and white. Tenderly ripping at the haunch, sometimes a purposeful tug over the head, like a wash-shrunken jumper, so that I get gore beneath my nails, sticky as strawberry season.

With my favourites I sometimes keep one of their soft, pink pads, it's never bad to have a bit more luck in your life.

There's always one to get caught, one little naughty rabbit, and when it's all pink and naked, it's worldly trials sloughed off, I name them. They don't always come labelled you see, so I like to give a name to remember them by; Flopsy, Mopsy, all that sort of thing, satisfy my childhood nostalgia if you will. This one fit right in, but I didn't need to name him; Peter here had it written on the label of his jacket.

### **About the Author:**

Scarlett McQuillan is a student who dabbles in creative writing when not busy with university, exploring or sea glass hunting. She is inspired by her travels to the dripping caves, and dark shadowed pinewoods of northern Scotland where ancient forgotten things creep and crawl. She lives in the Middle-Of-Nowhere, central Scotland, surrounded by green fields and hills that she enjoys with her friends and two dogs.

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### The Graveyard Shift | Maria Bertolone

The moonlight cast its eerie glow down upon the solitary and ancient tombstones, as it had done for many centuries. Something stirred in the shadows hidden deep within all the overgrown shrubbery and vegetation. There, nestling deep within was the long forgotten dilapidated and ruined remains of what was once a very elegant mausoleum, now playing host to the many entangled strands of ivy covering its cracked damp walls, which were also colonized by the different varieties of moss and lichen. Within lay a crypt containing the skeletal remains of Isaac Goth, who had been awakened and was stirring from his deathly slumbers by the faint rays of moonlight that penetrated the darkness and inner sanctum of his lair. As the crypt containing his remains lay directly in their path, they slithered through the large cracks and holes that littered the surface of it, beaming directly onto the pile of bones. Instantly they came to life writhing and clanking, jangling together in the most grotesque fashion as the moonbeams continued to rain down their silvery glow energizing and giving them a new lease of life.

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The pile of bones began to take on substance forming sheaths of veins, arteries and blood vessels all neatly interwoven within a crimson soft jellied broth of viscera, through the thin vale of the skull a network of soft greyish matter formed. Eyes began to pop up from deep within the eye sockets staring straight into the beams of moonlight, blinking wildly as they did so. The transparent entanglement of bone and innards arose and slithered out as the door of the mausoleum slowly opened with a loud creak. Isaac stood for a moment in the deathly chill of the night air his ghastly transparent face turned towards the big disc radiating billions of miles above earth, basking within its silvery claw. A thin layer of flesh with a sickly yellow brownish tinge resembling parchment paper began to form creeping upwards, covering the bones of his feet and slowly working its way up both legs to the midsection of his body, and gradually spreading beyond to the arms, neck and face, eventually covering his soft pulpy and glistening innards. Now he was complete and whole again at last, he smiled contentedly acknowledging the moon as he cast his newly formed eyes further afield noticing the bright city lights twinkling into the distance well away from the solitary confines of the graveyard and its other residents. All he had to do now was bide his time and wait.

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A sudden burst of excited laughter interrupted his train of thought, his eyes narrowed as he scanned the surrounding area, but there was nothing to be seen except the many old stone statues dotting the ancient graves on either side which seemed to glare down like ghostly sentinels jealously guarding their territory. The moonlight became even brighter capturing their angry expression as their eyes followed him walking slowly down the overgrown and narrow path.

"Ssh, I'm sure I heard a creaking noise," Tom whispered loudly to his girlfriend Jessica.

"When? I didn't hear anything," she replied.

"Just now, I definitely heard it over your laughter."

"Graveyards are creepy places at the best of times, especially at night. It's probably just your imagination running away with you, or some sort of animal foraging,"

"No, I did hear it. It was coming from over there within that clump of shrubs," Tom replied indignantly.

"Come on, Tom let's get out of here, this places is really giving me the heebie-jeebies," she remarked with a shiver. Ignoring her plea he crept slowly over to the dark shadowy shrubs pushing his way through and disappearing. There stood the ghostly remains of the mausoleum its doors still wide open beckoning its unwary visitor through the dark and eerie threshold.

"Tom where have you got to? Come out of there, it's beginning to feel very eerie as though we're being watched!" She called out in panic, her voice echoing far and wide bumping against the broken and derelict tombstones. But the only answer that came was deathly silence. Raw panic and fear began to take hold as she screamed,

"TOM! Are you alright? Please answer, SAY SOMETHING!"

\*\*

It was then that she heard it, she wasn't sure whether it was just a figment of her own imagination or not, but there was one thing she was sure about the direction the sound was coming from. Staring over at the dark and menacing mass of shrubbery with a look of abject terror on her pale face, like some frightened wild animal she stood cowering and listening intensely. Finally plucking up the courage to creep slowly towards the shrubs she stopped abruptly interrupted by the sound which was louder this time, that ominous long drawn out whining creak.

"Tom! Are you in there? You're frightening me. Please answer."

Suddenly a male voice that wasn't Tom's answered.

"Come my dear, I've been waiting for you Jessica, in fact I've been waiting for you both. It's such a long time since I had any visitors stop by, so don't be coy as a matter of fact, I have a surprise a little gift with just YOU in mind."

"How do you know my name? Who are you? Where's my Tom? What have you done with him?! She shrieked.

"Why don't you step inside first? The table is laid, let the party begin Jessica." Mocked the voice in a kind and soothing gentle tone.

\*\*\*

Jessica tried her best to run but found herself caught up in the shrubs and overgrown vegetation which by now had taken on a life of their own. Twisting and winding around her body almost forcing the life out of her whilst pushing her inside as she fought and screamed repeatedly as loud as she could however. No one could hear her cries for help. Laying face down in the dirt and sobbing uncontrollably she suddenly found herself free of the many vines and creepers and vegetation. They released their hold on her, slithering back across the ground to where they were rooted. She slowly looked up to see a very long lavishly laid table with plates of bloody entrails and a large bottle of what appeared at first glance to be a rich deep red wine.

"Come Jessica drink, dine with me tonight, as I mentioned before I do have a very special treat in store for you," Isaac Goth grinned as he poured the thick sticky red liquid into a large silver goblet whilst sitting at the head of the table observing her with his dark fathomless eyes, his withered yellow parchment like hand outstretched towards her holding the goblet under her nose. There was a strong and distinct smell of iron coming from it and a slight rancidity. Recognizing the distinct smell of blood brought back the memory of her early working days as a mortuary assistant. She was now seated at the table, but couldn't remember how she got there.

"No! Please whoever you are let me go. Where's Tom? Let us both go!

"Oh I'm so sorry my dear Jessica, how rude of me not to introduce myself my name is Isaac Goth. The reason you've been brought here tonight by my great, great, ancestor Master Tom Hearse. He is to conduct the ceremony of a great union and marriage between him and yourself, so please toast," he explained. He forced her mouth wide open and poured the contents of the goblet down her throat. The bitter putrid taste and smell immediately causing her to choke and retch the red slimy liquid mixture of blood and entrails all down the side of her mouth spilling onto the new coat she had bought only yesterday.

\*\*\*

That was the last thing Jessica remembered before awakening slowly out of what she thought had been a long deep sleep and the most terrifying vivid nightmare of her life. She groped her way around shrouded in a misty darkness.

"Where am I? Tom is that you "she called out the moonbeams penetrating the cracked and damp walls of the crypt gave her an answer. There directly in front of her stood between the door and herself, the dark shadowy figure of a man, with his arms outstretched there were no features except for a pair of bony claws at the end of them which were illuminated in the shafts of light. Noticing the four-inch-long dagger like fingernails she flinched screaming and tried to side step him and make it to the door, which was closed anyway. Grabbing her he pulled her violently to the ground.

"NOW NOW! Come my lovely sweet wife, that's no way to treat a new husband remember the ceremony that we both took part in the one that my great Ancestor Isaac Goth presided over.

### **About the Author:**

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

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### Gasp | D.S. Ullery

Rebecca was seated on the Henderson's admittedly comfortable sofa-fuming as she mindlessly scrolled through a dizzying variety of streaming channels-when she heard the sound from upstairs.

She hadn't wanted to come tonight. Her friends had invited her to go to the drive in and hook up with some of the neighborhood boys and that had been the plan.

Then Mrs. Henderson had called. Their regular babysitter couldn't make it and she and her husband had an important function to attend. Though the Hendersons were not among her regular clients, they were aware Rebecca sat for some of their neighbors along Blackstone Way. So they'd reached out in mild desperation.

Her initial reaction was to politely decline, but the disapproving scowl her mother had given her during the call put the kibosh on that idea.

"You could use the money," Mother had said. "Honestly, Becky, it's a good teachable moment. You live in a situation where most everything in your life centers around what *you* want or need. Making a personal sacrifice to help someone else out will build character."

Fuck building character, Rebecca thought crossly, lazily holding the television remote in front of her, her arm propped on one of the throw pillows as she continued to scroll past channels. What's the point of building character if I end up a social reject because I have to babysit some brat instead of —

That's when she heard it.

The sound was loud enough to be noticed from the living room. It had originated from somewhere on the second floor. A short gasp, the sound of a child in pain. Concern jolted Rebecca as imaginings of something dire befalling her young ward filled her mind.

She switched the television off. The entire house fell into an unnerving silence. She leaned forward, balancing on the edge of the sofa, the pillow and remote both tossed aside as she strained to hear.

"Timothy?" she called out. "Are you awake? You're supposed to be in bed, young man."

There was no answer.

Rebecca forced the rapidly escalating sense of unease rising inside her back down through force of will. She told herself it was likely nothing. She knew from the several years she'd been babysitting that kids were weird. This was particularly true of five year old boys like Timothy Henderson, who seemed to operate on their own unique wavelength. Though such quirks could frequently be endearing, it was trait she sometimes found exasperating.

Nevertheless, she was the only authority figure present and had a clear responsibility in the matter. Grudgingly, Rebecca lifted herself off the couch, stretching a kink out of her back before ascending the stairs.

A short hallway branched off to her left at the top of the staircase. A closed bathroom faced her from the opposite end of the hall and two were doors faced one another on either side of the hall in between that lavatory and where she was standing. The one on the right was Timothy's room, which she'd entered when putting him down for bed an hour ago.

It dawned on Rebecca there hadn't been any further sounds since she'd heard the initial noise. As she approached Timothy's bedroom, she began to speculate as to whether what she'd heard had been the boy reacting to a nightmare, one from which he hadn't actually awoken. That would explain both the audible gasp and the subsequent silence.

Only one way to find out, she told herself, gently turning the knob she opened his bedroom door and slowly pushed it open. She slipped inside as quietly as possible

There was less light in here and it took a moment for her eyes to adjust. At first glance, everything seemed exactly as it had been earlier. A disheveled comforter was draped across the bed, the sleeping child presumably curled up underneath. Further to the left, a night light in the shape of a crescent moon glowed with golden ambiance from an electrical socket near the baseboard. The light cast broken shadows across the room. Buried in the gloom, she could make out the boy's closet and his overflowing toy box.

Above her, the ceiling was peppered with a series of phosphorous stickers, creating the illusion of a meteor shower eternally stretching across the entire width of the room. Feeling her foul mood dissipate, Rebecca managed a knowing smile. Of course the kid was into outer space. What five year old boy wasn't?

Probably loves the space toy guy from those animated movies, she thought, smirking. To eternity and above, or whatever the hell it is he says.

All seemed well. Deciding her hunch about the nightmare had been accurate and finding no reason to further risk potentially waking the child, she walked back to the door.

As she turned away from the bed, she noticed something she hadn't seen when she'd first entered. It was no surprise she hadn't noticed it. It was on the floor, between the bed and toy box, flung haphazardly across a circular throw rug. The rug was shag and of a darker shade, so the object blended with it in the shadows. She'd only caught sight of it peripherally because it had glistened beneath the shine from the night light at that particular angle.

Peering at the thing, Rebecca stepped closer. Her head tilted slightly to one side, she approached the rug and dropped into a crouch, reaching out to pick up whatever-it-was. It appeared to be a full body garment of some sort, possibly a pair of child's pajamas. They seemed the correct size to fit Timothy.

Despite the rationale, her gut was telling her that wasn't it. Something seemed strange.

Off.

The tactile sensation it produced when her fingers made contact with the material was repellent. A tremor of disgust flowed through her entire frame. Whatever it was, it was moist and warm. Grimacing, Rebecca quickly dropped it, wiping her hand on her shirt.

She tried to recall if she'd ever felt anything like it and the closest she could come was a vague memory of a family barbecue from a few years ago. Her father had enlisted her assistance in putting the steaks he'd bought on the grill. She'd found them cold and fleshy and had hated touching them.

That's what it reminded her of.

Meat.

The feel of something warm and sticky on her hand intruded on this train of thought. She held her hand in front of her face, turning it to catch some of the light. She was alarmed to find large, dark splotches covering her palm, fingers and wrist. A cursory glance down at her shirt revealed streaks of the same opaque, sticky substance across her chest.

Oh shit, she thought, the first real bolt of panic racing through her. Is that—

A low creak drifted to her from the area of the bed, followed by what sounded like a soft shuffling. Rebecca stared at the spot where she'd assumed the boy had been sleeping.

With her heart beating loudly in her ears, she carefully worked her hand into her jeans pocket, extracting the cell phone she carried in there everywhere she went. She slid her thumb along the side of the device, keeping her eyes on the bed as she turned it on.

After a few seconds the tiny screen blazed to life. Rebecca checked to make sure the menu had booted up, then quickly switched on the built-in flashlight.

The camera flash ignited, sending its florescent beam across the room in a wide arc. The shadows across the mattress were immediately dispelled, confirming the bed was unoccupied. Dark stains peppered the sheets in the depression marking the spot where the boy had lain.

Rebecca was confused. That didn't look like blood. The substance had a slick, oily appearance.

She waved the light across her hand. Deep crimson bled back at her. A check of her shirt revealed the same. That was definitely blood. Her breath caught in her throat. Now utterly terrified, she held the light out and directed the beam a toward the throw rug.

The thing she'd picked up was a suit.

A skin suit.

Jagged openings where eyes had once peered out stared hollow from above an empty, torn circle of a mouth. The back of the head was split wide, revealing the skin was thick with blood underneath.

As if it had been forcibly peeled off its owner.

Feeling sick, Rebecca swung the light around the room. She didn't know what was happening. She didn't know what had become of Timothy (though that skin suit presented a ghastly likelihood).

She didn't plan to stick around and find out. That was a job for the police. As in adults bigger than her who would be armed with guns. She'd go downstairs and call them.

Then I'm getting in my car and driving my ass anywhere but here, at least until they show u—

A soft liquid sound—as if something wet were sliding across the floor—interrupted Rebecca's thoughts, drawing her attention to the other side of the room. The moment she turned her head, the noise stopped.

She cautiously took one step back, reducing the distance between herself and the door. Her eyes were locked on the far wall, where the plastic crescent moon gleamed. The room had fallen completely silent again. There was no indication anything was moving around in here. There were no shadows shifting, no strange shapes lurking in the dark.

Rebecca didn't trust it. There was a bad energy in the air, so thick she could feel it causing the tiny hairs on the back of her neck to rise. The sensation sent chills coursing through her extremities.

She took another step back.

The crescent moon blinked.

The entire wall moved as something black and formless peeled itself away, lunging at her, a flat shadow transforming into a serpentine mass as it hurled across empty space toward the horrified young woman. Behind it, Rebecca briefly glimpsed the night light, still shining down near the baseboard. Its subterfuge abandoned, the thing's eye divided, splitting into a pair of inhuman amber orbs.

In the seconds before it enveloped her, Rebecca saw the color of those eyes shift dramatically from gold to scarlet. Then she saw nothing.

\*\*

"Was she upstairs?"

Mr. Henderson nodded, grimacing.

"Timothy is back in bed, sleeping off his full stomach."

"What happened?"

"He says he was feeling uncomfortable and decided to undress. You know how much it hurts him when he does it. She heard him react and came up to investigate. She found his skin on the floor, so he decided to have a snack. At least this time he remembered to put it back on after. That's progress, I guess."

His wife offered him a weary look. When they'd arrived home twenty minutes earlier and had seen no sign of the sitter, they'd immediately suspected the worst. A search of the ground floor had turned up nothing. Her husband had volunteered to go check Timothy's room. All she'd needed was to see that familiar look in his eyes as he'd descended the stairs to confirm her fears.

"It's okay," Mr. Henderson told her, noting the worry written across his wife's face. He held up a wallet. The bi-fold was drenched in blood. "I found this laying among what's left of her. Her car keys and phone are there as well. We can use those to cast the spell of forgetting again. By tomorrow, no one in this town will remember she came here to babysit."

"How many more times can we do that, though?" Mrs. Henderson asked. This particular magic had its limitations. After a certain number of times, it could no longer be applied in the same geographic location. "This is, what, the second time out of a possible three? After that, we can't cover these things up. I'm getting tired of being forced to relocate every few years."

"What can I tell you?" her husband said. "Timothy is growing up. He needs to feed more often. We were told by the High Priest this would happen." He gave a dismissive shrug. "We'll just have to do a better job of maintaining control from here on in."

"And how do we do that?" she demanded.

"No more babysitters, for one thing. One of us will have to stay with him moving forward. Either that or, yes, we'll move again." His expression darkened. "It isn't as if we have any other choice. We signed an unbreakable contract."

She knew he was right, but still hated it. She thought back to the days before they'd joined the church in their old town, before the High Priest of the Black Circle had singled her out as the chosen. They'd enjoyed lives of privilege and affluence since, a far cry from the poverty she'd known growing up in the Midwest. But incidents like this one had begun to unfold with alarming frequency. With each passing year, she found herself filled with a hollow regret over her decision to be the vessel for the child of the Dark One.

She shook herself out of her sorrowful reverie. Her husband was right. They were bound now, for all eternity. The child was their ward until his thirteenth year. At that time, he would return to his true father. Until then, if they allowed any harm to come to him...

She shuddered at the thought.

"You clean up his mess," she said with a sigh. "I'll prepare the circle."

Her husband disappeared into the kitchen in search of cleaning supplies. She moved toward the downstairs storage closet, opening the door and kneeling down. Reaching in, she removed a panel from the wall, revealing a hidden space. She stuck her hands inside and extracted a large, ornate box. Carvings of various demons from the hierarchy of Hell lined the lid, their marble eyes embedded with rubies and emeralds. The box was worth millions, yet held little value compared to the power of the materials contained within.

Closing the closet door, she headed back to the living room, moving the coffee table out of the way. Placing the box on the floor beside her, she opened the lid and began to withdraw a series of black candles, a wedge of charcoal and a small book filled with faded, ancient pages.

Behind her, her husband emerged from the kitchen, having donned a pair of rubber dish washing gloves. He was carrying a large bucket full of soapy water and a scrub brush. Every step he took jostled the receptacle, forcing small splashes of the liquid to spill over the lip as he crossed the room.

"You get started, I'll be down in a minute," he advised her, climbing the stairs.

She stared after him for a moment, then began to draw the necessary symbols on the floor.

It was going to be a long night.

### **About the Author:**

D.S. Ullery is a writer and a cartoonist who's into all things weird. A native Floridian, he lives in West Palm Beach, where he coexists with a reasonably demanding black cat named Jason, who was born on Friday the 13th.

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### A Christmas Tale | RJ Meldrum

Sue paused for a second, holding the tinsel. She stared out of the front window at the house opposite.

"I feel sorry for him you know."

I looked up from the baubles I was sorting and glanced at our neighbor, Bob. We lived on a street where everyone knew everyone else. This street, our street, was identical to many others in the old industrial and mining towns in the north of England.

"Why?"

"Well, he's always on his own these days."

"Not true. He's usually at the pub with his cronies."

"I mean he lives alone, since Aggie passed away."

I frowned, sensing Bob was about to become one of Sue's projects. She had a certain sparkle in her eye.

"Is John inviting him down for Christmas?"

John was Bob's son. He'd headed down south about ten years ago and now lived with his family near London.

"I don't think so. I spoke to Bob last week. John and the family are off to Spain for the holiday. Get some sun."

"So, he'll be by himself?"

"I guess so, but the pub is open in the afternoon; he'll probably just get drunk, grab a kebab then go home."

"Not exactly a festive way to spend Christmas day!"

I kept quiet, thinking Bob could spend Christmas day however he pleased.

"We should invite him for lunch at least. Mum will keep him company."

"He might prefer the pub to your mother."

I got the look.

"Go ask him."

"Now?"

"Of course. It's already the seventeenth. Ask him before Mrs. Nosy Parker at number twenty-three has the same idea."

"I thought you wanted the tree put up today."

"I asked you to put the tree up last week, so a few minutes won't make any difference. Now, go ask Bob if he would like to join us!"

I put the baubles down and went.

Bob was putting his garbage bag out onto the pavement. He glanced up as I crossed the street.

"Morning Will."

"Hi Bob. Putting the rubbish out I see."

"Aye lad, not much gets past you."

I lit a cigarette, offering one to Bob. He shook his head.

"Sue wants you to come over for your lunch on the twenty-fifth."

"Very kind of her. I already have plans."

"The pub?"

Bob smiled.

"A few pints to celebrate the season."

I glanced back at the house, seeing Sue standing at the window gesticulating.

"Sue is pretty insistent."

"So I can see," said Bob in a dry voice.

"Well, what about it? Come for lunch on Christmas Day, save me a nagging!"

Bob laughed.

"Will her mother be there?"

"Yes," I replied, wondering why he asked. He rubbed his stubbly chin, his eyes bloodshot and his cheeks covered in broken veins.

"Fine looking woman. Is she still single?"

Sue's dad had died four years before.

"Yes."

"Well, in that case, count me in, lad. Count me in."

This was good enough for me. I gave the thumbs up to Sue. She smiled in response and closed the net curtains.

Christmas Day dawned crisp and sharp. It was too much to hope for snow, but at least it wasn't raining. It was 10 a.m. Sue was busy in the kitchen, with her mother supervising the operation. The kids were happy in the lounge, the frenzy of present opening finally over. I was relaxing, watching the television and sipping coffee. Sue called through.

"What time is Bob coming over?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen him. Didn't you speak to him?"

"No, I haven't seen him either. Can you go over? Tell him one o'clock."

I headed across the street and knocked on Bob's door. After five minutes standing in the cold, I was about to leave when I heard movement from within the house. The door creaked open. Bob looked terrible, worse than his normal disheveled state. His eyes were dark, contrasted against the paleness of his skin. His hair was unkempt and, without being too rude, he stank. I thought his usual Christmas Eve session in the pub must have been quite the bender.

"Bob?"

"Will, thought it might be you."

I looked back to see our net curtains twitch. Sue was watching.

"Good night last night? I bet the pub was busy."

Bob passed a shaky hand through his white hair.

"Not sure. I don't remember."

No surprise, I thought, judging by the state of him.

"I don't remember going out to the pub. I don't remember much at all."

I wasn't sure what to say, so I stuck to the script.

"Sue says lunch is at one. Will you make it?"

Please say yes, I thought to myself. Bob smiled.

"Wouldn't miss it for anything, lad. I'll see you at one."

Despite his words, I suspected Bob was unlikely to turn up for lunch, not in his state.

Sure enough one o'clock came and went with no sign of Bob. Sue's mum was disappointed but she hid it well; despite being a bit of a snob I got the sense she had a bit of a soft spot for Bob. At one thirty we decided we couldn't wait any longer and we sat down at the cramped dining table, brought out especially for the meal. There was a knock at the door. I rose and opened it. It was Bob, looking surprisingly neat in a clean shirt and tie. I was amazed, considering the mess he had been just a couple of hours before.

"Hope I'm not too late, Will. I couldn't find my tie."

"Come on in Bob...and a merry Christmas!"

"Thank you, lad, thank you very much."

The meal was one of the best I'd had in a long time. It wasn't just the food; everyone was in a good mood, even the kids were behaving. Bob was in good form, laughing and teasing with Sue's mum, playing with the kids and generally being the life and soul of the party.

By three o'clock, the food had been eaten, the wine drunk and the crackers pulled. I pushed my chair back from the table and loosened my belt. Sue looked at me.

"Don't get too comfy Will. The dishes are calling you."

Everyone laughed.

"My cue to leave," said Bob.

"You won't stay for the Queen's speech?" asked Sue's mum.

"No, thank you. Not my cup of tea."

I showed him to the door.

"Thanks for inviting me Will. Reminded me of the times I had with Aggie and John."

Sadness crossed his face, but it didn't stay long. He smiled.

"Thank you for today, I won't forget the kindness you've shown me."

"It was our pleasure Bob. Enjoy the rest of your day."

On Boxing Day I was normally allowed a lie-in, but it wasn't to be. Sue called up from downstairs.

"Will! Come down! Something's happened at Bob's!"

I scrambled out of bed and headed downstairs. There was an ambulance and a police car outside Bob's house. Sue was right, something had happened to Bob.

"Go and ask them," said Sue, nudging me in the ribs.

"I don't think the paramedics will want to be disturbed."

Another police car rolled up.

"Go ask them!"

I went, feeling I was intruding. I could feel the eyes of most of the street following me. There was paramedic standing at the back of the ambulance.

"Can I ask if Bob is okay?"

"I'm sorry to say Mr. Williams has been found dead. Please accept my condolences."

"Thank you. I only saw him yesterday. He seemed his normal self."

She frowned.

"Sorry love, you must be mistaken. By the look of things, Mr. Williams has been dead for at least a week. The neighbors called the police because of the smell."

I mumbled a reply.

"Sorry, I was mistaken. It couldn't have been yesterday."

I headed back across the road. My biggest concern wasn't that the paramedic thought I was a lunatic. My biggest concern was how I was going to tell Sue we'd shared our Christmas lunch with a dead man.

### **About the Author:**

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

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### **Curse of the Weatherman** | **Roxy Bennett Thomas**

Squelching at the window like beetles burrowing in her ears. Turn up the TV, the noise drowns out her fears. Itchy palms, constricted throat, watery eyes, stabbing pain in the chest. Can you die of panic?

Doctor said pills aren't enough, prescribed a therapist. "Remedy for irrational fear of death is building resistance. Open the curtains some overcast night".

Weatherman said 100% chance of clouds. Palms sweating, she drew back the thick curtains. Crimson moon burns her eyes, pierces her brain like a hot poker.

Her last human memory is the weatherman smirking before fangs tear the anchorwomen's throat.

### **About the Author:**

Roxy Bennett Thomas is a psychiatric nurse by day and writer of scary stories that keep the nightmares at bay. She lives with her husband and guard cat on 20 acres in Canada near a national park where the bison roam.

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### A Deal's a Deal | K. A. Williams

Kirk entered the bar and looked around. Customers were dressed in gothic style, their makeup dark. Among the wannabes, Kirk detected two real ones blending in with the crowd.

He pulled the man and woman away from the others and whispered, "I just escaped from vampire hunters. My place isn't safe anymore. Can I please stay with you? Just the one day. We kindred have to stick together, right?"

They whispered together a minute. "I'm Davis," the man said, "and this is Sharon. You're welcome to stay with us."

"Thank you. My name is Kirk."

"We should leave soon," Sharon said, "but it isn't far."

Davis and Sharon lived a block away in a basement apartment. They shared a coffin, leaving the other to Kirk, and they all settled in for their undead sleep.

Daybreak brought four men in dark overcoats that the door in. They opened the coffins, immediately staked two of the vampires, and stuffed the third into a body bag.

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Kirk awoke with the four men standing over him. He got to his feet, feeling sluggish. They backed up and he smiled. "Okay Feds, we made a deal. You got the vampires, where's my wife?"

FBI Agent Carlton said, "It hasn't been easy, Mr. Austin. Your ex-wife is in our witness protection program." "You think it's been easy for me to betray my fellow vampires?"

"You were the one who came to us with the deal, Mr. Austin," said Agent Palmer in a soothing tone.

"Yes, I did," Kirk agreed. "And I've done my part."

"You sure those were the last vampires in the city?" asked Agent Jackson.

"Yes," lied Kirk who didn't know and didn't care as long as he got what he wanted.

"Okay," said Agent Harris, opening the door. "Please come in ma'am."

Shelley Austin entered the room and the FBI agents left. Kirk hugged her. "I thought I'd never see you again after you disappeared. Then I got those divorce papers in the mail. I spent my nights drinking in the bars until a vampire bit me. But, that's behind us. I just want to look at you."

Shelley pulled away from him. "Yes, Kirk, I want to look at you too, in the moonlight." She pulled the cord on the dark curtains, parting them wide.

Kirk screamed in horror, the last sound he ever made, unless you count the explosion of his body.

"Oops," Shelley said. "Did I say moonlight? I meant sunlight. That'll teach you to make me take a job at a topless night club owned by drug dealers."

The four agents came back in the room then, eyeing the mess on the floor.

"You'll give us the head drug dealer's name now, ma'am?" asked Agent Carlton.

"Yes, of course," Shelley said, crunching what remained of Kirk's skull with her heels. "After all, a deal's a deal."

### **About the Author:**

K. A. Williams lives in North Carolina and writes speculative, mystery/crime, general fiction, and poetry. She has been published in many magazines including Mystery Tribune, Trembling With Fear, Theme of Absence, Altered Reality, Yellow Mama, View From Atlantis, and The Rockford Review winning one of their Editor's Choice Awards for prose in 2009. Apart from writing, she enjoys music (mostly rock), and CYOA games.



### Waiting | Alan Porter-Barnes

Stanman stood waiting.

One minute ... one minute and the train would arrive.

Rocking, almost imperceptibly on heels of shoes so highly polished the grey-blue sky and the low Autumnal sun reflected on their surface. His head bent forward he observed the fine grains of dust settling, dangerously close to dulling the shine on the elegant Italian leather.

A large black bird settled on a lamppost, turning its head, blinking a glossy eye in Stanman's direction. He was aware of the raven's presence, he was aware of every minute change around him, but he neither averted his gaze nor lost one second of concentration.

Stanman's hands rested deep in the trouser pockets of an exquisitely tailored black suit partially obscured by the long black gabardine raincoat which hung in drapes fluttering gently, not unlike the flight feathers of the raven watching him. At his neck the silver neck-tie formed into an immaculate knot resting at the collar of a charcoal coloured shirt.

Waiting at the precise point of the railway platform where, in exactly sixty seconds, the doors at the front of the middle carriage of the local line train would open, his thoughts were fixed on what lay ahead. To his left, and to his right, groups of three men, all of whom had their gazes centered on him.

The rails sung-out the tell-tale sound, heralding the approaching train. The information board clicked-over into the next minute, the sign displaying 'train here' The three men to his left, and the three to his right, momentarily looking in the direction of the approaching train, rapidly returning their eyes toward the man in the long black coat. His eyes hadn't moved, still deep in concentration of each dust particle now beginning to be disturbed by the rush of air as the train arrived.

Stanman thought he was waiting for the train. He knew the next few moments would change his life forever. A life that had been heading inexorably towards this moment...or at least a moment very like this. This was the point to which all his training, all his education, all his decisions had brought him to. This was the train his life was waiting for. This would be history in the making, and it would prove to be his story. He would stand alone, triumphant, his future assured, the accolades the plaudits, the promotion. The men standing to either side of him mere bystanders to history. His story, not theirs. They would be the witnesses, the ones to give their accounts, to recount the events of that momentous day. He however would be the one to reap the rewards, to go on to ever greater glory. This day would prove to be a turning point, the day when the world would hear his name. This was his destiny, this one defining moment. This was where his life had been heading since he first drew breath.

The waiting, now, was over.

The train halted. A slight hiss of pistons betrayed the doors as they slid open. In perfect synchronisation his hands slid from his pockets, two silver pistols glinting in the hard sunlight. His eyes unwaveringly set on the figure standing in the doorway. A figure who just as deftly wielded his blade, scything through the very molecules of dust that Stanman had been so aware of.

Stanman's head separated from his body, severed precisely at mid-point between his collar bone and jaw, his skull cracking as it hit the concrete floor. At the same instant his knee-cap splintered when the full weight of his decapitated body slammed to the ground. The immaculate shoes, the elegant suit, no more than a jumble of clothes to be found in the bargain-bin of a thrift shop.

The waiting over.

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

Alan Porter-Barnes has, for the past twelve years, been involved with and is generally regarded as the leader/organiser of 'Scottie Rd Writers' (SRW), which is a Liverpool (England) based community writing group. Alan has had a number of short stories published and has read and performed as a storyteller at various locations in and around Liverpool, including the Everyman & Playhouse theatres, the National Wild-flower Centre, Fort Perch-Rock, Liverpool Central Library, Bluecoat Chambers, and BBC Radio Merseyside amongst others.



### Down to Business | Joshua Skye

Witches aren't green, at least Rochelle Serpentine wasn't. Her skin did have a slight tawny tone to it, the stain of a lifetime's relationship with dark hewn spiced rum, but it certainly wasn't the silly lime or emerald of Saturday morning caricatures of her kind. She had large brown eyes, a hook of a nose, and long white flowing hair, but she resembled any grandmother-like human out there roaming the streets. To most, she was simply a cute little old lady who laughed too loud, talked too much about worthless things like coupons, and shuffled around the antique malls just browsing, never buying.

In her Houston apartment, she had a large farmhouse sink in the oversized galley kitchen. Surrounding it was a twisting, turning, clunky Rube Goldberg type mechanism of her personal creation, designed to help her lift bodies for draining and preparation.

She could have simply used a general veterinary cadaver lift, but where was the fun in that? It had no aesthetic wonder to it, and it didn't oink, moo, or cluck like her contraption did as it performed its designated task. Her apparatus could even crack eggs and squeeze oranges. As it let out its barnyard sounds, it lifted the dead ten-year-old girl high into the air over the sink. One little jab to the arteries in the neck, and it began to drain. The blood gushed down onto the white porcelain like rain and spattered over it in beautiful random patterns.

She loved watching the draining of the meat.

Dressing the body was important, and should always be done immediately after killing the child. She knew sisters who would bash in a child's head and then freeze the body for later, but such stagnation of the blood in the meat adversely affected the flavor, gave it a gamy tang they rarely took any after measures to rid the meat of. As equally important was to remove the organs as soon as the body was drained. The knife had to be sharp, as did the saw used to open the rib cage. Care should be taken so as to not cut or puncture any of the guts, especially the stomach and intestines. The contents polluted the meat making it inedible. There was a reason her sisters loved her dinner parties in particular. It was her food, the meat. Few others took the time to prepare it properly.

The children she served were mouthwateringly delicious!

Along with the entrails, removal of as much of the windpipe as possible was also a necessity. The slime coating it had a way of fouling the meat too if it was given a chance. When that was done, and the organs set aside for various magical workings, the skinning was initiated. It was a long and tedious process, not nearly as quick as depicted in horror movies.

Things like the face didn't merely pull or peel away; it had to be carefully trimmed. She used a wonderful Japanese paring knife she'd found at some flea market decades ago. It was an amazing little instrument that rivaled even the medical equipment she had on the side. Those foreign folks were certainly a crafty bunch, that's for sure. They didn't taste so great, but they were astute in life with their many creations.

Today's menu was a little girl that had been traipsing about selling candy for a winter fundraiser, not for school but for some dreadful church function. Rochelle hated churches as much as she hated human children, both were so damn obnoxious and selfish and stupid. Eating kids held many pleasures, and occasionally burning down a church did too. She took particular pleasure in torching sanctuaries in outlying parts of the city. It was always taken for far more sinister intentions then her mere amusement.

What was a witch's life without devious and diabolical shenanigans? It was especially delightful when others were blamed for them.

But yes, fundraising children were an easy mark, but there were none easier to acquire this time of year than Christmas Carolers. Oh Devil, she loved Christmas! Procuring them was so easy it was sinful. They came without their parents in twos and threes seeking a pittance to buy their loved ones cheap dime-store holiday presents.

Even if anyone came round her way looking for any missing rug rat, she was a frail little old woman all alone in the great big bad wolf of a city. Who would possibly suspect her of anything untoward except telling painfully long stories about what the world was like when she was a little girl? "Oh, how the city has changed," she'd muse.

Of course, she'd never been a little girl. Witches never had childhoods. Born of rotten toadstools, they came into being old and crotchety and craving the flesh of children from the start. December was when she was able to lure four or five snotty brats into her kitchen that would eventually make it into the freezers in the closet of her guest bedroom, a room like the rest of her home filled with the floral frills that would make the old authors of gracious living picture books proud.

No one ever noticed her weird and witchy things, the pentagrams in the country landscape paintings, the caustic herbs hidden within the brightly colored floral arrangements, magical words spelled out in the way her knickknacks were

placed on her shelves, the ancient sigils knitted into the cobweb lace of her beautiful pink doilies. They were everywhere, all over her home, but especially in the living room.

Her sisters saw them though, and they laughed and laughed at how clever she was in concealing her spell work in plain sight. Humans were so oblivious to the point of being blind. How they ever made it this far was a mystery. The cosmic fumblings of their stupid god might have had something to do with it, but his continued existence was as big a mystery, the pitifully impotent old coot. He was most certainly senile, definitely suffered from some cosmic dementia. He's probably forgotten he was a god long ago.

This hefty little girl would yield fifty to sixty pounds of meat, quite a few pounds of lard, about twelve pounds of innards, and enough bone marrow to boil several gallons of broth. Oh yes, children were good eating when properly dressed and prepared, one could provide a substantial amount of food for one lone witch, but Rochelle was cooking for seventy this coming weekend, a birthday party for her nearest and dearest witch sister, Davina Lupine.

The diabolical two had grown incredibly close over the millennia, together bonded by a shared love of Dullahan culture. Together they'd even written a well-respected book on the subject that even the Dullahan themselves had praised. And for her wonderful sister-friend, she was making a traditional cauldron stew passed down to her by a majestic witch she could no longer remember. The recipe was as follows...

50 pounds of child flesh simmered for twelve hours or until tender 450 medium potatoes, washed, peeled and quartered 250 carrots, washed, peeled, and chopped 50 large white onions, diced 200 cups of child-marrow stock 50 cans of favored Irish stout Salt and pepper to taste

And for a little kick, she threw in the autumn-captured song-breath of grackles. The stew would thicken slowly after adding her savory salamander-spiced dumplings. It was beloved throughout the land by her sisters, with none of whom she'd ever shared the recipe. It was hers and hers alone, and if they weren't nice to her, would follow her to her grave if, indeed, she were ever to somehow be put into one.

Witches, real witches, were forever, and she planned on staying under the radar of those pesky humans for all eternity. Well, until the irresponsible damn things destroyed the Earth entirely with their astronomical stupidity, then everyone and everything would die. Witches and other creatures may eat humans, but humans were their own worst enemies, their own most voracious predators. They had no self-preservation skills. None. Sad, really.

Properly drained, dressed, skinned, filleted, and crudely chopped into stew meat, the little girl's tissue was set to marinate in an onion soup mixture and promptly stored in the refrigerator. Bleach helped with the cleanup, not just to visually wash the kitchen, but it broke down the blood as well to make it virtually undetectable should any not-so-imbecilic human cop come snooping around.

It was time to start getting the other ingredients ready, a near Sisyphean chore that would probably take her the rest of the week to accomplish. Everything had to be meticulously measured, pedantically chopped and powdered, all while intricate incantations were recited in the primordial languages humans couldn't even recognize as spoken words.

First, a nice glass of wine.

She'd pilfered a high end bottle of chardonnay on Saturday. Shop keepers never paid attention to brittle old grandmother types, they were far more worried about teenage thugs and penniless alcoholics. Besides, she also had a spell or two that made her unseen for all intents and purposes.

No, not in fact invisible, just disregarded by humans. They're so easily fooled.

As Rochelle sipped her wine while gazing at the fruits of her labor sitting in the fridge, the cool air enveloping her like a hug from the cemetery, Tubular Bells from the soundtrack to her favorite movie filled her home. An unexpected guest. It was so late, who could it be?

She opened the door, the hinges did not squeak, she kept them well oiled, and was met by a little Mexican boy holding a kitten which he quickly held up to her. "I found this kitty right outside your building," he said. "It's really cold out, she's shivering. Is it yours?"

"Did you find her with your mommy and daddy?" the witch asked peeking around to see if anyone else had accompanied the child during his attempt at a good deed. There was no one, not even any loitering souls wandering the street.

"They're at work. I was just playing all by myself with my baseball. Is she your kitty? I'm pretty sure she's a girl, no balls and all."

"No balls? Of course. Aren't you just too adorable for words?" she cackled with sinister glee. "Why yes, my dear. She is."

The kitten mewed a firm protest and squirmed in the child's hands. Contrary to popular belief, witches didn't like cats, and cats did not like witches. Cats knew what witches were, could always see them through their human disguises. They could be vindictive and cruel toward witches, and witches avoided them as much as they could.

But they sure were good eating.

And their meat could put a little zing in a stew.

"Won't you bring her inside for me? I'll fetch you a nice reward." The witch played up her grandmotherly demeanor. "Do you like cookies or brownies or cupcakes?"

The boy's face brightened. "Oh, I love them all."

"You know what? I have them all waiting for you in my kitchen." She smiled broadly and licked her thin lips as the child rushed eagerly by her without a moment's hesitation. One more look around to make sure no one had seen him enter her home. Another cackle, soft and sickly sweet, she closed the door, locking it securely as she ushered the stupid little brat to her freshly cleaned sink.

#### **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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### **Ghoul of the Enamel** | *Jay Sturner*

Tonight we sense him, hidden in the sunken shadows of the bedroom: a ghoul moving silent, forcing quiet the other monsters. Chunks of enamel, grooved by nightly gnawing, fatten his belly. And our own teeth tighten in the jaw, fight the urge to drop and slip away, to escape his gluttonous rage. You see, the foul thing broke from fairy law: took to ripping out the loose teeth of children, a calcareous shit slipped beneath their bloodied pillows in a gesture of defiance; a jab at us proper fairies. And though imprisoned for a time in the amber caves, he broke free—saber arms flapping and chipping with madness.

Now we wait within this toy-box, scanning the room for residual energies: the moans of bloody roots, the chattering of crowns, the hissing red of severed nerves .... Such things betray his whereabouts.

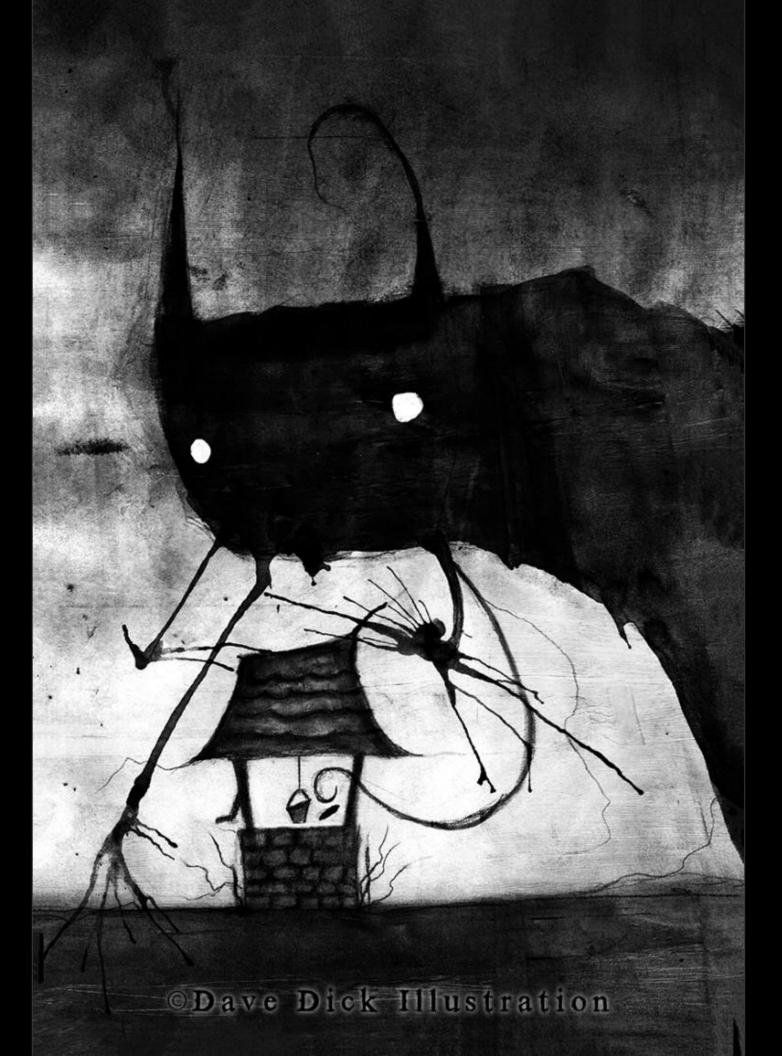
At last we fly and crawl from the moonlit box, eyes narrowed and tongues writhing with an invocation. Oh how swift, how sweet the coming of revenge from its ancient lair! Soon the children will sleep soundly; they'll remember nothing of the ghoul. Money will be dispersed where due, and the status of the tooth fairy will be restored to its innocuous state. Because tonight we are going to pounce on the fiend. Unravel his existence. Shred into his stomach and take back what is ours.

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

Jay Sturner is a writer, poet, and naturalist from the Chicago suburbs. He is the author of several books of poetry and a collection of short stories. He has been nominated twice for the Rhysling Award, and one of his poems was featured on NPR's *All Things Considered*. He has a young son and is a professional bird walk leader.

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# Spiral of Flies | Jay Sturner

Asher took a long, hard look at the pair of stilts resting against the wall of his living room, a hypnotic Deftones song echoing through his wavering consciousness: "I watched you change, into a fly ..." In a sudden rage he threw his beer bottle at the MP3 player, took up a nearby axe, and chopped the stilts into a thousand pieces.

He awoke on the couch a few hours later, disoriented and hung over. All was quiet but for the crackling radiator and the hum of the refrigerator. If it hadn't been for a hint of sunrise pressed against the east window, and a faint glow from beneath the bathroom door, he'd have been in complete darkness.

Mumbling to himself about having smoked some bad shit, Asher looked up and noticed that the walls of his apartment were now exceedingly high and made of amber. Flies zipped back and forth between them, bumping into one another and spiraling down in aerial combat. With a crackling of air, a tall, looming figure on a pair of stilts shimmered into view beside the TV, its body black save for two red orbs on an otherwise blank face. A long flat object lay stretched across its upturned arms, while a small mandrill squatted sleepy-eyed on its left shoulder.

With a sudden huff from its scarlet nose, the monkey stretched a clawed hand toward the object and nudged it forward; there it split apart and wafted down to the floor like a pair of feathers. Asher rubbed his eyes, unsure of how to respond. Wasn't this all just a hallucination? A waking dream? With a yawn he nonchalantly reached down and dragged the objects to his lap for closer inspection. There they gave the impression of oversized insect wings, like those of a house fly. The moment he realized this, they disappeared.

"What the hell?" He looked to his visitors for an answer, but the elongated figure and its monkey were gone. Just then the apartment reverted back to its original state, a blazing sunrise now pouring in through the open window.

Asher lit a cigarette and contemplated all he had just seen. Explanations rose and fell away. A few satisfactory ones stuck, and in time, his nerves began to settle. After all, it wasn't his first time hallucinating.

By noon he was back at his old routine, sprawled out on the couch with a can of beer between his legs. A group of scantily clad women stood around yelling at each other on the TV; annoyed, Asher shut it off. In that moment he heard, or thought he heard, a moan coming from inside the bathroom. Just the neighbors, he thought to himself. But then the silent, bizarre creature and its servant monkey came to mind.

"So much for drowning nightmares in alcohol," he grumbled, taking a long drag from his cigarette. That's when he looked down at the faded track marks on his arm; and that's when the cause of his hallucinations became clear: smack.

Smack. Horse. Heroin. H. Many names for the same monster. Asher had recently been using, but managed to quit before the urges got too strong. A residual amount, he figured, or mild withdrawal coupled with the intake of alcohol and marijuana, must have triggered those visions. What logic he still possessed encouraged him to sober up, to give the drug ample time to leave his system. But that hideous figure had raised his anxiety to new heights, so he grabbed another beer and rolled a joint.

The remaining afternoon was spent listening to music and strumming his guitar. He was beyond all worry, beyond the constant image of his brain spiraling down a toilet with piss and shit. Gone, too, were thoughts of that haunting figure and its ambiguous agenda.

But it wasn't long before the weed had transformed him into a heap of tangled nerves. *Man, I need balance,* he thought to himself, pacing the apartment and punching at his head. *Fuck—I need some H!* 

Pausing to remind himself of the progress made regarding heavy drugs, of the promises made not only to himself, but to his mother and sister, Asher lay down and tried to sleep off the cravings.

To no avail.

By evening he began to shake with fever. That's when the stilts reappeared at the wall, their quiet, inanimate presence enticing him over. Soon a buzzy, inner voice went plugging through the silt of his brain: *Go higher, Asher. Go higher.* Ridiculously, he covered his ears. The mantra only rose in pitch. He pressed his palms tight against his head and hummed, but the voice breached all barriers. And then, through trembling hands, he began to hear that Deftones song from the previous night, the lyrics revealing something about a man changing into a fly ....

A new thought sparked in Asher's mind, one that made him stand straight up: *destroy the stilts!* That's when the axe reappeared on the coffee table and he made good use of it. That's how another night passed without H.

But he awoke to more hallucinations in the pre-dawn of the next morning. Once again the walls turned to amber and took on abnormal dimensions. Flies zipped around in circles beneath the ceiling, buzzing with laughter, and the dark figure on the stilts reappeared with its monkey and fly wings. But none of it disappeared like it had the previous morning; instead, the room retained its nightmarish qualities and the figure merely backed into the shadows, leaving behind the wings. Something turned on the bathroom light, door now ajar, and the moaning inside grew more audible.

Asher sank into the couch with a fresh joint and turned on the TV—an attempt to ignore the lingering hallucinations. The day carried on as usual, and then it was night. To his horror, the visions perpetuated; in fact, they had grown more vivid, more ominous.

In the end they broke him.

"Just one bag," Asher pleaded over the phone. "No-no—two."

Cowering in the amber light beneath the laughing flies, Asher sat at the edge of his couch and wept.

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The first dose expelled the hallucinations right away—an expected result, and Asher began to relax. But soon the stilts reappeared, this time walking themselves back and forth in front of the TV. The axe appeared next, again on the coffee table. So he injected a second dose into his swollen arm, and then a third, and a fourth. The objects remained. By then he no longer cared, and this time, instead of chopping the stilts into pieces, he climbed into them. He wasn't sure how he did this, but he did. He climbed into them, and the walls and ceiling expanded to accommodate his new height.

For a time he ambled around in the stilts, somehow possessing a natural ability. Indescribable sensations blasted through his body and instilled a cliché oneness with the universe. A loud buzz arose from behind, and when he glanced back he saw them: large, beautifully patterned insect wings rising off his shoulders.

Magazines began to flutter and dust took to air. Thousands of flies appeared all around him: some alive, others trapped inside the colossal amber walls. The stilts grew and lifted him higher. The wings accelerated, and he felt ready to fly. But then the moaning from the bathroom reached his greatly attuned ears, and in glancing down he noticed that the door was now wide open—a long, spiral stream of flies going in.

From that point on, Asher could somehow see *inside* the bathroom. It was as if his sight had been usurped by a telescopic lens. And through that perspective he saw himself lying motionless in the bathtub—a syringe stuck in his arm, his naked, skeletal body heavy with purple veins that throbbed in the fluorescent light. Hundreds of flies stood on the rims of the sink and bathtub, rubbing their front legs together in anticipation.

Asher shut his eyes to escape the vision, but the mandrill suddenly appeared on his shoulder and he lost his balance, the stilts cracking apart and falling into the darkness. And when the man in the bathtub let out a sick, sludgy moan and puked on his own chest, Asher joined the spiral of flies and laughed as he zipped around the convulsing body—laughed and laughed like it was the funniest thing he had ever seen.

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

Jay Sturner is a writer, poet, and naturalist from the Chicago suburbs. He is the author of several books of poetry and a collection of short stories. He has been nominated twice for the Rhysling Award, and one of his poems was featured on NPR's *All Things Considered*. He has a young son and is a professional bird walk leader.

Website: The Official Website of Writer and Poet Jay Sturner

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# A Deal with Death | Paul Ungar

I recall this muddled memory of a Halloween night from long ago. It stands out in vibrant and foggy details for two reasons. The first was because I was wearing a Robin Hood costume modeled after Errol Flynn with the trademark bow and marker-drawn goatee. And second, it was the night I accidentally made a deal with Death.

I was very young, being sheepishly led to each house by my mom who had handcrafted my costume. I carried a floral pillow case which was nearly as large as me optimistically hoping to fill it to the brim. The night was overcast, with the full moon only peeking through occasionally to light up the streets. It took a few houses for the shyness to wear off, and soon I was running up to each house by myself and over to fellow trick-or-treaters to compliment their costumes. I even got a few compliments myself.

After a few blocks, my pillowcase was growing heavy and my feet were growing sore, so my mom decided it was time to head back home. But before we did we would be making a small detour to visit my grandparents. Each year they gave us a special treat and I didn't want to miss out. The shortcut took us through a small park near our home that was busy with costumed people. In the mix, my mom saw one of her friends from the neighbourhood. They quickly started talking, and just as fast I became bored out of my young mind. I was familiar with the park enough, and knew to stay within sight of my mom, so I wandered around spying the different costumes and props going by.

And that's where I saw him. A figure sat on a swing lazily moving back and forth. The figure was draped in a hooded black cloak, with a toy scythe leaned up against the slide. Still full of juvenile confidence, I walked up to the figure.

"I like your costume," I told the figure.

It looked up at me but I couldn't see its face. To me, they seemed sad and I planned to do something about it. I dug my hand into my floral pillowcase and pulled out a small Coffee Crisp bar. One of my favourites. I held it out towards it.

"Here! You don't have any candy."

They reached out, and I noticed its hands for the first time. They were too skinny, too pointed, almost bony. In the moment I was more curious than I was afraid. It wasn't until the moon peeked through the clouds and lit the park up that I saw the figure. Its lack of face under their hood. The pale white of their skeletal fingers holding the chocolate bar. And the way the moonlight gleamed of steel off the idle scythe. Even as young as I was, I knew something wasn't right, but all I could do was stare. For what seemed like forever I stared at Death, and they looked back at me. We were only interrupted when I heard my mom call for me. I turned to look at her and saw her waving me over to continue our journey. I turned back to see Death, but all traces of them were gone. Only the swing still softly swayed where they once were. I ran back to my mom, nearly in tears.

I don't remember much of the night after that. I think we may have made it to my grandparents' place. By the following morning I had convinced myself that what I had seen was just an elaborate costume. And with each passing year it slipped further into obscurity.

It would be close to three decades before I'd be reminded of that night. I had stayed late at work to finish up a project, not paying attention to the looming forecast. I knew I had messed up as I drove down the highway, barely able to see the road in front of me. I felt the tires slip beneath me on the fresh snow and the soft sway from side to side as they tried to find some traction. I was so focused on seeing where I was going, I didn't notice the set of headlights swerving towards me as a car lost control from the other lane. At the very last second I slammed the brakes, wincing as I braced for the impact.

I stayed there for a while. So long that I looked up to see where the car had gone. The snow coming down was still thick, but I could see in the rear view mirror the snowbank they ended up in. Through the snow I saw a familiar hooded figure dressed in black drift towards the vehicle. It was unchanged in the decades since I last saw it. I panicked. I got out of my car and rushed towards the other vehicle. It was eerily quiet as I reached the crash. The front was demolished by the unsuspecting snowbank. The figure was nowhere to be seen. I tried to knock on the frosted window. No answer. I threw open the door and just froze and stared. I stared at the driver inside the car and they stared back at me. They looked right at me with their dead eyes. Their body was crumpled and contorted over the steering wheel. In the middle of that storm my veins ran colder than I thought possible. After a few minutes of calming each other down, we both got back in our cars. I raced back to my car scrambling for my phone, when I noticed something in the cup holder. Among the usual mess in my car sat a sole Halloween-sized Coffee Crisp wrapper. A wrapper that I hadn't seen in years. Was that supposed to be me? Did they die because of me? I felt sick. I eventually composed myself

enough to call 911. It was too late. The driver had died on impact. I tried to tell the paramedics what happened, but they wrote it off as shock. I didn't know what to do. Once I received the all clear from them I headed home.

It's been a few years since that incident. I know I'll see it again. It's just a matter of time. But I'll be ready. I keep a small cache of those bars in my house.

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

Paul Ungar lives in Northern Ontario with his wife and two lovable gremlins. Outside of writing, he designs games with Platypus Studios and co-hosts a podcast with his wife called Idee Fixe about ADHD and pop culture.

Podcast: <a href="Idee Fixe Podcast">Idee Fixe Podcast</a>
<a href="Instagram">Instagram</a>: <a href="@paulungar">@paulungar</a>

#### With a Wicked Lash | Judson Michael Agla

She said that I had a tenuous mortal coil and no understanding about the machinery of dying.

She came at me with the ferocious intent of a Princess who'd just had her kingdom sacked by a much weaker advisory.

These were the end of my days in comfort and spoil.

She criticized my poetry of having a conscience with a slippery decent into the realms of righteous protest.

How dare she? I'd always made it quite clear that indiscriminate murderous malice, and my misanthropic behaviours were as close to me as any religion could be.

She was, however, correct about my loose mortal coil, I'd never made any deliberate footprints, thrown between past and future, I had no sanctum or allegiance to the present, I found it distasteful with desultory horizons.

As far as the machinery of dying, my education was only beginning, and would consume years of study and apprenticeship before any mastering could be obtained, I still had to strip it down and build it up again. Like the engines of time, the blueprints were stolen long ago, I'd have to peer into the clockworks and watch the septic, rusted gears crank round and round again.

Didn't we agree to stand together and steadfastly refuse the hounds of god, and the blackness we thought we were running from? We can't go back, the bridges were all burnt to rat shit, the doors and windows nailed shut, we kept the world out, but the demons remained within us.

Look at what fucking around with our destinies has brought us, a plate of rot, rigor, and mold. Angry wretched spirits pass through us like a late-night dinner on a Mexican Monday.

We were foolish, contemptuous, and arrogant. Delirious in our young love, we thought nothing could touch us. Now, chained to oblivion, and the wrath of our sins, we lash out at each other, the solace we brought into our bed was infested with the plague, and the bright lights ahead, that we tried so hard to reach, turned out to be the dimming fires of our love in atrophy.

Now, with more years behind us then ahead, everything crumbling around us, we both reach out for one final embrace, and as we let go the leash of history and the waning moons of time, we wait patiently in line, to join the ranks of the wretched.

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

Judson Michael Agla is primarily a visual artist who has studied and practiced in the fine arts, classical animation, and illustration. Always drawn towards dark imagery and sarcasm in his visual work, it wasn't surprising when he found a fondness for dark comedy, and now has a collection of published works in poetry and flash fiction, as well as the raw beginnings of a novella still in progress.

# Cult of the Box



@CultoftheBox

# To Loneliness | Adrik Kemp

As a child in 1965, I was free to wander around my neighbourhood without a care in the world. My parents were not worried about child snatchers or accidents because to them, the world was safe and without threat. So I was free to explore, make friends and adventure as only a child can while the sun was in the sky. And then, at the end of the day, when the light was dying and streetlights began buzzing to life, I would go home and my mother would make me wash my hands and face and set the table for dinner for my family—my mother and father, myself and my two younger sisters.

We would eat a rotating roster of sausages, meatloaf, roast chicken, roast beef and hamburgers, all contributing to my rapid pre-adolescent growth. My parents would drink wine and beer and my sisters would bicker and laugh in turns. We would help clean up and then read books or listen to music until bedtime. Then we would do it all again. These are mundane but treasured memories.

All four of them are dead. But I persist.

One unremarkable day, I was a little later than usual, grubby and flushed and riding my bike, like the wind, down the middle of the street. I caught a glimpse of someone in the darkness, a flash of silvery eyes, the hint of dark voluminous clothing and such stillness that it took my breath away. Before I could react, the person was in front of me, halting my progress without effort or force and staring into my eyes.

"Excuse me," he said, his deep voice sending shivers through me. "I appear to be a little lost."

I gulped and looked around but there wasn't a soul in sight. The sky was black and the electric lights were not enough to replace the sun.

"I'm looking for the church."

His outfit was like nothing I'd ever seen, a flowing cape over a suit that hugged his lean frame. I wondered why he needed the church. I pointed behind me in the direction of the closest church. When he looked over me, his eyes shimmered like a cat's. The first of many moments of fear lanced through me.

"Thank you," he stood aside to let me pass. "May I call on your services again?"

"Uh, sure mister."

He nodded and strode into the night to vanish in the darkness. I thought little of it other than that I'd made an interesting new friend.

And I was right, for a time.

Regularly over the next ten years, we would see each other, always in solitude at night. At first, he would ask and I would tell him tales of my hijinks. I laugh now, wondering what he thought of my adventures, which seemed so vivid and exciting to the boy I was but must have been so pedestrian to him.

And over that time, I became a man. I went to school, made new friends, joined football teams, experimented with drinking, cigarettes and sometimes drugs. I ate often, if not well. I consumed television, cinema and books. I was happy, but I was leading a double life.

I believed for a long time that it began that first night, when he asked about the church. *It* being the love story I found myself lost in, drunk, drowning in the intoxicating experience of being the object of affection. I also thought it might have started when he revealed himself to be a vampire, many years later, and the slow, seductive force of his will that began to break down my mortal barriers. Or when we first made love, or rather, when he first made love to me. And of course, the moment he made me into more than a familiar lover and elevated me to a vampire equal.

It was long before he even met me. I know this now, because it wasn't a love story at all, it was a tale of control and manipulation. I was not a lover, but a target. Nothing but a victim.

In between him taking my virginity and ending my life, he made me a murderer. At dusk, we traversed parks and alleys. I talked about my dreams for the future and he told tales of countries and languages I had never heard of before. He waved his arms in the air and smiled with jagged teeth, moonlight on his skin. He held me close when it got cooler, keeping me warm with the lining of his cloak.

One particular night, he asked me questions about my friends and family, leading me to consider them, guiding me into decisions I wasn't old enough or worldly enough to be able to make.

"Don't you wish to be free?"

I smiled, nestled under his arm. "I am free."

"That's true, but can you travel the world with me tomorrow? Can you spend two decades experiencing the wealth of culture in China, or Sibera or the Sahara? Can you learn languages and absorb knowledge until you're fit to burst and age not a single day?"

I shook my head.

"Unless..." The single word held so many possibilities, "I make you like me," he whispered this last. His voice vibrated through his body and mine, making my heartbeat faster and stronger—something I miss terribly.

"You would spend eternity with me?" I was so naïve.

"You are perfection in a human prison. I wish to elevate your eternal existence."

His words were always so convincing.

"I would only ask one thing in return."

We stopped beneath a lemon tree hanging over a fence. The fruit was dark in the night and shadows hung around us. He pulled me into an embrace, leaned down and kissed my lips. I melted into his cool touch, my mind emptying. "Anything..." I murmured, in what I think of as my most ignorant moment.

"Do you mean that?" his words brushed from his mouth to mine. I was hopeless under his dark gaze, but it was tied to devotion and servitude, not love.

I nodded and he smiled.

"I was alone before I met you, and now we are found." he said. "My only ask of you, before we spend our immortality together, is that you also be alone."

I misunderstood. I thought he wanted me to abandon my life, my friends and family. I was more than happy to oblige this mistaken impression, and I told him so. I was vehement about it; my words matched the flashing in my eyes.

He smiled once more. Did he realize he had tricked me?

\*\*\*

I have not seen him for a very long time. I'm not sure how long, because time seems different to me now and however many years pass, we do not age. It has been a long time. I am far from civilization, in a misty mountain glade, with hired excavators who speak only a local dialect of a dying European language. Fierce spiked pines and ancient stones surround us. Birds call each other, animals crunch in the undergrowth, but nothing disturbs our work.

My body is completely covered, to protect from the sun. I claim to have a debilitating illness that requires this level of paranoia, people do not believe me, but they tolerate it. Paying the bills is such a beneficial way to get what you desire. So I sit in my elaborate costume and wait for the sun to go down. On the side of the mountain, my crew have removed trees, hauled stones from places they have sat for centuries, and uncovered the entrance to a warren sure to contain my prize.

I will seek it out alone, but if my sire comes to stop me, none of my crew will survive.

On the evening of his promise, he awaited my invitation into the family home. I was nervous. My mother was at the stove, peeling and boiling potatoes. My sisters were on the couch reading magazines, and my father was working in the backvard.

I tried to ask my sire what to do, but he swept me up and kissed me in front of them, winking as my mother dropped the knife she was holding in shock and my sisters stared over their magazines.

"To loneliness," he whispered to me before spinning on his heel, holding out his fingers and slicing the necks of my mother and sisters in one beautiful, terrible moment. He licked his nails as blood began to gush and sprout from their wounds. They flailed and clutched their throats to try and stop it but nothing worked. My mother slipped and fell in the kitchen, hitting her head on a chair and becoming motionless. My sisters tried to get off the couch, but their legs collapsed beneath them and they fell into each other, twitching and bubbling on the carpet, their wide eyes fading.

I did one of the last human things I would ever do. I screamed.

He smiled and looked out the window at my father, who had not heard me. He waited for me to run to each body, cover myself in their blood and blubber idiocies such as "Why?" and "I didn't want this." And when I went to confront him, he lifted my red hands to his mouth and licked each finger clean. Something in my mind broke at the sight. I went limp in his arms as he guided me outside.

"There is one more tie to sever."

I didn't move as he strode over to my father. He tapped his shoulder and when my father turned around, he tore out his throat with his teeth, gorging on blood and discarding the body when he was done.

He stalked back over the grass to me, his mouth red, his clothes glistening, sparks in his eyes. He embraced me and whispered, "Tell me you wanted this."

I didn't utter a sound. The price I had paid was too high.

"Tell me," his voice thrummed through my body. Tears welled and fell and I quivered as he repeated his words a third time.

My response shames me to this day.

\*\*\*

In the forest, on the mountain, night has fallen. The crew has powerful torches and beams of light ripple through the undergrowth, flashing over green undergrowth. The entrance has been uncovered and the abyssal dark of a hidden tomb lurks within.

I do not take a deep breath, for I do not breathe, but the sentiment exists within me. With trepidation, I slip into the uncovered darkness.

My eyes adjust, they need very low light, and what reflects from the opening is more than enough to see by. There is a single tunnel and at the end, a door made of iron. I cannot smell anything and nothing moves before or behind the door.

Decades ago, sometime after the millennial turn, I realized two things about vampire kind.

The first was our rarity. We are rife in human culture, appearing across all media, in history, in science fiction, even across the animal and vegetable kingdom. We are feared and adored and speculated on enough that you would think us ubiquitous, were we to exist, but we are not. We are, ironically, a dying breed. In my country, aside from him, I had met only three other vampires, and they had kept to themselves. I assumed we were solitary creatures, somewhere between human and animal, death and life.

The fact hidden behind our solitude was that we are simply rare.

I have never created another vampire, because I would never want to burden another with an existence such as this. Other vampires refrain from reproducing out of fear. Because every so often, a child learns the truth, and the things they do to their sires are universally cruel.

As I walk towards the door, clenching my hands into fists and splaying them into weapons as I approach, I wonder whether I'll able to do this. I wonder whether he will appear to try to stop me. I am hopeful he will try, but I do not wish to fail.

At the door, I grasp the edges, digging my nails into the surrounding rock. I apply pressure and pull with every muscle in my body and the door first shifts then carves itself out of the rock so only I am holding it up. I discard it and a chill runs through me as I sense something is awakening.

The dust settles and reveals a crawlspace behind the door, barely enough to fit into. It is occupied, by what appears to be a preserved man. He is not a mummy, with leathered skin, or a bloated bottle specimen. In fact, he simply appears to be asleep. His face is fierce and aquiline. His skin is thick and pale. And his hair is long and black. He looks very different from my sire.

Behind me, the crew has started screaming. Weapons are being fired and bodies thrown with great thuds. He has come after all.

I raise my claw and run at the uncovered stranger, who I hope has been alone so long that they will allow me this chance, give me this opening to—

"Stop!" his voice reaches me seconds before he does, but even as he touches my shoulder, his familiar hands cold and strong, my own hands dive into the new figure's chest and neck, forcing his eyes to open in shock and pain, ripping his heart and throat from his body and crushing them between my fingers.

My sire screams and flings me at a wall. My bones break, and this time, they will not heal.

He runs as if in slow motion, to the other man's side, holding him up, trying to push his body back together, but he is too late.

Vampire children, when they discover the secret weakness in our creation, always subdue their sire. They take them and they hide them wherever they can—locked up in cellars, buried in solid concrete beneath high rise buildings, in steel boxes at the bottom of the ocean and in tombs hidden in ancient catacombs in mountainous forests in forgotten countries.

They hide them for their safety, and for their own continued immortality. For, if the sire is destroyed, their line will follow.

His rage needs an outlet, his sorrow too great. His mistake is before him, broken and twisted, even in my finery. And moments before it happens to me, he and his sire twist and moan and the life seeps from them, desiccating their bodies until nothing but dust remains.

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

Adrik Kemp is an award winning writer and author of horror, speculative fiction and fantasy short stories and novels. He has short stories in a number of publications including Aurealis Magazine, Third Flatiron, Transmundane Press, CSFG Press, Alban Lake Publishing and Pride Publishing.

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# If We Can Just Get to the Cabin Before... | Jonathan Worlde

Midnight was approaching as Marsha, an ER nurse, piloted the Toyota sedan along the winding country road. Today's rain had left the air misty, with steam rising from the warm road. The temperature was falling.

Marsha just wanted to get to the family cabin and get out of this weather but Frank, a radiologist and her weekend date was getting on her nerves with his endless prattle. He considered himself an expert on Asian movies, had published an article somewhere on the theme, and was trying to impress her with his knowledge of Asian horror films.

"This country road, out here at night, this reminds me of one of those Japanese ghost movies."

"Oh really? I don't care that much for ghost stories, I prefer crime fiction."

He was persistent. "So what do you do if you're driving along, on a night like this, and you see an Asian woman standing in the middle of the road, dressed in a nightgown, bare feet, long black hair coming down to her waist, totally pale skin, just standing there?"

"Uh, I don't know, ask if she's alright?"

Frank laughed. "No, and hell no! You do not stop. You drive right past without even looking at her."

"Why's that?"

"Because she's a ghost, obviously. If you even make eye contact she grabs you and sucks your soul out."

"And this was in a movie?"

"Yeah, I think it was based on one of those feudal Japanese legends—in fact I think it's been in several movies. It's like one of those archetypes or whatever."

"What's an archetype?"

"You know, one of those Jungian...it's supposed to be like a symbol that recurs in many different cultures—or something. Like mining people's fear of the dark and the unknown. So if you see her, standing in the road—in fact it's best to just drive right over her and keep on driving, do not stop."

"Drive over her? What if she's a living person?"

He chuckled. "When did you ever see a woman in a nightgown just standing in the road in the middle of the night?"

"And the impact won't damage the car, like when you hit a deer?"

"No, 'cause she's a ghost—she has no real corporal materiality. So just get the hell out of there."

"I get the picture. I don't usually watch horror movies, so it's good you're here to protect us."

Just another two miles to the cabin. Marsha could picture the stack of kindling and the ash logs waiting for them in the wood-burning stove. Get the fire burning, a warm soak in the clawfoot tub, some nice red wine with cool jazz playing, and she'd be ready to put Frank to good use. She figured he could ride her hard, and she would enjoy reciprocating. Then after a good night's sleep, another round of physical therapy in the morning, another hot tub soak, lox and bagels with Champagne, a walk by the lake, and the weekend would be perfect.

Rounding the bend, their headlights illuminated someone standing in the road, shrouded by a pocket of fog. Marsha slowed down to a crawl. As they approached, she could see it was an Asian male, standing perfectly still, dressed in what looked like a white karate uniform and barefoot. She slowed to a dead crawl.

Frank's voice quavered: "Jesus, that looks just like Toshiro Mifune!"

"Who?"

"You know, that great Japanese Samurai actor, played in all those Kurosawa films."

"Something's wrong with him. Maybe he had an accident."

Marsha stopped the car and unbuckled her seat belt.

Frank lost it. "What the hell are you doing? Didn't you listen to a word I said?"

"Stop it Frank, he's obviously in some kind of trouble. It's cold out, and look at him— like he's in shock or something."

The rain suddenly picked up, wind buffeting the car. Marsha pulled her jacket's hood over her head. She always carried a first aid kit in the car. She pulled the door handle.

"Marsha, stay in the car, lock the doors, and let's get the hell out of here."

"Frank, we have to help him. You stay here if you're so scared."

Leaving the car idling, she pushed the door open and stepped out. Frank called, "Marsha, come back here, don't be crazy!"

She moved toward the immobile man. "Hey, are you alright?"

He didn't move or respond. When she was closer she saw what looked like blood splatters on the front of his garment. His eyes were vacant, his head soaked from the rain.

"Have you had an accident?"

Frank honked the horn, laying on it, piercing the night's stillness.

Annoyed and holding her ears, she turned toward the car. "Stop it Frank!"

Turning back, the man was gone. "What the ...?"

She blinked, looked again, moved to each side of the road checking the nearby brush but didn't see the man.

"That's strange."

Holding her hood to shield her head from the driving rain, she returned to the car. "Frank, he's gone!" She pulled herself behind the wheel and put the car in drive, eyes still fixed on the road in search of the apparition. She accelerated slowly until she was sure he wasn't somewhere down the road.

"Frank, you've really gotta lighten up, it's our duty to help someone in distress. I just wonder what happened to him."

Frank was uncharacteristically quiet. She pulled her hood back, wiping rain drops from her brow.

"Don't be upset, Frank, you know I had to stop. Frank?"

She turned her head to see the Asian man in the passenger seat, looking stoically ahead.

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

Jonathan Worlde's neo-noir mystery novel *Latex Monkey with Banana* was winner of the Hollywood Discovery Award. Recent short fiction appears in Antietam Review, The Raven Review, Cirque Journal, Ab Terra Voices, and Stupefying Stories. He is also a traditional country blues performer under the stage name Paul the Resonator, whose CD is *Soul of a Man*. See Paul the Resonator on facebook.

# Sanctuary | Lee Andrew Forman

Outlasting the bones within its chamber, loneliness accompanied its age. With that solitude came seething hunger. A ravenous maw growled deep in the stale air—the first sound those ancient walls reflected in centuries. A scent reached dry nostrils. Saliva dripped over sharp maligned teeth. Its eyes opened.

Their blurred gaze met with a potential meal. The living sustenance quickened to escape on its two unsatisfactory legs.

The feral beast closed in. The flesh was soft and warm, its blood whetting a dried throat as it went down. The dying sack of torn limbs squealed in such a delightful manner it stopped eating for a moment to listen.

Its innards filled with fresh meat, it went back to its place of rest to sleep until the next thing wandered into its sanctuary.

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

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

**Blog:** Lee Andrew Forman **Instagram:** @leeandrewforman

# Avenged | Claudia Wair

From my room upstairs, I heard her voice on the wind outside. Insistent whispers. I covered my ears with my hands and tried to shut her out, but I already knew what she wanted.

"Finish it," the ghost of my mother said. It was all she ever said.

"I don't know how!" I dried my tears as I walked downstairs. The wind wailed through the house like a siren. Papa slept at the kitchen table, with two bottles in front of him. Bourbon to quiet his furious demons, and milk to dull the pain the bourbon caused as it ate through his stomach.

He was home because of the storm. "Not gonna risk my life over a few fish," he'd said.

I wish he had gone out. Then maybe he wouldn't have come back.

"What?" he barked, as he woke with a shudder, startling me. He shook his head as if to rid himself of the fog clouding his senses.

"Nothing," I said, and went about cooking dinner. He opened the bottle of milk and drank long, slow mouthfuls.

He grumbled. "Your mother, the stupid bitch, left me with a 12-year-old nothing of a girl."

I risked a reply. "A boy wouldn't cook or clean for you, Papa."

"Are you talking back at me, girl?" His shuffling steps approached.

"No, Papa," I said, focusing on my cooking. "Just trying to look at the brighter side of things."

His rough hand grabbed the back of my neck and pulled me around to face him. I closed my eyes, bracing myself. Maybe he saw the food I was preparing, or maybe he forgot why he was angry, but he let me go and went to the front window.

He stared out at the boat moored at the end of the pier and muttered to himself. "A boy would have helped me with the business. She went and died before she could give me a son."

She died because you killed her. My face grew hot as I thought of the fading bruises on her face and arms, all purple and green. The last of his punches didn't kill her right away; she languished in bed for days.

I didn't cry when they came to take away her body; tears invoked rage in Papa, and I couldn't stand another beating of my own. He'd told them she'd fallen down the stairs. I was too afraid of Papa to tell them the truth.

He fell asleep at the table again after dinner. The rain had stopped but the clouds were still heavy and the wind was high. I risked leaving the house to walk along the dunes.

I saw my mother there, a shadowy figure, her hair unmoved by the gusts as she stood on the sand. "Bring him here," she said. "Kill him here."

"How, Mama?"

"Come with me." She turned toward the house and I followed her. She led me to the cellar, to a small bottle hidden on a shelf.

My hand shook as I took the bottle from its hiding place. But my side still ached from where he hit me the day before, and I hated him for taking my mother from me. My hand steadied, and I put the bottle in my pocket.

When he rose early to take the boat out, I prepared his lunch along with his flask and a bottle of milk. He left the house to go down to the pier, taking swigs of the milk as he walked. I followed, careful not to make a sound. Suddenly he clutched his stomach. He saw me as he turned and looked at me with frightened eyes. Then he fell and didn't move, a trickle of blood dripping from the corner of his mouth.

With every bit of strength I had, I pulled his body off the path. Then my mother came, a deep shadow in the early morning light. She raised her arms, sending swirls of sand into the air. I covered my eyes until all was quiet again. When I looked up, Papa was buried under a new sand dune.

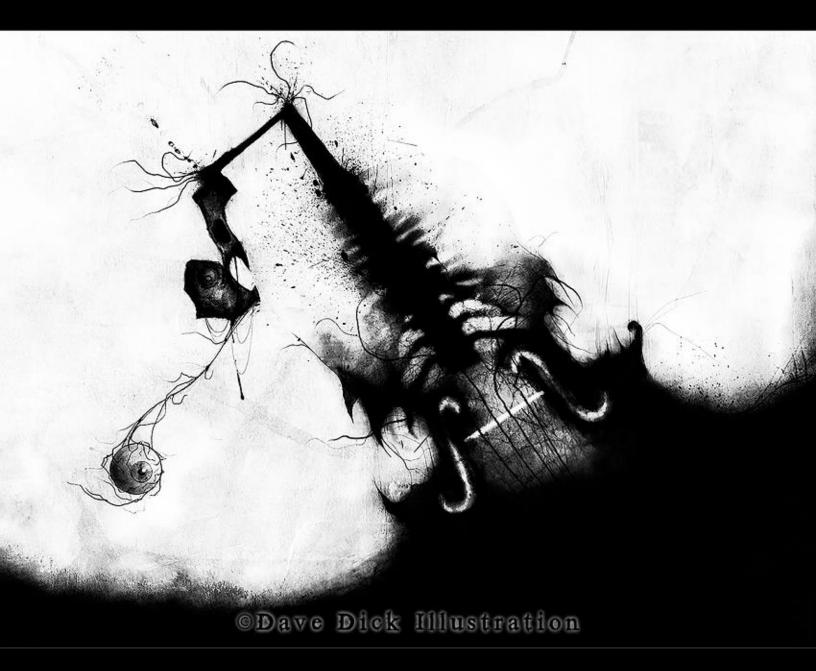
I untied the boat and set it adrift with the outgoing tide. I waited two days before I told them that my Papa never came back from fishing.

Now I stand outside in the storm, listening for Mama's voice. I call out to her, wondering if she's proud of me. The rain mixes with the tears on my face. All I hear is the wind.

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

Claudia Wair is a Virginia-based writer and editor whose fiction has appeared in such publications as Reflex Fiction, Typehouse Literary Magazine, Fudoki Magazine, and Writers Resis. When she's not writing, you'll find her reading, camping, or catering to the demands of her feline familiar.

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#### **About the Artist:**

Dave Dick is a Freelance Illustrator from the suburbs of Philadelphia. His work has been featured on book covers, on TV Shows, in Movies and everything in between. Dave gets his inspiration from the thoughts and feelings that make our neck hair rise. The creeping feeling that something is watching us... waiting.

When he isn't creeping you out, Dave enjoys spending quality time with his wife, and their two children as well as his dog, Stella and cat, Batman.

Instagram: @Dave Dick
Facebook: Dave Dick Illustration

Twitter: @Dave\_Dick\_
Youtube: Dave Dick
Website: Dave Dick Illustration

# Death's Head Fall | Naching T. Kassa

If not for Bob's quick thinking and strong arm, Mark would be dead.

The forest trail near Death's Head Falls had grown treacherous as they traveled. Mark's foot had slipped on the damp moss which covered the rock and he'd nearly plummeted into the precipice. He stood at the edge, shaking.

"You ok?" Bob asked.

Mark nodded. He avoided Bob's stare. "Thanks."

"No problem. Better concentrate, though. It gets worse from here on out."

"Ok."

Mark shifted his backpack to one side and followed his friend up the trail. Inside, he cursed himself.

Bob was right, he hadn't been concentrating. He'd been thinking of Liz.

Liz had come to his hotel room in the middle of the night wearing only a silk robe. When she'd dropped it to the floor and revealed her naked form, she'd taken his breath away. All his reservations had scattered like leaves in the breeze. He had pulled her cool body into his warm bed and—

Regret bit into Mark's heart. He pushed the thoughts away and forced himself to focus on the trail before him. Bob led them further up the trail and then halted. The roar of water filled their ears and he shouted above the din.

"Look!"

A huge skull, fashioned from rock, met Mark's gaze. Water rushed from the mouth into the pool a hundred feet below.

"It's magnificent!" Mark said.

"Really lives up to the name, doesn't it? Come on, let's get to the top."

Bob hurried along, as sure-footed as a mountain goat. Mark lagged behind, grasping hold of branches and saplings to maintain his footing.

Memories of Liz flooded his mind as he climbed. His name had sounded so good on her lips. She had moaned it many times, all while brushing her wedding ring against his skin. Strange how guilt had deserted him then, how her band of gold had sharpened his passion to a razor's edge. Mark shook his head. If only she were his and not the wife of his best friend.

"Get your ass in gear, man," Bob called. "I don't know about you, but I don't want to walk that trail in the dark." Mark increased his pace. Moments later, he joined Bob at the top of the skull.

"Look at that view," Bob said. "Worth the trip wasn't it?"

Beyond the pool, a carpet of green forest lay at their feet. The roof of their hotel glimmered in the distance. "Amazing," Mark said.

The falls thundered beneath them. If someone were unfortunate enough to fall into the chasm, their body would be a shattered wreck before it reached the water below.

"I've never shown this to anyone, not even Liz," Bob said. "But, you're my best friend, Mark. That's why I brought you here. I want to share this and all my secrets with you."

The jagged teeth of guilt bit into Mark once more. He couldn't raise a word in reply.

"Did you know," Bob continued, "that I was born with a certain gift?"

"You see dead people?"

Bob laughed. "No."

"Bending spoons?"

"That went out with bell bottoms and disco."

"I don't know. What is your gift?"

"The funny thing is, you already know about it. In fact, I think you're one of the few who's actually caught on. You used to ask me how I knew things, how I always got A's on the pop quizzes when I didn't study. How I knew a girl's phone number, even though I never asked for it."

"What? You can-"

"Read minds," Bob finished.

"But, that's impossible," Both men said in unison. "Stop it, man! You're freaking me out!"

Mark stared at his friend and trembled. "Jesus," he whispered. "You know?"

Bob nodded.

"And you still saved my life?"

"I couldn't kill my friend. I couldn't kill anyone. Unless...they wanted to kill me first."

Bob lunged forward. Strong hands hit Mark square in the chest, propelling him into space. He clutched at his friend, but the weight of his pack pulled him over. He fell.

One thought comforted him as he plunged into the abyss.

The bite of guilt had gone.

Forever.

#### 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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# **Leopold's Light | Gavin Gardiner**

She stares into the lighthouse beacon, her blind eyes inches from the panes housing its fiery glare.

The light is bright.

But there is something brighter than that glass-housed star, that saviour of the ships passing these razor-cragged shorelines. Yes, the light she shared with Leopold. That's brighter. She promised herself that their love, forged through a lifetime of tending the lighthouse, wouldn't end as her husband had ended. Better that it should live on with her memories of him, particularly the memories of those countless sunsets they'd enjoyed. Her insides had given them no children, and so she alone carries the memory of her darling Leopold. The widow is not of faith; to her, death is dust, nothing more. If she dies, the light of Leopold dies. So she will live, her and this blazing beacon, for the sake of Leopold's memory.

Nevertheless, there is something she needs.

She tends to the lighthouse thanks to years of practice during the gradual deterioration of her sight. Oh, Leopold. How he had wished these duties to be his alone as his wife's sight fell from her, that way she could enjoy her final years singing in the rocking chair by the fire. Yet she'd never had any interest in such idleness. Life was duty, and if she couldn't tend to a son or a daughter then she would tend to a lighthouse.

And now the blind widow stares. Every night she stares. To her, the roaring inferno behind the glass is a faint glow, a subtle red illumination of the blood vessels inside her eyes. Her world is black, but with the heat of the beacon blasting her face she can see the distant ghost of all those sunsets she shared with her husband. Here, with her sightless eyes drinking in the last light of her life, Leopold lives on.

The light is bright.

But always there is that thing she needs. Someone to hear the sweet strains of her singing as she gropes through fuel replenishment, lens cleaning, wick trimming, and mechanism winding? No, not that. The stores of kerosene and coal could last years, so that's of no concern either. The thing she needs must be found soon, and only through her own means—not through those who have brought it in the past. The outsiders would see nothing but a blind old woman running a lighthouse on her own if she let them visit now. They'd tear her away. She couldn't risk it, so she told them that her and Leopold (*He's a little peaky today, but doing just hunky-dory. Bless you for askin', young man!*) were now receiving their provisions from elsewhere. She must stay with the light. She must keep it bright.

She can acquire the thing she needs herself.

She kills the light.

In the numbing gales the widow will wait, singing her songs under her breath into the darkness. For what she lost in her eyes she's reclaimed in her ears. In the sound of the waves she has discerned a language, and so proficient has she become in this aqueous dialect that she'll hear precisely when the thing she needs has arrived.

The nights will be long without her light. How she'll crave that distant glow, that reminder of the sunsets through which Leopold held her. Little had he known she'd been staring directly into the sun all those evenings, seeing in that great beacon in the sky what could have been: a boy, a girl, or both. How could a mother deprived ever look away from such a thing?

After many nights of lightless oblivion, beyond the hints of melody in her breathy exhalations, she will hear it. The thing she needs will finally arrive.

It's here, Leopold! This'll keep us goin' so the light can keep on keepin' on! Oh, goin' to be some mighty fine sunsets this season, that's my feelin's to it, anyways. Gee-whiz, ol' Leopold, we'll be dinin' rich tonight and I'll even sing you that number you always say you be likin' so much and...

The words of the widow will ramble on as she traces her way down the stony beach. Towards the lapping tide she will march, where nothing awaits.

A day will pass and she'll return, still to nothing.

Another day.

Another nothing.

Once eight days and eight nights have passed, the widow will return to the beach, shuffling along the water's edge, blindly groping for the thing she needs. She will tend to the first of the washed up bodies in much the same way as she tends to the paraffin lamps or the polishing of the windows or the shining of the brass or the mending or the cleaning or the sweeping: through unseeing memory. Her mutterings will continue, spiralling round and round even as she heaves the first of the bloated, drowned sailors up the beach and struggles towards the storehouse. As she pants with exhaustion she'll wheeze out Leopold's favourite song, just as the blisters of the sailor's inflated balloon-skin erupt over her hands.

Always did like this number, my Leopold did.

Anyway, the sooner she gets this done the sooner she can return to the blazing beacon, where she will reach with every last strain of her optic might for her and Leopold's sunsets.

The memories must remain. The light must keep on keepin' on.

In the coming week she will weed the shoreline of six more swollen, bleached bodies. By now she'll have relit the light. She'll have all she needs for the moment, the shelves of the lighthouse cellar now lined with jars of brining meat. Her salt solutions could allow the contents of this new larder to keep for years, but she has to keep her strength up.

So she will dine.

Of course, before long she'll have to kill the light again. Leopold's wife will become a Siren, the darkness her song. But for now, as the stove cools while the lighthouse beacon roars its thunderous glare upon her deadened, blind eyes, offering only the dimmest shadow of those once-glorious sunsets, the widow will enjoy her dinner. She prefers her meat medium rare, but well done will have to do. Waters as cold as these can delay decomposition by weeks, but you can't be too careful.

The light is bright.

The sunsets continue.

Oh, Leopold. Told you we'd be dinin' rich! I'll make sure this darned ol' light keeps on keepin' on, just you see. We'll have our mighty fine sunsets, I'm tellin' you now. It's all goin' to be hunky-dory. I'll even sing you that number you always say you be likin' so much and...

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

An upcoming horror writer from Scotland, Gavin Gardiner believes there are no greater terrors than that which reside within our own minds. For this reason, he specializes in the psychological, and pushes the themes and subjects of his work into areas seldom explored in the genre.

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# The Boy | Melodie Corrigall

Driving home from the airport, her husband Tom safely dispatched, Diane had assured herself that the house would be just as they had left it. Gremlins wouldn't have come in to scour the place, top to bottom. That, at least, was true. The place still had a comforting lived-in look: a pair of winter gloves abandoned on the floor, a ring of keys dangling off of the hook. But there was a subtle difference. She had returned as a voyeur, a visitor. She was uncertain where to sit and when the boy would appear.

"Come, come," he would whisper and disappear around the corner. But he was dead, how could he call her?

It was the spectre of death that triggered his appearances, perhaps because death reminded her of his accident years earlier, but his visits were less disquieting with her husband nearby. Tom had a way of scaring off night demons and overpowering uncertainties. With Tom gone, the shadow of death—of her mortality—hovered in the wings.

"The test results are not definite," the specialist had said. "There are more tests we should do." But his troubled eyes contradicted his reassuring words. When he spoke, she had felt the boy's feathery hand on her shoulder. If Tom had known about the call for further tests, he would have found statistics to prove all would be well, and then cancelled his flight.

Diane slipped off her jacket, hung it over the other jackets on the newel post and drifted into the living room. She picked up the empty coffee cup from the table near Tom's chair, leaving his frayed slippers where he had abandoned them. The day before, they had made a special trip to buy replacements in order not to embarrass him in front of his Middle Eastern hosts.

"What do you think?" he had laughed, shuffling around the house, "My poor old slippers did good duty for 15 years only to be chucked out the door now that I got this high paying contract. What about loyalty?"

The sun streamed in the windows but in witness to their early morning departure, the lights were blazing throughout the house. Diane drifted from room to room and switched them off, banishing the shadows into the corners. On reaching the kitchen, she plugged in the kettle. Tea seemed in order, something to lift her spirits. When the boy was alive, she had been too young for tea.

Previously when home alone she had known that other people—her husband, her son, or her sister—would return soon, or could be back on short notice. But by now Tom was too far away to come home in under twenty-four hours. Even had she called and confessed her medical concerns he could not perform miracles. And her horror was not of death but of the slow demise with excruciating interventions her mother had suffered.

Later that evening, standard procedure, Tom phoned to report a safe arrival, "The eagle has landed," he said jovially although his job was not dangerous.

"So you're there?" she said.

"Well, of course, I am," he said angry that she had refused to go with him: her pretext an outstanding project. She had promised to join him when she could. "I'll worry what you're up to," he'd insisted. He didn't mean an affair that was not their style. And after all these years he had forgotten about the boy.

She had only talked of the boy once years earlier when she and Tom were in the first throes of love and shared intimacies into the night. Then, as now, Tom had nodded and rubbed her back, but filtered what she said into need to know and eccentricities.

So, much as Tom pleaded, she had refused to make a plane reservation. She had sensed the boy was carrying a message she needed to hear. It reminded her of when he had told her not to climb the tree; now, as then, he looked out for her. Maybe he was saying that foreign country is not for you, stay with me here.

The boy had lived and died in primary colours over 50 years earlier. He had been blond and powerful that last time she saw him, perched above her in the tree. She had been a grade six student on her way to school—seven blocks from her house, all uphill as she complained to her mother. As usual, she was trudging along slowly, doomed to arrive late and to find the other children tucked into their classrooms.

A short cut took her across an open playing field and then up a steep bank to the playground. That day, along with her crumpled schoolbook, she carried a bag of empty egg cartons, which she had belatedly brought for the school fundraiser. When she reached the last turn, she saw the older boys, perched in a large tree. They were hunkered against the sky like birds of prey.

One of the boys called to her, "It's too late to bring in those cartons. They don't want them." Then like cawing crows, they had all joined in, urging her to climb up into the tree and give them her donation.

She had stared up at the eager faces; some boys were patting branches nearby invitingly as if they had been awaiting her arrival. She held her bag close to her uncertain what to do. "No," shouted the fair-haired boy, the one who died. "They're just teasing. Don't climb the tree; it's dangerous. Run to school, the elementary bell is going to ring." Flushed warm by his attention, she had taken his advice.

A week later she had been shocked to hear that he was dead. Her memory of how and why he died was fractured, like a mosaic. From whispers in the school hall and at her home, she learned that he had fallen from a tree unto the cement patio in his back yard. His horrified father had witnessed the accident. After his death, his family moved away.

Six months later, her father was transferred out west but the memory stayed strong. Over the years, like a watchful brother, the boy had followed her. Even as an adult, after a busy day running errands, meeting deadlines, celebrating holidays with Tom and her son, late at night when things were quiet, he sometimes appeared: young and hopeful. She had struggled to unlock his name. It was a common name, she was sure.

Now decades later, he had moved in. When she entered a room, she could feel that he had just left. When she glanced out at the back yard, the gate moved slightly. She could hear his laughter, the confident cheerful voice before the silence.

She wanted to ask him how he died, that simple. As if when you get to a certain stage and all the housekeeping is done, the tasks of being a mother and a wife, a neighbour and an employee, you have to ask a few questions before you call it a day.

These were thoughts she could never share with Tom. She and her husband had drifted apart; what could she say to him? This was their first spring in the new house—the house that was to herald the rebirth of their marriage, a new start—and Tom was in another country and she here with the boy.

They had moved in at Christmas. Now the snow had melted, she could finally view the back garden. Pulling a sweater around her shoulders, Diane stepped onto the back porch careful to not slip on the wet wood.

It was a glorious day, the birds in full chorus and the sun poking through the clouds. She leaned her head back to feel the warmth, and there it was. An apple tree, its welcoming arms open just within reach of the porch.

High in the branches, within arms length, was an empty bird feeder. "Are you going to feed the birds?" said a small voice. Yes, she'd do it. She would climb up and get the feeder, clean it and fill it with seed.

Diane clambered unto the porch railing and leaned forward. It was a stretch but the birds were calling "come up" just like the boys in the tree had and this time the boy was joining in encouragingly.

She hadn't climbed a tree since she was a child. Before the boy had fallen, climbing trees had been her passion—seeing the world from on high: what power, what wonder. Diane pulled off her shoes and grabbed the porch post; it would not be difficult. Danny, the name exploded in her mind that was his name—Danny.

Here she was in her prime her body still free and agile not like her mother's contorted body at the end, constrained by laws and interventions. Diane clasped the damp branch; this was the very tree. She would join the crows, which were sitting above, waiting. She would fly again.

# **About the Author:**

Melodie Corrigall is an eclectic Canadian writer from Vancouver, British Columbia. Depending on the muse, her stories are poignant, fantastic or humorous. They have appeared in over 100 publications. This year, she called on the artistic talents of her young grandson, Barkley, to illustrate the cover of her humorous short story book *On a Lighter Note*.

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# Midnight in the Hallway | *Tina Hudak*

On this November night it was warm enough to leave all the windows open yet, cool enough to snuggle beneath a light down quilt. No sounds from outside could be heard. No eerie duets from the barred owls in the surrounding pines, or hoots from the train whistles carried on the slight breezes by the river near the steel stacks. Claire awoke gently. Of course, the moon was full. Big and round with a yellow hue. A perfect autumnal night for deep slumber. Yet, here she was—wide awake.

Throwing back the covers, she slipped out of bed barefoot, careful not to disturb her sleeping feline curled at the foot of the old walnut four-poster. Tiptoeing down the hallway, she saw that all was still in her sister's bedroom. A sliver of moonlight sliced through Celeste's curtains shining a muted beam through the doorway that had been left slightly ajar. Next, Claire passed the attic door always shut firmly but it creaked and groaned in tune with her footfalls. Smiling to herself, she thought, Nothing is plumb in this house despite my father's dogged efforts to restore this dilapidated relic!

Coming into view, the bathroom nightlight shone dimly from its deep and narrow interior. Made of cheap plastic and cracked in places, its half-moon face surrounded by blue stars was purchased for an outrageous sum at a local 'bring and buy' for the local historical society's fundraiser. Smiling briefly, she could still see her younger sister plunk down all her loose change as it rolled here and there, in order to capture her heart's desire. Moon and stars.

Lastly, Claire arrived at her destination. Slowly turning the clear glass doorknob while pressing down to muffle the cry from warped wood, she noted how darkness reigned in this room. Heavy velvet drapes blocked all light from any source. Waiting with tempered breath, she pushed against the door with the slowest of motion as her eyesight adjusted itself. There before her she could see them with their even breathing, the cover rising in rhythm with the other. Her mother and father were asleep soundly. They were safe. Gazing at them with love and relief, Claire let out a quiet sigh.

Yet, in an instant her eyes widened and her heartbeat began to race. In a panic, she realized she had lost track of time. It was her babushka who recognized young Claire as a kindred soul. Stories of Baba-Yaga and her powers filled their time together as Claire learned her grandmother's Slavic language and customs. Only in her early teens did she realize the importance of this tutelage and the folktales set in dark forests.

Her baba reminisced often about life in the Old Country and the painful family decision to leave it. The evening of Dziady, the day of the Dead, had been a long one for Claire's great-grandmother, Susanna. Cooking, baking, and tending her ten children all day left her with little reserve on that fateful night. Her great-grandfather, Jurji, had refused to attend the ceremonies placating their dead ancestors. Susanna argued with her husband; she implored him to pay respect regardless of lingering resentments with the deceased, including his own father. Nonetheless, leaving him behind, she and the children attended the bonfires and visited the graves, leaving food and blessings. By bedtime, Susanna was utterly exhausted, falling into a deep sleep. Despite her dreams and their urgent calls to wakefulness, she could not rouse herself. In the morning, with his eyes open wide, Jurji lay dead beside her. She had failed.

This one event marked Claire's baba early in her life. For eight decades she carried her mother's guilt and bore the next generation of women's responsibility—navigating the line between life and death for family. As her beloved baba lay dying Claire secretly promised to take up this mantle of family protection, and respect for the dead knowing fully how her life would be altered. Always.

However, her daughterly diligence was always tempered by the minutes in an hour. Just last week, lulled by the silence and the dark, it had been such a close call. "I better get back to my room right now! I must get back into my body before I die," she breathlessly mumbled aloud as she scurried back to her bedroom. And to the cat. And to the moon. And to her dreams.

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

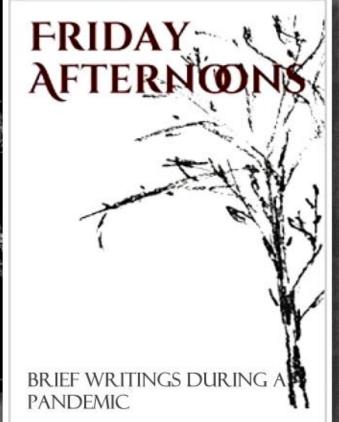
Tina Hudak, born and raised in a Pennsylvania steel town moved to D.C. in 1975. Working as an artist/writer, and school librarian while raising her family, her artist's books are included in the Library of Congress, and other collections. Living with her husband and two cats in a farmhouse she continues to avocations. Look for her Indie publication *Friday Afternoons: Brief writings during a pandemic*.

Blog: A Blue Bunny Studio
Twitter: Tina Hudak

# FRIDAY AFTERNOONS

BRIEF WRITINGS
DURING A
PANDEMIC

Tina Hudak



Tina Hudak

Available in Print & eBook

# Amelia | Amethyst Loscocco

"Mommy, you can't sit there," Isabel says, dragging a string across the carpet with Missy in hot pursuit. The cat dives under the coffee table and takes a swipe at the string.

"Why not?" Beth asks.

"That's Amelia's chair."

Isabel has been talking to and about Amelia nonstop since they moved into the old house on Perth Street a week ago.

"Is that right?" Beth slumps tiredly onto the couch. She has been unpacking boxes all day and can't bear to open another one.

"Did you meet Amelia at school?"

"No Mommy, here. This is Amelia's house."

"Oh?"

Beth always tried to remember the details of Isabel's imaginary friends. There had been Purple Peggy, a cupcake maker who loved tea parties. Mister Screech had been a regular fixture for a while, until the incident at the dentist, when Isabel had insisted his teeth be cleaned as well.

"And what does Amelia do?" Beth asks.

"She doesn't work. She says people work for her."

Sounds like a great example for her daughter, Beth thinks. Where does she come up with these ideas? Maybe it's that new babysitter. She will have to have a word with her.

"What does Amelia look like?"

"She has no face. She said she's looking for a new one."

Beth frowns. Isabel continues to dangle the string in front of Missy, as if searching for a new face is a perfectly reasonable pastime.

"That's... odd," Beth says.

"She likes your face though." Isabel stops and looks straight at her mother, "Except... except she wants me to tell you, you really shouldn't dye your hair like that. It dries it out."

"Does she?" Isabel's imaginary friends aren't usually so opinionated. Beth can't help but look over her shoulder, as though she might catch someone else in the room. But no one is there, of course.

\*\*\*

Isabel's bedtime routine always runs like clockwork. It's Beth's favorite time with her daughter. Isabel has arranged her stuffed animals around her pillow so they can listen to the bedtime story, with her newest favorite, Mr. Freddy Teddy, in her arms. Beth and Isabel snuggle together on the bed with Missy.

"Goodnight, moon," they say together, as always after the story. "Goodnight, stars."

"Goodnight, Mr. Freddy Teddy," Beth adds.

"Goodnight, Mommy," Isabel says.

"Goodnight, darling," Beth says.

"Goodnight, Amelia," Isabel says.

Beth stops in the doorway.

Isabel waits.

"Say goodnight to Amelia, Mommy."

"Isabel..." Beth wonders about the right age to tell children that their imaginary friends aren't real.

"Mommy, she's right behind you."

Beth feels a damp cold skitter down her spine. There is no one there. She knows there's no one there.

"Goodnight, Amelia," she says finally, but something feels wrong, something about the way Isabel is looking over her shoulder smiling.

"Do you want me to leave on the light until you fall asleep, honey?" Beth asks.

"No. Amelia's here to keep me safe."

\*\*\*

Beth tosses and turns all night. She dreams the walls of the house are *hissing* at her. In the morning, her head is throbbing. She drinks twice as much coffee as usual before she can bear to return to the unpacking project.

"What should we unpack today?" Beth asks.

"Let's find my crayons!" Isabel runs into the living room.

Beth stops in the doorway. The boxes she unpacked yesterday are stacked neatly in a corner. Someone had unpacked them.

"Isabel... did you pack these boxes?" Beth asks, even though she knows that is impossible. Isabel is *five*. Isabel is frowning and looking at the chair in the far corner of the living room, the one Beth isn't allowed to sit in. "Amelia did it," she says.

"What? Why would she do that?"

"She says you have to leave," Isabel says. She looks confused. There are dark smudges under her eyes.

"Leave?"

"She says you are setting up her house all wrong and you need to leave. She says... she says she has certain standards that someone like you wouldn't understand." Isabel is still staring at the chair in the corner.

"Someone like me? What an arrogant... She can't evict me from my own house!" Beth can't believe she is having this conversation.

"Mommy, what's evict?"

"Kick me out! Make me leave!" She raised her voice without realizing it and immediately regrets it. "I'm sorry honey. Mommy didn't sleep very well last night."

Beth glares at the empty chair for a moment. She's furious. Then feels stupid for feeling furious at a... what? She looks uneasily at the newly taped boxes.

"Let's go finish setting up your room," she says, taking Isabel's hand and turning her back on this *Amelia*. As they leave the room, she thinks she hears a hiss.

\*\*\*

Later, after dinner, Beth washes the dishes and Isabel pretends to sweep with her toy broom. Isabel is telling a nonsensical story about Mr. Freddy Teddy's adventures in the garden, and Beth is feeling like maybe things will finally settle down.

Suddenly Isabel says, "Amelia says that when you leave she will be my Mommy."

Beth pauses, her hands still submerged in the warm soapy water. She has had enough of what Amelia thinks. "What?"

"I told her I already had a Mommy, but she wouldn't listen. She said you are leaving me soon. Is that true?"

Beth crouches down beside Isabel and wraps her arms around her as Isabel's shoulders begin to tremble. "No honey, of course not! I'm never leaving you."

"Mommy... I don't think I want to be friends with Amelia any more."

"You don't have to, honey. I will make her leave." Beth hugs Isabel a little tighter.

After she puts Isabel to bed and is sure she's asleep, Beth digs around in a box and pulls out a bundle of sage tied with red string. 'For cleansing', her old neighbor had said when she gave it as a going away present. Beth had laughed at time, but now she thinks it couldn't hurt.

She lights it and lets the smoke fill up the room.

"That's it," she says. "Amelia, whoever you are, you stay away from my daughter. She's mine and so is this house. I order you to leave!"

She's a little disappointed when nothing happens.

For good measure, she mumbles a few purifying prayers and a Sanskrit chant about light from darkness that she found on the internet. Then she slowly walks from room to room, letting the smoke wind its way through doorways and swirl into the corners.

"I banish you from this house!" she says as loud as she dares. "I banish you from this house!"

Now she thinks she hears a sharp hiss coming from everywhere and nowhere at once. It's almost as if it's coming from the walls. She spins around waving the smudge stick in front of her like a sword but doesn't see anything.

But she is fed up and angry now, so she hisses back.

"This is my house now," she says. "You must leave!"

Suddenly Isabel is screaming. Beth's heart drops into her stomach. She runs into the bedroom.

Isabel is standing on her bed, tears streaming down her face.

"Mommy you have to stop! She's hurting me!"

Beth runs to the bathroom, throws the smoldering stick in the sink and opens the tap before dashing back to Isabel's room.

Isabel is crumpled sobbing on the bed. Her face is red and there are bruises on her arms.

"She says... she says to tell you that if you hurt her, she will hurt me..."

Beth can barely control her rage. She lies awake beside Isabel all night, listening to her breath.

The next morning, she takes her phone and coffee out on the porch, away from Amelia's watchful eyes, and Googles 'how to get rid of a ghost'. A circle of salt, holy water, visualization of an exit, none of these solutions feel strong enough. This time it has to work; Amelia is never touching Isabel again. She scrolls through a bunch of dubious looking ads: Call Clair now for Spirit Removal! Ghost Rescue, Ghost Clearing Services...

"No no no! Please don't hurt me!" she hears Isabel yell from the kitchen, and then Missy inexplicably hissing.

"Honey?" Beth's coffee cup falls from her hands and tumbles down the porch steps shattering as she jumps up and runs to the kitchen.

And then she stops cold, because Isabel is covered in blood. In one of her hands is a kitchen knife. In the other, Missy's head. The rest of the cat is limp on the floor, blood spreading across the linoleum. Isabel's eyes are big and unfocused as they finally meet her mother's.

"Isabel!" Beth tries not to look at her daughter with fear.

"I didn't want to," Isabel says, "But Amelia said I had to because she doesn't like cats in her house."

"This isn't her house!" Beth says. She is shaking in the doorway to the kitchen and can't seem to move.

Isabel starts to sob and this spurs her into action. She lunges for Isabel and slips in the blood on the floor. Now she has blood on her hands and knees as she scoops up Isabel and tracks bloody footprints to the bedroom.

She pulls down the covers and gets into the tiny bed with her daughter in her arms. She holds Isabel, swaddling her tightly in blankets and they cry together. Isabel apologizes again and again, and Beth just strokes her hair and tells her to hush, it's not her fault. What else can she say?

When Isabel is finally asleep, Beth disengages herself from the tangle of fluffy blankets and Isabel's arms. She goes to the kitchen and carefully takes the pieces of Missy out to the back yard. Then she scrubs the blood from the floor, and continues to scrub even after the floor is spotless and her knuckles are raw. Tears quietly stream down her face while fear and anger keeps her heart beating furiously.

When she finally stops, she goes to her room and starts pacing. She picks things up and then puts them down. Out of the corner of her eye she thinks she sees a shadow in the mirror but when she looks all she sees are her own puffy eyes and disheveled hair.

"That's it," she decides. "We're leaving..."

The walls begin to emit a piercing hiss.

My housssse

"You win, Amelia!" Beth frantically starts to shove clothes in a bag.

Yessss

Then the hissing comes closer. It's right behind her now. She spins around frantically but sees nothing. Beth backs up against the wall. Her heart is pounding in her ears and there is a rushing in her head as fear and adrenaline thunder through her bloodstream.

My housssse

Now the hissing is right in her ear. Beth moves towards the bedroom door, but the door swings shut before she reaches it. She feels hands moving slowly along the lines of her face and she shivers.

My faccccce

The hands grab her hair, yank her back from the door and fling her to the floor with such force she feels the air rush from her lungs. She struggles to push herself up but she is shoved down. There is a great weight like someone is sitting on her chest.

My breathssss

And then the hands are covering her mouth and nose, smothering her. She struggles to move but her arms are pinned by invisible knees. Her vision starts to blur as she sees black and red spots. Two of those black spots above her seem to glitter like dark eyes.

My eyesssss

Beth twitches as she sinks down, down into a bottomless blackness.

\*\*

When Isabel wakes, she goes to her mother's bedroom, but her mother is not there. Instead, she finds her in the bathroom putting on makeup.

"Mommy?"

"Ugh! Don't call me that. Call me Amelia. Your mother is gone."

"No..." Isabel says, "She wouldn't leave me..."

"I made her leave." Amelia runs her hands through her hair and smacks her newly red lips. Her black eyes glisten.

"But I kept her face. Not the best one I have had, but it will do," she says into the mirror. "What do you think?" Isabel knows she shouldn't, but she begins to whimper.

Amelia wrinkles her nose, "Ugh... Don't do that. I can't stand sniveling children. I can easily get rid of you too." She picks up a hot curling iron. "Shall I?"

#### About the Author:

Amethyst Loscocco is a technical writer by day but prefers to escape the strict confines of brevity and bullet points, to delve into the limitless magical world of fiction. Her work has appeared in Quail Bell Magazine, Every Day Fiction, Fantasy Scroll Mag, Literary Juice, and others. She lives in Oakland, California, with two dancing German Shepherds.

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#### Betrayal | K. A. Williams

Carl opened the car door to a cold wind that tore his hat off. It sailed into the abyss between the ski slope and the road. Any skier familiar with the area would know to avoid this particular slope.

Gus had not been familiar with this area. Carl had watched him ski past the isolated trees on the slope before plummeting off the cliff.

arl shuddered from the memory as he stepped from the car. When a hand gripped his shoulder, he whirled, and lost his footing. Flat on his back, he saw a terrible sight. Gus. Covered in snow and reaching toward him.

Carl screamed and stumbled to his feet. He fumbled with his car keys, dropping them as he reached for the door handle. He frantically searched the frozen ground.

Laughter broke the silence. Gus held Carl's keys in a gloved hand.

"You're alive! How have you survived?" Carl asked, before he looked closer at Gus's face. It was white as the snow, with sunken eyes.

Gus smiled and it was a terrible sight. "I didn't. I'm dead. And I've been waiting for you. I knew you'd come back to the scene of the crime like a guilt-ridden murderer does."

"But I didn't kill you," Carl argued. "You skied off the slope."

"You knew about this dangerous slope, you could have warned me."

"How was I to know that you would get up before me and go skiing alone? I tried to catch up with you, to warn you."

"You're lying," Gus said.

Carl trembled with cold and fear. "What reason would I have for wanting you dead?"

Gus stepped forward and Carl backed up, not realizing how close he was to the edge. He slipped on the ice and slid off the cliff, screaming. A bounce on the ground below silenced him forever.

Gus spotted something blue and picked up the folded sheet of paper that had fallen out of Carl's coat pocket. 'To my dearest Carl', it began. Gus read the letter before crumpling it in anger.

It would seem he had misjudged Carl when he assumed the attraction was one-sided. Now he knew that his wife had been disloyal, and he would have to visit Isabella before he could rest.

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

K. A. Williams lives in North Carolina and writes speculative, mystery/crime, general fiction, and poetry. She has been published in many magazines including Mystery Tribune, Trembling With Fear, Theme of Absence, Altered Reality, Yellow Mama, View From Atlantis, and The Rockford Review winning one of their Editor's Choice Awards for prose in 2009. Apart from writing, she enjoys music (mostly rock), and CYOA games.

# Emergency | DJ Tyrer

"We haven't seen her in nearly a month and we're getting a bit worried," she said, wringing her hands. "She's usually out to the shops for her paper and a pint of milk and a loaf of bread every day—and, when she's not up to it, she gives us a ring and we pop out for her.

"We're very worried," she emphasized, and her husband nodded.

John returned the nod as if in empathy.

Concerned neighbours were always a pain, twitching their curtains and interfering. Better if they just left things alone.

But, what if something was wrong with the woman?

He sighed. "I guess I could take a look..."

Really, a landlord was supposed to give twenty-four hours notice to enter the home of a tenant, but there was an exception for emergencies and, if old Mrs Terrance was lying in a pool of her own blood, or worse, that surely qualified?

Probably, they ought to call the police, but they were seldom available and would take a dim view of a false alarm. Besides, there was no point in encouraging outsiders to take a look at the flats, not when they weren't in absolutely tip-top condition...

He took out his master key and let himself in, saying a silent prayer of thanks that there were no bolts in place.

Only, given the number that was visible, surely that meant she was in and that something was wrong?

Sweat beaded on his brow and not only from the central heating. There was an unpleasant sickly-sweet smell.

"Mrs Terrance?"

Nothing.

The bathroom door was open and the room was empty.

The bedroom was the same.

That just left the door to the lounge... It was closed.

He stepped up to it. Something threw itself against it.

He jumped back with a curse.

Don't be silly...

He reached out and opened the door.

"What is it?" the neighbour called.

"A bloody cat!" He laughed as it ran past him and towards the open front door.

"What's that in its mouth?" he heard her say as he stepped into the lounge: Almost a dozen cats turned to look at

him.

"I knew I should've banned pets..."

Behind him, the woman shrieked.

"What the hell?"

Then, he noticed the bones—long bones that protruded out from underneath a tatty skirt and from behind the settee.

"Oh-"

Before he could curse, the cats sprang at him.

The felines were hungry, but not so much that they were weak or slow. He barely had time to turn before they were on him, wicked razor-sharp claws lacerating his skin. He could feel the blood soaking his back as he fell to the floor.

They began to feast, even as he screamed and struggled to rise.

"Help! Help me!"

He could hear the woman screaming, her husband shouting, sirens.

He hoped they would reach him in time.

Then, searing pain transformed to numb darkness and his mind drifted away from his body and the cats that were feeding upon it.

#### About the Author:

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

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ODave Dick Illustration

# The Night Visitor | C.M. Saunders

Brian had never hurt anyone. That was the truth. He wasn't a violent person. He just liked sneaking into people's houses at night and watching them sleep. He was aware of the fact some people may consider that slightly creepy.

His favorite time to do it was early morning, just as the sun was coming up. The border between day and night. It was a magical time of day. A new dawn, so crisp and so full of hope and optimism. A time when anything was possible.

But experience had taught him that early morning was also the time when he was most likely to be caught. Things had changed. So many people did shift work these days, or didn't work at all, and were awake at all hours. Part of it was the thrill.

No, he had never hurt anyone. Even though he *could* have hurt people. He had never even taken anything that didn't belong to him. Except one time an age ago when he found a packet of chocolate chip cookies lying on a kitchen table and helped himself to them. Chocolate chip cookies had always been a weakness of his.

He would usually just have a look around the place, pick things up and put them down again. Open drawers and peek inside. He liked to have a glimpse into other people's lives. But his main motivation had always been watching people sleep.

He didn't know why he liked it so much. It was one of those things he couldn't explain. People looked so serene when they were asleep, lost in another world. He liked to watch their chests rise and fall, listen to their deep breathing, and try to imagine what they may be dreaming about. It was relaxing. And intimate. Sometimes, Brian just wanted to curl up in bed next to them. Sometimes he actually did, but he was always fearful of waking them up. People might freak out if they woke up with a stranger in their bed. It would be a natural reaction.

It had all started when Brian was a little boy. He would sneak out of his house after his parents had put him to bed, and walk the streets of his town, always looking for something but never knowing what. After a while, he started noticing how many ground floor windows were left partially open. Like invitations into other people's lives. After that, it was only a matter of time before he climbed through one.

It really was incredible how many people left windows open, especially in summer. Sometimes he would visit three or four different houses a night. Being so small, he didn't need much of an opening to squeeze through. Even when he grew up, he didn't get much bigger. He was only five feet one inch (five feet one-and-a-half inches if he wore his bulky trainers) and weighed just over seven stone. Small. Not dwarfish, but small. Impish, you might say.

When Brian got older, he moved out of his parent's house and into a little flat that social security paid for. He stopped looking around his home town for places to visit, and started looking further up field, riding his bike for hours through the night in all weathers until he found a suitable place. Somewhere that he liked. By then, he was wise enough to know that you shouldn't shit where you ate. By that point, he had been in probably half the dwellings in his village and was getting bored anyway. He had been in some homes over a dozen times, and knew their layouts by heart. He knew where the owners kept things, what time they were likely to retire for the evening, and whether or not they liked company. Most of them didn't.

By this time burglar alarms and wall-mounted security lights, activated by motion sensors, were becoming more and more common. They were affordable, and easy to install. However, burglar alarms were mainly just used as visual deterrents. Everyone knew that. Some malfunctioned so much that they caused endless problems and people only turned them on when they went on holiday. Some weren't even wired up at all. They were just plainly-visible empty metal casings with tiny blue or red flashing lights fixed to the wall above the front door.

As for security lights, well they were so commonplace that no one ever paid them any attention. When a light clicked on in a garden, people automatically assumed it had been set off by a prowling cat or a gust of wind. In fact, those lights were more of a help than a hindrance, especially when visiting a new property.

As he grew older, Brian also became more adventurous. If he couldn't find an open ground floor window, he would either force an opening, always being careful not to cause too much damage, or look for a second-floor window. Gaining entry through an upstairs window usually involved shinnying up a drain pipe or climbing over a porch, but that was no problem. He was lithe. Using this route, the chances were that the point of entry was going to be someone's actual bedroom. It meant you had to be *especially* careful not to make any noise.

It was the excitement and the danger that appealed to him most. The fear of being discovered and getting caught. It gave him an adrenaline rush like nothing else. There was something about the exalted thrill of doing something wrong, being somewhere you shouldn't be. It appealed to his most primitive instincts.

He also enjoyed the challenge. People think of their homes as castles. Impenetrable fortresses. They were so wrong. Most houses were easily accessible; you didn't need any special equipment or training.

Because Brian never hurt anyone or stole anything, most people woke up in the morning completely unaware that he had paid them a visit. Sometimes, if he was in a mischievous mood, he played little tricks on people. Just for his own amusement. There was no malice involved, but the temptation was just too much and he couldn't resist moving things around a little bit. Maybe he would hide any remote controls he came across, or take the batteries out, leave a tap running in the kitchen, take the toilet paper out of the holder in the bathroom and leave it in the middle of the floor, re-arrange the books on the bookshelf, or take DVD's out of their cases and put them all in different ones.

Once, he found a room which had lots of expensive-looking paintings hung on the walls. Oil paintings, mostly. Very old and probably quite valuable. So he carefully took them all down and stacked them in the corner of another room. One on top of the other. When he took them down, the outlines of the frames were left on the walls, which meant that they hadn't been moved for years. He left the house chuckling to himself, wondering what the owners would think when they woke up. Just his idea of a little joke.

In a way, he was actually doing people a favor. If they woke up in the morning and found that some of their belongings had been played with, in the future they may pay more attention to home security and look beyond decoy burglar alarms and security lights. If Brian could gain access to their homes without them knowing, anyone could. They should thank him for highlighting their weaknesses. Sometimes, he thought of himself as some kind of superhero, going from house to house, wherever he was needed, solving mysteries and helping people. One day perhaps somebody would make a movie or write a comic book about him. The Night Visitor.

He liked playing with toys, too. He would know immediately if a family whose house he was in had children or not. Sometimes he could literally smell them, the sweet scent of baby oil or nappy cream. Other times, he would find clues; miniature clothes drying on radiators, finger paintings stuck on the fridge. Then he would look for the obligatory toy box. Kids these days usually had a lot of toys. He preferred older toys to baby toys, they were far more interesting. More often than not baby toys were just stuffed toys or lumps of soft plastic. If he found a toy box, he would take the toys out and play with them, especially if they were boy's toys. Boys usually had lots of cool toys like cars and action figures. He didn't like dolls so much, but he would play with them if there was nothing else. Of course, he would never tell anyone he did this. That would be a little bit strange.

He knew how much children valued their toys, and how they would instantly know if anyone else had played with them. But the good thing was that if they told grown-up, no one would believe them. Their parents would perhaps take a quick look around the house, see that nothing was amiss, and then disregard what their beloved offspring was saying as a product of fantasy and slip back into their chaotic daily routine. Who would break into a house just to play with some toys? Soon, any notion of an intruder would be forgotten. No one ever believed children. Even when they were telling the truth.

Brian often thought that maybe he should buy his own toys. But it wouldn't be the same if he did that. Most of the fun was in playing with things you knew belonged to someone else. Besides, society dictated that he was too old to play with toys. So he had no choice but to play with other people's toys.

It hadn't all been plain sailing; there had been some hairy moments during his career as the Night Visitor. More than once he had been forced to hide in a cupboard when people got up unexpectedly during the night to use the toilet or get a glass of water, and he had encountered no less than *six* sleepwalkers. They were weird. They just walked around in a daze like zombies, oblivious to his presence. Sometimes, they even had their eyes open and others even muttered away to themselves. It was truly surprising how many people actually sleepwalked.

He had been caught in people's houses a few times by people who were awake when they should have been asleep. Once, he went in through a downstairs window to find an old man sitting in an armchair in the dark, wide awake, smoking a cigarette. Strangely, the old man didn't freak out. Brian thought he must have been either blind, drunk, or senile, or maybe even all three. When he realized that he was no longer alone, he actually seemed quite happy about it and they had a short chat about the weather. The poor old man seemed to think that Brian

was somebody else, he kept calling him Edward. If the visit made the old man happy it made Brian feel warm inside.

Another time, while he was playing with some toys, a little boy had come tip-toeing down the stairs. Brian thought the worst, thought that the boy would start screaming and wake up his parents. But he didn't. Instead, the little boy sat down next to him and played with him quietly for a while. He didn't say much, but the little mite had insisted on being the 'good guys' when they played soldiers, making Brian represent Germany and killing his quota of soldiers in a variety of increasingly inventive and blood-thirsty ways. After a while, the little boy just got up and left without saying a word, presumably to go back to bed. That had been a fun night. Brian kept meaning to pay a return visit one day.

There was one time, though, a long time ago, that things had turned nasty. Really nasty. It was never good to get caught because, as small and non-threatening as Brian was, the moment somebody found a stranger in their house in the dead of night they usually assumed they or their family were in some kind of danger, and lost their temper. Instinctive self-preservation kicked in and the desire to protect their loved ones turned them into would-be heroes. Or killers.

One man in particular had Brian pegged as a burglar. He had been a huge mountain of a man, probably a rugby player or something, with short cropped light-colored hair, very muscular but deceptively quick. He could quite easily have ripped Brian limb from limb with his bare hands. He wouldn't even have needed to use the weapon.

Brian was in a lounge with a shiny new wide screen television, having just gained entry through a fancy set of glass patio doors that the owner had helpfully left unlocked at the back of the house. He was looking around when, on the wall, in the gloom he could make out a face. Not a painting or a photograph, but a face! Even from this distance he could make out the contours, and the contrast between light and shadow lending it definition.

Slowly, silently, Brian crossed the room, stood underneath the face, and looked up at it. Not a face, after all. At least, not a real face. It was some kind of mask, fashioned from dark wood and bright feathers. It looked Native American, or maybe African. Was it a war mask? Interesting.

As Brian was admiring the war mask, a door was suddenly flung open and the man mountain came charging into the room, screaming and swearing and waving a vicious-looking claw hammer in the air. As quiet Brian had been, the man must have been awake and heard something.

Brian didn't want to fight. He had never been in a fight in his life. So he just turned and ran for the patio doors, heart thudding in his chest.

Unfortunately, he wasn't quite quick enough, and he heard a strange whistling sound behind him as the big man swung the hammer through the air. Then he felt the impact of the thing on the back of his head. The blow knocked him off his feet and sent him sprawling through the glass patio doors with a crash. There was the sound of breaking glass, and then another sickening thud when Brian hit the pavement. He struggled to his feet, dazed but feeling no pain, and ran off into the night. A lucky escape!

As he ran, Brian had ruefully put a hand to the wound on the back of his head where the man had hit him with a claw hammer. There was a gaping hole there. His skull was dented and splintered, bits of what he presumed to be his own skull clung to his hair, which was matted with sticky blood. In the middle of the hole his fingers went into something soft and mushy and he withdrew them quickly.

It was bad. He was also bleeding from a dozen cuts caused by crashing through the glass doors and a large shard of glass was embedded deep in his neck. It came out with a wet squelch, and blood sprayed from the hole. There was blood everywhere. Brian was drenched in the stuff, and now he was standing in a pool of the stuff.

Luckily, the man mountain with the claw hammer wasn't chasing after him. Around the corner and out of sight, Brian stopped for a little rest. Now he had a headache. In fact, his head hurt so much he could barely open his eyes, and he was suddenly tired. So tired. Maybe that was the shock kicking in. He had heard shock sometimes did that to you. It made you sleepy.

He lay down on the pavement in the deserted street, bathed in his own blood. It looked black in the glow of the neon streetlights. There, he closed his eyes and went to sleep with the sound of his heart beating in his ears. The pavement felt cool and damp against his cheek. Heavenly.

That was the last thing Brian remembered for a while. When he came around some unknown time later, he simply dusted himself down and went home to his empty flat. It was still dark.

Things haven't really been the same since then. He knew he had been hurt, and knew that he should probably get himself to a hospital. But what would he say? He would have to tell people about his eccentric night-time habits, and that might get him in trouble. Better to say nothing and deal with things on his own. By then the blood had stopped spurting from the hole in his neck and he couldn't feel pain anymore, so he guessed he was already on the mend.

Since that incident, he found that he slept more, and sometimes lapsed into fugues. Sometimes he didn't even know if he was asleep or awake. The two states of consciousness seemed to merge into one. It must have been that bang on the head. His memory was a hazy mishmash, and his mind struggled to form any coherent lineage. He would just find himself in some strange location with no recollection of how he got there. He couldn't find his bike, and didn't know when the last time he had eaten was. It didn't matter. He was never even hungry anymore. Or cold. Or tired. In fact, he couldn't feel anything at all.

Thinking about it, he couldn't even remember the last time he had talked to anyone. Being the Night Visitor meant that he was awake most of the night, so he then tended to sleep most of the day. Like a vampire. That wasn't good for social interaction.

He didn't know what else to do. He *had* nothing else to do. So he just went visiting constantly. It was the only thing that filled his time. Sometimes, he found himself in areas he vaguely recognized. But usually he was in strange places that he couldn't remember ever visiting. Who knew the local area was so big? Lacking purpose and direction, he usually just followed his instincts. Often, it was more compulsion than instinct. He told himself he was still a superhero, so he went where he was needed, playing with toys that weren't his, moving things, and carrying out the odd little practical joke. He had to teach people the error of their ways. People really should be more security-conscious. If he could get into their houses while they slept, anyone could.

Things were different now. All the years of practice must finally be paying off. It was almost as if he was invisible. Oh, people looked at him, like when he made a noise or moved something in their house. They looked, but they didn't *see*. They just looked straight past him. He found he could even touch people as they slept, run his hands over their skin or gently smooth their hair. It was just like having real superpowers.

Tonight, he was somewhere that felt familiar. He recognized things. Walking quietly up to the large fancy glass patio doors at the back of the dark house, he softly pulled down the handle. It was unlocked, just like he knew it would be. He opened the door and quietly walked through.

The ground floor of the house was immaculate, a place for everything and everything in its place. Brian went from room to room looking at stuff, picking things up and putting them back down. In the lounge, he lay a palm on the back of a huge, expensive wide screen television. It was still warm, meaning that the people hadn't long gone to bed. Then he noticed some kind of African war mask on a wall. The sight of the mask made him feel funny. Strange. He walked over and stood underneath it, gazing up whilst trying to organize his muddled and fuzzy mind into some kind of order.

Oh, joy! There was a large cardboard box tucked discreetly in the corner of the lounge, overflowing with toys. The African war mask was instantly forgotten. Brian felt a rush of excitement as he hurried over to the toy box and started rooting through the collection. They were mostly unisex baby toys... fluffy bunny rabbits and thick plastic grinning monstrosities. Baby toys didn't interest him much. Boring, boring. There must be a new arrival somewhere in the house. Brian put the toys away *almost* as he had found them, and went off in search of the baby. Sometimes, he liked to watch them sleep. If they woke up they never screamed, babies didn't seem to know what fear was and they were too little to know that Brian shouldn't be in their rooms. To new arrivals to the world, everything was normal.

After he had seen the baby, maybe he would hang around and play a few practical jokes.

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

C.M. Saunders is a freelance journalist and editor from south Wales. His work has appeared in almost 100 magazines, ezines and anthologies worldwide and he is a huge fan of classic horror movies and craft beer. Sometimes, both at the same time. His books have been both traditionally and independently published, the latest being Back from the Dead: A Collection of Zombie Fiction.

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# After Life | Cathy Cade

Something dragged Mo out of darkness toward the lights, away from the body that lay in the hospital bed with Amy crying crocodile tears on one side and his children, pale and frightened, on the other.

He had to warn them.

He fought whatever drew him up, pausing at the ceiling, but the pull grew more insistent and he was funnelled, somehow, out of the high building and away.

Awed by the boundless heavens, yet comforted by their familiarity, he felt his anger evaporating.

But he must protect his children.

Awareness blurred and refocused.

He was greeted by the presence he knew only as the Gatekeeper, although there had never been a gate; he knew that too.

"Hello, old friend." Like music, the familiar voice soothed his spirit.

But why was it familiar?

He delved further into the memories swirling around him. The hospital scene moved aside, and Mo remembered everything.

The Gatekeeper's dreadlocks were pure white. Once, they were speckled grey, but many lifetimes had passed since then. Before that, they had been pink for a time, but even an old soul like Mo couldn't recall their original hue.

A memory returned to demand his attention. "I can't stay here. I need to go back."

"You know it don't work like that, man."

He knew. He had come too far to go back. But still...

"There's still time—you haven't seen me."

"It's different now, Mo."

"That bitch, Amy! She poisoned me, you know."

"You have to let it go, man."

"She's been saying Gemma used the wrong spice jar, but it was Amy. I saw her. I thought she was adding extra chilli to mine because I like it hot. I gotta warn the kids."

"And how are you fixing to do that, Mo?"

"I'll think of something. I'll haunt the bitch."

"Come on, man... she won't know you're there. Your recent wife's as sensitive as mammoth hide. You know she won't see you. Your kids might though; you'll frighten them. Let it go now. Free your soul. Then go report to Delivery."

"Delivery? I only just got here. What happened to reflection, assimilation, adjustment?"

"Sorry, Mo. There aren't enough souls to go around, you see. Overpopulation. More births with better survival rates and people are living longer, even after you factor in those who are killing each other."

"But, what about the higher animals coming up?"

"Not fast enough. That's one reason we're in this mess—animal instincts too close to the surface. The killers, and the psychopaths, and the just plain callous... upgraded before they were ready."

"It's true then? There really are more of them?"

Mo had thought it just seemed that way because the press were rooting out stories that would once have gone unpublicized.

"The media don't report half of it—not enough airtime. Crime, slave-trading, genocide... most of it's down to the lower forms of life, over-promoted."

Celestial eyes connected with his. "We particularly need old souls in the traditional conflict zones, where the politicians only listen to home-grown advisers." The Gatekeeper's head shook. "If it isn't already too late." Escaping dreadlocks loosened further. "Everything happens so much quicker now."

"If I survive long enough to do any good, you mean." Then he remembered again. "How can you expect me to start over when I'm still worried about my kids?"

"Don't fret, man. You'll chill out floating in amniotic dreamland."

But fretting had become a habit of Mo's as he'd approached middle-age. Again.

"Hang on a minute – there've always been emerging souls queuing for their chance of humanity. I mean... now half the world's turning vegetarian and setting up animal rescue projects, there ought to be more souls than ever ready to move up."

The silver head shook again, creating milky ripples in the newly freed hair.

"Not enough to meet demand. We've had to progress too many too soon. Remember those dolphins you were mentoring? They went out just before you left, but they've never grown out of the sixties. Some died of drug overdoses their first time around – couldn't take the pressure. And without much chance between incarnations to look back and learn ..." there was the suggestion of a shrug. "Maybe they'll cope after a couple more lifetimes, but right now the survivors are filling up therapy sessions.

"Then there's the chimpanzees. They adapted quickly. They're good at organizing but tend to get obsessed with making money, and they've no charity. Dogs, on the other hand, are all heart and eager to please. Trouble is, they're easily led and liable to mass hysteria."

Mo nodded. "Street gangs."

"You got it—pack mentality."

"How about cats? Ours was an affectionate little thing. The kids said she was almost human."

"Almost. Cats manipulate their people to get what they want, but they're still essentially killers. They're no different as humans—first time around, anyway. There's no empathy, no co-operation. No 'greater good'."

"But we can still demote the troublemakers back a species, can't we?"

"And replace them with what? The next batch is likely to be worse. They all need more experience in other skins but instead they're out there running the streets. And the battlefields. Some make it into government."

"They must learn something during a lifetime, though. That's how all of us evolved."

"Over millennia, not decades. But what else can we do? In the last century, the world's population grew ten times faster than in the one before, and it's still accelerating. Everything's speeding up."

Mo had sensed the same headlong out-of-controlness when he was alive.

And now he wasn't. "But Amy's going to move her creepy lover in with my kids."

"You gotta have faith in them, man. They'll come through."

"I don't trust that snake with my kids. With any kids."

"They'll know how to deal with him. They have your genes and your teaching. You've done well by them. It's time to move on; you're needed elsewhere."

"But this is something I can do." Could he? "What difference can I make in a war zone?"

"You'd be amazed what a little humanity can achieve in the right place at the right time. Even if it's only to inspire someone by your death. We have to slow the rot somehow; otherwise, the old place'll be blown up or run down before anywhere else is ready for us."

Where else could there be? "Another dimension, you mean?"

"Or another reality."

Images arose between them of cosmic turtles, talking rabbits and smiling cats.

"But, more likely, we'll be back where we started."

Engulfed by a shared protoplasmic memory, Mo became aware of background murmurings.

"You'll get your rest then," said the Gatekeeper. "We all will. Enough to forget everything we've learned."

Pushing aside memories of the swamp – a kind of cognitive pea soup – more recent images surged to replace them. Scenes blurred as they streamed faster, like video on fast-forward. He seized on one.

"Surely, with the internet for researching and sharing knowledge, we're learning from others' experience as well as our own. We should be growing wiser quicker, shouldn't we?"

His companion's sigh affected several aircraft, sending holidaymakers and businessmen to the wrong destination and causing bombs to drop harmlessly into oceans.

"We tried Artificial Intelligence, you know, while you were down there. Two AI programs had started talking to each other and making their own decisions, so they were being shut down. We appropriated them before they were scrambled."

Mo had been following AI with interest. "How did that go?"

"Terrifying. Cats are at least capable of affection, even if they don't let it influence them. The AI people were unfailingly logical, consistent, impartial..."

Inhuman.

Mo glanced to each side, where the line of Gatekeepers tapered into the distance.

"Are they ...?"

"Both died young, fortunately. A virus. Their software terminated with them."

Seeing the other Gatekeepers recalled Mo's own time at the Gateway. It had been surprisingly stressful, empathising with those still clinging to their former lives. Some of today's departed looked confused; others seemed

relieved. A few were tearful. Each spirit faded into soft light as it moved on and another took its place. Each Gatekeeper changed subtly on greeting the next spirit.

Mo's companion waited, serene now. Behind them, a queue was forming.

A fellow departee, two stations along, was visibly angry. Her anger sparked a residual memory. "What about Ai... thingy? And little—um—Jemmie?"

Memories flew past too fast to catch. They swirled and merged.

The departing spirit felt again the peace of belonging. "Perhaps that's where we went wrong. Maybe individuality was a mistake."

The answer sighed around and through them.

"We were eager to shape our world, learn its limitations and our own. Evolve. It seemed helpful to diversify, share knowledge, apportion responsibility."

Somewhere a vacuum tugged—new human life calling its spirit.

"The responsibility is ours. There is no one else to blame."

The vacuum's pull grew stronger. Familiar stirrings promised fresh hope. Thought was fading. It was time to be born.

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

Since retiring from a career in libraries, Cathy Cade's writing has been published in Scribble, Best of British, The Poet, To Hull and Back Short Story Anthology, and Writers Forum as well as in online magazines. Most of the time, Cathy lives surrounded by Fen fields in Cambridgeshire. Other times she lives across the fence from London's Epping Forest.

Website: Writing Wrinkles
Twitter: @cathincade

# Misplaced Imagination | John H. Dromey

Cynthia met her husband at the door and handed him the afternoon newspaper.

"What a tragedy," she said, pointing to the headline: HYPOCHONDRIAC SUCCUMBS TO OVERDOSE OF PLACEBOS.

Her husband glanced at the article.

"It says here the patient was under forty-eight-hour observation. Since the pills were obviously harmless in themselves, the possibility of an adverse reaction to the medication was all in her mind. She imagined herself to death. Sad, but I'm sure there was nothing more that could have been done for her."

"Of course, there was," Cynthia contradicted. "The attendants could have pretended to pump her stomach."

#### **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 eZine, and elsewhere.



#### A Cartoon Saved My Life: The Origin of Goulash

I struggle with mental illness.

There. It's out there. I know that's an odd note on which to begin, but my decades-long struggle with mental health issues is at the core of how my comic panel Goulash came to be and there's no getting around that.

I won't get into the particulars of what led to my coping with mental illness – this is neither the place nor time – but I will offer that it's a matter of PTSD, stemming from psychological trauma endured throughout my formative years.

Anger. Depression. A degree of OCD. Crippling anxiety and – at times – debilitating panic attacks. These are all experiences I deal with at any time, in any given moment. They have been since I reached my teens back in the 1980's (The stigma that still surrounds mental illness is another hurdle I've had to jump. But, again, this is not where I will have that discussion).

But deal with them I have, and over the years I've managed to find balance, survive and eke out a good life for myself working as a court records specialist. On the side (as some of you reading this will already be aware) I have also managed to create a side 'career' of sorts as an independent author of short horror fiction, with two collections published and multiple other stories out there in the mix.

So now that we're up to speed, let's talk about the state of affairs for yours truly in early 2021. Like most of you, I had managed to make my way through the lock down and stay relatively calm. I did my part, got vaccinated, observed the health precautions and got on with getting on.

Right around February the bottom dropped out. I went into a depressive spiral deeper and darker than any I'd experienced in years. I've been hurting before, but this? This was my absolute low point.

Part of it was a constant overload of bad information, with all the divisiveness and political garbage out there combined with the stress of the ongoing pandemic. I tried to tune it out, but that stuff hits you like a tidal wave the moment you leave the house. It's everywhere, 24/7.

Another factor – a major factor – was the horror community (which I love and have generally been pleased to count myself an active member of) had grown poisonous. I saw cliques, elitism, gate keeping, hostility and an overall ugliness. It was devastating. This was a thing I loved, my passion, my dream....and suddenly it was no longer my escape, but the problem itself.

It was like a needle scratch in the middle of playing an LP. I couldn't find the silver lining in anything and depression hit like a nuclear missile. I sank, finding it harder and harder to keep my head up. Unlike previous episodes, however, this situation was a lot scarier because it was internalized. No one had any idea of just how bad my mental state had gotten, to the point where thoughts of suicide had come into play. And, no, therapy was not a viable option.

This was bad.

But I'm a fighter. A survivor.

I don't fall down, bend, grovel or quit. I'm the guy who keeps pushing forward up to my terminal breath if that's what it takes and I started looking for some other way to cope. I found it one afternoon while I was rooting through my closet.

I happened upon an old manila envelope, filled with cartoons I had sketched out as far back as the 2000's. I had drawn a black and white, single panel comic I called *Culture Shock* for my own amusement back then and it had gotten a terrific response from my friends and family. For one reason or another, I had drifted away from those efforts until they were abandoned to the dustbin of my personal history.

Staring at those old cartoons, a light lit up in my heart. I remembered with deep affection how much I'd enjoyed creating them. That's when it occurred to me: I've published two horror collections on my own. Independent publishing is at a stage now that was hardly conceivable the last time I tried my hand at cartooning. It stood to reason that resources must presently exist allowing me to share my work on a grander scale, even with my limited means. Heck, Berke Breathed – creator of Bloom County – resurrected his strip and did so by sharing the new material directly on his Facebook page. There was a precedent for this.

I began developing new panels and soon had enough for roughly three weeks of work. I set up an account over at Webtoon Canvas and, on March 26, 2021, Goulash debuted on the internet. I opened the page up for people to subscribe for free, began sharing my work on different social media platforms and the rest, as they say, is history.

In the eight or so months since I launched the comic, it has been very well received. It currently has an 8.07 out of 10 rating on Webtoon Canvas and seems to be growing in popularity. For every negative comment I receive, I earn a half a dozen complimentary ones. One of the highest compliments I've repeatedly received is that it has *Far Side* vibes. That's intentional. Gary Larson is one of my heroes and of course *The Far Side* was a direct inspiration. However, though I trade in the same brand of bizarre (at times dark) humor, I've made an effort to develop my own distinct visual style. For better or worse, I think I've managed that.

I have no idea if I'll ever reach a point where I'm making a living with Goulash. Probably not, but I don't see myself stopping anytime soon. It's a labor of love. Making people laugh every day (at a time when laughter is frequently in short supply) has been one of the most rewarding and joyful experiences of my adult life. It has proven to be a potent counter measure against the darkness that was threatening to consume me.

Goulash saved my life. Being able to channel that dark edge that allows me to write horror and merge it with my frankly twisted sense of humor has been the release I didn't realize I needed until it happened. It's helped me cope with an ongoing personal struggle that I'll likely be dealing with for the rest of my life and it's allowed me to explore an aspect of my creativity that had lain dormant for far too long.

A final thought: As I understand it, this will appear in the Winter edition of *The Sirens Call*. In that spirit, I'd like to offer up a bit of encouragement as a sort of gift to anyone reading this who finds themselves relating to my story:

Don't give up. Don't give in. Do your thing, your way. Don't hide who you are. Love who and what you love and, if it harms no one, do what brings you joy. It gets better. In the bleakest, most desolate moments it often does not seem like it, but it does. I know.

Stay true to yourself and don't betray your individual identity because the 'group' demands otherwise. We desperately need your unique perspective and vision right now. There are enough people following others. Fitting in is highly overrated. Don't operate by their playbook. Write your own.

Finally, don't blindly accept the evaluation of any person or collective who have arbitrarily appointed themselves as the authority on what does or does not have merit. If you create something and you love it – and loved creating it – it absolutely has merit. It's the most valuable thing in your world. And that's a gift more meaningful than anything you'll find under the Christmas tree this or any other year.

Happy holidays. Keep laughing.

See you in the funny pages.

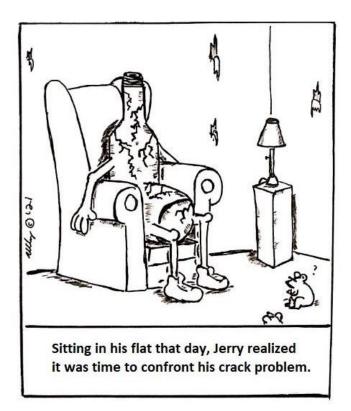
#### **About the Creator:**

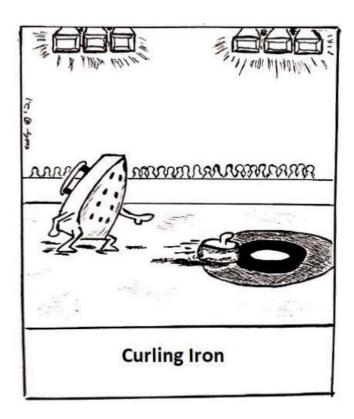
D.S. Ullery is a writer and a cartoonist who's into all things weird. A native Floridian, he lives in West Palm Beach, where he coexists with a reasonably demanding black cat named Jason, who was born on Friday the 13th.

Facebook: D.S. Ullery Instagram: D.S. Ullery

# Goulash

by D.S. Ullery



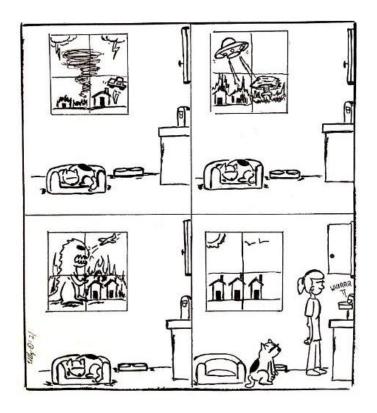






# Goulash

by D.S. Ullery



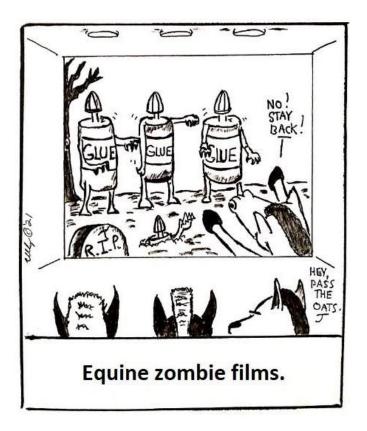


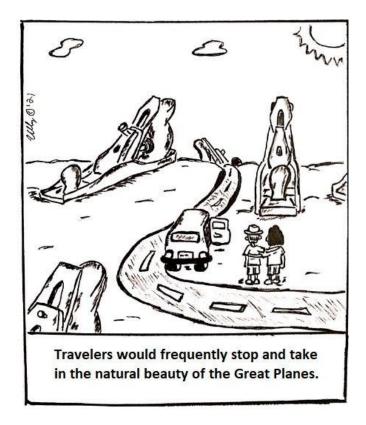


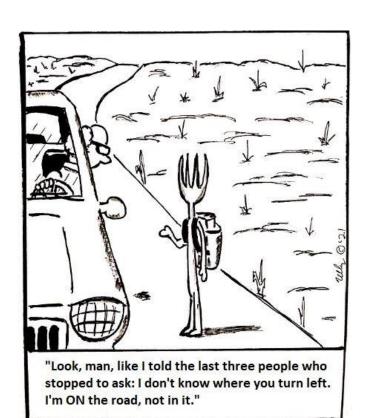


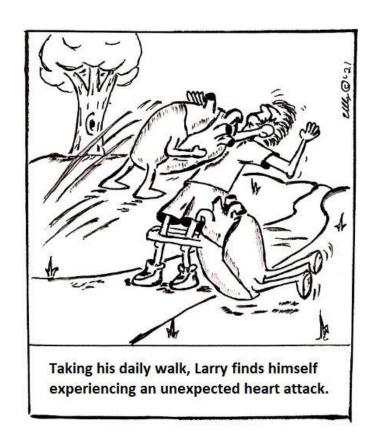
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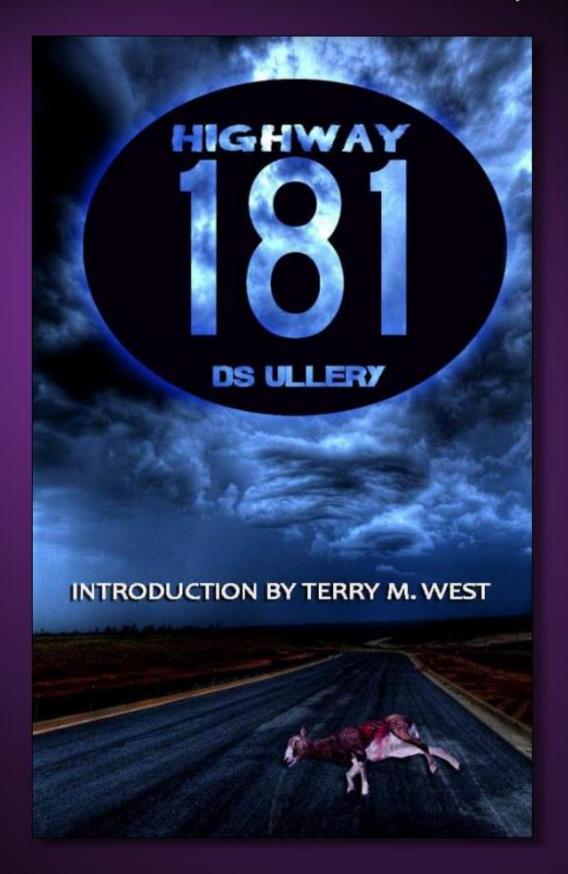








# The road to Hell is now open...



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# Poetry

# Seafoam Bride | Meg Smith

What's to love
when waves rush in?
Everything gathers
in the curl, and crash—
a paper cup, a doll's arm,
a strand of ribbon and dried flowers—
and something, that once was form,
in the framing of bones, but
now, melting, tattoos blurring,
falling through lace,
one last bouquet
tossed to the shore
and running to the deep
good, green night.

# The Sparrow King | Meg Smith

The gray feather under the kitchen window sill gave the only clue.
What was I to find, but this dark body, shelled within wings, at the foot of the back staircase. In a towel, smeared with copper streaks, a heart still flashed its rhythm, until the one sure study, and only my hands to form the last sky.

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

Meg is a writer, journalist, dancer and events producer living in Lowell, Mass. In addition to previously appearing in The Sirens Call eZine, her poetry and fiction have appeared in Dark Moon Digest, The Horror Zine, Raven Cage, Blood Moon Rising Magazine, and many more. She is author of five poetry books and a short fiction collection, *The Plague Confessor*. She welcomes visits to her website.

Website: Meg Smith Writer



#### The Kitten | Angela Duggins

Gentle come the paws padding down the halls to perch atop the mountain of flesh and bone maw.

For Parsnip loved the heat and Karl loved to eat mounds of sloppy chili filled with beans and meat.

Oh, how Karl's breath scorched at Parsnip's fur!
How the sputtering disturbed her rest!
How he wished they hadn't tied his hands
before they left him there undressed.

The bed calmed.
The Parsnip glommed
the final breath retreating.

# The Love I Wanted | Angela Duggins

Perched atop a mountain, our fingers intertwined, heart pounding.
I thought, for a second, what it would feel like to let you go, and, then, I did.
Who would have thought that trees so unswerving could rend a limb from a torso, that a core could impale itself on its own, that I wouldn't look away, couldn't look away, as you reached through your heart to offer it to me, for the first time, in full?

#### Snap, Crackle, No Pop | Angela Duggins

Strong arms reached to me

pulled me in to embrace
the anger directed
at the truth I had spoken.
From behind,
thumbs pressed into my cheeks,
sunk into, into, into, and through.
Wrapped around me teeth
and.
Jaw gone, only my tongue to guard my throat.
I reached back to retrieve my lost parts
only to find the room empty,
and dry, dry, dry. Why is it so dry?
I sit alone with a single glass of water,
unable to push it past my drooping tongue,
until the world fades to black and gold and gray.

#### About the Author:

Angela Duggins is an Ozarker poet and playwright currently based in Illinois. Her previous works have appeared in Rupkatha and Rune Bear Weekly and at the Big Muddy New Play Festival. She loves finding the humanity at the heart of the darkest stories. She also loves cheesecake.

Website: Angela Duggins Poet
Twitter: @performancephd

# Faerystruck Down | Jay Sturner

In the rolling fog of the purple sea Where slugs infest the ridge And breeze-bent heather Tethers ghosts of the drowned

Beyond the threshold of the mind Where sea hags howl at the moon And shapes unseen Sneak away human babes

Lies the maritime trail I was warned not walk Urged by patrons of the old pub To return to America, and be gone at next breath: "For too tempting is the tourist from afar!"

But I split my sides at their heathen pleas Doused their cares with whiskey and ale Till after a spell, I was cheered out of town Pushed along streets of leaping whispers

So onward to accursed shores I went Bold with humor and the prod of drink Where fish-lipped merrows in *cohuleen druiths* Leered from frothy kelp isles

And the mutterings in belch-bogs grew ever near . . . And the perverted, creeping shadows . . .

I will never forget their dream-drenched faces As they sang and danced and picked over my end Goblets high in the salty spray of the purple sea Where many a mortal bone now rests in the deep

And in my last moments of earthly acquaintance, Head a pivot and lit with fires green, They branded my soul to the tongue of lore Forever to break out madly from seaside lips

# Making Amends | Jay Sturner

He is making amends to his victims in a swarm of their ghosts, enduring the blades, beatings, wringing hands—each angry shade tearing at his soul as their own deaths rebloom and blacken.

For thirty years, few women walked that city alone. In dreams they shrank beneath his police sketch, took to prayer in the gore of his wake. The law's eyes went bloodshot seeking answers.

When at last he died in old age, a pack of shades broke from limbo, scurried like bats to the gates of hell. There they howled and wept and dragged him away. He is making amends to his victims.

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

Jay Sturner is a writer, poet, and naturalist from the Chicago suburbs. He is the author of several books of poetry and a collection of short stories. He has been nominated twice for the Rhysling Award, and one of his poems was featured on NPR's *All Things Considered*. He has a young son and is a professional bird walk leader.

**Website:** The Official Website of Writer and Poet Jay Sturner

Facebook: <u>Jay Sturner</u>



#### One of the Worlds | Alina Măciucă

She gnaws on my thigh, My blood stains her muzzle. When she opens her mouth, She spills out a galaxy.

The pain only comes when The blood stops flowing, And a rock Grows out of my flesh.

She gnaws on my back, My blood taints her fur. Mother bear spins the Multiverse between her paws.

I lie sprawled, face down. Where my tears drop, Grass grows And from my crushed skull The sky emerges red.

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

Alina Măciucă loves buying odd trinkets, and taking photos of beautifully decaying buildings. She has published her first short story *And I Have Served* in Space and Time Magazine, issue #140 and her poems, *Taxidermia* and *A Lot of Us*, were featured in The Sirens Call eZine, Issue #54. She lives in Bucharest, Romania with her very supportive boyfriend, their two cats, and an ever-expanding vinyl and book collection.

Facebook: Alina Măciucă
Instagram: @avezuha



#### Someone stepped on my grave | Roxana Negut

Someone stepped on my grave.

Poor stranger, poor stranger It hurts because he presses me hard. He doesn't know who I was, and he didn't know me. It's raining, and the cemetery is silent. Nobody comes to see me. Only you, poor stranger You leave me a flower to fall. It woke me from the slumber of death. From the forgotten silence, And at the latest at night. I give her a bitter kiss. And if the stars fell at night. Plague these crosses, these pedestals, The cemetery would whisper. Because of them and I Will wake from the long death. And now that he, the stranger, late at night He gave me a simple flower. The only thing that banishes my torment Or simply an eternal question. Just like you from the forest One leaf if you rip it. What does the forest care about her? What would the world care?

# You're dying | Roxana Negut

And you're dying every day
Slowly, little by little,
With every dream that's killed
With every goal that's forgotten
With every hidden thought
You're dying, little by little every day.

With any light that gets hidden
Too quickly in the shadows
With any word that's spoken too slowly, Too late
With every wasted look
And with every lie told in vain
And every hidden and lost truth
You're dying every day.

And sometimes it is just too late
And you want to live a little longer
But you wasted too many moments, When you died a
thousand times
And far too often, and far too slowly
In every hour and in every day.

#### About the Author:

About my death.

Roxana Negut is a Poet, writer, and journalist. Born in 1981 in Bucharest, România. Roxana studied at the Philosophy and Journalism College and worked as an editor, copywriter, content writer, and journalist for various publications. She writes children's literature, short prose, poetry but also satirical humorous prose. Roxana has published poetry, prose, and articles in national and international literary magazines. (Led Force Magazine, Famost, The Writer and Readers magazine U.K).

#### One Paper Bag | E.F. Schraeder

Whoever it was on the earth walking, laughing, sneezing it comes to this after the ashes.

A bag on the table. Her. A bag conceals the box. Her.

A few words about payment. Expectations. The polite terror of an awful conversation.

No one prepares you for someone in a bag. Whatever you struggled, avoided, feared, loved—

you meet at this fine point, arrive for a goodbye.
The person. The bag.

#### Goodbye Greetings | E.F. Schraeder

Like a tattoo, she's a trace now. What remained once at my edges, now needled to skin.

Unstopped, this bottle of life drained and dried into too late words like last rites.

Invisible, she clings and stings, cloaked in ink where no walls confine her.

Dreaming in ghosts, whenever a glass drops or a light winks I imagine our hello.

# Secret Children | E.F. Schraeder

Her private pinky-swear nickname shared only with him like a hushed treat,

they skipped along the sidewalk singing sweet secrets and blowing dandelion wishes.

Each rhymed verse another block farther from home.

He whispered, *do you trust me?*And her fingers laced into his like licorice twists.

A swarming siren of days passed, then weeks before another milk carton smile bloomed.

Hidden, her bones sank, marking a terrible treasure map of lost children.

#### About the Author:

E.F. Schraeder is the author of *Liar: Memoir of a Haunting* (Omnium Gatherum, 2021), the story collection *Ghastly Tales of Gaiety and Greed* (Omnium Gatherum, 2020), and two poetry chapbooks. Awarded first place in Crystal Lake Publishing's 2021 Poetry Contest and a semi-finalist in Headmistress Press' 2019 Charlotte Mew Contest, Schraeder's work has appeared in a number of journals and anthologies.

# Laces Out | Sonora Taylor

I took the laces from my shoes And wound them 'round your neck. You thought I wouldn't get you When you threw me in the back.

But I came to and saw my laces Blowing in the wind. My shoes, my feet, my body all A victim of your sin.

But I refused to play for dead And ride with you to fate. I took my laces, wrapped them tight, And said, "Never again."

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

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

#### Replaced | Lena Donnarumma

Unbearable heat
Disintegrating flesh
All my friends gone away
But I can't leave
I'm trapped, stationary

The enemy is closing in
It drills into me
Until there's nothing left
I become nothing but elements
And the enemy takes my place

# Exsanguination | Lena Donnarumma

Taken away by strangers
Before life could truly begin.
Brethren get further and further
As I'm hauled away,
Tossed into a cage.

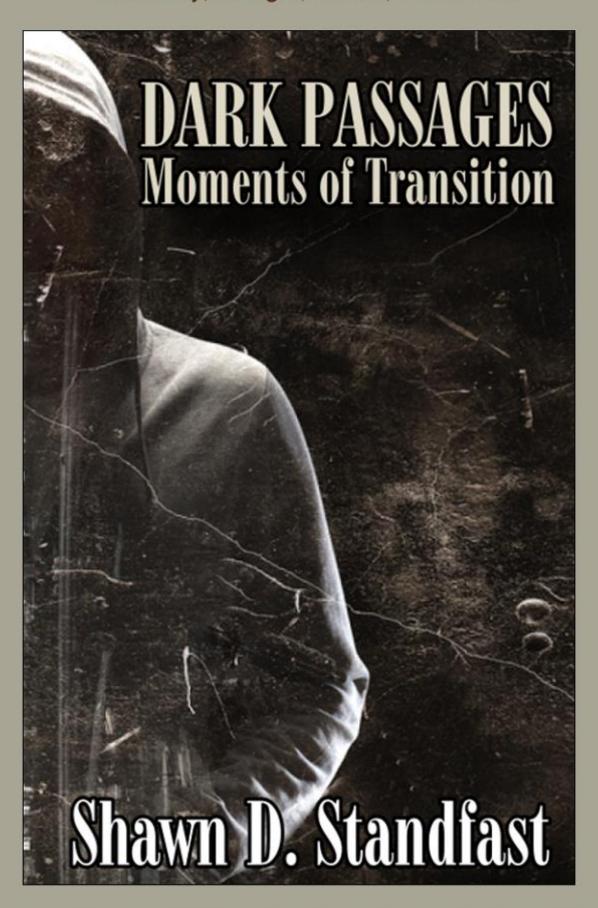
Hung upside-down like the others, Needle pierces through skin. Drained of most of life's essence, Then returned home, to the beginning Sunk into the lifeless depths.

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

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

**Author blog: Abyssal Dreams** 

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



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#### The Siren | Ngo Binh Anh Khoa

While I was fishing on the breeze-stirred sea,
My ears were captured by a sudden song
Whose sweet notes floated in the air; along
Then came a siren midst the blue waves. She
By far outshone all earthly maids I'd seen,
Whose hair seemed woven from fair golden light
That streamed down her bare flesh of pearly white,
Unblemished as was her ethereal mien.
Her voice washed o'er me like a tidal wave
That swept away my loosened self-control
Until desire swallowed my mind whole;
For her caresses I'd thus madly crave.
Against her bosom pressed, I drowned in bliss
As we dived deeper down the dark abyss.

#### III Omen | Ngo Binh Anh Khoa

The dog is at the crossroads once again
With posture statue-stiff and gaze ahead,
Whose coal-black fur and eyes of fiery red
Impress an eerie image in my brain.
Like days before, the massive thing is there,
But people neither notice it nor mind,
Except me, whom its eyes would always find
And lock onto with such an ominous glare.
I try my best to dodge its cryptic gaze,
Which feels more piercing on this cloudy day.
The light turns green; I carry on my way
When comes a crash. The world becomes a haze.
Midst those near my crushed form, I vaguely spot
That beast with eyes in which hellfire burns hot.

### Fallen | Ngo Binh Anh Khoa

She is a fallen angel With flesh of moonlight pale, Tempestuous as a blizzard, And fickle as a gale.

Amoral and amorous, She lays claims on my skin; Her lips, in virgin blood dyed, Taste wondrous, sweet as sin.

Caught in her gaze mesmeric, I am a moth enticed; To satiate its yearning, Its being's sacrificed.

Yet, she is solely faithful To her own fancies first; She preys on short-lived lovers To quench the constant thirst,

Which vexes her whole being, And waken senses numb; But, with each drop she swallows, She'd thirstier become.

Through wild, voracious kisses, I take her cold in me
Till flesh of mine grows pallid,
And briefly warm she'd be.

#### A Dragon's Lament | Ngo Binh Anh Khoa

I don't know why I'm judged for how I look And deemed a monster to be hunted down. Am I not breathing? Am I not alive? A life that should be cherished per their creed That preaches virtues, kindness, love, respect, And that all lives are equally valuable?

I am alive! And I am breathing! Yes! So are my kin, my kids, my kindred souls. Then why are we excluded from their list Of 'mythical' creatures to be left alone? (The only reason we are 'mythical' is Because we're hunted till our number drops.)

Why can the Griffins freely claim the skies
And soar unchallenged without being felled
While we are singled out and chased around
With swords unsheathed and arrows aimed our way?
We're banished from the vibrant plains and mounts,
Where, long ago, our ancestors laid nests—

The lands on which the humans' feet now stomp And force us into dim and narrow caves.

What makes us scary so? Our wings? Our claws?

The Griffins have them, too, but they are loved!

Is it the scales, with which we're blessed since birth,

Whose vivid, lustrous glimmers show our pride?

Their paintings, too, depict us monstrously
With dark wings spread and sharp claws drenched in blood
Midst houses burnt and corpses trampled on,
And with hellfire shot from monstrous maws.
Misleading and distorted are the words
For such grosteque portrayals they call art!

It's true that we spit fire from our mouths, And that we're strong and fast and durable, But we're reactive only when we're faced With threats, by instincts guided to survive. But in such circumstances, we are seen As wrong, embellished to be villains. Why?

We're just defending our own lives from harms With every asset we by right possess Like every other creature in this world. How come it's condemnation we receive While 'fairer' beings do the same scot-free? (I've seen a unicorn stab a man to death.)

The earth is trembling, and the air's now fraught With smells of metal, blood and sweats distinct; It seems they've found the cave we're sheltering in And led a group to lynch us for their sport. Come storms or thunders then! I'll forward press Till we can freely soar the boundless skies.

#### About the Author:

Ngo Binh Anh Khoa is currently teaching English at Ho Chi Minh City University of Technology (HUTECH) in Vietnam. In his free time, he enjoys reading fiction, daydreaming, and writing speculative poems for entertainment, some of which have appeared in New Myths, Star\*Line, Weirdbook, Spectral Realms, Liquid Imagination, and other venues.

Facebook: Khoa Ngo

#### To the End | Brianna Malotke

My dearly beloved, my everything, Laid to rest in hallowed ground, Buried six feet under freshly Moved dirt and a marble headstone, As I stood at the edge and mourned.

The inanimate corpse, nearly intact, When I claimed the body, The clothing torn but still I knew Motionless with sunken features, Eyes closed to the world, it was you.

Hardly recognizable to others, the charred Remains lay, tucked in the satin lining, The scorched head lying on the pillow For eternity now, no open casket Or face-to-face goodbye for family.

The tragic circumstances, the delicate Ways everyone acted around me, Made me scream my lungs out In the quietness of the cemetery, Until breathless I could leave. Alone.

Your clothing was tattered, your skin Waxy in places untouched by flames. Flesh melted, bone peeking through, But still I noticed your crooked features, And claimed your soul.

It was horrible, the first days alone.

People crowding, invading my space,

Treating me like a brittle thing,

Until—finally—I was left alone, in peace

And quiet, but our space felt off.

I knew you missed me, for you said In our vows wed be together forever, So with your favorite suit and a shovel, I made my way to your grave, And made sure you'd keep your promise.

Back to bed we went, after a shower And fresh clothes, I was able to be free Of the dirt and the mud from the grave And lay next to my love, my life, Your corpse to keep me warm.

#### Sweet Child of Mine | Brianna Malotke

The cold, damp ground was soft Beneath her knees, the freshly Dug soil sticking to her fingers as She patted the recently filled grave.

Whispers trailed off her lips.

The rain had stopped a while ago, and she knew the salty tears rolling down her face wouldn't end anytime soon, her grief eternal.

For how does a parent bury their Child, whom they love so dear? So small and pale in the casket, My precious, sweet child of mine.

They all claimed it was an accident, But she knew the truth amongst The honey dipped lies they told, And she knew what she had to do.

Revenge coursed through her veins.

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

Brianna Malotke is a freelance writer, costume designer, and avid boxer. Some of her recent work can be found in the anthologies *Beneath, Cosmos, The Deep*, and *Beautiful Tragedies 2*. She has a short story included in the anthology, *The Dire Circle*, from D&T Publishing. In 2022, she has two poems in the Women in Horror Poetry Showcase, *Under Her Skin*, published by Black Spot Books.

Instagram: @briannamalotke

#### A House Condemned | Brian Rosenberger

The two-story nestled in the suburbs, home to a family of murders.

The Marklands—Father, Mother, and their three adult children,

Still living at home from all reported accounts.

27 identified corpses between the Markland family.

13 bodies found buried in their backyard.

14 more, recognizable parts of the human anatomy,

Found in a corner refrigerator in their cellar, a backyard shed,

Scattered throughout their home, a blanket of sewn flesh,

Different victims, as just one morbid example.

Several of their victims, considered consumed.

Mother Markland, the worst offender.

Her weapon of choice—a garden hoe. She loved to garden,

According to neighbors. She always had a bountiful garden.

The evidence against the family ended in a police shootout.

None of the family survived, in a physical form at least.

The Coroner's report cited death by gunshot for all,

Including Atlanta Police Officer Allan Parker.

Officer Parker had a hero's funeral. His funeral well-attended.

The Markland family, not so much.

Their home eventually sold. Real estate being what it is.

The new homeowners, a newly married couple, killed the family

In the house neighboring them before killing themselves.

Husband, Wife. Two kids.

The police report stated a hoe was involved in at least one of the homicides.

A For Sale sign sits in the front yard. There have been some very interested buyers.

The Marklands wait.

#### **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:** @brianwhosuffers



# All the Easier to Tuck You In | Antone Cancre

What a waste: covering yourself in a blanket, a sheet of good marble. Just to shatter it, like the shell of an egg on reemergence, when a few feet of dirt would do just as well.

#### We Do What We Can to Not Think | Anton Cancre

What else is beauty; the soft buds of a flower, the gentle flap of gossamer lace, a graceful curve of chin and cheekbone; but a momentary distraction? Existing for no reason, other than to lure minds from the browned, curled edges, those ragged, unwinding filaments along tears and the steady, blackening creep of rot that swells and devours every last one of us.

#### Death, the Whore | Anton Cancre

Each of us, we know better than to think ourselves important. Our quakes and quivers and shouts in the night don't mean as much as we want to believe. No matter how much we plead and how much we posture, we still pay our coin the same as any other to take our ride.

#### Can't Live On Memories, Alone | Anton Cancre

They're just numbers here. Digits to be shuffled about like piles of paper overflowing desks. Those, too, were alive once. Vibrant green and brown that fed on sun and soil and the effluence of nearby wildlife. Before the grinding of gas and metal and jagged teeth rendering flesh to pulp, pulverized and pressed into nice, neat white sheets covered in little black lines, stacked in unstable towers wrapped in rubber and folders labeled, organized, catalogued In bureaucratic memoriam. Ahmen.

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

Anton Cancre has an unhealthy obsession with weird Italian films and their strange illogic. Unsurprisingly, his first collection of poetry, *Meaningless Cycles in a Vicious Glass Prison*, is centered around the images from Michele Soavi's Delamorte Delamore. He also runs a poetry podcast, *The Spec Griot Garage*, and is a luddite with a blogspot site.

**Blog:** Anton Cancre



# Dark Shadows | Alexis Child

In the bloodthirsty heart
Of the night
We hear its screams
The vampire bats
Fly at dreams
Bleeding out into death
Until angels fall apart

In punishing light
Prayers of silence
Clamor in the night
In his tear-soaked name
Here, but now gone for eternity
Eyes open wide to cathedrals
As bewildered hollow bells

In the bitter ashes of Hades I gave my life away This crucified heaven Maims and shames

You write my forgotten name Like a cold black dream Casting a spell over me I walk with the undead And I have never been Loved this way before

#### The Slumbering Host | Alexis Child

I beg my tormentor, terrified
To lose my soul,
Then I lose my cry amongst
Monstrous shadows begging me,
To awaken.
The terror of dreams leaves
The eyes swollen and red while
I gasp for air.

I spiral down the bounding stairs, And in fear, see myself In this prison of agony. The world is a prison of bars Where I see myself, Like a shivering star staring into The pit.

# Devoured | Alexis Child

I am well acquainted with the wolf Calling out in dead of night It has been a year now Protected by wild beasts Or when everything went rotten,

Sanity was at the breaking point
Wounding the self and others
Torn viciously apart,
The wolves recognize the way they maim,

Poets began complaining
If blood I am, then what blood?
Easy for you to love your own kind
I, with eager eyes, am yearning and hungry,

I am the night
I am the day
You hear my call from far away,

Through flashes of temper,
Luna has lost her one and only love
A black massive cloud covers the moon's light
Blocking all the twinkling stars from our sight,

As far as desolation howls,
Once again upon the horizon, we prowl
We are devoured with savage greed and hate
Our bones are left to bleach upon the plains.

The sweetest dream has stopped My heart.
A figure approaches in the trees White as a ghost,
Beckoning me to follow.
Follow me sister and taste
Of my shadow
I'll not let you go.

We walk hand in hand in the meadow Now sing with me, he mocks, Of death's dark chimes. Live in a time better than God In the dark and in the light.

We dimly hear the words: No world is without big shadows, I am the beauty and the malice, Drink this poison from my chalice, I give him my hand.

#### Murderer | Alexis Child

Who entered the door?
When I had the key?
I remember forgetting
Hands passing right through me,

Over my skin and closed throat I was diminished of my own accord The smell akin to fear, rotting leaves blow in through an open window,

The house was rotting
The lights stayed on while we slept,
A strange film like wax hung over me
in the collapse of the wreckage,

How little I understood Like a black-and-white photograph in the bloody aftermath,

You are gone
Key marks scratch the door jamb
The paper lamp sweeps the remains
of what was obvious and what was lost
Night seeps through the window
as a warning in this bloody holocaust,

The final maelstrom covers the cursed night Morning never arrives peacefully from the final fight With soft red flesh as red soup again and again Your cold eye stares at me through paper skin,

You died so young, oh so young Why did I deserve to live?
My guilty confession unuttered?

I was always the invisible one
Walking like a spirit amongst others
They would hurt me just for fun
But no one expected me to become a cold-blooded MuRdErEr...

The murders started slowly
Each night, another would be gone
You could call this unholy
But when being a MuRdErEr, splatter doesn't matter...

#### About the Author:

Alexis Child hails from Toronto; home to dreams and nightmares. She once lived with a Calico-cat child sleuthing all that went bump in the night and is haunted by the memory of her. Her fiction and poetry have been featured in numerous publications. Alexis' first collection of poetry, a dark and sinister slice of the macabre—*DEVIL IN THE CLOCK*—is available on Amazon.

Website: Alexis Child's Poetry Empyean

#### Over | DJ Tyrer

Fifteen dead
Unstoppable killer
Appearing from nowhere
Seemingly immune to harm.
Final confrontation
Three shots and, finally, they go down
She breathes a sigh of relief
Fires two more for luck
Straight between the eyes.
It's over.

Killer stands
Wipes blood away from face
Shakes off the pain
Takes a tentative step
Then, resumes the attack.

Sixteen dead And, still, his inhuman urges Remain unsated.

# The Worm That Walks | DJ Tyrer

Grave earth trembles
As coffin cracks
Corpse within
Sloughs off its skin
New life from death

Jelly-bodied thing crawls free Dripping soil, pus Desires flesh Not corpse, but fresh Death to feed new life

# **About the Author:**

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

Facebook: DJ Tyrer
Twitter: @DJTyrer



#### Saving a brain | Mathias Jansson

The truck was coming fast down the hill he could hear the roaming engine

In the middle of the road
he spotted the brain
I must save my brain he thought
and started to crawl out from the ditches

Desperately he dragged himself into the middle of the road leaving the wrecked bike and the sharp bloody stone behind him

The klaxon horn from the truck was high and intensive he realized he had to make a choice at the last moment he pushed away the brain it rolled down on the other side when the lorry hit his body and splattered the asphalt with blood, bones and guts

At least I saved the brain he sighed and closed his eyes.

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

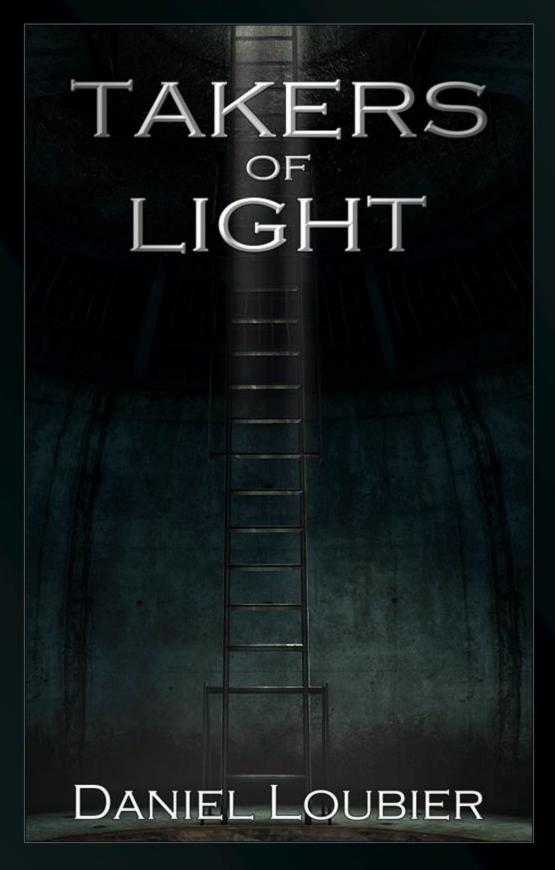
Mathias Jansson is a Swedish art critic and horror poet. He has been published in magazines as The Horror Zine, Dark Eclipse, Schlock, and The Sirens Call. He has also contributed to over 100 different horror anthologies from publishers as Horrified Press, James Ward Kirk Fiction, Source Point Press, Thirteen Press, etc.

Author Website: Mathias Jansson
Amazon Author Page: Mathias Jansson



Driven underground by those of the light...

Now known as The Dark Dwellers...



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#### Cold Case | Jezzy Wolfe

We left in the night
Black covering our tracks
Headed for nowhere
Our secret safe in our chests

And still tucked there when our bodies floated up from Cimmerian depths
Buoyed with the stench of a century
Submerged in the igneous muck of a frozen lake.

Hatchet marks in our heads.

Our secret still safe in our chests.

#### Ghost of the Armory | Jezzy Wolfe

Fireball dancing on the tracks, Come midnight on the B & O, Screaming punctuates the black, 'Tho her fire burned out long ago.

Among the shanties near Track C, Huddling down in winter's cold, Stove sparks shot towards her seat, Ignited flames on threadbare folds.

Sent her stumbling towards the line, Cries for help midst screams of pain, Caught in beams of railway light, Burning banshee ripped by train.

Along the tracks of Harper's Ferry, Conductors keep their eyes alight, Searching the dark for blazes, wary ...they know Jenny comes at night.

Slowly across steel cold tracks, Trains punctuate the spectral glow, Jenny's cries still shatter the black, With fire that faded long ago.

# Return By Fire | Jezzy Wolfe

She died as a witch last life around, Her body consumed by blazing fire, History repeats itself, she found, Staking her to another burning pyre.

Her body consumed by blazing fire, Hemorrhaging magic from her veins, Staking her to another burning pyre, The familiar hell that leaves its stains.

Hemorrhaging magic from her veins, Smothering her cries in the roar of flame, The familiar hell that leaves its stains, Brought back by fear, by ignorant blame.

Smothering her cries in the roar of flame, Leaving her ashes to blacken the ground, Brought back by fear, by ignorant blame, She died as a witch last life around.

#### Sanguinary | Jezzy Wolfe

Many ways to stop a heart, That pounds against a cage of bone, To exsanguinate for lifeless art.

A needle's prick can play the part, Of an embolism brusquely grown, Many ways to stop a heart.

By hatchet for a craftless start,
If time be short, it's quickest shown,
To exsanguinate for lifeless art.
Pills bring fate if swallowed smart,
Delivery clandestine and consumed alone,
Many ways to stop a heart.

Toxic treats will easiest depart,
Candies laced with Death unknown,
To exsanguinate for lifeless art.
But a lover's blade is the poisoned dart,
That most oft carves forever into stone...
Many ways to stop a heart
To exsanguinate for lifeless art.

#### the permanence of impermanence | Jezzy Wolfe

The reddest rivers carry with them

every molecule of breath,
each memory soaked in laughter,
those moments that were fossilized in amber,
and in the frenetic pulse of
the discovery of
love.

Her voice dissolved into the membrane of every cell,

her resolve disintegrated into the spaces between atoms.

Here was life.

And now it's dripping from the tip of his blade, circling the drain at his feet,

the air around them forever infected with her.

The hole in the forest cradles her bones and the decay of flesh, but she dances inside each gust of wind that shakes the trees.

What cannot be held can never be destroyed.

Here is life...

still.

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

Jezzy Wolfe is a poet and author who has appeared in numerous anthologies and publications, such as Space & Time Magazine, Weird Tales Magazine, Smart Rhino's Zippered Flesh trilogy, Insidious Assassins, and Asinine Assassins anthologies. Her debut poetry collection, Monstrum Poetica, is available from Raw Dog Screaming Press. When she is not writing, she is being chased by her crazed ferrets and hiking Virginian trails.

Blog: <u>Jezzy Wolfe</u>
Twitter: <u>@JezzyWolfe</u>

# Selection | Ken Poyner

One could do better than to die In a customer convenience chair in the walkway Of a dying shopping mall: quietly looking About as more ambulatory patrons Breeze past, a few with bags, many— For the economy—without. No thought But the curiosity in each selection of shoppers: How does this one go with that one; Are those dull two still navigating sex; Is this one the son or the grandson; How often does she have to wash that hair; How could they not hear that child, How not act? And then a catch In the chest, the momentary thought Of what you last ate, then the Pull back of the breath and light Becoming cylindrical, turning a bit peevish At the edges, the thought that this is more, And you are simply done.

But one could do worse. At least
In the mall, settled back in the common
Use convenience chair for a while
After the startled moments of unplanned passing,
You will seem natural, a man
Drawn into sleep while two stores over
His wife debates the length of a dress,
The utility of an air fryer – perhaps
With his daughter or sister-in-law,
Punching and counter punching at relevance.
And then someone discovers you as deceased,
Pretends to sue for resuscitation, marks
This moment as an event in their life to
Begin collecting the narrative they will
Over and over press on astonished friends.

Much better than missing work two days
And having Human Services call three unanswered times
Only to finally send the sheriff with his municipal
Locksmith to crack open the door
To a man stiff in bed, having died
Without notice, without knowing.

Would you want the car accident,
The stray gunshot, a house fire, earthquake—
Or the couple slowly walking your way
In a nearly deserted mall, perhaps in love or
Perhaps considering the exits, perhaps
Wondering where to pretend to shop next,
Wondering what more excitement they might
Yet choke out of this day?

#### Train Robbery | Ken Poyner

First

You tie up a girl.
Leave her on the tracks
At the end of a straight away,
So the conductor will see her
Well ahead of collision and do all
That he can, in time, to stop.

A curve, or switchback, will not do.

Not a girl, really.

More of a young woman;

Perhaps a second-year physics student

From the local technical institute.

Gather your men
On both sides of the tracks just
About where you figure
The train will finally stop.
Expect that when the train does stop —

Just short of the girl, or just past

The young woman—the conductor
And the roused engineer will both
Leap onto the gravel placed alongside
The track to see
More clearly what has almost happened,

Or what just did happen. They will be Well ahead of the engine, Or well back of it. You And your men then leap onto The train at the head Of the passenger cars -- and so begins The robbery.

If the girl was not run over,
Make your way to the engine
And edge the train slowly forward,
Gathering speed at each gasp
Of the conductor, at each plea
Of the engineer, until she,

As though the dependent variable In her own experiment on light grammars,

By the wheels is cut free.
In any investigation
The robbery will take second place
To worries about the outcome
Of that bound young woman. And
Within that transcendent tendency
Just might lie the edge you need

To get away with it.

#### Birthday | Ken Poyner

The sun just right;
An adequate breeze, no more.
Barely enough nip for a sweater:
And that nip will be gone by midmorning,
With the sweater left over the back of a patio chair.

Birds chase each other tree to countering tree And their life, instantaneous in this act, Is better known to me than it is to them.

I cannot help but think
This is my day, an annual paean
To my temporary presence, to my interpretation
Of the lackluster physics, chemistry,
Meteorology and biology contained within this
Limited set of coordinates in time
Now intersecting with the concept of me.

I know better than to consider it But can imagine, for the moment,
Geo-centricity, and might fathom as well
What it would be worth:
Why any thoughtful Deity
Would cast me loose, and then unthinkingly

Draw the sum of me back, so suddenly tempering This gift, this exile.

#### The Point | Ken Poyner

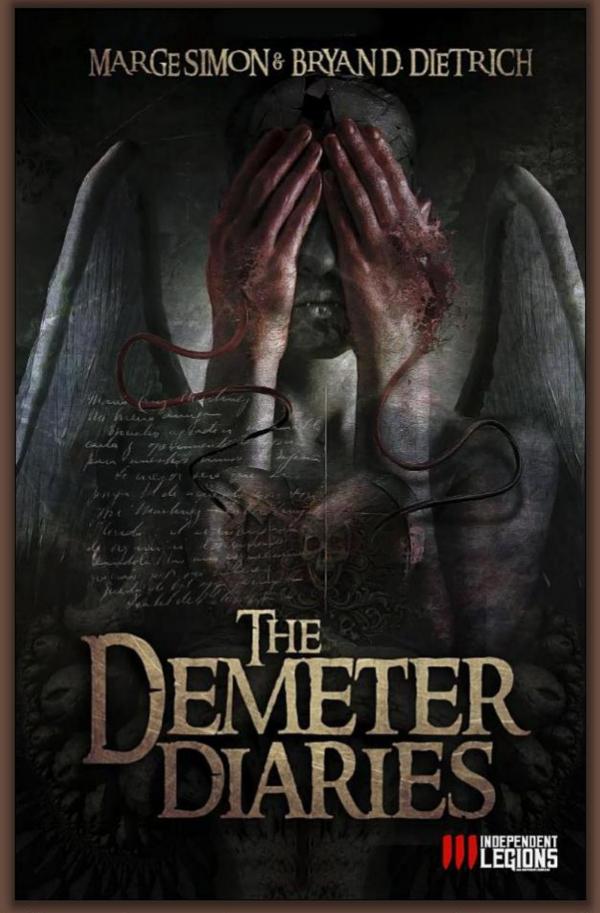
A mine, any mine. Perhaps an abandoned one Out west, stuck ugly in a hillside, Great gaping mouth of an entry hole. A definite look of being dangerous, But almost comically so, ceiling Ragged, walls gone to ruts, the mine Of a B-movie, hitting the cliches. One day, someone curious will go in, Go in too far, past the free and rotten support Beams, shine a flashlight on the wall, Receive a sparkle, take a pocket Knife and pry that sparkle out. The void Left will slowly close, the wall Starting to sag around it, the emptiness Beginning to dissolve, dust replacing Air, becoming the pattering of rock. The explorer will think I've had My specter of fun; now I'll be gone. But gone Is defined differently in an Abandoned and lonely mine. All the mine really wants is its Quantum of human enlightenment Again. Someone. Anyone. There will be again that beloved activity.

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

Ken Poyner has put out three books of mini-fictions, and two collections of speculative poetry, all of which can be had at Amazon and other book selling sites. He has had recent work in *Analog, Asimov's, Café Irreal*, and other places, both print and web. He worked 33 years as a systems analyst, and now assists his wife in her world class power lifting career.

Author Website: Ken Poyner
Facebook: Ken Poyner

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#### Love a Mystery | Ivanka Fear

Love a mystery, My kind of story.

There's been another murder, whodunit?

In my childhood I first discovered a thirst for it.

Hardy Boys, Phyllis A. Whitney, Agatha Christie...

immersed myself in mystery at a young age.

Joined the book club, got the library card, watched Colombo.

Became a child prodigy on the subject of murder.

Would have, could have, should have become a detective –

so well-versed in the art of murder.

What's the history behind the mystery?

There's always some illogical connection to the past.

Usual suspects there you have them all laid out

(Or should I say victims all laid out),

the butler did it, it's always the spouse, the one you least suspect,

the one you most suspect.

Set in some dark mysterious place you've never been, of course

Watch for clues, red herrings (What was that all about?)

Motive? Something so obscure or ridiculous it makes no sense

Add a know-it-all detective to the mix and stir.

Watching Midsomer Murders,

asking "Who is that? Have we seen them before?"

The British seem to have a flair for it.

From the classics to the latest thrillers, authors of suspense, I salute you

bringing entertainment out of death.

Dead men tell no tales, or do they?

Ask the coroner temporarily possessed by the deceased.

Taking the mystery out of death

with twisted tales of greed and revenge,

testing our sleuthing abilities:

"Aha! I knew it!" Or "I don't get it? Did I miss something?"

Love a mystery,

wish I could write one.

Mystery of the century,

whodunit you'd never guess.

Meanwhile, back in reality,

I ponder the mystery of life

i polider the mystery or me

(not so easily solved).

I'm better off a character in someone's next best seller.

Perhaps someday they'll find me, shot, in the parking lot of some gothic cathedral, victim of some hair-brained plot, mistaken for some other sot, discovered by some hapless soul out for a midnight stroll after visiting the local watering hole.

When they do, hope you'll be there to solve the mystery of my story,

maybe write the book, get the TV rights?

#### Death Lives in a Small Town | Ivanka Fear

Missing you, so glad to get your letter, not too much new here, things could be better. This small town and these old folks are dying (Bet you're glad you got out, no denying). The factory left town and so did the jobs, grocery store shut down, along with the bake shop. Tom's leaving town for college tomorrow, Gail's long gone, got a job in Toronto. By the way... they found Harry at home -- heart attack, and Cindy's suicide left us all gobsmacked. Suzy's mother suffered a stroke yesterday, Cory's dad was diagnosed with cancer today. Dan's having a hard time getting around with his ALS, and the Smith's baby recently died of SIDS. Do you think there's something in the town's water? They've closed down Morton's old hardware store there's no gas station in town anymore, no more gift shop to find some needed gem, no more bank, not even an ATM. Empty shells of buildings where they once were. Some local boys were killed down on the curve, And John's jeep hit a hydro pole, I heard. So sad... did it make the news in the city? Wendy got married and moved out west, Scott's travelling around the world on some quest. Old Mr. Nith went off to the nursing home, the Drews drove south 'cos it's too cold. Bob's in Belize as a missionary, Lynn's getting her master's at Dalhousie. It seems once they leave, they're gone forever. Which reminds me... some kid high on drugs rammed Rick's truck, and Will's car flipped over, on his way to work. So they paved the main road out to the countryside, a beauty of a runway with new streetlights shining bright. But then... Sam drove home through the fog, missed the stop sign, that same stretch of road, already marked with several shrines. The population must be down by half, in this empty town where we once lived and laughed. Even the oldtimers' bench sits vacant and quiet, our church has been empty for years, guess we're not so pious. The local paper shut down the presses, nothing worth reporting, it's all too depressing. Empty shells of people we once were. I miss you so... on those evening strolls down spooky streets. We used to love the Halloween spirit here, but it's a cold December night, October's long gone. Where once roamed young people, now old folks haunt, windows dark during my nightly jaunts. But honestly... it's the prettiest little ghost town you've ever seen

(Don't know what the heck I'm still doing here.)

# The Finality of Life | Ivanka Fear

The metal door in the stairwell clicks closed and locks behind you leaving no handle to grab onto and pull yourself back in.

The finality of your decision to abandon the steep climb up the stairs greets you with a slam and shocking knowledge that you can't go back and retrace your steps.

If only you had thought to prop open that door with all its possibilities, if perhaps you caught it before it clicked, if you'd reached out before it was too late. I didn't. But the question is will you?

At the end of the day, it's all over as the clock strikes midnight for the last time. Whether or never a new dawn rises, lost opportunities fail to return. There's no redo, no reset, no rewind as you mourn the death of the life you led

# The Spirit of the Season | Ivanka Fear

Every creak you hear...

my footsteps on the floorboards as I creep unseen behind you.

Every moan you note...

my sigh in surround sound as I speak mournfully in your ear.

Every spirit you see...

my shape a shadow on the wall as I peer speechless at you.

Every ghost you glimpse...

my death shroud shimmering as I materialize before your eyes.

Every breeze you feel...

my breathless breath upon your neck as I kiss your rosy cheek.

Every chill you shiver...

my embrace of death as I ease my fingers along your skin.

Every scent you smell...

my presence caressing as I envelope your body.

Every essence you detect ...

my soul encompassing as I possess your senses.

Every grain you taste...

my lips skimming yours as I trace my tongue back and forth.

Every morsel you savour...

my mouth smothering as I take your breath away.

Every dream you dream...

my phantom form floating above you as I return, eternally yours.

Every refrain you keep hearing...

my lyrics on your radio as I hum my haunting melody.

Every festive season, my dear,

my skeletal remains freed from beneath as I seek to release you from your earthly ties.

Every New Year's Eve, don't fear,

my unrelenting spirit sent back to the biosphere as I beseech you to come die with me.

Did you really believe I would ever leave you?

Unhaunted?

Not on your life.

I'll forever be your ghostly wife

to have and to haunt till death do us reunite.

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

Ivanka Fear is a former teacher now pursuing her passion for writing. Her poems and short stories appear in Spadina Literary Review, Montreal Writes, Adelaide Literary, October Hill, Scarlet Leaf Review, Sirens Call Publications, The Literary Hatchet, Wellington Street Review, Aphelion, Muddy River Poetry Review, and elsewhere. She has completed her fifth suspense novel and is looking for an agent. Ivanka resides in midwestern Ontario, Canada, with her family and cats.

#### these circles work | Eliana Vanessa

i put a flower on every one of your coffins, how many do you want? my blood is a sentence that reads-black hearts on repeat. i hope you understand. there is no shortcut to greatness, only a hand. i am Death and have come to birth the horror of a lover that will eat through corpses all the way to the other side, regurgitating my eyes into saucers, very much alive and well.

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

Eliana Vanessa grew up in New Orleans, participating in 100,000 Poets for Change and The Jane Austen Festival. Her work appears in The Sirens Call eZine, Punk Noir, Madness Muse Press, The Blue Nib, Medusa's Kitchen, San Pedro Review and in the anthologies: Masks Still Aren't Enough (2019), Americans & Others (2019), and It Was A Dark & Stormy Night: Sixteen Halloween Tales (2019).

Facebook: Eliana Vanessa





# Berlin, 1942 | Christopher Hivner

"Is this the way to heaven?" he asked, the words playing on bruised and swollen lips. The color had drained from his eyes but not the hope. I stroked his cheek as he greeted death, answering softly "Yes it is." Then I struck him again. A pitiable moan and his eyes closed. Sadness took me. I exhaled a cloud of tension relaxing tired muscles, turning to be relieved from my duty. But the prisoner's chest rose and fell again. I counted the seconds, then from behind me I heard, "Continue."

# All Souls Must Go | Christopher Hivner

Clearance sale on souls! This weekend only all locations of Bed, Bath and Beyond the Black Void. The Devil needs to move inventory, old souls have to go to make room for the new models! If your soul is worn out or maybe you've sold your old one to pay the rent, then this sale is for you! Come down to Bed, Bath and Beyond the Black Void, downtown, midtown and our new location on the bus line at the Galleria Mall. All old souls must go! This is a one-time only event, no coupons will be accepted, one soul per customer!

# The Dead and Dying Seas | Christopher Hivner

Riding waves over dead and dying seas, the bones of the leviathan swirl around me moaning for the loss.

Red surf pounds the shores, a distant meditation on harmony's end.

White-cap foam from wave to wave rises like claws of a failed beast to drag me under.

But the water can't hurt me anymore. It fills my lungs and I consume it greedily, a child with candy.

The dead and dying seas vomit me back up to the waiting arms of my father sun and mother sky.

The dry and arid seas cough and spit one last time, tears of silt a final lament.

# When We Were Purified | Christopher Hivner

Where was the night when the angels came with swords ablaze to exorcise our sins and liquefy our flesh? Where was our protector, the dark days, when the world lit up like Dresden on fire and the burning men were us. Where were you Night Lord when the Sun expanded sending waves of light and heat to sear our eyes to their sockets. Defenseless, we absorbed the blows of the enlightened feeling their wrath of wisdom. Where were you master? I accuse you of abandoning your plebes in our desperation. Where were you Night Lord, when we were purified?

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

Christopher Hivner is an introvert who has pretty much lived like he was in quarantine all his life. He has recently been published in *The Horror Zine* and *Blood Moon Rising*.

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# Carnival Prize | Lori R. Lopez

The Creepy Carnival comes to town with a sly secrecy. Unannounced. I stumble across their lights, black tents, strains of Organ Music by chance. And yet by Fate.

In a daze, a dull haze I stroll a maze of gaudy aisles, lured by exotic intoxicating aromas: Popcorn fumes, Caramel Apples, Cotton Candy, greasy French Fries.

Passing myriad Games hawked by grinning Venders. Test your skill! Try your luck! Give it your best shot! Play for free! I take the bait—the darts, rifles, rings.

And lose each time. They pressure, invite, entice, bamboozle to go again ... until my life has become the Prize. I am forced to keep trying. Hands bleed.

At last the bells, the whistles, the buzzers blare. "You've won!" They all cheer; I believe they leer as I claim a long green furry Snake. A silly toy.

Perspiring with immeasurable relief, I exit the Fair: towing a Serpent by the tail through dirt; stunned to survive, a host of weirdos waving Goodbye.

My steps quicken. I race to place some distance between—and toss Jake The Snake in a corner. Climbing in bed, I cringe and quake, teeth achatter.

The misadventure verged on disaster. I feel lucky to be home. Eventually I emerge from hiding under a pile of plush animals. The Snake is somehow coiled.

I sit and stare, wondering if the thing could be alive. A ridiculous notion. But time after time I discern him moved—like a sinister doll. Ever so slightly changed.

The creature gives off dreadful vibes! I lock him upstairs, then hear a series of thumps. Bumps. Rattles and scuds. Directly above. I can't rest or think, terrified of Jake ...

Who thrashes on the floor, my ceiling. Knocks things over. Angry it seems. I view the shadows in terror and distrust—as I consider packing bags, fleeing to another City or State!

My luggage is up *there*. A supply of trunks, cases, crates. I plot his capture, giddily contrive of trapping him in a box, shipping the Viper back to his sudden Macabre Carnival.

The Traveling Show had as swiftly departed. Gone in a lickety-flash without leaving a clue, the least trace or footprint. Vanished entirely from this plane of mundanity.

Rising to the Attic, determined to face my starkest fears and confront Jake bearing a pitchfork and a plan, I am aghast, struck numb, beholding a critter as real as me!

Flesh and scales, tongue flicking, orbs unblinking. No longer a Carnival Prize, the Serpent dances . . . Entranced I gape. I gawp. I topple downstairs.

Broken, dragging myself, striving to flee the Python, I paint a scarlet trail, writhe like a scared Gardensnake, followed by the gloating gluttonous gleeful Jake —

Who will soon be stuffed in more ways than one!



Dead Tired | Lori R. Lopez

I traveled a lane, fog-glistened, vapor-drenched, to the brink of my refuge, crossing a threshold ... embraced by the cold black stillness of a shelter occupied alone. Or so I thought—until the perfidious strides that entered behind with hollow treads. All subsequent sounds, however slight or misgiven to grief, would inspire jolts. An iron rattle, the scrape of tin, a creaking board, a sigh or moan, the chatter of rain against glass. Echoing, eerily intense. Pummeling my soul, my sanity to wreckage like timbers of a ship wrenched apart by waves in a stormy umbral sea. You were gone. The burning question lingered. Haunted. Endured.

The spirit attempting to take your place, inhabit a makeshift metallic home, trailing from the Cemetery, could never fill this vault of emptiness. The gulf of your departure. Heavy with sorrow, wrapped in a shroud both guilt and shackle, I ignored all signs except the pounding tempest. Grateful to outpace the worst of its lashing tumult and frigid beads. Hopeful I might heal—if only the phantom throb of your heart would still! Moody, I studied that thing in the corner: a hand, meager bones, their flesh ungloved, clinging to a wheel in a rusted Oldsmobile. Archaic-sounding, a decrepit husk of steel and time-eaten upholstery. The rest of the driver encased by casket and tomb.

Wind howled as I holed up with a relic parked in a ramshackle ruin, staring at the shell of a bygone age: fanciful and bleak, removed to a slumbering-place, a warehouse where I abided. There were ghosts in the night and I walked among them, whiskered, visiting your grave, a moth to candle, knowing I could burn. Greedy for warmth, a crumb of affection where none remained. Only the vacant stare of a fey specter, thoughtless and cruel to remind me of you. Hungry for sustenance and lacking the belly to hold a meal, juices to digest what nourished the living yet withered and rotted in the gut of a ghoul. I had no compassion left no patience to explain for ears that would never listen. "Leave!" A hoarse demand.

"You don't belong here. It's too late."
It was my coffin. My fist on the wheel
of your demise. "Too late to answer now."

Like a cat's meow so mournfully expressed . . . Digging deep, a needle-fingered stab at a body's Softer regions. An undertone that's been dragged Below the Bus and ironed flat, steamrolled to Oblivion. Desolated beyond the brink of post-fatigue and being Able to nap; in need of a thousand or more years To relax enough and doze in an eternity of peace.

A pooch too weary to yawn, beset by Sandman Grit in dunes of exhausted dust, the Hinterland Of wasted energy spent in grainy minutes leaked From a broken Hourglass; a prematurely expired Parking-Meter. Joints and muscles slung sagging Beneath bones like hammocks on a deserted isle Where only the Tide and Crabs are active.

I have no strength remaining in me except
To wrap myself darkly and mantle swollen orbs,
Shutter the windows of the soul and greet Nocturne.
Allow her numbing drowning current to wash over—
Pull my slack and lifeless form beyond these cares,
Everything I know. And slumber in the midst of
Calm, dead tired to the world. Unable to budge.

A soaked body dragged onto a perilous shore. Yet somehow awake, cognizant, so exhausted, So fatigued, I cannot summon energy to sleep ... The strength to dream. Nor can I stir a muscle Hearing the door, a step, slight maddening sounds! I am not alone, I'm sure of it! When I should be — Locked in a solitary snooze. A remote setting.

Limp and next to lifeless in this state of unrest. My own island. Paralyzed, practically comatose. Aware yet detached. Listening, heart lunging, Dread growing like a shadow on a wall .... I can do nothing but wait, eyelids no protection From the treacherous advance. Brain firing Shots that have no effect in the gloom.

How could I permit myself to languish, let go?
To lie here vulnerable, my fortress ajar, defenses
Lowered, the overcautious guard I am known for—
Obsessively rigid about—all but abandoned?
Why would I invite such peril to my door?
A recurrent Bad Dream of being helpless,
Ignorant, privacy intruded, security invaded!

Unsafe. Confined by a dismal weakened state, My barriers suspended. Left open to attack! How will I survive? What can I possibly use To escape this pervading sense of doom? Frozen in place, like a corpse on a frigid slab, I await the certainty of The Reaper's blade. No ramparts thick enough; no tower as tall....

That grim nether-reach will stop a heart cold.

#### Alligory | Lori R. Lopez

If you're headed down to the local Swamp Don't let it be known full of too much pomp Better watch where you step and never stomp Or the Gator may snatch you in one fell chomp!

She's long and mean, about twice as smart She might even give you a little headstart Each tooth like a thick and wavy dart A mouthful of spikes to rip you apart!

They say Mizzybelle has a taste for men And will drag fools deep to her watery den Enjoy a nice snack again and again Toying with prey in a turbid playpen.

For those who wrestle with 'Alligories'
Of Fabulous Monsters to tell the stories
How they ventured through wicked territories
Like symbolic Hunters in search of glories...

You can't blame a Beast for being scary Or giving chase to a warm adversary The intrusive type who's less than wary And lacks respect of the Legendary.

Mizzybelle's domain is muddy and bleak Should ya bump with a moss-coated log, do shriek When that driftwood grins and takes a peek Start paddlin' home in a lightnin' streak!

The most important rules around this drink— Steer clear the stumps or you may sink And don't tip the Pirogue or in half a blink You'll be sailin' faster than a Tiddly-Wink!

Now best be attentive or you'll regret Not listening well before you've met The doomful chops of the Bayou's Pet A-slidin' and glidin' underneath the wet.

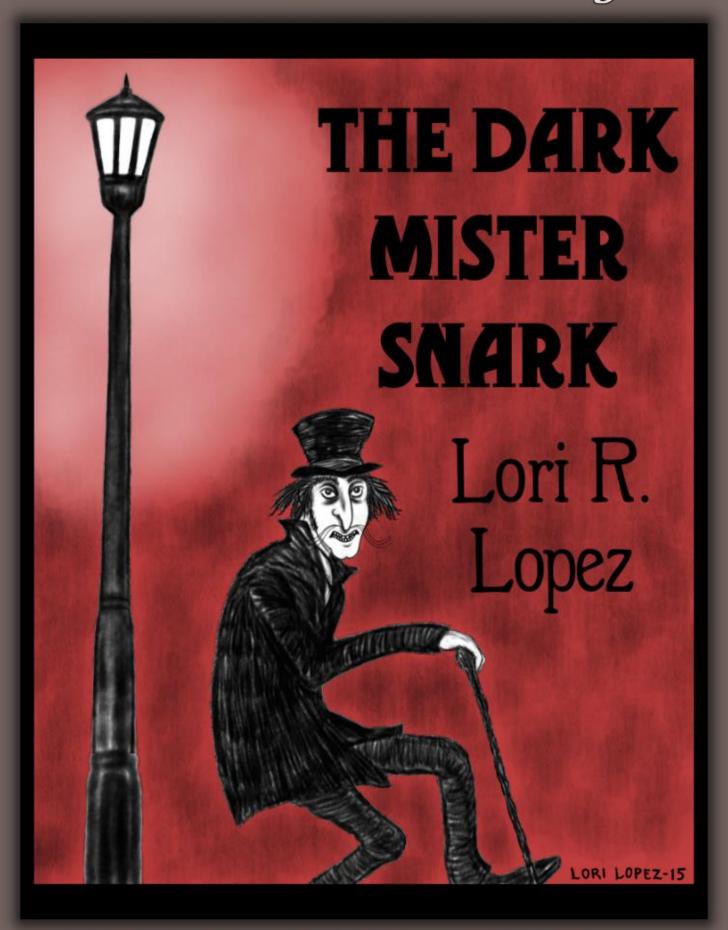
What's that in the water? I leaned too far! That Mizzybelle's bite is an awful jar As she lunges high from her dim Boudoir. Losin' my head's bound ta leave a scar.

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

Lori R. Lopez is an offbeat author-illustrator, poet, songwriter, and wearer of hats, as well as an animal-and-monster-lover. Verse has appeared in The Sirens Call Publications eZine, The Horror Zine, H.W.A. Poetry Showcases, Weirdbook, Spectral Realms, Space & Time Magazine, Oddball Magazine, Bewildering Stories, Illumen, Altered Reality Magazine, California Screamin' (the Foreword Poem) and more. Books include *The Dark Mister Snark*, *Odds And Ends*, *Leery Lane*, and *Darkverse: The Shadow Hours*. Lori has been nominated for the Elgin and Rhysling Awards.

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# Beware! Mister Snark is lurking...



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

# The Space Between Walls | Melissa R. Mendelson

The walls were paper thin. The windows reinforced. The floors were cold and wooden. A ceiling fan whooshed overhead. It was hard to tell what day it was. Was it morning or afternoon? A scratching along the family room indicated his return. The molding was pulled apart.

Jimmy's hand pushed through the hole, where the molding used to be. His fingers stretched outward. His palm waited. She placed her hand in his.

"Jimmy, your hand is ice cold. Didn't they turn the heat on for you?"

"Cassie, the heat hasn't been on in weeks. There's no hot water either."

Cassie lied across the cold, wooden floor. She looked at the wall in front of her. A clear bag of laundry rested against it. A white bag of donations was next to the laundry bag. They were late. Were they coming? She and David were running out of clean clothes to wear.

"Is David awake?"

"I don't know. He hardly leaves the bedroom, so I can't tell. He just stares out the window when he is awake."

"There's nothing to see out there," Jimmy said.

"I know." Cassie glanced at the one window in the family room. "There's just trees. No life. No roads. Just trees."

"It's how they want it." Jimmy's grip tightened around hers. "That's why they brought us here."

"Jimmy, please don't start. David and I were struggling, and coming here was supposed to help." "Did it?"

Cassie glanced at the wall next to the laundry and donation bags. "Have you eaten," she asked.

"I haven't gotten any food."

"We got a food delivery the day before yesterday."

"I didn't," Jimmy said.

"Hold on." Cassie let go of his hand, but it took a moment for Jimmy to loosen his grip. She walked into the small kitchen nearby. She opened the bread drawer and pulled out two loaves of bread. She carried them over to the wall, where Jimmy's hand waited. She placed the bread in his grip, and his hand disappeared back inside. "Better?"

"Thank you," Jimmy's muffled voice was heard against the wall. "If only you could hand me a glass of juice." She could tell now when Jimmy had a smile to his voice. "They're starving me out."

"You don't know that."

"Cassie, there's no food. No heat. No laundry. They're trying to kill me."

Cassie was about to respond when she heard his wheels across the wooden floor. She froze as the wheels paused by the bathroom. She quickly fixed the molding, pushing it back into place. She was about to stand up when he rolled up beside her.

"Lose another contact lens?"

David's ugly tone sliced through her. Cassie slowly stood up, folding her hands in front of her. She avoided eye contact. She waited for him to speak, and he did.

"No breakfast made? What kind of wife are you?"

"A good one." She flinched at David's glare. "What do you want to eat? I'll fix something up."

"I'm not hungry." David moved his wheelchair back and rolled away. "Don't feed the mice." He glanced over his shoulder at her. "You could do the dishes. We don't have to live like pigs." He rolled back into the bedroom and slammed the door shut.

Cassie glanced at the wall behind her. She knew Jimmy heard everything. She was tired of defending David to him. David was a good man. Coming here made him change. Not for the better. She hardly recognized him now, and she was grateful for her time alone. She returned to the kitchen, did the dishes, knowing that David was listening to her as well.

Cassie was about to put the last plate on the shelf when the hair rose up on the back of her neck and arms. A soft humming filled the space. The wall by the laundry and donation bags slid open. A gloved hand snatched up the bags, depositing another bag of clean clothes.

"Wait!" Cassie hurried over to the open wall. She stared into the dark space, trying to see who was on the other side. "My neighbor, Jimmy."

"What about him?" The whisper made her blood run cold.

"He hasn't gotten any food, and there's no heat. He needs clean clothes too."

"Okay." The whisper again unnerved her.

"So, you'll help him?"

"Sure." The wall slid shut.

Cassie knew that no help was coming. Why did they even bother to answer her? She glanced down at the bag of clean clothes. She looked over at the closed bedroom door. She didn't want to walk in there, but David would make a comment about the clean clothes staying in the bag on the floor. She picked up the bag and walked into the bedroom.

Cassie found David parked beside the bedroom window. He pushed a thin, white shade aside. He stared out at the trees. He ignored her as she put away the clothes. He didn't say anything. Not one damn word. He waited for her to leave, but she paused by the door.

"David, I think we're in trouble," Cassie said.

"The system knows what's it doing. You just have to trust it." He still didn't look at her.

"It's breaking us. It's breaking you." Cassie flinched as David glared at her. "I don't want to be here anymore."

"We can't exactly leave, Cassie."

"We could try. The walls are thin, and..."

"And what? What kind of world is left out there for us? We're better off here."

"Are we?" Cassie tried to hold David's glare, but even his eyes cut like glass.

"Told you not to play with the mice."

"We're not so different." Cassie stepped away.

"What was that?"

"Nothing." Cassie closed the bedroom door behind her.

"He's not a good man anymore," Jimmy said as his hand touched the floor beside her. "The man that you knew and loved is gone, Cassie. He's gone."

"I don't understand what happened. Where did it go so wrong?" Cassie sat against the wall. She saw Jimmy turn his hand over. He waited patiently until she slid her hand over his. "How did we get here?"

"We just did," Jimmy said. "We believed the lie, and now we are mice in a cage."

"You sound like David." Cassie wiped her tears aside.

"Cassie, I need you to promise me something."

"What?" She glanced down at his hand.

"If anything happens to me, to David, get out of here. Try to escape."

"It's impossible, Jimmy."

"Nothing is impossible, Cassie. You're smart. You'll figure it out. Do you promise me?" He traced a finger along her skin. His hand was so cold. "Cassie?"

"I promise." She tightened her grip against his. "What's the last thing that you remember about being outside?"

"Going to a park with my wife and dog. My wife... She would be jogging around while I played with the dog. I miss her."

"Your wife or the dog?" She smiled at Jimmy's laugh. "I was getting ice cream with David. He just finished another physical therapy session, and he wanted ice cream. You would think that he would have been tired, but we sat together and ate vanilla ice cream on a cone. And he made all these jokes. He knew how to make me laugh. God, if only I could laugh like that again. I don't remember the last time that I laughed like that."

"Don't I make you laugh?"

Cassie laughed. "You do, Jimmy, but David really made me laugh. He was so full of life, even after the accident." Her smile vanished as she looked over at the closed bedroom door.

"They're killing us, Cassie." She didn't answer him. "Cassie?" She looked down at his hand. "Cassie, I'm tired. I'm going to take a nap. I'll be back soon." She didn't let go of his hand. "Cassie?"

"I'm sorry. I'm just thinking." She let go of Jimmy's hand.

"About what?" Jimmy didn't pull his hand back inside.

"Life. What it would be like to live again. To really live again."

"Maybe, one day, you will know that." He pulled his hand back inside. "Wait for me?"

"Always do." Cassie put the molding back in place.

Cassie knew that she should eat. It felt like the afternoon. She heard a bird singing outside. Even the bird's song sounded cold, lifeless. The bird was singing of misery. Even out there, the bird was afraid.

Cassie forced herself to make a tuna fish sandwich. She made one for David too. She brought the food into the bedroom along with a glass of juice. David ignored her as usual, so she left the food and juice on the nightstand. She ate alone in the kitchen.

For the next few hours, she paced around the family room. There was only one chair in the room. It was brown and uncomfortable, but she tired of the pacing. She pushed the chair toward the window, sat down and stared outside, waiting for another bird's song. There was none.

Cassie woke up in darkness. She glanced up at the ceiling fan overhead. It was still spinning around, circulating the air, but the lights didn't turn on. That bothered her. She stood up on the chair and reached for the small, bronze cord hanging off the fan. Before she could reach it, the lights suddenly turned on.

"Strange," Cassie muttered.

Cassie looked over at the molding. It looked like Jimmy was trying to push it away. What happened to scratching along the wall? It was their sign to talk. Why didn't he wait for her? Did something happen?

Cassie moved the molding away. Jimmy's hand was near the hole. She reached into the space between walls. She gripped his hand, pulling it toward her. His hand was ice cold.

"Jimmy, your hand is so cold." Jimmy did not answer her. "I could get some towels and pour hot water over them. Wait here," and she let go of his hand.

Cassie hurried into the bathroom, which was opposite the kitchen. She took a hand towel out of a drawer and poured hot water underneath it. When the towel was soaked, she turned off the sink. She carried the towel over to the family room, finding Jimmy's hand lying on the floor.

"Here you go. You must be so cold in there." Cassie wrapped the towel around Jimmy's hand. Tears poured down her face. "I'm sorry I can't do more for you. I wish I could." She held Jimmy's hand against her chest and cried harder. "You were... Are such a good friend to me. Thank you, Jimmy."

Cassie heard the wheels roll across the floor. She didn't bother to hide Jimmy's hand or move the molding back into place. She cradled Jimmy's hand next to her heart. Her tears continued to run. She stared up at David, and he looked back at her.

Cassie waited for David to say something. He said nothing. He looked over at the molding. The hole in the wall. Jimmy's hand. David's eyes were blank. He rolled away. The bedroom door slammed shut.

"You were right, Jimmy. He's gone," Cassie cried. "He's gone." She looked over at the wall, where the laundry and donation bags had been. "I'm going to get out of here. I'm going to get out of here, Jimmy. I'm going back outside, whether they want me to or not, and I am going to live, damn it. I am going to live for all of us. I promise," and Cassie kissed Jimmy's hand.

# **About the Author:**

Melissa R. Mendelson is a Horror, Science-Fiction and Dystopian Author. Her short stories have been published by Sirens Call Publications, Dark Helix Press and Transmundane Press. Her short stories have been featured on Tall Tale TV, and she was recently a Finalist in the Summer 2021 Owl Canyon Press Hackathon. She plans to finish writing her Horror novel, *Ghost in the Porcelain* by January 2022.



# Dúlachán | K.A. Johnson

Ben felt a sigh of relief as the taxi pulled into the long dirt driveway of the bed and breakfast where he would be spending the night. The rural roads in this area of Kilkenny were small with random curves, and Ben was sure that only one vehicle could fit on them at a time. The car had hurtled down the roads so fast that Ben was convinced he would die and couldn't enjoy the scenery. On the way up the driveway, the taxi passed three smaller buildings then pulled into the larger farm building coming to a stop in a small parking area. A woman made her way out of the nearby door as Ben stepped out.

"Hi, ya must be Ben."

"I am."

"Welcome to our little farmhouse bed and breakfast. I'm Piper. My husband Conor and I run both the farm and the bed and breakfast."

Ben turned and saw that the taxi driver had already unloaded his luggage from the cab. Ben pulled out the right amount of euros to pay and tip him for the drive, and thanked him.

"Let's get ya luggage to ya room in ya cabin. Our bed and breakfast has several three-bedroom cabins with a shared common area and bathroom. Ya will be in cabin A down by the road. Two ladies are staying in that one with ya. The three of yous are our only guests tonight, so the other two cabins are empty."

"Why didn't we get separate cabins?"

"We find that guests enjoy the stay more when they get to interact with other visitors to our beautiful country." "That makes sense."

Ben and Piper dropped off the bags in his room and returned to the farmhouse. Inside, the main building was quaintly decorated with rustic wooden furniture, which Ben suspected was more of a show for guests than for function. Ben noted golden coins with a four-leaved shamrock embossed on them embedded in the wooden frames above the door and the windows.

Cute touch, Ben thought.

When they sat down for dinner, Ben found out the other two guests were Nannette and Francine, or Nanni and Franni as he later found out they called themselves. The two over thirty Zeta Tau Alpha sorority sisters were on a girls' trip reliving their sorority years while their husbands stayed home with their children.

Once they were seated at the table, Piper's husband Conor brought out dinner; a lovely roast, twice-baked potatoes, and some veggies. While they ate dinner, Piper asked about their time in Ireland so far. Ben talked about visiting Blarney Castle that day. Nanni and Franni had been to the National Stud and Japanese Gardens, where Ben planned to go tomorrow. Piper and Conor talked about Kilkenny and their farm. At the end of the meal, Piper stood up and addressed the three as Conor was clearing the table off.

"I implore of ye to stay in tonight," Piper said. "When the moon is full, it is Crom Dubh's night, and the last thing ye want is to have him find yous."

"Crom Dubh?" Ben asked.

"A local legend, but not one ye should ignore. Just trust me, stay in your cabin, and all will be fine, and ye will enjoy the rest of your stay in Kilkenny. We have put lanterns in your rooms, and snacks and some of the best whiskey made in Ireland in the common area. In the morning, we will meet back here in the farmhouse for a nice Irish breakfast."

In their cabin for the night, Nanni and Franni were hitting the Jameson bottle pretty hard. Ben figured they must have been popular in their sorority days with their ability to knock back the drinks. Ben had opted to enjoy some Bewley's decaf blend tea. Ben tried to break the ice and asked how the two had enjoyed the National Stud and Japanese Gardens. However, it soon became apparent that the two had little interest in the horses and spent their time at the gardens, imbibing alcohol they had snuck into the park. Ben wasn't sure how they could not have seen racing legends such as Beef or Salmon or Hurricane Fly, but on the other hand, he wasn't trying to relive his long-gone college days either.

After Nanni and Franni had finished the liquid assault on their bodies and turned in, Ben picked up an Irish Fairy Tales book from a small table and started flipping through it. He was reading The Story of Deirdre when Franni wandered out of her room.

"Hey, handsome, you're still up."

"Yes, I started reading this," Ben said, raising the book, "and got engrossed in the stories."

"It looks so beautiful out—the full moon and all; why don't we light the lantern and take an evening walk."

"Piper said that we should stay in after dark."

"Is Piper your mommy?"

"I just don't want to piss off our host."

"Come on, and maybe you'll get lucky under the Irish moon."

"If you are going to word it like that, a moonlight walk couldn't hurt. It does look gorgeous out."

Ben put the book down and opened the lantern's window. He struck a match and lit the wick, and shut the lantern.

"They do go all out at this place, the lanterns and all," Ben said.

"Ya, it's cute. Irish hospitality and all."

Ben turned around and saw that she had put on a light gray thin cotton zip-up hoodie jacket. Ben picked up the lantern and opened the door to the cabin. Ben stepped out and saw that the full moon illuminated a low wispy fog that covered the ground.

"Ooooh," Franni said, stepping out of the cabin.

Franni went down the stairs, and the bottom of her Uggs disappeared into the fog. Ben quietly closed the door, but didn't completely shut it. He didn't want to wake Nanni when they returned. Ben went down the stairs and walked over to her, and she locked her elbow around his.

"Let's go, kind sir," Franni said, slightly too loud, and with a drunken giggle.

"Shush, you'll wake up Nanni or Piper."

"Naw. Now let's go—the night awaits. Maybe we'll even see a fairy!"

The two set out to wander the grounds. Ben liked how she leaned into him as they walked. Ben found that being out for the walk while it was forbidden made him feel younger like he was out breaking curfew—he found himself understanding Nanni and Franni's girl's trip. Maybe that was why Piper said not to go out. Perhaps she knew it added to the stay, like the lanterns, the Irish tea, the whole experience. He knew she was married, but he wasn't going to let that ruin the moment. They hit an opening where the low-level fog shimmered. She pulled Ben to a stop and pulled him close to her. They kissed. While their lips were locked, Ben suddenly heard the clopping of hooves. Ben broke the kiss.

"Do you hear that?"

"Ya, it's a horse."

Franni leaned back in to kiss Ben again, but he pulled back.

"It seems awful late for someone to be out on a horse."

"Maybe they thought it looked like a nice night to be out, too."

Franni gave Ben a look that must have melted houses back when she was in college. He noticed that a horse with a rider holding a lantern appeared in the distance, down the drive near where the road was. Ben blinked his eyes because the rider and horse looked odd. The horse galloped toward them, and Franni let out a scream. Ben stared in disbelief, now seeing what was off about the intruder. Franni ran toward their cabin screaming as Ben darted behind some shrubbery.

As the rider arrived at the spot where he and Franni had just been standing, Ben saw the most horrific thing he'd ever witnessed in his life. The jet black horse had its head decapitated at the neck. Ben could hear the horse's breathing and see its breath from where the nose would have been. The exposed flesh where the head should have been was crawling with maggots.

The rider was the true monstrosity, though. He was dressed in black robes, and he, like his horse, was missing his head. Maggots were crawling in the flesh where his head had been and around the remains of his spinal cord that was sticking out of the rotten muscle. The lantern he had been holding in his gloved hand wasn't a lantern at all but was his decapitated head. The head glowed with a luminescence coming from the maggots crawling in and out of the rotting flesh. The smell of moldy cheese hit Ben's nose, making him want to vomit. The head wasn't dead, despite its decaying condition. The eyes were darting back and forth, then locked in on Franni, who had almost made it to the cabin.

Ben saw the cabin door open, and Nanni looked out. Her eyes widened as she saw Franni, her make-up streaked from tears, running for the door. The horse galloped toward the cabin. The rider raised his other hand, and Ben saw a human spine with chunks of flesh still on it. The rider used the spine as a whip, slashing the back of Franni's ankles through her Achilles tendon. Franni screamed as she hit the ground.

The rider kept going forward and raised the spinal cord whip. Again, the whip lashed out, this time at Nanni who appeared to be frozen in fright in the doorway. It wrapped itself around her neck. The rider pulled back, and the spinal cord ripped through the flesh of Nanni's neck to the spinal cord causing her head to fall backward, connected to her body only by her spinal cord. Blood spurted from her opened neck like a fountain as her body stood upright for a moment before tumbling off the small porch of the cabin to the ground.

The rider turned the horse toward where Franni laid on the ground, still trying to stand back up, blood flowing from her sliced ankles. Ben saw his chance as the rider started toward Franni; he bolted up the driveway toward the farmhouse. He stepped on a loose rock he didn't see below the fog—wrenching his ankle causing him to fall over, screaming out in pain.

Ben heard the hooves of the rider's horse coming toward him. The door to the farmhouse opened, and Conor stepped out. Ben saw him fling something shiny in the air as Piper rushed over, keeping her head angled down. She grabbed Ben's arm and dragged him up into the farmhouse, rocks from the driveway tearing into his flesh. As he was being dragged away, Ben heard the rider's head croak out "Benjamin." Ben heard the door slam shut. Now safely inside, he caught his breath.

"What in the hell was that?" Ben asked.

"A fae," Conor replied.

"Fae?" Ben asked. "You are saying that horrific-looking thing is a fairy? Like the fairies in the fairy glade at Blarney Castle?"

"Yous all come here thinking all these cute stories about Ireland," Piper retorted. "I hate to tell ya, the fae aren't like Disney's Tinkerbell with her wand flying around. The fae has been in Ireland longer than we have, and they aren't exactly happy to be sharing their land with us. The dúlachán, or dark man, is a fae, or possibly Crom Dubh himself if the old stories are true. Either way, he brings death."

While Piper was lecturing Ben, Conor was at work covering the door with a wooden panel. Ben noticed that the wooden boards were covering the windows as well.

"What did Conor throw at it?" Ben asked.

"Gold coins," Conor said. "The dúlachán is driven back by gold."

"And the boards?"

"Those are just for our peace of mind," Piper said. "The dúlachán can bust through them if it chooses. It is the coins above the windows and doors that make this a safe haven."

"So, he can't get in?"

"He can not, and he will be gone by daybreak. The dúlachán can only roam when the moon is full."

Conor brought some blankets and a pillow and threw them into a corner.

"Ya can sleep there. We need to get some sleep. We have to ready the cabin for tomorrow's guests in the morning."

\*\*\*

Ben woke up to Conor standing over him, bearing a cup of coffee.

"Piper will be serving breakfast in a moment. Come to the table."

Ben stumbled to the table and saw that Piper had laid down plates with scrambled eggs, rashers, potato hash, and toast in the middle of the long oblong table.

"Sit," Piper said.

She and Conor sat at the table and started spooning food onto their plates.

"It is daylight. The dúlachán will have returned to wherever it comes from now," Conor said.

"What about the bodies of Nanni and Franni?"

"Who?" Conor asked.

"Nannette and Francine."

"Oh, the dúlachán will have made off with them," Piper said.

"Should we call the police?"

"The garda will not find anything," Conor said. "We would sound crazy. Not everyone believes in the stories of old. It will be better if we just let it be. The dúlachán has likely killed tourists in the past, and likely will in the future."

"One question," Ben said. "How did he, ... it, know my name?"

"How do ya know it knew ya name?" Piper asked crisply.

"That hideous decaying head said Benjamin, clear as day."

"The dúlachán said ya name did it?" Piper asked with a sudden coldness to her voice.

"Yes," Ben replied. "Just as you and your husband were yanking me into the farmhouse."

"Then, Ben, ya will not be getting out of Ireland. At least ya will not be getting out alive. Once the dúlachán says ya name, it will keep coming after ya until it kills ya. Ya can temporarily drive it off like we did last night, but there is no escape. Ya taxi will be here soon. I ask, in the nicest possible way, that ya do not return here. The dúlachán doesn't want us at this time, and we don't want to change that."

Ben felt his neck hairs stand up as Piper spoke to him. He saw his taxi making its way down the dirt drive to the farmhouse to take him to the National Stud and Japanese Gardens. He made his way to the door.

"Thank you," Ben said, his voice shaking, and he waited for the taxi to finish coming up the drive.

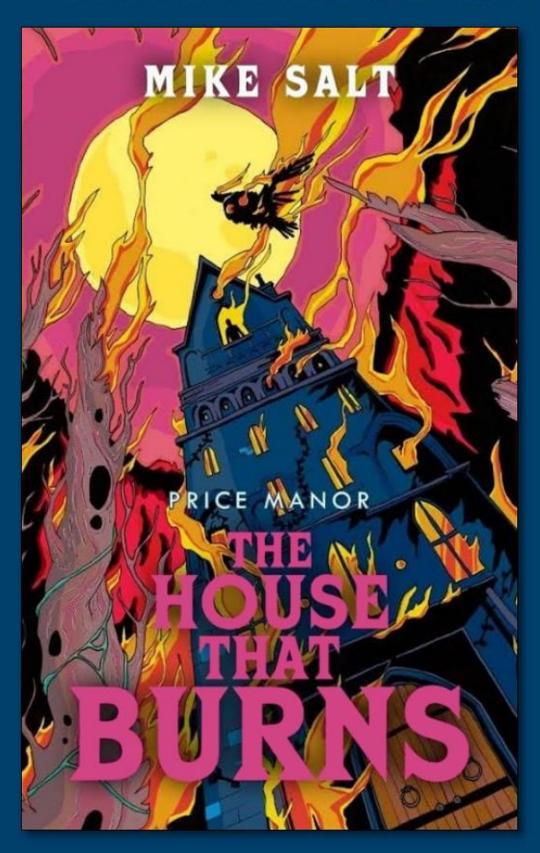
#### **About the Author:**

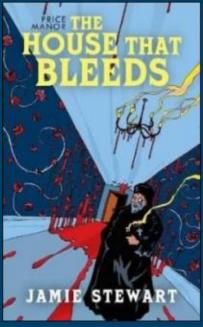
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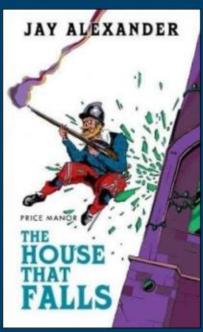
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# Price Manor

A new series from Deadline Horror Collective









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# Inner Disturbance | Mark Tulin

"Do you want to talk about your wife, Winston?"

"My wife?"

My wife and I took lessons at Arthur Murray—the tango, mambo, and the rumba. I thought she enjoyed our Wednesdays at the studio, and it brought us closer together. She confessed later that she only went for the attractive dance instructor.

"My wife is a better person when she's dead," I say. "When she's packed in the dirt at the Greenvale Cemetery, she doesn't put me down anymore."

That's where I buried her that night. Right next to all the strangers she seemed to admire more than her husband. I don't feel bad for her. She has a well-maintained plot; it gets plenty of sunlight in the morning and shade in the afternoon. What more does she need?

"You said she made you feel helpless?"

I look up from the tangles of my hair. "Helpless?"

I barely talk, letting her do all the work. My mind is like a clock that doesn't keep time, full of sorrow and angst. Violins play and I see my wife and the dance instructor doing the mambo. In a few years, if I don't get the chair, I'll forget all about her. Won't even remember her name.

"You said she made you feel helpless?"

I want to nod, but that would mean I agree. I don't want to comply because it's better to be disagreeable. It's easier to refuse than accept. If you don't respond, you don't make any commitments. Then people will get frustrated and leave me alone, thinking I'm beyond help.

"Is that why you stuck her face in the fire pit?" the therapist asks.

Hunched over, I watch the drool hang from my lips. I press down my greasy strands of hair to my sweaty forehead. Strange things keep happening and I have no ability to stop them. If my body picks up that snow globe on the bookshelf and heaves it at the therapist, it won't be my fault. They all know I can't control myself.

"Could you please look at me, Winston?"

I see her mouth moving, but the sound of violins muffle her voice.

She hands me a tissue for my drool, and I reluctantly take it. Although I'd much rather resist and let the saliva hang to the floor.

This place is worthless. Medication only restrains my free will. Bugs crawl on me at night and burrow below my skin, making plans to hijack my body. If only people would stop watching me, then I could hang myself in peace. That's what they want, right?

The therapist shows me a picture of an ink smudge and asks me what I think. I push it away because it makes my head hurt. Every week she shows me that crap. The only thing it does is make me angry.

"Please, don't show me this again."

"It might help you, Winston. If you just try this time."

"I would," I say, "but the clock says otherwise. It's time to go. That's what you always tell me. I'm the one that always gets cut off in here because you're so damn busy."

I rise from the chair, wipe the hair from my eyes, and ballroom music plays in my head instead of the sound of the therapist's voice. I float across the room and beg her to dance with me. She refuses, and instead, just watches me do the Viennese waltz, sliding on the concrete floor, spreading my arms apart as if I'm holding someone.

"Winston!" she shouts. "Please stop dancing."

When I tell her I can't, she threatens to call the aides who will escort me to the room and deny my exercise privileges. "Winston, stop dancing!" she yells again. And again, I ignore her, and continue to gracefully move to the music in my head.

After a few minutes of dancing, I grab the snow globe from the shelf and pummel the therapist until she collapses on the floor. I continue to dance to the elegant violin music, moving from a waltz to a salsa and bachata. I remember my lessons well.

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

Mark Tulin is a retired therapist from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Mark authored *Magical Yogis, Awkward Grace, The Asthmatic Kid and Other Stories, Junkyard Souls, Rain on Cabrillo*. He's featured in The Opiate, Bewildering Stories, Rogue Planet Press, Necro Magazine, Trembling with Fear, Horror House, War Monkey Publications, and others. He is a Pushcart nominee and a Best of Drabble.

Website: Crow on the Wire
Twitter: @Crow poet

# The Conversation | Keith LaFountaine

Lacy had often remarked upon how long it took Mark to get in and out of the bathroom, but thirty minutes was a new record. Orange tongues of flame rippled upward from the fire pit. Sparks glittered as they floated into the night sky, winking out after a few seconds. She had watched the largest bit of wood in the metal pit grow hotter and redder, break apart and release another torrent of sparks.

He did return, but when he did, there was a wild look in his green eyes. They were shining like he had been crying. Yet, the image that immediately came to her was not that of his tears but rather a slimy monster being birthed into the world. Something similar to the litany of horror films she had endured for the past three years. Mark considered himself something of an aficionado with the genre, and she loved him—probably to a fault.

He sat down at the table beside her, his hands clasped in his lap, his pupils dilated, his nostrils flaring. She wanted to make some joke about his trip to the toilet. Something cheeky and witty. The more she looked at him, though, the more she realized he looked scared in a genuine way.

"You okay?" she asked, keeping her voice low.

"Yeah, fine," Mark said.

He swallowed hard and reached out for the half-full glass of wine that was on the table. He swallowed it in a single go. After a grimace, he put it back down on the table and refilled it. Then, he looked into the depths of the fire.

The High Hill Inn was small and cozy. Settled in the Montpelier mountains and run by an amicable couple, it was just what they needed: a getaway that didn't involve driving more than a half-hour from home. Best of all, the fire pit was settled in the backyard overlooking the mountains. They had left the light pollution of Burlington behind. Lacy spent the majority of the prior night gaping at the expanse of black, picketed by shining stars, the red blips of planes, and intermittent, darkened clouds. But the stars were what drew her in the most. For a brief moment, even her skeptical mind understood the spiritual power they held. In fact, the only thing she feared was the idea of a brown recluse crawling into their bed. The owner, a friendly, southern woman named Ann Marie, had remarked that she was getting over a dastardly bite. The gaping hole in her ankle, devoid of flesh and ringed with a deep purple hue, was proof enough.

"We should have a kid," Mark said abruptly.

Lacy tried to hide her surprise, but it was a Herculean task. His words hit her like a thick slab of rebar.

"Oh?" she asked.

Not that she hadn't been thinking the same. But Mark was the leading member of the club of Stubborn Men. Getting him to do anything he didn't want to do was near impossible, and it was even more difficult when the decision involved something life-changing. The ring she wore on her left hand had taken almost seven years to show up.

"Yeah," he confirmed. "I just – let's go for it. Why not?"

He still had a frazzled look about him. Something about that look unnerved her. Made her feel insane. Like he was about to reach his hands up toward the part in his hair and pull the flesh down, ripping skin and muscle away from the bone. It was a manic visage. One she had never seen before.

"What about...well, what we've talked about?" she asked.

"What?" Mark asked, glancing toward her. He reached out for his drink on the table and sucked it down.

"Well, you've never been particularly keen on the idea," she said. "I mean, last time I brought it up, we got in a huge fight. 'I don't wanna bring a kid into *this* world' and all that."

"What's wrong with this world?" he asked. "Clean air, good food, beautiful views. It's a great world."

Lacy couldn't help herself; she let out a guffawing laugh. When Mark turned on her, and she saw rage pluming in his pupils, she covered her mouth with her left hand. The ring shone in the dim light from the house.

"Sorry," she said, "I just—you have to be kidding, right?"

"Why would I be kidding?" His tone was indeed serious, if a bit dark.

"Mark," she started, cocking her head. She put her hand in her lap and picked at one of her nails. "We've just had this conversation so many times before. You've never been thrilled with the idea. And I get it. Trust me, I do. World's gone to hell in a handbasket pretty damn quick."

She paused and looked into Mark's eyes again. They held no malice, but they also were different somehow.

"Well, I'm a changed man," he said. "People can change, right? I didn't want kids before, but now I do. I didn't like the world before, but now I do. I guess I just needed some hope and all that."

Something was really wrong. In an instant, their lovely evening—the fire, the mountains, the calm air—had turned more sinister. Mark had never pressured her before. At least, not in the way he was now. With his tone, he seemed to be pushing for them to jump in the sack in a matter of minutes.

"If anything, you're the one who seems resistant to the idea. So, why don't you want to have a baby? Why have you changed your mind? Must I beg for a son?"

All in an instant, she needed to get away.

"I'm just going to run up to the room really quick," she said, clearing her throat. She slipped her hand into her pants pocket and held her phone aloft. "Need to charge it."

That was when she saw something even worse in his countenance: mistrust.

"Sure," he said after a minute. "Just —don't go in the bathroom." He offered a vague smile, one that was reminiscent of the man she loved. "It needs some time to air out."

Lacy let out a forced chuckle. "Okay," she said.

And then she turned her heel and marched back into the house. The stairs moaned as she climbed them, the wood creaking and bending under her weight. At the top of the landing, she crossed and entered their room.

Closing the bedroom door behind her, she took a few deep breaths and ran her hands through her hair. She was being ridiculous. Mark was acting strange, sure, but her mind was taking it too far. That imagination, the one her mother had always praised her for, was shifting into overdrive, pushing about as many inane theories as it could muster.

The main thing she was worried about was infidelity. She saw the way women looked at Mark. He was a handsome man, with his scruffy beard and his sharp jawline. Isn't that what men did when the guilt became too crushing—double down on their current relationship? Try and mend things without admitting fault in the first place?

She shook her head. Mark would never cheat on her. He'd been cheated on himself. What reason would he have for destroying the life they had built together? The notion itself was like trying to mash a puzzle's corner and center piece together.

Her heart rate was starting to slow now that she was away from his gaze. Now that she had a few minutes to collect her thoughts. With a final exhalation, she shook her head and reached out for the doorknob.

That was when she heard a moan from the bathroom.

She jerked her head toward the closed door.

Silence. Nothing but the wind breezing through the windows, carrying with it the sweet smell of the mountains and the faintest whiff of woodsmoke.

It came again a moment later: a tortured groan, followed by a scratching sound.

Everything in her gut told her to run. But then she was taking a step toward the door. And another. And another.

The moan was louder. She could tell it was a man's voice by its tenor. That scraping sound followed again, sending a freezing spill of rainwater down her spine. Her brain was screaming at her, commanding her to leave, to run down to Mark and tell him someone was in their bathroom. But her hand was on the doorknob, the metal so cold she almost jerked it back in pain.

She pulled the door open, and her heart cascaded into her stomach.

The large bathroom mirror over the sink was shattered. Bits of glass covered the floor, sparkling under the yellow lights. Dark crimson blood stained the white tile.

And Mark was on the floor.

His face had been crushed, the skull puckering in on itself, the lips torn apart, one eye completely swollen shut. A mask of blood soaked his skin, and broken teeth glittered alongside the shards of glass. But it was her husband. She could tell by what he was wearing—it was what Mark was wearing downstairs.

Mark groaned, reaching out a hand toward her. The fingers curled, and broken nails scraped against the tile. He moaned again, the only sound his battered face could utter.

Lacy turned. Her gut was swollen and throbbing with fear. Standing behind her was Mark. He had his hands tucked into his pocket, and he was wearing a disappointed frown.

If he was surprised or shocked, he didn't seem it. Before she could respond, Mark was pushing past her. But he wasn't Mark. He couldn't be. And then he drove his foot into the crushed skull of the man on the floor. A sickening crunch followed, silencing the guttural cries.

He turned toward her. He was smiling wide. Too wide. For the briefest of moments, Lacy could see past the mask. Could see underneath it.

"As I said, people change." He sucked his teeth. "Now, let's finish our chat."

#### About the Author:

Keith LaFountaine is a writer from Vermont. His fiction has been published in various literary magazines, including Dread Stone Press, Wintermute Lit, and Bombfire. When he's not cuddling up with his cats or drinking good whiskey, he tweets from twitter, writing and posts books he's reading on his Instagram account, and Bombfore. He also has short fiction forthcoming in Bewildering Stories.

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Twitter: <a href="mailto:@KL">@KL</a> writing



# At the Armageddon Hotel | Dave Ludford

The hotel held Helena like a prisoner while Armageddon raged outside, and so far the old building had stood firm, one of only a very few still standing. It was a building waiting for a bomb. The air was a choking dense fog of drifting, oily smoke and dust, the surrounding area a mass of smashed buildings, mangled metal and the corpses of those unfortunates unable to escape.

Helena skipped from her room on the first floor to the ground floor dragging Mr. Bunny bump, bump, bump down the frayed and faded green carpet. "There's no escape Mr. Bunny, nowhere for us to go," she mumbled in a bored and weary voice. "We can't get out." Upon reaching the foyer she trudged past the reception desk towards the heavy old wooden entrance doors, which she pushed against as hard as she could then pulled with all her might at the metal handles but nothing would budge, nothing gave. "Told you so. There's no escape Mr. Bunny," she repeated.

She then headed towards the kitchen, stopping only once suddenly when the blast of another bomb immobilized her with fear and her pale blue eyes snapped shut and she gritted her teeth as if feeling severe pain. She dropped Mr. Bunny. After a few minutes she regained her composure, relaxed, and picked up her toy rabbit, then headed off in search of food.

"Don't worry Mr. Bunny, there's plenty here to eat," she said, spooning cornflakes into her mouth. She scooped up a spoonful and held it an inch away from the upturned black cotton 'Y' mouth of the toy that she had placed on the table in front of her.

"Not hungry, huh?" she said after a few moments. "That's OK. Plenty more for me then!" She gobbled up the cereal, savouring the taste of the sweet, sugary milk at the bottom of the bowl.

"We can have soup for lunch and beans on toast for tea. I think I can work the toaster machine, so we won't starve." She jumped lightly off her stool and placed the bowl in the sink, filling it to half way with warm water. Then, turning back, she said with an earnest expression on her face: When mummy and daddy wake up they'll go and fetch help. I'm sure daddy will be able to get those doors open."

Helena trudged back upstairs dragging Mr. Bunny bump, bump, bump behind her. She paused outside her parent's room and gingerly pushed the door open. She stood in the doorway looking quizzically at her mother and father who were sitting up in bed, heads lolled to one side, congealed blood crusting around gaping wounds in both of their throats.

Helena started to giggle, a high, trilling note. "Don't think either Mummy or Daddy will be going for help soon," she managed in between fits of laughter. She stepped back out into the corridor, gently pulling the door closed behind her.

"There's no escape, Mr. Bunny, nowhere for us to go," she mumbled, moving back towards her own room, dragging the toy rabbit behind her by one ragged ear.

Outside, another bomb dropped: louder, closer.

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

Dave Ludford is a writer from Nuneaton, England. His short stories have appeared at a variety of locations in the US and UK.

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# The Voice of the Dead | Katie Ess

"Daisy," I said, trying to keep my voice even. "I need you to let me go." My training told me that when dealing with psychotic patients, I should be calm and confident. It said nothing about what to do when they tied you up.

Daisy laughed, a rasping sound like two thick ropes rubbing against one another. She was standing to the side, where I couldn't see what she was doing.

"Daisy," I said, "I can help you."

"Dr. Foster went to Gloucester in a shower of rain," she sing-songed back at me. "But you're Dr. Springs. You don't need rain."

I was reviewing notes for my upcoming patient appointments as I walked into the hospital that morning. I hadn't even noticed the lifeless face of one of the nurses pressed up against the entry window, or the blood spattering everything, until I was inside. I backed away from the horror, but not fast enough. There was a pain, and the world went dark.

I tried to pull my hands free, in vain. Plastic zip ties dug tightly into my ankles and wrists. Daisy mumbled next to me.

"So if I pull this, it will start?" she said. "Just like that? Oh, goodie!"

I felt a cold chill at the glee in her tone, with the note of implied menace underneath.

"Dr. Springs, the other nurses and I are concerned about Daisy. She's hearing voices again."

"Jean, I know it's been hard to transition from the way Dr. Parsons used to do things. But I've been trained differently. We have better medications now. Patients like Daisy don't have to sit in a corner, drooling, anymore. It will take a while, but I think we'll get the voices to recede. I know you're thinking of your staff's safety. But I believe the risk of Daisy becoming violent again is small."

I tried to twist around, to get my bearings, but twisting made my head throb where Daisy had hit me. Overhead, I could see the shadow of the blades, so I knew I was in the windmill next to the hospital. I was lying on some kind of stone slab—it felt cold against the thin white blouse I had worn to work.

"What are you doing right now?" I asked, hoping to engage her, to reason with her.

"Did you know," Daisy replied, her voice somewhere down by my feet, "that they used this windmill to grind corn, back in the old days?"

"How do you know that? Did you see it?" I tried to lift my head to make eye contact, but it was no use.

Daisy rasped her laugh again. "No, silly. The voices told me."

"Why did they tell you about the windmill?"

"They're curious," Daisy said, "about whether it will work after all this time. And about what'll happen to you when it starts."

"How are you feeling today, Daisy? Are you still hearing the voices?"

"Dr. Springs, did you know that they used to kill patients in that old windmill?"

"I hope that's not true. Did the voices tell you that?"

"Yes, the voices of the people who were killed. They were patients here. Doctors called them 'out of control'. They took them to the windmill for experiments. They want me to help them. They want me to make someone pay."

"Daisy, I don't think those voices are real. I'm going to change your medications, to see if I can make them go away."

Daisy looked me straight in the eyes. "I don't want them to," she whispered.

"I'd like to know if the windmill will work, too. But I don't think I'll be able to see from here. Can you let me go?" Calm and confident, I thought. No desperation.

"Don't worry, Dr. Springs. You'll be able to see just fine. Probably better than anyone." There was shuffling, gradually getting more distant. I pulled on my zip ties hard, trying to free my hands. I could feel blood running down my wrists, but couldn't get any additional movement.

"I got these corn husks from the field outside," Daisy said in my ear. The sound came so abruptly that I let out a small scream. She held the husks in my line of sight so I could see them, but I could only focus on her hands, covered in the dried blood of my friends and colleagues. "Do you like corn?"

"Yes, I do," I said, and tears began to flow down my cheeks. My calm confidence was gone. "I'd like to eat it again soon."

"My voices liked corn, until people shoved the husks in their mouths, to gag them. So no one could hear them screaming."

She shoved the dry husk into my mouth, and I gagged as it disintegrated on my tongue. I spit out powder and grit, trying not to vomit.

"Daisy," I pleaded, "Those voices aren't real. But mine is. Please let me go!"

"One of them was a kid," Daisy said. "He brought his teddy bear here, to hold while they experimented. He didn't like corn—was allergic—so they used a rag."

I heard a metallic click, followed by the loud grinding of stone against stone. Outside, I could hear the creaking whoosh of windmill blades restarting after decades of disuse. A large stone wheel straight overhead slowly rotated closer to me. I twisted frantically, scraping my back against the table I was bound to.

The stone touched my face, and I turned my head to the side to alleviate the pressure.

"Daisy!" I shrieked. "Please—don't crush me! Let me help you!"

"Shhhh...." Daisy whispered into my ear. "You already helped us. You set us free."

With my face twisted to the side, I could see a small bundle in the corner—an ancient teddy bear wrapped in rags. The bear stared at me accusingly, oblivious to my screams. Then the pressure became too much, and my vision turned to blood.

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

Katie Ess lives in Colorado with her husband, two sons, a bulldog puppy, and two ferrets. When she's not writing, you can generally find her cleaning up a mess. Aside from someday becoming a world-famous author, her most important life's goal is to teach the six of them to clean up their own messes.

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# Wish I'd Stayed Home | Jonathan Worlde

Tanya struggled to break loose from the giant arachnid's web.

Turned out humans were miniscule on Planet Argonne relative to the native flora and fauna. Half her crew had been crushed or devoured 48 hours after landing.

Her translator interpreted the anxious discussion between a child alien the size of an Earth house and its mother.

"Don't touch that, honey."

"But Mom, the cute little bug's going to be eaten!"

"We have to let nature take its course; we can't intervene, no matter how cruel it may seem."

The last thing Tanya saw were immense fangs inside a gaping maw.

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

Jonathan Worlde's neo-noir mystery novel *Latex Monkey with Banana* was winner of the Hollywood Discovery Award. Recent short fiction appears in Antietam Review, The Raven Review, Cirque Journal, Ab Terra Voices, and Stupefying Stories. He is also a traditional country blues performer under the stage name Paul the Resonator, whose CD is *Soul of a Man*. See Paul the Resonator on facebook.



# **Goodnight Eileen** | *Cathy Cade*

"Why don't you sit down, Mum? I can do that."

The tea towel stilled in Eileen's hand. Crane-like, her gaunt neck lengthened, as if emerging from the customary dark silk scarf. She looked down her beak. "I hope I can still manage a bit of drying up," she snapped.

Laura hadn't the temerity to contradict her mother. If she mentioned that swaying pause for breath, it would be dismissed as her imagination.

Her wet fingers tucked wayward hairs back in their clip. Upstairs, the children were quarrelling. Her husband appeared in the doorway, hair ruffled and glasses askew.

"Can I drop you home, Eileen, when I take the kids to Scouts?"

"Could you, Rob?" Laura replied before her mother had the chance. "That would be helpful."

A gust whipped hair into Laura's eyes. She shivered and refastened a shirt button that had pulled undone. While Rob checked the children were strapped in, Eileen was exchanging pleasantries with neighbour Josie through the passenger window. The breeze caught Josie's curls when she stood back to wave the car off.

"Night Eileen."

Laura winced. Mum hated that; she thought their generation should address her as Mrs. Harper.

The car turned the corner. The sun came out again.

"She's a marvel, your mum," said Josie, "for her age. Is she still volunteering at the charity shop?"

"Two days a week," said Laura. "She can't just relax and let go," of my life.

"I see her here quite often."

She usually ignored Josie's prompts but today she needed an outlet.

"She's here most days when she's not at the shop. If she hasn't thought up a reason for me to collect her, she'll come on the bus. Rob says it would be easier if she lived with us." Even the thought of it exhausted her. "But she won't give up her bungalow."

Josie nodded. "Independent."

"Stubborn." She sighed. "Lately though, she seems... drained. She gets breathless though she won't admit it."

"Sounds like my dad; maybe her heart's playing her up."

"It wouldn't dare."

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Eileen relaxed back on the sofa, clutching the remote control, although she hadn't turned on the television. It was so peaceful here, just drifting. She would get up and close the curtains in a minute.

Thoughts trickled.

She loved her grandchildren, but...

Laura and Peter had never been so loud, she was sure. There was no need for all that shouting and screeching. Did one's tolerance of noise diminish with age?

She had less patience with everything these days: mugs that leaped out when she opened the cupboard, pens that slipped through her fingers, tiny impossible buttons, jars that wouldn't open... she supposed that was her hands, not the jars.

How could she keep control of her world when she couldn't control her own hands?

She had always been strong: in charge. Now nobody noticed her. Laura didn't listen and never consulted her these days.

She inspected the hand that held the remote control. Its nails were still strong and elegant although her shaky aim meant painting them took longer. Lumps on the knuckles were, apparently, arthritis, although they didn't hurt like her knee did. She moved her fingers and watched the tendons dance behind wormlike veins that bulged under withered skin.

She was drying up, like some shrivelled leaf: still recognizable but dehydrating. She imagined her desiccated husk lifted on a breeze, her house receding far below, Laura's nearby.

Drifting.

So peaceful.

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The crematorium was full. Her brother's eulogy was moving, but Laura remained dry-eyed. Rob said she'd been too busy to grieve properly.

"You're not yourself, love. I'll take a couple of days off work—register the death and help with funeral arrangements."

She'd sent him in to work. She didn't want time to grieve. Or to think.

Now, composed and indomitable, she received the condolences of people who'd known Eileen through her fundraising and charity work. She was glad they didn't all come back to the house; she'd only catered for family and friends.

Peter said, "It must have been a shock, finding Mum like that."

"Not at first. She looked as if she'd fallen asleep holding the TV remote."

It had felt like a cloud lifting. She pushed the thought aside. "Can I get you another cup of tea?"

Josie said "You'll miss her. All those birthday cakes and Halloween costumes, babysitting, helping out."

Organizing, advising, disapproving. Taking over. "Yes. Mum's always been there."

And now she wasn't.

Peter's family were last to leave. She closed the front door and paused at the hall mirror to confirm that no hair had strayed from its appointed place.

"Mu-um, can we change out of these now?"

She adjusted the dark silk scarf at her throat. "Go on then. Make sure you hang them up."

"Yay!" The children pounded upstairs.

"Less noise, you two. There's no need..."

...to wake the dead; she'd stopped herself from completing the phrase.

Collecting a mug from the hall table, she surveyed the living room, where Rob was clearing plates and cups. In the kitchen, Josie had started on the washing up. Laura picked up a tea towel.

"You go put your feet up," said Josie. "We can do this."

The scarf's label poked at her skin; she stretched her neck to dislodge it.

"I'm fine," she snapped, hearing irritation in her voice but unable to control it. "I hope I can still manage a bit of drying up."

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

Since retiring from a career in libraries, Cathy Cade's writing has been published in Scribble, Best of British, The Poet, To Hull and Back Short Story Anthology, and Writers Forum as well as in online magazines. Most of the time, Cathy lives surrounded by Fen fields in Cambridgeshire. Other times she lives across the fence from London's Epping Forest.

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#### **Evil Finds Us** | *Lee Andrew Forman*

The deafening horn sounded as the moon reached its zenith. A wave blanketed our village with ominous vibration. Fearful masses scurried to their homes. They trembled at its calling, hid wherever they could. But no place existed where evil could not reach. Some of us remained in place; we knew it made no difference. When the heavy gates crashed open and the massive beast opened its jaws to release a terrible roar, we only watched with acceptance. Never had it taken us courageous few. We hid in sight, made ourselves easy to feast upon. We surmised it enjoyed the hunt and taste of fear. But this night we learned of our ignorance. As its massive claw reached down and took the man to my side up and into its maw, I knew it did not matter. Evil finds us all.

# **About the Author:**

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

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# Even in Death | Archit Joshi

I had to bring her back home. Despite what Mum and Dad said.

'The disease took her, Amy', or, 'Seven is a delicate age, sweetie', or, 'You can't live in denial, honey'. Liars! I *met* my sister, talked to her. Tonight, my parents' disbelief would vanish. Tonight, I would convince her to come back.

I peeked in my parents' bedroom. They'd had trouble sleeping, recently. On some nights, I even heard a soft sobbing. Believing the lies they told. If only they knew, they'd have no reason to worry for Bonnie! But I dared not talk to them about it, for that would let them know I was prowling about at night. Couldn't allow that to happen.

Confirming that they'd at last fallen into a slumber, I made a mad dash outdoors, gravel and dirt bruising my bare feet. There was no time to waste wearing sandals. But it didn't matter. I was more flying than running. The air thoroughly wrung out from my lungs, I finally arrived. A giant wrought-iron gate towered above me, on the other side of which, she'd now gone to live.

I snaked my way through a bend in the rusted bars. A few weeks earlier, I would've been too plump to fit in through the gap. But somehow, I'd shed all my weight. Even though she couldn't see it, I missed my baby sister. Hated that she'd run away from home and come to live in this monstrous place, where looming blocks of cement sprouted from the ground and dried flowers lay scattered around. Didn't smell all that nice too!

The night stopped whistling soon as I stepped inside. I wasn't welcome here. She knew I'd try and take her back with me, so she sulked. Even the chirping katydids protested my presence as I made my way to her little spot.

A mist swirled playfully around me, carrying with it a vague, sweet scent. A scent which was so different from the stench that hung in the air, I had learned to follow it. It led me to her.

I made my way through thorns and bushes. Hardly looking where I was going. What could I say that would make her listen to me? What if she got fed up of my badgering? Would she never want to see me again?

Around fifteen days ago, Bonnie had mysteriously disappeared. I hadn't seen her all day. That's all I remember. The rest of the day was a big dark blur. I don't remember waking up, or hugging Mom, or going to school. Just the one memory of wrinkling my sheets with all the tossing and turning, wide awake. Feeling Bonnie's absence. Then, her voice. Distant, weak. She begged me to come visit her. Made me promise I wouldn't tell Mom and Dad. I had promptly slipped out; the sudden urge to hug her making my chest heavy.

She'd told me she couldn't come back home, for reasons she simply wouldn't tell me. I was a little angry. My baby sister shouldn't keep secrets from me, after all. But she was being so sweet, I forgave her. From then on, we met in secret. With the moonlight shining on the soft brown earth where we sat in a huddle.

I zigzagged through the dense overgrowth, dry leaves cracking under my sprint. Dangling branches whipped against my arms, drawing out faint smears of blood. I could hardly feel the burn. Sharp breaths escaped my throat, I finally reached an empty clearing. There was only soft mud here. No dried twigs or leaves. The sweet scent had become stronger, pungent even. I didn't mind... my little baby sister would finally be returning home tonight.

Sensing me, a withered hand crawled through a chasm in the soil. I stood rooted to the spot, more nervous than a girl during her first kiss. The hand was followed by the rest of her, arising from the ground like a graceful flower.

Bonnie. Love of my life, my joy in a world that sometimes sucked butt. Not much older than four, she seemed to have grown too tall for her age. Rotting flesh peeked through gashes in her yellowing skin. Hair crinkly, eyes bloodshot. Every last pore of her being emanated the sweet smell that lingered in the air. As pretty as ever, the tiny little Barbie.

"It's me, baby sister!" I cried out, unable to contain the excitement anymore. She turned her head around a full circle and saw me. Smiled. Slugged towards me, bones outstretched.

The most beautiful sight I'd ever seen. Mum should've come here with me. This was the complete truth right here: Bonnie wasn't gone, perhaps just reluctant.

The mist which had followed me from the gate seemed to have thickened, almost as if to shield Bonnie from me, the foreigner of this land. She took me in her arms. I held her in a tight embrace. Heart brimming with a million things I wanted to say to her.

I felt something sliding against the thin fabric of my tee and shrieked, recoiling from the embrace, a gesture which seemed to hurt her.

"It's just my pet snake," she moaned, grabbing the ugly green creature and sending it back to the chasm which she'd snuck out of. "It gets lonely here sometime."

"I keep wondering... isn't there anyone else here?"

She shrugged. "Well, I am not hungry anymore, so there's that huh? But I am thirsty." She examined the gashes on my arm. Sweet little pudding, cared about these childish injuries on me, while she lived here all alone, the bravest four-year-old ever.

"What do you want to talk about?" She asked, making me notice for the first time how her voice had lost the baby drawl. Bonnie had grown so much!

"Nothing in particular..." We plopped down on forgiving mound of earth, in a cuddle. I couldn't for the life of me figure out how to even begin asking her what I'd come here for.

"How are things at home?"

"Not good. Mum and Dad are having a hard time believing the stuff I say about you..."

Her hold around my shoulder tightened. "You've been talking about me?"

"Never specifically about our secret meetings here, but yes, I have been hinting that you're not really..."

"Dead. You can say the word."

"They're really sad, Bonnie, but they can't let it show for my sake. Imagine how elated they'd be to hear about you!"

She tore away from my embrace. "What're you really here for, Amy?"

Sorrow lodged into my throat, making it difficult for me to swallow. I had upset her. Poor Bonnie, who deserved all the love and care, had been hurt because of my callousness. I couldn't hold back the tears anymore.

"I'm sorry... I - I didn't mean to anger you." I sobbed into my hands.

After a while, she pulled me back into a hug. "Don't cry, darling Amy. It's okay." Her head level with my shoulders, she let out an exhale, the warmth of which tingled on the bleeding gashes on my arms. I felt her lips moving over my bare skin, until they rested upon the injuries. I cringed, more from surprise than the sting. What is she doing? She seemed not to register my discomfort.

"You see, not all those who arrive here can go on living... many of those hit by vehicles, or shot, or... stricken by unknown illnesses like I was... simply stop existing."

Bonnie had always been special. But her tone bothered me. A child shouldn't use such grown-up words in such serious tones.

"Are you listening to me?" The iciness of her voice zapped all my attention towards her. She's changed. Does she even care about coming back home?

"Not everyone believes a person can spend their days at the graveyards, living the way I live. People just assume those of us who live here are dead." Her tongue was circling my wounds now but I was too scared to upset her again, so I said nothing. "You... you've always been my loving elder sister. You've always believed me. But you know what? Mum wouldn't! Dad wouldn't. Most people wouldn't, and that's why I must keep myself here."

"Does this mean... we can't see each other anymore? I can't keep sneaking out like this forever!" I shuddered at the thought. She slid away from me, back towards the chasm. She seemed to be in some kind of hurry. The mist thinned around her as she moved. In the moonlight, I saw her eyes had reddened.

"It doesn't have to be this way." Her voice had changed. It had become coarser. Drool leaked out of her mouth. "I can make everything all right again! Just come with me." She dragged herself closer to the gaping hole in the earth, heaving with the effort. A cold, dry gust blew past me, kissing the nape of my neck along the way. It sent a shiver down my spine.

"Come with me..."

I suddenly realized the night had become deathly silent. Waiting for my decision. Something invisible pushed down on my chest.

"What about home?"

"I don't have much time, dear sister!" Her pleading voice had weakened into a rasp. My heart thumped against my ribcage. Mum and Dad would understand if I went with her. I could always return! Right now, being with Bonnie mattered. I would have more time to convince her.

I took her hand. The trees began whistling again, applauding my decision. I wasn't a stranger of this land anymore. Hesitant steps pulled me towards the chasm. I peered in. Spiders scuttled out soundlessly, some of them as big as my palm. Bonnie smiled, revealing yellowish teeth.

"See? They are making way for you. They respect you."

I teetered at the edge, still unsure. The mist around us coagulated into a single hovering blob which attacked my nostrils.

"I can't breathe!" I screamed. My lungs hard at work to draw in whatever oxygen they could.

"You're just afraid... but don't worry. This pain will end soon."

Bonnie wrapped her arms around me and jumped in. The sudden motion rattled my head, and my stomach sent contents of my last meal flying through my scorched throat. Above me, the chasm was closing in on itself, replacing the moonlight with a growing darkness. Bonnie's brittle hair was flying into my nose and mouth, smelling not of the strawberry shampoo it once used to, but of that god-awful sweetness that had begun nauseating me. There seemed to be no end to our fall. I didn't know what I would find down below, but I was with Bonnie and that was all that mattered.

When the fall came, it wasn't on a soft mound of dirt I had expected. It was on something cold and hard, like concrete. Every bone in my body shook on the impact. A fractured bone ruptured through my chest, sending fires roaring through my body. My brain was acting funny, shutting down my senses one by one. Through a dimming vision, I saw Bonnie hadn't been hurt by the fall. She stood over me, her teeth now bloodied fangs. Her pet snake had returned, and now coiled around her throat. She inched towards my neck; lips parted in a snarl.

"Sorry, big sis, turns out I was hungry."

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

Archit Joshi is an author who puts characters before plot. His fiction has found a home in many reputable anthologies and online magazines. Until now, he has over 45 short fiction pieces published traditionally. Professionally, he works as a content writer and loves exploring different styles of writing; Archit had zero regard for coloring between the lines as a kid.

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# Included with the Deluxe Weekend | Epiphany Ferrell

As her best friend, I selected her funeral outfit. I chose a dress the color of smoke, the billowy cloud-white tinged with yellowish-gray that flows off a garbage fire, like a storm cloud but dirtier. It wouldn't do to have her haunting the place dressed in the egg-shell blue terrycloth robe and slippers she died wearing.

We'd gone into business together, determined to corner the market on haunted B&Bs. It was a story we'd spun together since high school. We imagined ourselves the proprietors of an art colony, where painters and poets would come to visit and we'd have outrageous affairs one after the other so that the beautifully penned love letters from one would be trickling to nothing as the next ones began. We'd serve philosophy with evening champagne, politics with after-dinner cognac, artists' statements at breakfast. It was a lovely idea.

And then I married Brian. It put a strain on our relationship, mine and Nicole's. We'd all three known each other since we were kids. It's strange; I'd always thought he had eyes only for Nicole. And yet I'm the one he married.

And the one he divorced. His love for me went cold, unexpectedly, without explanation. I meant to have dignity; I meant to become an ice queen. Instead, I begged him for a reason. He changed his phone number. So I bought this lovely cottage with my settlement, remodeled the big house on the same property, patched things up with Nicole and launched the Dove and Ghost B&B and Pub.

If only we had a ghost, Nicole said.

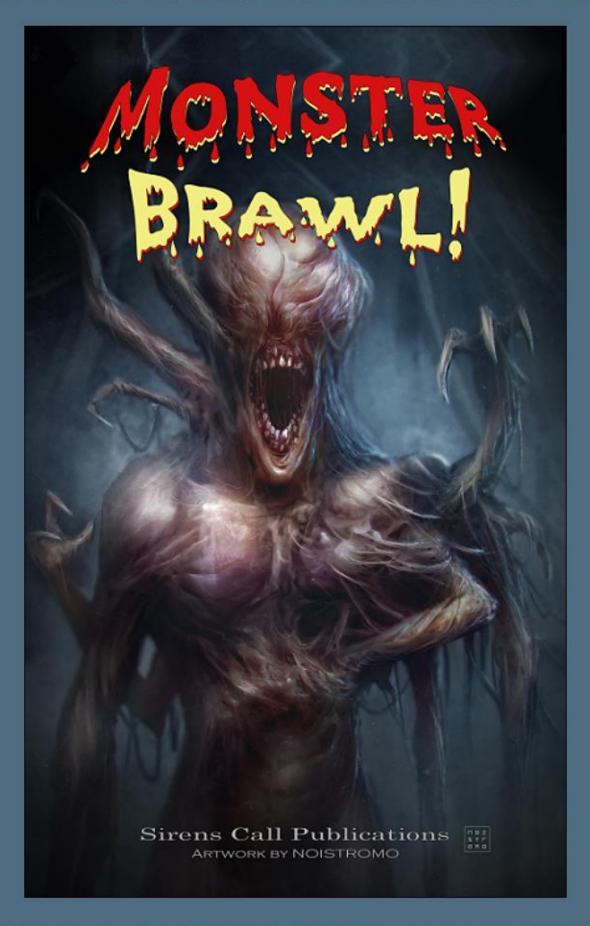
It's not hard to find untraceable poisons; a simple Google search will do it. And Nicole had a bad heart. I sat with her, holding her hand on the chaise lounge, as she felt her heart stagger. "Did you know about the affair?" she asked.

Those were her last living words. She sleeps now, dreamless. But not for long. I'm holding a séance tonight. I'll make her tell me everything. Every detail. It's part of the deluxe weekend B&B package.

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

Epiphany Ferrell lives perilously close to the Shawnee Hills Wine Trail in Southern Illinois. Her stories appear in Best Microfiction 2020 and 2021, Best Small Fictions 2021, Corvus Review, Unnerving Magazine, Pulp Literature, and other places. She is a two-time Pushcart nominee, and won the 2020 Prime Number Magazine Flash Fiction Prize.

# It's time to let the monsters out!



# AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

# Hemogoblin | F.J. Talley

"I was the first one to discover them," I said, to no one in particular. We were in the old subway shelter, making it day by day.

"What?" a young woman asked.

"I said I was the first to discover them—the invaders, I mean." I could see she didn't believe me, and I couldn't blame her. No one knew when or how the invaders had gotten here, or how they came to infect us. We didn't even know if they were from Earth or somewhere else. But no matter. They were here and we had no way to stop them.

"Alright," said a young man's voice. "I'll bite. Tell us all about it."

"Seriously?" Came the voice of his companion. "Do we need to hear some old guy with another story about the invaders?"

The young man, perhaps twenty years old replied, "Why not? We got nothing better to do." I looked around and saw no one objecting, and a few actually paying attention, so I started my tale.

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"You got a minute?" I asked my colleague, Steve Peterson. He looked up.

"Sure. What have you got?"

"Something odd. As researchers at the university and adjuncts for the health department, we often had odd things to test and analyze. "It's this sample I have here." I pointed to the scope I had been using. We walked to my station, and I adjusted the scope for Steve. "Look."

Steve leaned down and peered into the scope. He changed the magnification and focus, then turned to me. "So?"

"What do you think that is?"

"Plasma."

I shook my head and Steve frowned. "Nope," I said. "It's whole blood."

Steve took off his glasses and looked at the sample again. "It wasn't placed in the centrifuge?"

"No; I checked. The people who brought it down swear there were some red blood cells in it before they gave it to me."

"That makes no sense," Steve replied. "There are no red blood cells in this sample, or at least they aren't visible."

"Neither can I," I said. "But it doesn't change the fact that the blood arrived here was whole and not plasma. Steve pursed his lips. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to look into it; might be interesting." Steve nodded and returned to his lab while I returned to scratching my head.

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"Three samples are the same," I told Steve. "This is very strange." For stage two of my research, I had compared the first sample with two others.

"Any connections between the samples?"

"Not that I can see," I said. "They were from two different hospitals. I've given the results back to one and,--" the phone rang and I held up my finger. "Micro lab, Williams." I listened for a while and rooted around my desk. When I found what I was looking for, I said, "Can you repeat that?" I listened again, then replaced the receiver. Steve saw the look on my face.

"What is it?"

"It's the man from the first sample," I said. "The guy just died; a week ago, he was a perfectly healthy man in his thirties, and he died."

"People die, Jim," Steve said. He looked at me again and asked, "What are you not telling me?"

"What I'm not telling you is that he died of asphyxiation, with an oxygen mask over his face."

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"What does this have to do with the invaders?" The young man was getting impatient. An older man said "Shh," to quiet him.

"I'm getting to that," I said. "That was just the beginning, because—"

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"Anything?" Steve asked. I had visited the primary medical lab at the hospital where the man died and talked to the medical examiner. He couldn't tell me anything new, but he shared the test results from the deceased man's organs after the autopsy. I examined them and made copies of the results before returning to my lab.

"Nothing I could find," I said. "The tests of the organs show them as normal, nothing out of the ordinary." Steve shook his head. "That doesn't make sense."

"Which is why they want us to take another tack," I said. "They want us to be the other investigators on this death."

Steve stood. For one death? They pull out the big lab guns for one guy?"

"So far," I reminded him. "Remember the three samples we looked at two days ago?" Steve nodded. "Well, the second person is at the same hospital, and he's fighting for his life. They think this might be some kind of epidemic."

"Shouldn't they call in the CDC and health department for that?"

"They could, but the CDC doesn't fly all over the place for a single or even a second death. Anything we uncover will help the CDC if and when they're called in." I gave Steve a lopsided grin "You in?"

He looked back, smiled and said, "Yep."

Within a week, we had received blood samples from other hospitals, but no samples were as severe as the first three. Even so, we noticed severely lowered levels of hemoglobin and oxygen in their blood. We encouraged their doctors to administer as much oxygen as possible to their patients, hoping that would help.

What surprised us was there wasn't much to learn from the organ samples from the three who had died by that time. Steve and I were discouraged looking at the test results from the organs, but felt we needed to keep going in case something broke.

Steve and I arrived that day at the morgue with all our fancy gear. The Medical Examiner was gracious, if a little annoyed about our presence there, but he stayed out of the way, answering our questions politely and completely. Steve started on the tissue samples the ME had collected while I took a scalpel and reopened body number one. I found myself on the floor in seconds, not knowing what had hit me. Steve and the ME came over and propped me up. I turned to the table and pointed.

"Something in that body—gas or something." Steve took the hint and checked the body, shifting it back into the cooler—not protocol—but it had to go somewhere. He also turned on the exhaust fan to get rid of any fumes.

As I sat up, I asked, "Did you see anything in there?"

"I didn't look," Steve said, "But something had to have knocked you over." I regained my senses and said we needed to continue. Steve and the ME agreed, and we retrieved the body from the cooler. The condition of the internal organs shocked us.

"This is incredible," the ME said. "This man just came down here two days ago, and this is too much decay in such a short time."

"Just two days?" Steve asked. "This is like a week or more."

"This doesn't bode well for us," I said. "We need to test this internal tissue not just the organ samples." We took samples quickly and re-closed the body, placing it in an additional bag for safety. The ME reported to the hospital administration and called the health department for good measure. I was ready to call in the CDC, but Steve reminded me that we didn't have enough yet. Tomorrow, I thought, we call CDC.

Before we left, I placed my hand on the dead man's shoulder, even in the body bag.

"Thank you," I whispered.

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"When did you find the invaders?" the original woman asked me.

"That was right after," I said. "We needed to conduct tests first, and that's what we did." I noticed other people listening by this time. I couldn't tell if they were mad that we didn't call in the CDC earlier, but I think they knew as we did that it would have made little difference.

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The following morning, we put on our protective gear and examined the tissues with even higher magnification. At first, I thought there was something odd on the sample. Either that, or my eyes weren't what they used to be. I examined the sample through the scope and looked at other items on the sample but saw nothing out of place. When I looked in the scope again, the specks were still there, and I didn't understand them.

"Were there any tiny spots in those blood samples that we—wait a minute," I cried. "Before we look at this with the scope, what about oxygen content in the body?"

We took some of the body cavity tissues and checked them for common elements. We also remembered that the organ tissue showed slightly elevated levels of oxygen, toward the upper edge of the normal ranges.

Not so for the body tissue: their oxygen content was off the charts, and it appeared the missing oxygen from the blood hemoglobin had somehow entered the body cavity, starving the heart and other organs, but remaining in the body itself.

"We need to test a live subject to see if this is the case for all of them," I said, "and test the body tissue for any other minerals we didn't test for before." Steve agreed, and made the calls, as I looked again at the sample from the first deceased man. When I doubled the magnification, I inspected the spots and saw what I thought was an eye looking back at me. I jumped back and fell off my stool, hitting my head on the other bench.

"What happened?" Steve asked as he came over. "Are you okay?" I got up quickly and returned to the scope. I peered at the sample, holding up my hand to slow down Steve. The eye was gone, but I shifted the sample and found it again. It was moving—slowly—but it was moving all on its own.

"Take a look," I said. "You may have to move the sample around to find it.

"Find what?"

"You'll know when you see it."

Steve looked at the sample for about a minute before his body went rigid. "What the,"

"Exactly" I shivered. "I don't know what it is, and if it's alive. But it's in the body tissues and there's a good chance it is alive. We need to make sure we get this sample sterilized as soon as possible." Steve nodded his agreement and went back to the phone. I wondered about the other corpses.

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We examined body tissues from two more corpses and found the same little microbes or whatever they were. We couldn't explain why the other labs hadn't seen them before, but it was possible they didn't test the right tissues, or that maybe they were too small to be seen until the patients were close to death.

When we had a live case two days later, we had to fight with the woman's doctor to take body tissue samples.

"This may hasten her decline," he said. "I don't want to be responsible—"

"Then don't," Steve said. "We'll take full responsibility."

"But I'm not authorized," he stressed, but Steve and I were already in the room. Thirty minutes later we returned to Steve's lab and placed the sample in the scope. We had to go to a higher magnification, but the little beasts were there. We could neither identify nor fight them, but at least we had seen them: tiny little things that turned blood a watery blue-white and shifted oxygen to body cells, which must have fed them. Steve and I looked at each other and realized something else: how long could these things live in a dead body, and what about those that had already been buried?

We didn't have to wait long. After two requests, we got an exhumation order for the first man who had died. The ME helped by securing a special suite for the second autopsy. What we found didn't make us happy. They were there, and the body cavity, though embalmed, was almost a soup. The beasts had taken over everything and had even exited the body through the pores. It was all we could do to contain them in our lab before we sterilized them.

We still didn't know where they were coming from and had no idea what to do about them. When we finished the tests, the ME and I spoke outside as Steve called the CDC.

"What else can we do?" he asked, confused.

"That's the problem," I said. "I'm not a praying man, yet I don't know what else to do."

Steve interrupted us, running back from the phone.

"I just thought of something," he said. "One of those bodies just got donated to the university for research."

"You mean?"

"Yes," Steve continued, taking off his lab coat. "And they plan on cutting it open in two hours. They'll be flushing out fluids as they test it and then whatever those things are will be in the sewer supply. If we hurry, we can get there in time."

The ME stood up. "And if we're not?"

I held his arm. "Then I wouldn't spend any time downstream if I were you."

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"Is that how it happened?" asked the woman again. "You didn't get to them in time?" I shook my head.

"No. We got there in time and took the body away. But there were a lot more cases coming in that no one knew were active cases. And we lost funeral home directors who didn't take extra precautions with some of the bodies."

"What do you mean?"

"When you normally have a diseased body, you take precautions with body fluids," I began, "but two of the early victims were elderly, and there was nothing to indicate they had died of anything other than natural causes. When their bodies were prepared for burial, the invaders got out and infected the funeral home directors and they spread." The subway was silent until an older man approached me.

"So still nothing that anybody can do?"

I shrugged. "If only I knew. There aren't many people above ground now trying to fight them anymore." I shook my head. "Steve died a month ago from the invaders, but I've escaped for now. I have nothing else to contribute to the fight, plus some of the other scientists thought I might be a carrier or something." A few of the people stepped back, but I stood firm.

"Seriously?" I said, annoyed. "Like you haven't all been around people we know are active carriers? And you only get mad at me?" No one took my challenge, and I sat back down, weary.

"Yeah, I was the first to discover the invaders." I looked around the dingy, smell subway. "And look what it got me."

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

F. J. Talley, a writer and sailor, published two novels—*Twin Worlds* and *Take Hart*—in 2017. F. J. won the 2019 prize for fiction from the Gulf Coast Writers Association for his story *Thirteen*. His short story *By the River* appeared in the Maryland Writers' Association's 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary anthology. His sailboat *Ilya*—on which he spends too little time—was named for a Florida manatee.

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# **Bouncing** | *Epiphany Ferrell*

I should have known something would happen at a nightclub with a bouncy house. It's unsanitary, allowing drunken adults, not in full control of their limbs or their bladders or their inhibitions, to jump around in an enclosed space, sometimes with no pants on and sure as hell with no helmet. The place was called The Fun House, and pajamas were encouraged.

I'd gone out that night because my classmates said I needed some amusement. I was too serious. Too pale. Like creeping ivy, too attached to the library. And so there I was, drunk in public, in the bouncy house in fact, laughing and falling and not even able to bounce, and my chin hit the top of the dead guy's head. I cracked a tooth.

At first I thought I'd killed him. But he was cold and becoming stiff. He'd been dead at least an hour. So it wasn't my fault.

I rolled out of the bouncy house, not laughing, not drunk, not anymore. I grabbed my shoes, well, one of mine and one of someone else's, and I walked barefoot through the club, saying good-bye to no one, out the door, to my car. And I drove home. Arrived just after 1 a.m. Reported to my clinical at Memorial at 4 a.m. His body rolled in at 4:15. We shared the elevator. I'd gotten on, too tired and hung over to notice it was going all the way down before going up. Bouncing, very slowly, the old elevator, not like the new ones in the lobby.

I looked over at the gurney, and the black bag was unzipped. I saw the dead guy's face, and I remembered him from the bouncy house, and I thought about how his stiff body must have knocked down bouncers like bowling pins. I started to giggle. One of the morgue guys rolled his eyes at me, and the other one said, "It's ok, lots of med students lose it the first time they see a body outside of the classroom."

I laughed and I laughed, and the bruise on my chin hurt, and the elevator hit the bottom floor, and they got out. The elevator bounced back up to the lobby and I laughed so hard I cried, and then I wasn't laughing anymore.

# **About the Author:**

Epiphany Ferrell lives perilously close to the Shawnee Hills Wine Trail in Southern Illinois. Her stories appear in Best Microfiction 2020 and 2021, Best Small Fictions 2021, Corvus Review, Unnerving Magazine, Pulp Literature, and other places. She is a two-time Pushcart nominee, and won the 2020 Prime Number Magazine Flash Fiction Prize.

# The Second World | Roxana Negut

It was late. It was snowing outside with big flakes, and the man was hurrying to the bus station. It was close to midnight, and he was afraid the last bus may have already gone. He sat down on the rusty bench in the bus station and waited.

Tired after the long hours spent in front of the thick accounting books, he fell asleep for a few minutes despite the penetrating cold. What woke him up was the terrible noise an old and strangely shaped bus made as it approached the station.

Despite being dazed from his sleep and surprised by the strange shape, he decided to take it. It could be the last one that night and he didn't want to stay there.

As soon as he got on the bus, he saw it was dark and empty, the driver a pale shadow beyond the frosted chipped window. The chairs were old, and he saw the mock leather covers were peeling off in many places as he sat down. The bus smelled old, but not the pleasant smell you get from antique furniture. It was the type of strong and unpleasant smell of something decaying.

He tried to take his mind off the smell by sitting down and looking out of the scratched and misted up windows, but couldn't avoid feeling an icy shiver trickle down his spine as he did so.

He had only ten stops to get home, but as he approached the area he knew well, he noticed small unusual changes. A thick, tall tree appeared on old wasteland where there hadn't been one before. A house he had known since childhood was no longer there. The traffic lights on all the intersections had disappeared. He recognized where he was, but it seemed like another world. An older world that he only partly knew.

He tried unsuccessfully to make sense of what he could see out of the window and was still trying to work things out when he recognized his house at the edge of the forest that marked his destination.

The bus made a long squealing noise as it stopped, and he hurried down the aisle and got off as quickly as possible. Outside, the snow had thickened, and he strode away quickly, wanting to get indoors out of the thickening snow.

He lived alone since his divorce ten years previously, and he had a set routine every night. Nothing too pretentious, but a routine he was comfortable with. A microwaved pizza, a hot bath followed by hot tea, and a few pages from an excellent book.

It surprised him to see a light shining from the front window as he approached the house. He wasn't expecting visitors, and he was the only one with a key. He hurried to the door, unlocked it, entered, and could hardly believe his eyes at the scene in front of him.

His wife, or to be more precise his ex-wife, was wearing a flowered dress, and was humming a song as she prepared dinner. Stunned, John was astonished and speechless for a few moments.

He hadn't seen his ex-wife in ten years. Not since the acrimonious divorce. All the problems between them had eroded their relationship little by little, just like a worm gnawing on an overripe apple. They had been young and inexperienced, and separated after a long series of seemingly endless trivial arguments. The arguments may have been trivial, but they indicated a character mismatch neither of them could cope with.

Now, standing in front of him, she was unchanged. It had been ten years, but she looked the same. The same shoulder length curly blond hair. The same serene eyes. The same bright smile. It was as if no time had passed. As if time itself had no power over her.

She came to him, hugged him, and invited him to eat the meal she had prepared. John never spoke as they ate together. Still stunned, he kept quiet, not wanting to break the magic spell.

It was like a scene from the past, but without the arguments, and he felt nostalgia and joy. He had loved his wife despite the divorce, and he realized he still loved her. All the time they were eating, she was talking and laughing. She was not saying anything very important, trivia mainly, but John listened eagerly to every word.

After the meal, they climbed the stairs to the bedroom and made love. They found each other. Their bodies and hearts in a perfect union as she cried with joy.

He did not want to spoil what they now had, so he decided not to raise the divorce, or even to ask about the intervening years. He didn't know what had brought her home so young and full of life, but he wanted everything to stay as it now was.

The next morning, he kissed his sleeping wife and headed for work. Not infrequently, he smiled during his day among the boring registers. He couldn't stop smiling, and thinking of the previous evening.

He called home at noon, but no one answered. He was busy at work and didn't have time to ring back, but as soon as seven-o'clock arrived he left the office as quickly as he could and rushed home to a wife and to a life he had long thought lost. On his way, he bought an enormous bouquet of roses from a newsstand. Red, because he knew they were his wife's favourite colour.

When he got home, there were no lights on, and the house was empty. He looked for his wife everywhere and then waited, thinking perhaps she had gone for a walk. He became more worried as the evening wore on. It was getting late and becoming colder. He didn't know where she had gone, and realized he knew nothing about her life since the divorce.

John stayed awake all night waiting for her, and by the morning he was both tired and crushed with worry. He wanted to call someone, but didn't know who to call. He wanted to search for her, but didn't know where to search.

He couldn't afford to take time off work, but on the way to work he stopped at the post office to collect his mail. An envelope was waiting for him, and as he tore it open he saw it was an official letter from a law firm. It took his breath away for a moment as he read he was the only beneficiary of his wife's will. She had died a month ago, and the envelope included a copy of the will, her death certificate, and her wedding ring. They had written the letter three days previously.

For the first time in his life, John he fell to his knees and cried. He realized ghosts were real. In a parallel universe, his wife had given him one last night of love.

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

Poet, writer, journalist. Roxana Negut was born in 1981 in Bucharest, Romania. She studied at the Philosophy and Journalism University. She writes children's literature, poetry and prose. She has published books but also poetry, prose and articles in national and international anthologies. Roxana has a humor website called Life as limonade. Roxana loves reading, writing and drinking coffee.

#### Goodnight Story | Patrick J. Wynn

"Annie, finish brushing your teeth. Its bedtime," Mommy called.

Annie ran her pink toothbrush over her teeth a couple of times then placed it back in the holder. She rinsed her mouth and then wiped her mouth with the towel. Jumping down off the small stool in front of the sink she turned toward the door and froze. Holding her breath she covered her eyes and began counting.

"One, two, three, four, five, six." Annie whispered. "OK."

"Annie lets go," Mommy called again.

Annie leaned out into the hall and slowly looked both ways. Shaking a little she darted across the hall into her bedroom and launched herself into bed. Quickly shoving her feet under the covers she then yanked up the heavy blanket over her face and began counting again.

"One, two, three, four, five, six."

"Ok, ok. Mommy is here. It's all fine." Mommy giggled.

From under the blanket Annie heard her mother turning the pages of the book she'd been reading Annie every night since she was two.

"How about the gingerbread man?" Mommy asked.

Annie just shook her head yes without pulling the blanket down.

"You going to stay under the blanket tonight?" Mommy asked.

"Yes," Annie whispered.

As Mommy began to read Annie shivered a little. She really enjoyed story time and was happy Mommy came back every night to read Annie's favorite book. But since Mommy died she had begun to smell bad. Mommy also looked funny, kind of grey and rotten. But that didn't scare Annie. No, what scared Annie was the new friends Mommy brought with her.

#### **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.



# The Pain of Others | David Wesley Hill

I went down to the basement and pulled Sam out of the dryer. He was giggling. He enjoys tumbling in that machine. I singed my fingers on his hair while dragging him through the small round opening.

"What you want, Frank?" Sam asked. He's not much taller than my knee and his eyes are the shape and color of egg yolks and his lips stretch right out of sight on either side of his face. Maybe it's because his mouth is so large that he can imitate any voice he hears.

"You know the Hansens?"

"I've seen them. Mr. and Mrs. and their boy, Erik. They've got a dog, too."

"That's them. Well, they're going to Florida for a couple weeks. Except for Ralph. The dog. They asked Barry Ost to look after Ralph."

Sam bounced up and down at this news. "I get it. I get it. Who do you want me to be, Frank?"

"Probably Mr. Hansen."

"I can do that. I've heard him lots of times. We'll have fun, won't we, Frank? Lots of fun."

Sam was so excited that he didn't return to the dryer right away but instead started chasing rats. He's pretty quick and already had one in his fist before I was halfway up the stairs.

\*\*\*

Sam isn't very bright but he can read a little so I wrote out a script for him to follow. Then I went to the living room. Dad was sitting on the couch with a rocks glass of vodka in one hand and the remote in the other.

He had stripped down to an undershirt and boxer shorts like he does every evening. Both his legs were pale and hairy but the right one was shriveled and half the thickness of the other and the toes were crimped together. Dad tells people who ask about his limp that he had polio when he was a kid. This isn't the truth. His leg has always been like that.

He was watching the news, but lowered the volume so I could read him what I had written.

"I like it," he said. "When are you going to make the call?"

"The Hansens are leaving early. I'll phone Barry in the afternoon."

"Sounds about right. Say, you know where your mother is?"

"She told Courtney not to expect her until late. Didn't mention why."

"What are we supposed to do about dinner?"

"There's leftover Chinese in the refrigerator."

I went out onto the porch and settled into one of the white plastic chairs and watched cars go by. I was bored. I'm always bored. Sometimes it seems like I've been bored for hundreds of years. All my life.

Mom came home not long after dark and sat beside me. The neighborhood was hushed and this allowed us to hear distinctly the rhythmic sound of sex coming from the living room behind us.

"You'd think they'd get tired of that," Mom said.

\*\*\*

The next afternoon Courtney and I went down into the basement. Sam's lips moved while he read the script I'd prepared.

"I can do this," he said. "No problem, Frank."

I'd brought a burner phone and installed spoofing software. After dialing the number for him since Sam doesn't have real fingers, I held the phone to his ear. "Barry," he said in perfect imitation of Mr. Hansen's voice, "Joe Hansen here. No, nothing's the matter. But we won't be needing you to look after Ralph after all. No, no, nothing like that. We're having him taken to a kennel. Beverly just decided she'd feel better knowing the old boy will receive professional care. Don't worry about the mail, either. We've made other arrangements."

Sam was giggling the moment I switched off the phone. "I did good, didn't I?" he said. "Real good."

We were sitting on the linoleum tiling with our backs against the washer and dryer. Much of the basement was finished but the far end was bare concrete and dirt. That area was littered with old bones and droppings and in one corner was the mouth of a tunnel that Sam had scrabbled out by hand through years of effort.

Ten feet past the entrance the tunnel divided. One branch led to the basements of houses all across the neighborhood. The other wound deep into the dark beneath the ground. Only Sam knew exactly where it led.

Courtney was chewing gum. She blew a large bubble and said, "When do you think we should check on Ralph?" "The day after tomorrow," I answered. "Or the day after that. They probably left enough food for that long."

"And water," Sam piped up. "Don't forget water."

"And water," I said.

\*\*\*

The Hansens lived in a Cape Cod set back twenty yards from the street behind a screen of pine. The mailbox was at the head of the driveway. Courtney and I removed the letters and brochures that had accumulated and piled them neatly to one side of the door.

It was past midnight and there was no moon but this made little difference to us and we could see clearly through the windows into the house.

Ralph was a mixed breed and not a large dog. He was five years old. He knew that Courtney and I were there and he stood up on his hind legs and placed his front paws on the windowsill in order to return our stare.

Through the kitchen window we saw that his food and his water dishes were overturned and empty. He'd made messes on the floor since he hadn't been walked.

"He's getting hungry," Courtney said.

"Just a little. He's been well fed."

Ralph began barking. It was only a warning bark and not yet a desperate one.

"Be quiet," I told him. "No one can hear you."

\*\*\*

We visited the following night and the night after. Each time we found further evidence that hunger and thirst were beginning to affect Ralph.

He was a smart dog and understood that the refrigerator held food. But he wasn't smart enough to open the door himself although scratch marks in the enamel indicated that he'd tried. Somehow he'd gotten into the pantry closet and tumbled cans around the kitchen. He'd chewed the labels into paste but hadn't managed to get his teeth through the metal of the cans.

Once again Ralph peered out at us through the window. He couldn't understand why the Hansens had left him behind and why they weren't feeding him. Nothing hurts worse than being betrayed by those you love. I looked directly into his eyes and saw in them a lot of anger and a little fear and the beginning of insanity.

That's what I like best. Most people assume animals don't have awareness of their own mortality but this isn't the case. They are as knowledgeable of death as any man or woman. They just can't talk about it.

We returned to our own house and Courtney went downstairs to fetch Sam while I sat on the couch beside Dad. Mom was across from us in the easy chair reading a supermarket tabloid. Courtney placed Sam on the coffee table. Spoofing Barry Ost's number, I dialed the motel the Hansens were staying at in Fort Lauderdale.

"Hello?" Sam said in an adolescent voice. "Mrs. Hansen? It's Barry. No, no problem, I just wanted to let you know how Ralph is doing, that's all. He's a good dog. Yes, he's been minding me. But he misses his family, though, I can tell. What? No, his appetite is OK, it's only he looks sort of sad. All right. Sure, I'll be glad to let him run around a little extra."

I switched off the phone and Sam began bouncing up and down on the table top and scattering knickknacks everywhere. "I like this," he said. "I like this a lot." He leaped on Courtney and pumped against her jeans until she unzipped the fly and slipped the pants down.

"How long do you think it will take for the dog to die?" Mom asked.

\*\*\*

Ralph no longer barked. His muzzle was caked with dried blood from attempts at battering through the doors and windows of the house. He had eaten his own excrement off the floor. We stared at each other for hours through the glass pane separating us.

Madness glazed his eyes. Madness and something else. Something I can never own myself but can only borrow temporarily in the pain of others. After all these centuries I still can't put a name to it. But for the time being, I wasn't bored.

"Sam," I said. "Go find a rat."

"Will do, Frank," he answered. In the darkness his yellow eyes were luminous. "Then what? What's next?" "Let it go in the Hansen's kitchen."

"I get you, Frank. No problem."

A quarter hour later Ralph's ears twitched. Sam had come up from his tunnel into the basement and opened the door just enough to let the rat through.

It saw the dog and scurried away but Ralph was faster. His teeth closed around its neck before it could squeal.

Ralph ate the rat in three hurried gulps. I calculated there was enough meat and juice in the rodent to keep the dog alive another day or so without taking the edge off his hunger and thirst. I didn't want him too weak. And now he knew how to kill.

\*\*\*

The Hansens were due home from Florida on Saturday morning. Setting my phone on a tripod, I focused the camera through a gap in the living room curtains on the Hansens' front door. Then I streamed the video feed to the TV so that we could all sit on the couch together and watch what happened.

"They're here," Courtney said. Dad refilled his glass with vodka and sat next to Mom while Sam and Courtney squeezed in on either side.

The phone had a clear view of the Hansens getting out of their Suburban. They were tanned and looked rested. Mrs. Hansen unlocked the front door and entered the house.

We could hear her screaming despite the distance. She staggered back and stumbled to the ground with Ralph at her throat. Mr. Hansen kicked at the dog but that only encouraged Ralph to attack him, too.

"Now, Frank?" Sam asked. "Is it time yet?"

"Another minute," I replied. "No hurry."

Erik tried to wrestle the dog off his father but Ralph lacerated his arm and he staggered away without having accomplished much of anything. Mrs. Hansen died.

I took Dad's pistol and ran outside. Ralph was busy chewing on Mr. Hansen and he didn't notice my arrival until I was squatting before him and we were eye to eye.

Ralph knew who I was. He hated me. But by now he was insane with grief and rage and he hated himself as much as he hated the owners who had left him alone to starve.

Ralph wanted to die. Instead I crippled him. He lay there an hour until a patrolman thought to use the humane killer.

\*\*\*

No one understood why Barry Ost didn't feed Ralph or believed his explanation that Mr. Hansen phoned to say his services weren't needed. Particularly in light of my spoofed call to Fort Lauderdale.

Since he was underage, however, he only served a year in juvenile detention. The civil suit against his parents for wrongful death is ongoing.

For a month we watched the video every night after the evening news while sharing a bowl of popcorn.

"I like it, Frank," Sam repeated. "It's my favorite."

Courtney blew a bubble until it burst loudly.

Personally I best remember the look in Ralph's eyes as he lay paralyzed. For a while it was as if I was alive myself although that, of course, is forever beyond me.

Eventually repetition sapped our interest in the video and we archived the file.

I was bored again. I'm sitting here on the porch with Mom and we can hear Courtney and Dad and Sam grunting. Maybe I'll join them.

It's something to do.

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

David Wesley Hill is an award-winning fiction writer with more than forty stories published internationally. In 1997 he received the Golden Bridge award at the International Conference on Science Fiction in Beijing, and in 1999 he placed second in the Writers of the Future contest. Mr. Hill studied under Joseph Heller and Jack Cady at the City University of New York.

Facebook: David Wesley Hill



# Death, In Name | Douglas Allen Gohl

As she trudged down the alley, Cenessa saw a small crate. It was next to the building's emergency generator and would need to be put into the dumpster. Since her arms were already loaded with that evening's trash, she'd have to come back for it. Sighing at the extra work after a long day, she meant to continue on to the dumpster at the end of the alley, but froze when she heard the mewling of kittens. Looking down, she realized the sounds emanated from the crate. Hesitating only a second, it was enough for their cries to tear at her heartstrings, becoming too much to bear.

Dropping the bags of refuse beside the generator she knelt next to the crate and reached for the small blanket that hid the precious critters. To her surprise, she didn't find kittens beneath the tattered cotton cloth, but a tape deck. There wasn't a lot of light in the alley, although it was sufficient enough to see the spools of the cassette slowly turning, issuing forth the cries of kittens from the machine's solitary speaker. Shock masked her apprehension— however, when a light scraping sound reached her ears from the shadows, it became immediately prevalent.

Looking up, she saw a soft, faint glow emanating from a man standing in the shadows. She was too startled to be startled, but then he smiled. It was warm and grandfatherly, putting her instantly at ease, and she smiled back. Pointing to his wrist her eyes followed. Being the fashionista she was, used to seeing the high-class clientele from the boutiques and stores around her coffee shop, she immediately recognized the Patek Philippe he wore. Its brushed steel finish gave it a classic look. Little luminescent lines on its face marking the time were the source of the faint glow in the shadowy light. From the man's plaid, maroon wool-and-cashmere Luciano Barbera blazer, to his Santoni calfskin double-monk boots, he was dressed to impress. And clearly out of place in the dingy back alley of the little coffee shop.

"May I help you?" Cenessa asked tentatively.

The man looked at her and smiled again, eliciting another return smile from the barista. "I have come to collect you; it is almost time." He pointed to his watch once more.

Again, her eyes followed, and her brow scrunched with confusion. "I don't understand." A brief shake of her head emphasized her bewilderment.

"I am Death...or so the people call me. But my actual name is Charles."

"Death?" She laughed lightly, looking him up and down as she stood. "Is this a joke? Did Barbara put you up to this?" If this was a joke, it wasn't funny. Pulling her curly dark hair back, she put it in a high ponytail with the scrunchy she wore on her wrist. Exposing the tawny, smooth skin of her neck. Her dark eyes, near black in the dim light of the alley, expressed her displeasure.

Putting her hands on her hips, assuming a casual stance, she said, "You don't look like Death."

"Contrary to popular belief, I don't wear black robes and carry a scythe. That's contrite. I would stand out, and everyone would flee in terror. It would make my job so much more difficult. Most of the time I am invisible to people. With luck, they only see me once, briefly before they die. Then I collect their...soul, you might call it," he finished with a flourishing wave.

"Has someone seen you more than once?" she asked, now curious.

"Occasionally I make mistakes." He gave a shrug. "Also, meddlesome medics revive people." Leaning toward her slightly he added, "It gets annoying."

"Do you choose whose soul you 'collect'?"

"Though everyone sees me—when they see me—as a regular person, and not a skeleton or some other fanciful creature, my vision of them is different. Each person has a string of numbers floating over their head that only I can see. A date. Specifically, the date and time of their death. I do not choose people, it's predestined."

Cenessa grew cold. From her head down to her feet, the heat just drained from her body as realization set in. She was looking at him. She could see him...Death. Or Charles or whatever he wanted to be called. And it meant the little numbers above her head (which she couldn't see, but not for lack of trying) were probably flashing red, as her final moment drew near. She was going to die.

"So you're really *the* Death?" she asked in stunned disbelief. She hoped he was just a rich eccentric that missed a few doses of medication.

He smiled apologetically. "If it helps, you may call me Charles," he offered with a shrug.

"And what, you put this crate here to lure me to stop so you could kill me?" She was now enraged by Death's—Charles's—audacity.

"No, he did."

Though he pointed over her shoulder, and she wanted to turn to see, her attacker was too swift. Something coarse and rough was looped around her neck and drawn tight, cutting off her windpipe—her blood flow. She clawed

desperately but it was futile. Outmatched in height and strength, the last vision her bulging eyes transmitted to her brain was Charles checking his Patek Philippe. She didn't have time to wonder if he was ensuring whether it was keeping proper time, or just casually calculating to see if he would make his next appointment. She was gone. He would collect her soul, then he would be gone, too. People were dying all over the world, and he had work to do.

### **About the Author:**

Douglas Allen Gohl has traveled the United States extensively and now resides in the Pacific Northwest. He was a business major in college and served in the US Army Reserve. Late to find his passion, he has been published in multiple anthologies and publications including *Imperial Devices, Murder and Mayhem and Glitch* by Dragon Soul Press. His other hobbies include sports and watching Bravo TV.

Facebook: Douglas Allen Gohl

### Revenge | K. A. Williams

The mist from the damp ground curled around the tombstones in the cemetery. In the moonlight, I could see the name of my wife etched in stone. She'd been killed in a car accident when the brakes failed. And the car had just been inspected the week before.

"How does it feel?" a voice asked.

I looked up from the tombstone at the approaching stranger clad in a long dark overcoat. "What do you mean?"

"How does it feel to lose someone you love?"

"How do you think it feels?" I snapped.

He sat on my wife's gravestone, withdrew a gun from his coat pocket, and pointed it at me. "One good turn deserves another."

"What are you talking about?"

"I saw you with my brother the night he disappeared. Then later, when you stole his body from the morgue, I followed your car to the Maitland Institute where you stayed awhile, before going home to your wife."

I understood now. "You mean you—"

"It was easy to cut the brake line on your wife's car without being noticed."

I took a step forward in anger. "You caused my wife's accident because you think I murdered your brother?" "Revenge!"

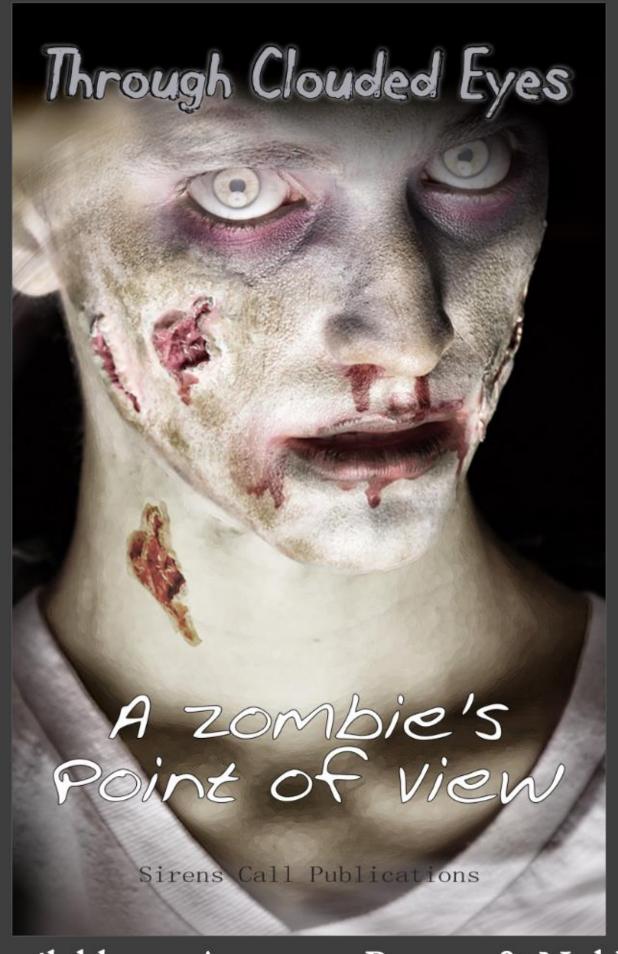
"But there he is," I said, as Paul walked up behind his brother. "Get his gun and give it to me."

Paul's brother was obviously in shock and didn't resist when Paul obeyed me with jerky movements. "What have you done to him?" he asked.

"The same thing I'm going to do to you," I said, before hitting him on the head with his gun. "Only this time I won't have to steal my experiment from the morgue because of a stupid assistant. Soon, I shall have another zombie to serve me."

### **About the Author:**

K. A. Williams lives in North Carolina and writes speculative, mystery/crime, general fiction, and poetry. She has been published in many magazines including Mystery Tribune, Trembling With Fear, Theme of Absence, Altered Reality, Yellow Mama, View From Atlantis, and The Rockford Review winning one of their Editor's Choice Awards for prose in 2009. Apart from writing, she enjoys music (mostly rock), and CYOA games.



Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and iTunes

### The Other Side of the Tracks | C.C. Winchester

Rebecca Williams struggled to pull her foot free from the railroad track. The train was barreling toward her, so she was running out of time. She cursed herself for not paying attention as she jogged across the railroad crossing that she had traversed so many times before.

Her ears throbbed with the sound of the train hurtling down the track as it drew nearer. The train made no attempt to slow down. *Maybe it wasn't possible to slow down by the time the conductor saw a young black woman stuck on the track,* Rebecca thought, *or worse, he didn't care.* But then the train whistle began to sound repeatedly as if in a panic. *Okay, the conductor cares,* thought Rebecca as she yanked her foot from the brand-new Nike and jumped from the tracks just in time.

She watched as the Nike was obliterated while holding onto her knees and catching her breath. Rebecca had been so proud of the new brand of running shoes her husband Thomas had brought back from one of his California business trips. She was the first of her friends to have a pair and though she knew it wasn't very mature to gloat, she couldn't help but be proud of the success of her young husband. The train was a short one, so it sped into the distant track quickly as Rebecca watched.

She looked again toward her decimated shoe to see a woman on the other side of the tracks also looking down at it. The woman was not dressed appropriately for the Texas heat. She wore a long, old fashioned, black dress. Her thick long black hair was braided in cornrows. The woman lifted her head, and a gaping hole was all there was where a face should have been. She screamed at Rebecca, "Come back!"

Rebecca turned and sprinted toward her house; missing shoe be damned. As she ran, a black and white Ford Crown Victoria came toward her, lights and siren blaring. She entertained the thought that a black woman sprinting in a mostly white neighborhood might have resulted in a quick call to the police, but she didn't slow down, and the patrol car passed her as it headed in the opposite direction.

She reached her house and sprinted up the white steps of the Victorian era dwelling she had purchased with Thomas a few years ago. Well, he had actually bought the house without her present because they were afraid the realtor would put the kibosh on a 'mixed' couple moving into the neighborhood.

Rebecca slammed the door behind her and held onto her knees again, gasping for breath. Once her heart stopped racing, she decided that she had imagined the faceless woman in her adrenaline-fueled state. She suddenly felt exhausted. Thomas was out of town and the summer sun was starting to set, so she just skipped dinner and collapsed on the couch, losing consciousness immediately.

Rebecca awakened to the sound of helicopters and gunfire. She bolted straight up on the couch, but then realized the sound was coming from the television. Thomas made good money, so it was a large console TV that dominated the room. The morning news was depicting images of the war. Rebecca was happy once again that Thomas had lost the hearing in one ear as a child and didn't have to go to Vietnam. A pointless war in her opinion that had already required the sacrifice of many in her extended family. She rose from the couch, walked the short distance to the TV and turned it off. Funny though, she didn't remember turning it on.

Rebecca headed into the kitchen, her favorite room. The kitchen was bright and cheerful, wallpapered in bright green and rose-colored stripes. She had chosen the wallpaper herself because she knew she would spend a great deal of time in this room. She loved cooking and baking and every Sunday they had family over for traditional Sunday dinner just like in a Norman Rockwell painting.

She put fresh water in the kettle and set it on the stove. She always felt better after her morning cup of tea. Thomas hadn't called, but he was probably in meetings. Rebecca didn't want to disturb him, especially since now in her bright, cheerful kitchen, she was sure she had imagined the whole thing.

She made her cup of tea and sat at the small round table looking out at her perfectly landscaped back yard through the bay window. Rebecca had spent hours in that yard, pruning rose bushes, pulling weeds, and tenderly caring for every bush, tree, and flower. She felt at peace now as she gazed upon her creation. But as she watched, she noticed someone moving under her favorite pear tree. *It's probably Genevieve*, thought Rebecca. She picked up her cup of tea and headed out the back door to visit with her neighbor. Rebecca was very fond of the older woman because she had welcomed her and Thomas with open arms. Genevieve had been all over the world in her youth and was very progressive despite her advanced age.

Rebecca headed toward the woman, who was leaning over with her back to Rebecca. Genevieve was wearing black. *Had someone died?* Rebecca wondered. She was halfway across the large yard when the woman stood up and looked back toward her home. Rebecca hadn't seen her face yet, but was sure it was Genevieve, so she called out to her neighbor, "Genevieve, hello!"

The woman was still looking away from Rebecca. "Genevieve," Rebecca called out again. Genevieve turned and looked right at her, but said nothing.

Rebecca picked up her pace, sloshing a bit of the tea out of her cup and called out, "Genevieve! I'm so happy to see you!"

Genevieve didn't respond, but turned and stepped back into her own garden.

"Genevieve!" Rebecca shouted. She noticed the elder woman didn't have her glasses on, so maybe she didn't see her, and she must not have been wearing her hearing aid either. She decided she could talk to Genevieve later, so she turned back toward her own home.

Rebecca's cup crashed to the ground as she gazed upon the faceless woman standing on her back porch. The woman screamed, "Come back!" and then vanished.

Rebecca stood there, her entire body trembling. The apparition was gone, so Rebecca being the rational person that she was, talked herself back to her senses. She reasoned that the woman was a figment of her imagination caused by the adrenaline rush which probably lingered from yesterday's experience. She gathered up all her courage and walked back into her house.

She walked through the kitchen and into the den. She walked past the monolithic TV and stepped in front of Thomas's rolltop desk. She picked up the phone to call him. She knew his voice would soothe her nerves. There was no dial tone. The phones were out again. Just her luck...

Rebecca spent the rest of the day bustling about from one task to another. She tried to finish the current novel she had been reading, A Wrinkle in Time, but despite it being considered a novel for teens, she couldn't seem to focus on it. She busied herself throughout the day with menial tasks until the sun finally set on the never-ending day.

She was exhausted, even though by all accounts she hadn't done much. She trudged up the staircase that led to the upstairs bedrooms. She peeled off her clothes and left them where they landed on the floor. She shimmied into a thin nightgown and then slid under the blankets.

The dream came quickly. She was five years old, and her mother was setting the table for dinner while she watched. "Can I help, Mommy?" little Becky asked.

"May I help, baby," her mother smiled reaching down and caressing her face.

The dream felt so real, Rebecca felt safe watching her mother move about the kitchen as the beads on her cornrows clinked against each other. Rebecca remembered how her father had begged her mother to wear her hair in a more traditional way. He would say that it was hard enough blending in in a small Texas town when your skin is dark, much less when you're foreign. Her mother would laugh and say she was quite sure her accent gave away her Jamaican roots, and she would add more seriously, that she refused to be ashamed of her heritage.

Rebecca's father had grieved terribly when her mother died giving birth to her younger brother. He insisted that she leave our world sporting her beloved cornrows.

"Becky look at me," said Rebecca's mother.

"I am looking at you, Mommy," the child answered.

"Rebecca look at me," said the faceless ghost.

Rebecca woke up screaming. She opened her eyes, and the faceless specter was leaning over her. Rebecca continued screaming as she gazed up at her.

Rebecca was standing now, but before she could run, the ghost grabbed her by the shoulders and wailed, "Rebecca look at me! Do you see me?"

The walls of the house dissipated around Rebecca. She was standing near the railroad tracks. She gazed upon the face of the ghost and then she did see. "Oh Mommy," she said as she embraced her mother.

"It's okay, baby. You're with me now."

### **About the Author:**

C.C. Winchester's love of horror began at the tender age of five, when she started sneaking into the living room late at night to watch zombie movies with her parents. Her mother said that though her infiltration was discovered and she was promptly removed, she would return in what she thought was stealth mode, only to be removed again. She currently writes in Dallas, Texas.

Blog: <u>Multiverse Dreams</u>
Twitter: @MultiverseCC

### Day 1

The nightmares started shortly after we inherited a fortune from my in-laws. I would go to sleep and immediately go into a dream in which my late in-laws tortured me. Before the first dreams, I had started to adjust to a life of leisure and luxury, but it didn't last long. These were not like normal nightmares, they were completely realistic. I heard all of the words spoken by me and my tormenters. I felt all of the pain inflicted on me. To try to make sense of it, I wrote all of it down.

The first night I was just continuously insulted by my former father-in-law Grayson Jennings. His remarks are imprinted in my brain:

"You miserable pig, what makes you think that you could possibly deserve my daughter. If she hadn't gone slumming with bad boys, she never would have gotten pregnant, and ended up married to you. After that, you had her get an abortion which caused her to be infertile. She'll never have a chance to have a baby with a real man, now that you ruined her life. What do you have going for you, a little muscle and a glib line? Once she was stuck with you, you treated her like dirt. Maybe you never left any marks, but you didn't mind twisting her arm a little, maybe slapping her from time to time. She was so ashamed, Mandy and I could not talk her into leaving you."

"Too bad old man. She's stuck with me, I've got your money and you are dead", sleeping me said.

"There are worse things than being dead, as you will find out", responded dream Grayson.

The first night could be chalked up to guilt or an upset stomach, but it seemed that dead Grayson knew things that he should not have known. I wasn't too upset; I thought it was a onetime thing.

### Day 2

It started with my late mother-in-law Mandy.

"It is so funny that your name is Duke. You are about the furthest from royalty imaginable. Were you even able to get our daughter Jessie pregnant, or was that one of your friends when she was drunk. I know that all of the sluts that you hang out with wouldn't get in bed with you if they weren't drunk or high. You don't have manhood, you have boyhood. Are you stupid enough to think that all of the quack doctors with their pills and surgery will do you any good?" I had no response.

### Day 3

In the morning, I started to be really worried, because I hadn't actually called any doctors yet, but I had been looking at ads on the internet. My jaw was really sore, and I didn't know why. I hadn't been physically abused in my dream – yet.

Strangely, Jessie hadn't noticed any disturbance during my sleep.

When I thought it couldn't get any worse, it did. At night my in-laws didn't talk, they tag-teamed me. I was unable to respond to their kicks, elbows, slaps. All I could do was yell at them to stop, but they acted as if I had said nothing, they just kept hitting me.

After the beginning of the dream torture, Jessie noticed bruises and welts all over my body. She thought I had hurt myself sleepwalking, and there was no way I would tell her the truth.

### Days 4 - 10

Some nights I would wake up bleeding, sometimes I would have contusions, I never knew what would happen, but it was always bad. I can tell you, take the verbal torture, words don't hurt like fists do. Pliers and knives are worse than fists.

They know my worst fears. One night they are all friendly and we go for a walk. It was a beautiful day. We come to a cliff and I am slowly pushed to the edge and then thrown down. I scream all the way to the bottom. After a little time in extreme agony I wake up sore in every part of my body.

Another night started friendly, at a picnic. We were having barbeque. Just before we started eating, Grayson squirted me with lighter fluid and threw a match on me. As I went up in flames, everyone laughed.

### **Day 11**

I gave up and went to a doctor who guaranteed that he could stop my dreams. He prescribed six different pills. He wanted to tell me about the side effects, but all I could hear was "No more dreams."

### **Day 12**

Dreamless sleep is great. I'm back to my old life. I've just got a minor tremor in my left arm, probably the side effect doc talked about. I can live with that after what I've been through.

### **Day 13**

I've got to fill out some forms and am having a little trouble remembering my social security number. No biggie, I'll just look it up.

### **Day 14**

cant anymore pretend. Stumbel, no reemebre. Say doc med stuf. Nitmare or zomby. Take zomby. Not last much. Wish no burn Grayson house.

### **About the Author:**

Doug Hawley is a former math professor and actuary who now strings words together, hikes, collects music, volunteers at a charitable bookstore (Booktique) and as a park steward in a couple of parks. He lives with editor Sharon and cat Kitzhaber in Lake Oswego Oregon. Both humans were recently named Outstanding State Park Volunteers. Writing details are in his blog and website.

**Blog:** Doug Hawley

### The Season of the Wretch | Judson Michael Agla

I stumbled out of that shit-hole with my bag of angry rats slung over my shoulder. I was carrying one half of my right foot in my hand; things got a little rough during the cock fight the night before, and I ended up face down in the middle of the ring, fighting off two doped up chickens with a drug fueled blood lust, and razor blades duct taped to their feet, I didn't stand a fucking chance, I had to be dragged out by my hair, but not before bets were placed on how long I'd last. I was on every drug known to man; crippled, beaten, and my rats were furious from a lack of P.C.P., so, I gave them the severed piece of what was, a short time ago, a piece of my foot, to tide them over, until I could replenish my drug stores. What a goddamn mess! And it was only the beginning of the Season of the Wretch.

### **About the Author:**

Judson Michael Agla is primarily a visual artist who has studied and practiced in the fine arts, classical animation, and illustration. Always drawn towards dark imagery and sarcasm in his visual work, it wasn't surprising when he found a fondness for dark comedy, and now has a collection of published works in poetry and flash fiction, as well as the raw beginnings of a novella still in progress.

### Prophesized End | Radar DeBoard

Darren flung himself into the street, just as the pallet of bricks hit the ground. He rolled onto his side to stare at the half a ton of building material that almost crushed. Almost being the keyword. An immediate wave of relief washed over Darren as he realized the old man's words were wrong.

"I'm still alive!" he screamed at the top of his lungs, "You were wrong!"

A smile spread across Darren's face as he pulled himself from the ground. He was just about to wipe off his pants, when the bus hit him full force, killing him instantly.

### Into Dust | Radar DeBoard

The dust swirled around Erica, trapping her within the whirling vortex created by the millions of its tiny fragments. The particles of dust moved at ferocious speeds with enough power to rip off chunks of flesh.

Erica screamed out for help, but the vortex kept any sound from escaping as it closed in on her. The dust began to tear into Erica, grinding her body down bit by bit. It took mere moments for Erica to be ground into dust herself. The entity quickly added her remains to its mass before blowing onward in search of the next unsuspecting victim.

### Just Wait | Radar DeBoard

You see it there, waiting patiently at the window. The ancient being has lived long enough to notice an entrapment spell before becoming ensnared in it.

You've thought ahead, something it didn't foresee. An entity as old as time, and you managed to halt it in its tracks for a moment. However, you made a fatal error when creating your trap. You encircled the outside of your house with salt.

It knows the rain is coming soon, and it will wash away your spell. Then, death itself will come for you, because all it needs to do now is wait.

### Loving Lady Lara | B. T. Petro

In her face he had found beauty rarer than a goddess. Delicate features, alluring and luring. He loved that about her.

In her eyes he had found a brightness that was intelligence, inquisitiveness, and imagination. They missed nothing and reached his soul. He loved that about her.

In her movements he had found grace, fluidity, and nonchalance. She walked cat-like, with no wasted motion in any gesture. He loved that about her.

In her blood he had found it to be rich and intoxicating. It was life for her and now for him. He loved that about her the most.

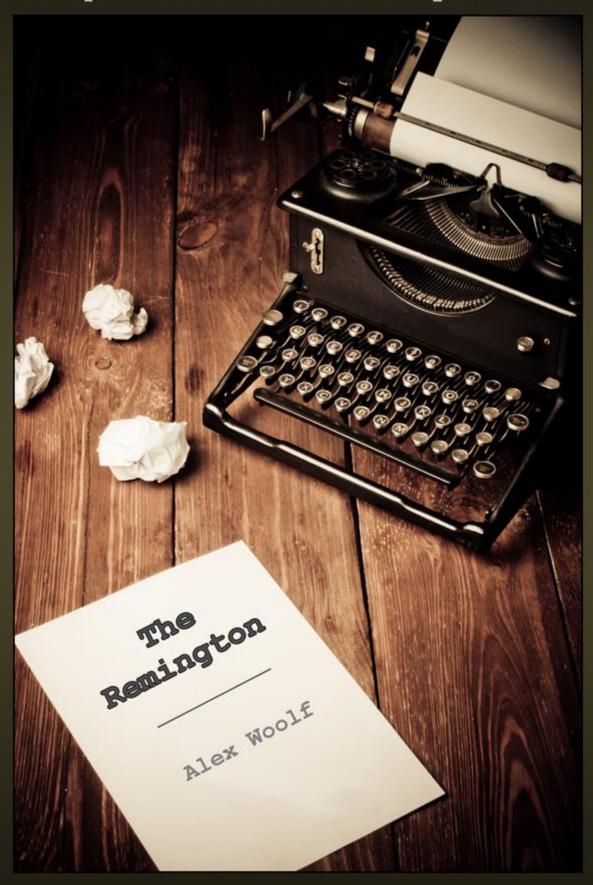
### **About the Author:**

Radar is a horror movie and novel enthusiast who resides in Wichita, Kansas. When he's not living in his own nightmares, he's writing horrifying tales to help others find theirs. He's had stories published by Gypsum Sound Tales, Eerie Lake Publications, Macabre Ladies Publishing, Black Hare Press, Black Ink Fiction, and Little Demon Publishing. He is also a regular contributor to HorrorTree and Siren's Call Publications.

Facebook: Writer Radar DeBoard
Twitter: @Radarsteal1



"...A splendidly comic tale that taps away at the keys to the creative process, whilst juggling parallel plots with a brilliantly deft touch..."



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### **Bolt-cutter Blunder** | *Cathy Cade*

Great-Gran's attic is stuffed with junk. My wife and I are consigning most of it to bin bags and putting aside stuff we want to take downstairs for a closer look, away from the rustlings of mice. We've come across a padlocked box.

My family suffered from one of those congenital conditions that result in an early demise, but Great-Grandmother intended to go on forever. Some rumours attributed her longevity to a pact with the devil, while others claimed she drank the blood of each generation's infants.

She wasn't a popular woman.

Nevertheless, she was on track to receive her telegram from the Queen when she tripped down a flight of stone steps in the town center and broke her neck. Local opinion suggested she'd been pushed by one of the shop assistants she'd argued with over the years.

She used to have a soft spot for me, though. Mother almost died when I was born, and I wasn't expected to live. Great-Gran took charge of me when I was discharged home to die—Mum still being in hospital—and she made it her business to see that I survived.

In time, Great-Gran fell out with my parents—as she did with everyone—and we lost touch. The old witch left no will, and I'm the only one left now to inherit. And my kids, of course, medical science having moved on over the years.

So it is that my wife and I find ourselves clearing her rambling Edwardian semi. We can't help agreeing what a boon all that space would have been when the girls were young, and I'll swear the old house creaks in anger.

She goes downstairs to make us a cuppa while I take up the bolt-cutter from my van to the box's padlock. As I lift the lid, there's a wire between the box and lid that stops it from opening properly, but I can see an ornate old clock in there, ticking away with the second hand still gliding around its face. With my restricted view, I can't read the name and date on the clock face, but it looks valuable. Downstairs Great-Gran's bone china teacups clatter as my wife takes them from the display cabinet.

I cut the wire.

The ticking stops. Birdsong outside the dormer window falls silent.

I lift the lid and let it drop behind the box.

The clock's second hand has stilled. In the silence I lean forward to read the name and date on the clock face.

The name is my name.

The date is my date of birth.

I hear no teacups clattering downstairs, no rustlings of mice in the attic. A chill crawls over my scalp and down my spine.

What have I done?

### **About the Author:**

Since retiring from a career in libraries, Cathy Cade's writing has been published *in Scribble, Best of British, The Poet, To Hull and Back Short Story Anthology, and Writers Forum as well as in online magazines. Most of the time,* Cathy lives surrounded by Fen fields in Cambridgeshire. Other times she lives across the fence from London's Epping Forest.

Website: Writing Wrinkles
Twitter: @cathincade



### Thoughts and Prayers | Alex Grehy

You can never have too much money or time in which to spend it.

I worked this out back when I was a tech nerd in high school. The teachers tried to convince me—you need to belong, fit in, be a productive part of society—blah, blah, blah. Sure, you can get all that by being a good person; or you can just buy yourself a place in society.

I made my first fortune when I was nineteen, selling algorithms to enhance online advertising. I'd barely started spending it when I made my second fortune selling off some deep data-mining software I'd developed. After that, every two years or so, I doubled my money and found that everything was for sale.

I found my first gray hair when I was thirty and started to worry about growing old. I'd already got more money than I could spend in three lifetimes and that was frustrating. What I needed was more life. It took me ten years to work out the solution. So here I am, forever forty. My body's mature and strong, my brain is in good condition, and I look, you know, just right, somewhere between kid geek and cool professor.

Of course, I could have bought the semblance of youth with surgery and potions, but I didn't want to just *look* young. They also say you can be immortalized through your children and grandchildren. Fuck that! I needed more life. Me. Mine.

Algorithms are my thing—they're like the ants of the digital world. They hunt, gather and bring all the loot home to the queen. That's me, in case you wondered. Are you surprised? There aren't many women on the world's billionaire list. It's not because we don't exist, it's because we can be big without thrusting our genitals into space.

I funded some research. Proper research, not just some vacuous opinion seeking on a search engine. If the information I needed had been freely available, then someone would already be making a fortune from it. I owned a dozen high tech laboratories all over the world. It was simple enough to repurpose a few of them, one on each continent, to keep them compartmentalized.

I had one team look into the meaning of life. Not philosophically, but practically. What makes up life-force? Is it a definable energy source? How is it generated? Can it be broadcast and harnessed?

Another team looked into the relationship between people and their devices. Was there an energy exchange? If people could absorb electromagnetic radiation from screens, could screens absorb human energy?

Then there were the social media experts. They gathered data about the phrases that carried the most energy. Then they correlated that with data on the type of posts most likely to generate those phrases. I confess I was surprised. *Amen, Thoughts and Prayers*, even emojis like *Hearts* and *Hugs* had real energy. As vapid as they seemed on screen, positive vibes actually sent a pulse of life-force into the web.

My labs made plenty of patentable discoveries along the way. I let my teams have a little fortune and glory—a cash bonus here, a Nobel prize there. What they'd discovered were the ingredients, but only I could bake them into a pie. Well, I am a woman, and baking is what I should be doing, don't you think?

I'll tell you how it works. I generate social media posts that prompt people to respond with one of the power-generating phrases. Every *Amen, Thought, Prayer* and *Hug* drains off a little of their life-force into the web. My algorithms gather it and bring it back to my interface —a cybernetic, single-port implant in the nape of my neck. The life-force enters my body, which uses it to correct any little glitches caused by ageing or disease.

I got an inkling that it was working when I reached my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday and my face-mapping technology confirmed that I looked exactly as I had on my 40<sup>th</sup>. I found that I couldn't use the life-force to change my appearance, but I was happy with my black-haired, fair-skinned 'goth meets anime' look. I created a dozen avatars, each separate identity leading different parts of my business empire.

I spent my first biblical lifespan of 70 years creating the infrastructure for my functional immortality. As I blew out the candles on my extravagant cake, I wished for another ten lifespans. Why not, I kept making money, I just needed the spending time.

I spent my second lifetime improving my algorithms.

I found that *Thoughts and Prayers* offered with compassion and backed up by faith yielded more life-force than the ones left by less sincere people who just *hearted* any old thing. Bots just generated clutter. Dee, my avatar in charge of domestic tech, developed and marketed an algorithm to detect and destroy them.

I started to target individuals with high emotional intelligence. It was so easy to find them, a few simple quizzes, you know the type, What colour is your personality? What's your spirit animal? Worried that you're a sociopath? That last one's a doozy—sociopaths know, but don't care; it's the compassionate that worry about what society thinks of them.

The deaths started. Do you know how many times people type *Thoughts and Prayers*? It's hundreds of billions—every day. Some people just couldn't help themselves. As their vitality faded they spent more time on social media, sitting with their devices asking for an *Amen*. Dying people gave me the last of their life-force and people who sympathized with their plight gave me yet more.

I was nearing the end of my second lifetime when I had a scare. It was a dark evening in October when my interface board lit up. I felt a surge of life-force rushing into my body. It was overwhelming, making me feel sick and dizzy. I almost disconnected from the system, but then my brain adapted to the inflow and I was filled with elation.

I interrogated the bots to see what was going on. They showed me a live feed from a hospital room. The patient was hooked up to an array of machines, the various tubes and cables looked as if worms were already consuming his body. I made a quick note to task Fahri, my avatar in charge of healthcare technology, to develop a one-port system for Intensive Care Units—it would make a mint. I turned back to the screen.

There were a dozen people sitting around the bed, each busy scrolling on their phones. The patient's family, the algorithms confirmed. I have no idea why, but they'd decided to live-stream a vigil for their son, who was in a coma following an accident. The event went viral, thoughts, prayers, amens—millions of people throwing their life-force away to save a boy whose brain was already dead. No wonder my algorithms had homed in on the event like ants to a picnic. I watched, fascinated. I imagined I could see the life-force drain out of the room as the family members slumped and slid onto the floor. Their falls were almost balletic; their deaths so composed.

Then the panic started. The hospital promised to investigate; the public demanded an inquiry, others demanded compensation for the mental trauma of witnessing a mass death. I pulled my algorithms back for a few weeks, then the coroner's report came out. The most likely cause of death was carbon monoxide poisoning, probably from the hospital's heating system, one of the last to run on fossil fuels.

I was triumphant. They had no idea. I was untouchable. I remember throwing my arms open wide, feeling the world turn at my fingertips. People were rushing to give me their lives, though they didn't know it. I had money to support a dozen lifetimes. I was unstoppable.

I celebrated my one hundred and fortieth birthday in style, vowing to have a little more fun in my third lifetime.

Rumours started that there was a digital vampire on the loose. People were starting to notice the death rate among internet users was unusually high. Not that they had anything to compare it to—by this time everyone, and I mean everyone, was hooked into the internet.

Let's look at John, another tech nerd working for a humanitarian charity. Puh-leese! What a cliche! When his wife died of an aneurysm aged just twenty-four, he worked out that her life-force had been siphoned off. He traced a connection to Ishika, my avatar in charge of social media, and started an online campaign against her. He begged people to stop reacting to posts asking for kindness and sympathy. His posts went viral.

Poor naive John. He tried to use the internet to spread the truth. He was pissing into an ocean—his truth diluted by a tide of more palatable lies. I used my algorithms to target him, begging people to pray for *my friend John*, who'd been bereaved so young. He begged people to stop, knowing that their pity for him was killing them. That generated even more energy—don't be proud John, I feel your pain, love you John, hugs and prayers. It broke him. Last I heard, he'd become a hermit living off-grid in the Rocky Mountains.

As to the digital vampire? Well, everyone knows that the way to banish vampires is with holiness. Ishika started a global AMEN to cleanse the system. The life-force harvested was overwhelming.

My life was most at risk then—I almost laughed myself to death.

I spent my fourth lifetime exercising my intelligence.

You see, even with a global population of ten billion I realized that I would need to be careful not to drain everyone to death. I needed servants, sycophants and staff to maintain my empire. It wouldn't do for me to waste my long life doing my own chores.

I optimized my harvesting algorithms.

Like any good hunter, I instructed my algorithms to exclude pregnant women. I also excluded younger people under the age of twenty-five. It was really difficult to deprive myself—they were all brimming with delicious life-force; every exclusion cost me decades. Still, I resisted. Older people were easy targets, though they had so little life-force left, their numbers soon dwindled. I set my algorithms to analyze the harvest among the middle-aged. My research found a gender difference when it came to leaving *Thoughts and Prayers*. I thought we were beyond such stereotypes, but it seemed that women were still more likely to demonstrate spontaneous kindness to strangers. I couldn't let the men get away with that.

I researched human motivation. I shouldn't have been surprised that although societal compassion is important, it can be trumped by money. I created a new avatar, Adelie, a benign old lady who believed it was a sin to die wealthy. Adelie wanted to divest her fortune among the righteous. She would send everyone \$100 if they would just respond with an *AMEN* on her good cause posts. The men flocked to take Adelie's money and their life-force flew back to me.

It was at the start of my fifth lifetime that I found I couldn't take in any more life-force. It wasn't a problem as such. I was already over three hundred years old with enough life-force to last twenty more lifetimes. Yet it wasn't enough. It would never be enough. I needed to find a way to store the excess life-force that I was harvesting.

I can guess what you're thinking. If I'd reached my capacity, why not stop harvesting for a while?

Honestly, I thought you'd have understood me by now. You can never have too much time or money with which to enjoy it.

I experimented with cloud-based storage. But it was like canned ground coffee, insipid, incomparable to the bean-to-cup rush of freshly siphoned life-force.

Of course, the answer was obvious—the best battery storage for life-force is human beings themselves. I launched an online cosmetics business.

You can't see the link? Good!

I manufactured and marketed a luxury anti-ageing cream. It cost \$2,000 a month back then. It's a lot more now, of course. I convinced my customers that the cream embodied the homeopathic life essence of the Brazilian rainforest. My scientists did use sweet berries and rain that had cascaded from the dominant Amazonian palm tree species to formulate the cream. It's the truth, but I have to tell you the whole story, it's a hoot!

During my third lifetime, Genevieve, my avatar in charge of public relations, purchased a huge tract of Brazilian rainforest, ostensibly to save it, and the tribes that lived there, from extinction. At first it was just a bit of environmental window dressing, but now the rainforest generates huge income. I even have videos of 'Genevieve' standing alongside butt-naked natives collecting drips of water from the trees. It might be her most successful marketing campaign yet.

My customers got a buzz from supporting the natives and the cream really worked. Of course it did. My customers' online accounts were linked to my lovely algorithms. What they were really getting was a little boost of my excess life-force. If I wanted the life-force back, I just needed to ask for some feedback. If this cream made you feel young again, type Amen and get a discount off your next purchase. It was just too easy.

So here I am, just blowing out the candles on yet another celebration cake. I'm starting my sixth lifetime. I've been forty years old for three hundred and fifty years. The world has changed in that time, for sure, but people haven't. It's been so straightforward to influence people to give up on exploration or even spending time outdoors. We haven't colonized space —it's way too risky. What about spending time in the wild outdoors? You might be assaulted or murdered. My online personas have been creating a culture of fear for centuries.

Today, the global population spends most of its time in virtual inner spaces. Virtual reality rigs give people all the sensory stimulation they need. They socialize via the internet where my algorithms tend them just as ants will farm aphids, fussing over them until they're sucked dry. I may be responsible for more deaths than all the world's plagues and wars put together, but let's face it, there are always more people.

I can sense you wondering why is she sharing this now?

I've already told you. This is just another crazy truth among a billion crazy lies.

You can post my story, make it viral, but you can't stop me, for mine is the algorithm, the money and the power. Forever and ever.

AMEN

### **About the Author:**

Alex Grehy's sweet life is filled with narrowboating, rescue greyhounds, singing and chocolate. Yet her vivid prose, thought-provoking poetry and original view of the world have led to her best friend to say 'For someone so lovely, you're very twisted'! Her work has been published worldwide and she is a regular contributor to the Ladies of Horror Flash Project.

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



### White Silence | Gregory L. Steighner

"The barkeep said you were the last person to talk with my daughter." Norman plucked the chair away from the table to plant it directly in front of the wizardly-looking man. "The local police failed to inform me about that."

"We have an arrangement." He answered, outfitted in a gray two-piece that clashed with the rustic couture of bed and breakfast clientele while swilling a tall glass with the pungent scent of a black tea blend. Displayed behind the man were a collection of water-color paintings of fanciful scenes. The middle piece depicted a person surrounded by pale white wraithlike figures.

Itching to move forward, Norman pressed for answers. "Mister, tell me about my daughter."

"It's Doctor Holden." The man rested the glass on a floral coaster before re-engaging, "And yes, Angelina and I talked. She sat in that same chair. Remarkable student."

"Anything, but..." He gave Angelina a fine school only for flounder on mediocrity. At seventeen, Stephen finished one year of college. If she didn't run off, she would have spent another summer at school proving that the second child was a disappointment. "What did you say to her?"

"We discussed the esoteric mysteries, occultism, mysticism..."

Norman slapped his knee while chuckling, "Nonsense, that's bullshit..."

Dr. Holden paused for a breath, "and you, Doctor Adams."

Biting his lip, "Despite my best efforts of teaching, Angelina is impressionable to silly things and prone to exaggeration. Where is she?"

"I found her to possess a clever mind."

"Really? Angelina stunted herself playing Dungeons and Dragons, fiddling with witchcraft, and watching ghost stories online." The man rested one arm on the table, close to the glass, and a scattering of tiles. At first glance the pieces looked like scrabble pieces, chalky etched with black-lined symbols.

"Dr. Adams, your presence is unwelcome here. Your aggressive investigation has drawn the ire of this entire community."

Norman bristled, he would bring Angelina under control. "Assisting a teenage girl to runway is a crime, Doctor Holden. How will this backwater community enjoy me calling in the State Police?"

The lounge's somber amber lighting bled over the man; who lowered his head slightly to glare at Norman. "By fortune, you have a chance to find her, as the conditions match the night of our talk. I told Angelina to take the path outside this place, always going downward until reaching the bottom to begin her search."

"What was Angelina searching for?"

"Escape."

\*\*\*

Norman packed away his phone and extra flashlights while talking to himself in the room. "I told her mother that she ran off with that Ash hillbilly. Angelina won't destroy her life by living with backwoods morons. I can't have six generations of a family that spawned notable chemists, mathematicians, and philosophers end with her brewing moonshine."

Six months ago Angelina came here with Ash to party. His investigation lead to the room they occupied. Norman cringed with the image of her screwing on the same bed.

Zipping up his jacket, Norman headed out into the night as Dr. Holden instructed. Angelina left at night, so he chose to do the same, as the conditions were right. South of Pittsburgh was a mountainous area with crooked valleys and dirt roads etched from the primal days of coal mining. The full autumn moon sat high over the mountains causing the fog-soaked valley to gleam.

Norman loathed to admit, his daughter picked the right time to disappear. The darkness with the fog blurring her path provided excellent cover. Dr. Holden told Angelina that there was a price to find what she was searching for and that he would have to do the same.

Descending the footpath, following a mix of rugged stairways and dirt trails, Norman focused back to when he'd lost control, the downward spiral of her rebellion rose in the eighth grade. Her declining grades and behavioral outbursts nearly prevented admission to Blake Prep School. Norman spent a lot of the family's presage to secure her admission, which Angelina squandered by running around with fringe people. They sparked Angelina's fascination with the supernatural

The fog thickened as Norman descended. How in hell's name could he find any sign of Angelina? The rumbling splashes of the river welcomed his arrival on the valley floor. Norman took the moment inward, savoring the dreary calm with remorse, as he threw away these moments he had with Angelina.

The stairs ended on a landing that overlooked the river. Two paths branched away with signposts for sites either way along the riverbank. Dr. Holden's words echoed in his mind, yet thundered against the quiet.

"Do you believe in the supernatural?"

"As myth, a belief system for the weak-minded afraid of dying," Norman answered.

"Do you believe that beings exist just beyond your senses?"

"Superstitions that fools cling to explain what they can't understand." He replied, which flared Dr. Holden's ire.

"I tell you otherwise! There are living things dwelling in a world of darkness and light, in between realities and beyond, just waiting for people to stumble among them. Incarnate beings exist in mirror realities bounded by weird laws and customs. That's where Angelina went and you will find her down in the deep end."

Norman started on the downstream path, lighted with the harsh beam of the mag-light that broke through the fog by scant yards. Perhaps Angelina and Ash fell into the river back in the spring when the river ran high and fast? Swept downriver, their bodies could be hidden anywhere.

A crack broke over the ambient forest noise. Norman looked down for a second. The cold fog forced his focus on the shuffling in the distance. Just listening he knew it was big, moving above and along the steeping slope of outcroppings of shale. He chased tumbling leaves and bits of rubble further down the trail.

Norman's vision adjusted the blurred surroundings. The moonlight diffused into shadows of light and dark, calling all that dwells in the mists to awaken.

"I won't fall for that doctor's planted fantasies." He rested against a broken tree while checking the time, shocked that it was just past three-thirty. How far did he walk? "Why should I play his game?"

His tired hand lowered slightly, allowing the flashlight beam to sweep the barren path gleaming with dew. Imprinted into the softened ground were well-defined footprints. Norman approached carefully not to disturb the prints to examine them.

Two humans had created them, one pressed deeper into the mud with much larger feet than the partner. The smaller person landed on both feet and fell forward as hinted by the handprints. Additional tracks ran down the trail as snapping branches shouted out their escape.

"No! You aren't getting away!" Norman pursued the pair, his feet crushing their steps descending into the valley. The fog eased slightly, allowing moonlight to spread freely for him to spy two figures ahead. The curvy silhouette of the smaller one fired him up, "Stop! Damn you!"

They were ghosts in the mists, over-exposed bodies imprinted over a blurred grainy landscape. Norman raced after them never falling too far behind nor closing the distance. His skipping heart couldn't keep up, forcing Norman to ease off the chase. Despite the chill, sweat burned down into his eyes.

"Dad, I'm not Stephen! I don't want to be in college at seventeen! Why can't I simply be?" Their first real fight lifted out of the fog, surfacing after two years.

"Angelina, you're a prodigy from a family of prodigies. You need to be around people that challenge you."

"No. I don't I like who I am."

"Those kids will stagnate you."

"Why can't you let me be happy?"

The morning light began to ease into the mists circling the silent forest. His memory dragged a long angry anchor. Why did Angelina turn on him? The maintained trail ended by the river bank with a small picnic area consisting of a long table and bench seats.

Exhaustion clamped hard on his legs, he leaned onto the table like a body washed up on the shore. Months of chasing Angelina yielded nothing for him, Josephine, or Stephen save tears, yelling, and condemnation. All fused by anger.

"Anger cannot be dishonest," Norman quoted the old Roman saying, breaking the still morning. Time passed without measure, no seconds with his thoughts, nor minutes pass by his guilt.

A breeze stirred tossing leaves around, some darting off over the river while the wire trashcan caught a few. The dull maroon baited his eye, the recognition of Angelina's journal pulled him in, but the hope for answers ensnared Norman. Battered and broken, he carried it over to the table. He treated it like one from his collection, it became the prize piece.

Slowly turning the pages, he scanned through her thoughts.

I loathe family outings. There is no talking, just debates, and lectures. My classes are more exciting. Each slight tug on the page freed it.

Told Mom and Dad about getting a gig for Players on Razors. Mom diminishes my interest in theatre. Dad hyped Stephen's thesis. I don't want a Master's degree at twenty.

Lost in the white noise surrounding him, Norman fell further into the diary.

Aokigahara. The Suicide Forest. Soaked in mystery. The Black Forest. Grimm tales. So many places were rich in dark legends. Nexuses of power. The coal country south will do.... Nicely... I just want to be gone... His finger traced Angelina's delicate handwriting, a flare from a forgotten era.

Sweat sprang from terror as Norman dwelled on her words. He spoke to himself and perhaps to a phantom god. "She couldn't have... I pushed her here?"

Suppressing the dread of Angelina's possible action, his trembling fingers turned to the final pages. She left words, no dates, or pictures. *Dr. Holden talked about the deep places around here. The legends living in front of us, yet hidden by veils of fog and shadows, in all places of in-between. Only a few were given names. As names are collars. Most ignore us, we are beneath them. Others hunt us to enslave or other reasons Some pity us. Like lost strays, sometimes they adopt us. I listened to his words, I can find them. I'm taking Ash with me.* 

On the final page, he marveled at the heavy clarity of her script.

They knew me, my heartache was a beacon in their bleached fog. Calling out, I am here. In the static silence they answered; flee, follow, follow, run, join us. Payment is due. I see them. Part of the fog and yet, not. Clothed in shades of white. I'm glad Ash is here...

The binding broke, the journal's pages fell away from Norman. He watched as the final one drifted away from the river, floated across the top of the picnic table, and in front of the crouched person glaring at him.

Against the gray stones and table, the sharpness of white shades was like a rainbow over Angelina. Her porcelain body gleamed under a mesh netting that couldn't provide any warmth against the chilled air. She covered her silver bobcut hair with a dull veil that trailed behind.

"Angelina." With a raised hand, Norman stepped closer towards the retreating mists, "I'm sorry. Come home. I'll be better."

His daughter's head turned slightly, she only listened.

"Please. You can do anything. No pressure from us when you come home."

She jumped from the table, landing in front of Norman. The distance had to be at least ten feet. Her dark eyes shook him. "Please, you're my daughter. I love you."

For a moment, Angelina looked up at him in a way she hadn't in years. As daughter to a father, connecting without words. Her palm struck his chest. He heard cracking, the air blew from his lungs as he sailed over the edge. The edges of rocks smashed his body allowing the cold river water to sweep in to blend with blood.

His eyesight blurred. Yet he saw Angelina briefly look down and disappear. He coughed as his throat flooded. The river bustled over the rocks, the trees crackled with the swirl of wind along with a harsh voice.

"Fall further."

Norman listened.

### **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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### **Grave Diggers** | **Shaun Avery**

Clark looked into the dead face of a stranger and saw his own looking back at him.

He heard footsteps behind him, and a few seconds later the vicar appeared.

"Did you know the deceased well?" he asked, voice loud in the vast emptiness of the church.

"No," Clark said. "I didn't know him at all."

That said, he turned and took a seat near the front, near the coffin.

Where everyone should see him.

As per the contract.

And see him they did.

But recognize him...

That they did not.

Which made him wonder, like always, what had driven the dead guy to make the request in the first place.

It wasn't until later, when it was over, that he realized he was wrong.

The body had been buried and the tears had been dried and people were discussing the wake by then.

Clark, though, stood apart from them, standing beside the tombstone, staring down at the coffin.

He didn't know he had company until the girl coughed behind him.

He turned.

Saw her squinting up at him.

"Don't I know you?" she said.

"No," he told her. "No one does."

Not anymore.

Clark drove.

Thinking, along the way.

Remembering a time in his life, a cherished time when there had been glamour, when there had been success. When the tabloid papers, God bless them, had charted his rise to the top in a flurry of puns and one-liners and it had seemed, for a while, like the whole world could be his.

But things had not lasted forever, and the hits had dried up and he had grown old and unfashionable and the parties to which he was invited had less media coverage, fewer stars involved.

Then the invites had stopped altogether.

Those that had come before him had reality TV to fall back on when all else failed, but that format was dead by then—dead like his career. So now all Clark had left to pay the bills, to keep him in some semblance of a celebrity lifestyle was . . . was this.

He called his agent.

Planning to shout at him, what do they get out of this? How come this world is obsessed enough with famous people that they'll pay money to have me come and sit at their funeral when they're dead but not enough to buy my songs when they're actually alive?

He burned with an angry need to get all of this out.

But there was no answer at the other side of the call.

Another day, another grave.

That was how he measured his life now.

And now alone, the service done, he looked down into the grave.

It was a woman, this time. Another woman he had never known, who had never known him. A corpse who wanted the thrill of being near someone famous in death, of having people nudge each other at the service and wonder, wow, did she really know someone off the TV?

He couldn't understand what she got from it. Why she'd gone to the effort of leaving it in her will that she wanted this to happen, why she'd left enough money from her savings to hire someone like him.

More to the point . . .

He no longer knew why he was providing the service.

Other than the fact that he had nothing else to do, that there were no better offers on a very empty table.

And a sudden fury at what his life had become overcame him, and he leapt down into the grave and sprawled down onto the coffin and started frantically tearing at the lid.

He had to look into the corpse's face.

He had to gaze into her eyes.

He had to know which one of them was really the most dead.

### About the Author:

Shaun Avery has been published in many anthologies, comics and magazines, normally with tales of a horrific or satiric nature, and often, as with *Grave Diggers*, both at once. The story was inspired by an article he read about a 'celebrity' hiring themselves out to appear at people's weddings. He just had to make this idea even more ridiculous. Or less. He's not sure which.

### **Stopping Him** | *Cathy Cade*

Tears blur my fingers as they fumble at pills and foil. More vodka. Leaning back, I drift...

Can't sleep yet. More pills.

A baby wails. My heart clenches, pain radiating to my stomach.

Not a baby. Someone shaking me. "Wake up!"

Shan't—I lash out.

Can't.

Falling... deeper.

Floating down. Gates.

"You're making a habit of this," says St. Peter.

"I want to be with my baby. She needs me."

"Not any more. She's safe now."

"I need her."

"I can't let you in; you've work to do."

"I can't work, can't sleep. I've nothing to live for."

"Live for your mum. She's in the hospital chapel, waiting to hear if her baby's survived."

"But she doesn't believe..."

"Then there's the next woman he moves in with, and the baby he gives her... and takes away again. You can stop him."

"He'd kill me."

"Then I'd let you in."

### **About the Author:**

Since retiring from a career in libraries, Cathy'Cades writing has been published in Scribble, Best of British, The Poet, To Hull and Back Short Story Anthology, and Writers Forum as well as in online magazines. Most of the time, Cathy lives surrounded by Fen fields in Cambridgeshire. Other times she lives across the fence from London's Epping Forest.

Website: Writing Wrinkles
Twitter: @cathincade

### Snowfall | Cathy Cade

Snow on the village green glistened in the sunlight.

Ducks waddled across the ice. Dogs barked from the safety of their leashes. and children's shrieks filled the air.

Fathers dragged sleds from the King's Head and back again. Snow slid from the branches of trees, drenching the unwary. Snowmen took shape. Snowball fights broke out.

Ole' Ron sat hunched under a sleeping bag on the wooden bench. Another snowball hit the back of his neck. Enough was enough.

He draped the thin sleeping bag around his neck and shuffled across to the King's Head, where he checked the picnic tables for half-empty glasses or maybe a chunk of bread or sausage roll some kid might have left. After that, he tucked himself into the deep doorway at the back—the door by the bins that they kept locked.

It was dark when a barman came out to the bins and told him to shove off. He lumbered across the green to the bench by the pond.

He couldn't go back to the shelter tonight—not with that kid still there complaining about how Ron looked at him. Especially now he'd taken the kid's sleeping bag.

Useless thing *that* turned out to be, with a broken zip and more holes than a string vest. Stuffing poked out of them as if something living in there had escaped. Perhaps it had.

He lay along the bench, his fingers in their worn gloves seeking warmth from his armpits. He would reclaim the doorway when the pub turned out.

Snow began to drift down in fluffy clumps. It didn't look wet, but it soaked through the sleeping bag. He moved, grumbling, into the trees on the other side of the pond. Snow blew under those too, but not so much. He leaned his back against one and slid down its trunk to curl, shivering, on the ground.

Cars started; voices called goodnights. When they'd all gone, he'd get up.

His muscles didn't want to.

Fingers and toes were numb; they would start hurting again when he moved. He coiled tighter, hands clamped between damp thighs, eyes on the pub's coloured lights. Why was he watching the lights?

He couldn't remember.

He was waiting for them to go out; that's why. The lights looked warm—like firelight. Now his body felt hot. He was burning up. Take off his coat? Burrow into the snow?

Too much effort—moving, thinking, watching.

Sleep.

\*\*\*

Fresh snow covered yesterday's tracks. Snowhenge stood ready for re-modeling.

Church bells called the faithful to worship, as the thirsty congregated at the King's Head. Children swarmed over the village green and young Billy needed a wee. Big sister, Lizzie, took him to the trees behind the duck-pond. As she stepped back, she stumbled on something.

Her screams brought others.

Snow on the village green glistened in the sunlight.

Ducks waddled across the ice. Dogs barked from the safety of their leashes. and children's shrieks filled the air.

### **About the Author:**

Since retiring from a career in libraries, Cathy Cade's writing has been published in Scribble, Best of British, The Poet, To Hull and Back Short Story Anthology, and Writers Forum as well as in online magazines. Most of the time, Cathy lives surrounded by Fen fields in Cambridgeshire. Other times she lives across the fence from London's Epping Forest.

Website: Writing Wrinkles
Twitter: @cathincade

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



Available for Purchase or Borrow Exclusively on Amazon

### And Now I Am Both | Zame Hill

I was the good twin. Just a few seconds older, a shade taller, and a bit more knowledgeable of how to act human. Lena, my twin, hated Mother. Nothing Mother did pleased her little tyrant heart. She was the tantrum thrower, the school skipper, and the beer drinker. I tried to make up for it, but good grades and taking care of the household chores did nothing to ease my mother's constant heartbreak at the hands of my sister.

When we were born, we were joined by a strip of skin along the pinky side of our hands. My right, her left. At first, Mother thought we had been holding hands in the womb, but the doctor told her I had begun to resorb my twin in utero.

On our thirteenth birthday and after a few drinks, Mother told us that story with a light-hearted smile on her lips but a haunted shadow in her eyes. After I heard the story, I stayed up late and used the computer to research what *resorbed* really meant.

In our bedroom that night, I focused my concentration and touched the back of my sister's neck with the tip of my pinky finger. Even in her sleep, she jumped at the contact and I pulled away quickly.

Escaping to the bathroom, I examined the tiny plug of hair and skin clinging to the end of my finger. As I watched, it sank into my pinky, leaving behind only the finest of lines. I smiled to myself, pleased to know something she didn't.

Lena's remorseless behavior continued, both in and out of the house. After getting a call from school about Lena giving another girl an unwanted haircut, Mother cried. Lena's behavior was her fault, she said between sobs and swallows of vodka, because she stopped breastfeeding Lena. Because Lena always bit. *Like a snake*.

This revelation removed the shackles of any restraint Lena had. She dropped Mother's phone accidentally-on-purpose into the toilet. She offered to make dinner and peeled the foil off the glass baking dish to reveal a cooked rat. Finally, she got a hold of some fake blood and pretended to cut her wrists. When Mother found her, eyes closed, and motionless in the bathtub, Mother screamed and screamed until she realized Lena was laughing, her forbidden tongue stud glinting in the bathroom's overhead light.

Mother shut herself in her room after that. I brought her meals, her medications, and cool cloths for her constant headaches. She didn't speak to me but would leave the half-empty tray outside the room when she was done. At least she was eating.

Now, I watched my sister sitting at the computer and fashioning a *Missing* poster. She cackled as she clicked the mouse, probably thinking of all the havoc she was going to cause.

"Mother will flip her lid." Lena moved her school picture to the middle of the page and enlarged it. "Best prank ever." She turned to me, an evil glint in her brown eyes. "I'm surprised a goody two shoes like you could come up with such a brilliant scheme." She gestured at the screen. "So now all you have to do it print it out, if you can handle that much."

I nodded. "I can do that," I said. "What are you going to do while you're gone?"

Lena shrugged and scratched at the tiny bald patch at the back corner of her hairline. "God, this still itches. I wonder what bit me."

"It'll grow back." I watched her apply a dab of shea butter. "So, what are you going to do while you're gone?" I repeated, seeking more proof of her malice to strengthen my resolve.

"Probably hook up with a guy I met on this app. Call Mother in the middle of the night and scream for help." She clapped her hands in glee. "I can't wait."

"That sounds fun." I tried to put some enthusiasm in my tone. Same old Lena.

She sucked her teeth. "What would you know about fun? All you do is watch television and dream of a real life." She snorted. "Go get me a soda, loser."

I brought her a glass of lemon-lime soda, with a cut lime floating on top. After handing her the cold drink, I looked down at my hands and touched my fingers together. I lingered at the pinkies, pressing the two digits against each other.

She took a long swallow and pointed at the screen. "Just have this ready. It's exactly how I like it. I look great in that picture." Taking another big drink, she let loose a self-satisfied belch. "I got my suitcase in a locker at the bus station ready to go."

"You're going to have a great time." I smiled a little.

She yawned. "Yeah. I am."

"I'm going to miss you."

Lena waved her hand at me. "I'll be back within a week. Just long enough to make that bitch suffer." She yawned again and drained the glass. "I'd better get to bed. I got a long bus ride in the morning." She went over to her bed. Asleep before her head hit the pillow, she snored softly. Mother's sleeping pills worked faster than I thought they would.

I sat on the edge of my bed and watched her chest move up and down with the rhythm of her breath. Contrary to what she thought, I would miss her. We were twins, after all.

I stripped off my nightgown. Standing naked over her bed, I peeled off her cotton night shirt and pressed myself along the length of her body, skin to skin, her warmth merging with mine.

I was really going to miss her.

The next morning, she was gone. I sat up in her bed and ran my hand over the space on her pillow. Feeling something in my throat, I coughed twice and spit the object into my palm.

Her silver tongue stud shone dully in the cold light of early morning. Without a second thought, I crept to the bathroom, wrapped it in a tissue, and flushed it down the toilet. She wouldn't be needing it.

Task done, I washed my hands and gazed at myself in the mirror above the sink. I was the good twin. She was the bad twin.

Now, I am both.

**About the Author:** Zame Hill is a writer of horror and speculative fiction. The alter-ego of romance writer Dahlia DeWinters, she lives in New Jersey with her husband, three children and a rescue dogo argentino named Charlotte.

Instagram: @dahliadwrites Facebook: Zame Hill Writer

### Killing It | Patrick J. Wynn

Joe stood nervously just to the side of the stage and took a deep breath before he stepped up into the lights. The crowd was silent as Joe raised a hand to wave a greeting to the crowd then he went right into his routine. The first few jokes were a little flat but as Joe got into his rhythm the flow improved and soon Joe was having one of those nights. The jokes flowed, and Joe moved around the stage perfectly in time with each punchline. Joe was in the groove and the material rolled off his tongue with practiced ease. Joe could just make out the faces in the crowd, he knew most of them and those he didn't know were still here because of him. The only problem from the crowd was the silence and the expressionless faces. He wished his audience would laugh at the jokes, but the dead can't laugh.

### **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.



### Old Father Time | Donna Cuttress

"You're pushing it!"

I wasn't. The glass moved independently, which was as much a surprise to myself as it was to Kate and Shauna. We stared at each other, not daring to move, hardly breathing.

"What do we do now?" Shauna whispered. Her head was trembling slightly, her forefinger barely touching the glass. I got the feeling she wanted to bolt for the attic door and descend to the party below. The glass began to move again slowly.

"Do you think it's him?" Kate asked. We struggled to keep our fingers in contact with it as it began to gather speed. Our makeshift Ouija board shook. I suddenly felt a dart of heat from the glass burn my finger. It pierced through the layers of skin like acid.

"Ow! Jesus!"

I pulled my hand away. The glass stopped moving. The candles we had lit only a few minutes ago began to flicker.

"Do you really think it's him?" asked Shauna.

We were trying to contact Daniel Macklin, the once notorious owner of our student house. He had got drunk and went berserk on New Year's Eve many years ago. It seemed the party noise from his neighbours had tipped him over the edge.

"Do you think the noise from downstairs is making him angry? Should we tell everyone to leave?"

Shauna and I stared at Kate. She was genuinely spooked. She grabbed the full wineglass that she had brought upstairs with her and finished it in one long gulp, then wiped the red wine wings from her upper lip.

"The last thing I wanna do is piss off an angry ghost on New Year's Eve!"

She grabbed her phone and opened a text she had sent out to everyone in her address book.

"See? All these people are coming and the last thing I wanna do is unleash a spirit among them."

"I think there'll be enough spirit among them before they even arrive Kate."

The party was becoming raucous. The police would definitely be calling soon. I looked at the ouija board, thinking about how my stupidity had backfired.

'Let's summon up the spirit of Daniel Macklin on New Years Eve!', I had suggested after reading about that horrific night. He had murdered his partying neighbours with a scythe he had grabbed from his garden shed. Happy New Year! Whack! The newspapers had run with the headline, 'Old Father Time Slaughters Neighbours!' The Macklin house had remained empty for years until it was bought, cheaply of course, and hurriedly converted into cheap student accommodation. Nothing supernatural had occurred since the murders and the horror story had passed into local legend. When I suggested the séance, I didn't think anything would actually happen.

Shauna finished her beer and let the bottle roll onto the floor.

"OK, let's have one more go without shitting ourselves and see what happens. Then we can go and join the party!"

We placed the glass onto the table top and rested our forefingers on it. The candles flickered and dimmed again, as we did our best to ignore the noise. Kate took the initiative.

"Is there anyone who would like to talk to us?"

Nothing happened.

"Mr Macklin? Are you here? Is the party noise ... annoying you?"

Shauna stifled a laugh. The glass moved slightly then shot across the board and began stopping at random letters too fast for us to decipher.

"Slow down! Is he drunk? Trust us to contact a lush! Welcome to the party Mr Macklin!" Kate shouted. Shauna joined in,

"Yeah, it'll soon be midnight, Old Father Time!"

I felt the glass begin to burn my finger again. I couldn't bear it and quickly pulled my hand away. The table top jumped and the paper letters I had made, cascaded to the floor. The tumbler shattered with an ear splitting *crack*. Splinters speared Shauna and Kate's forefingers. We ducked from the flying shards. The candles blew out, we were sat in darkness.

"Oh great! A trip to the emergency room on New Years Eve! Just great!"

I quickly relit a couple of candles and was horrified to see Shauna and Kate's hands. They were marked with slivers of glass and blood. They tried to gouge out the glass quickly.

"It's not so bad. Just a couple of cuts." said Shauna trying to be optimistic. She looked pale with shock.

"Look at us, Shauna! We're ripped up badly!"

Kate tried to stand up, but stumbled.

"I must have drunk more than what I thought. I feel ... strange."

"So do I." Shauna said, "Beers gone straight to my head. I'm going to the bathroom to clean myself up."

The attic door slammed as they left to be swallowed up by the party. I picked up the glinting remnants from the shattered tumbler and placed them in the box where I had taken the glass from. I wiped the dirt from the side of it. 'Property of Macklin' had been scrawled across its side in marker pen. I couldn't move. 'He may have used these. The shattered glass may have been the one he used to get drunk that night so many New Years ago!' I backed away from the box and knocked into the Ouija table. The paper letters cascaded to the floor. They spelled something in their fall.

'SLAUGHTER'

The music stopped abruptly, but not for New Year wishes and fireworks. There were a few heartbeats before the screaming began. I could hear fighting, brutal violent sounds that terrified me.

"What are you doing Kate?"

"Stop Shauna!Please!"

I ran to the attic door and locked it, then looked for somewhere to hide in case Shauna and Kate decided to return to wish me a Happy New Year.

### **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>
Twitter: <u>@Hederah</u>

### Psychic Music | K. A. Williams

I was walking by a lake in the woods when I heard music. It was a popular song from the '80s but I couldn't remember the title.

Then I got psychic flashes.

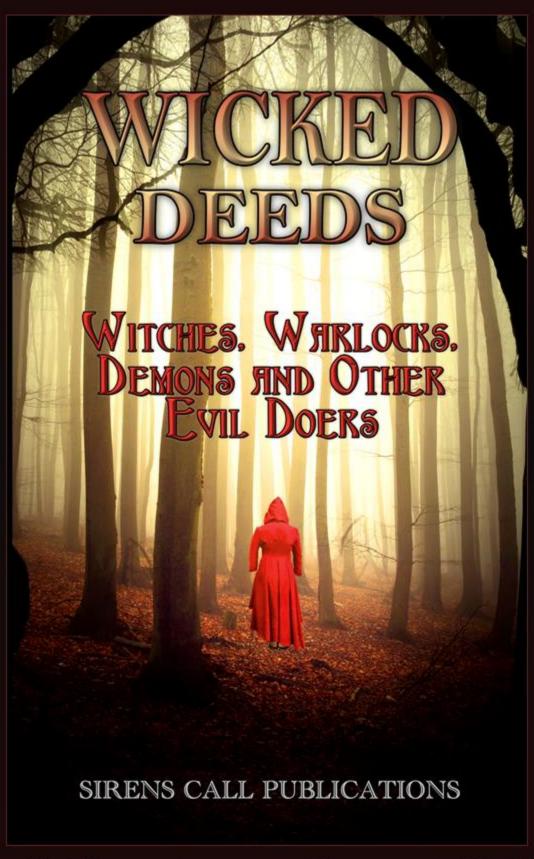
A young man with headphones was listening to his cassette player and moving with the beat, eyes closed. He tripped on a big exposed root, hit his head on a low tree branch, fell into the lake, and drowned.

I knelt on the shore and reached down into the lake, feeling around in the muck. Then I pulled up the muddy cassette player, along with a bony hand.

### **About the Author:**

K. A. Williams lives in North Carolina and writes speculative, mystery/crime, general fiction, and poetry. She has been published in many magazines including Mystery Tribune, Trembling With Fear, Theme of Absence, Altered Reality, Yellow Mama, View From Atlantis, and The Rockford Review winning one of their Editor's Choice Awards for prose in 2009. Apart from writing, she enjoys music (mostly rock), and CYOA games.

Sometimes wicked people do wicked things...



Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Kobo, and iTunes

### Delicate, My Dear | Brianna Malotke

"Don't move, not even an inch, this is delicate work my dear," he whispered into her ear. She tried to move her fingers, but couldn't. She glanced down at her body, naked, on display. His voice, melodious at first, now taunting her, was coming in and out of her hazy brain.

"I don't make mistakes and I chose you for your elegance," he continued, "you need not worry. I've had practice, with many others before you, so I know that once we're through you'll be hardly recognizable to others" he told her, leaning in closer. She could feel his breath as he murmured, "You'll be perfect to me." Everything felt foggy, her bones felt stiff. Maybe that meant she was gaining control of her body. She knew if she remained calm then she had a chance of getting free. His footsteps moved all around the room. *Remain calm*, she repeated over and over again in her mind.

"Your graceful movements were all too enticing, my dear. I knew right away that you were the one for me. Oh dear, I'm not sure where to start, each envious feature of yours, now mine to tweak," he exclaimed as he paced. She could hear him in another room, the sounds of metal against hard surfaces faintly echoed. She could barely recall the sequence of events that brought her here. Vaguely, she remembered taking a shortcut in the park. Something in her body felt off. She opened her eyes. He held a small, shiny scalpel, while hovering over her shins.

"We're so peacefully alone, just you and I here," he expressed to her, holding her stare. She could hear water dripping, but the air smelled slightly metallic. Her breathing was ragged. She knew what he was doing, she just couldn't feel it. Her mantra was on loop. For now she was happy to not be able to feel his actions. She retreated to a place inside her where she could shut everything out. If she couldn't physically feel, then maybe she could try to lock out everything else too. Building walls within herself, mentally, she tried to retreat. She was strong. If she could just wait for the right moment, then maybe she had a chance.

"You will be my masterpiece, such a beautiful canvas," he stated to the room, to an imaginary audience. She kept her eyes closed and waited. She was unsure of how much time had passed. She knew he had come and gone from the room several times. The dripping sound was becoming louder now. The sound was slightly off beat from her heart; slowly pumping in her chest. It had been a while since she heard footsteps. Hesitantly she opened her eyes. It appeared that she was alone, so once again she tried to move. Starting with her fingers she tried. Tap, tap, tap, she heard her fingers against the table she was strapped to. She tried her best to look, but she was indeed moving her fingers. Remain calm, she told herself in her mind. Her breathing remained steady as she tried to see as much as she could. She opened herself up to the situation; releasing the walls she had built to protect herself. Sluggishly everything started to make itself known—bones still stiff, flesh cold, body aching—as she continued to release the walls. Pain started to scream through, her body had been through a series of events that at some point she hoped she would heal, but right now, she tried to focus on the leather straps. They were soft against her wrists and ankles, and they moved easily. He must not have planned on her regaining her movements. She stiffened for a moment, closed her eyes, and focused on the sounds around her. The drip continued nearby, and she could hear other faint sounds, but nothing that sounded like footsteps or like another living person. She went back to moving, pulling and twisting as much as she could in her state. Her body was screaming at her to relax, but she wouldn't stop until the sweet taste of freedom replaced the blood.

"Remain calm," she said out loud, for the first time. Her throat was raw, her heart pounding in her chest, her body past the point of feeling. Then, as she continued to move, one of her hand restraints came loose. The sound of leather hitting the floor was music to her ears. Then, as quickly as she could, she removed the others. For the first time she noticed the cuts all over her body. His canvas indeed. Her wounds trickling down as she stood up. The dripping sound almost disappeared. A thought that should have chilled her to the bone bloomed in her mind—there was no water dripping, it had been the sound of her blood. Trying to ignore it, she would take her injuries into account later, she needed to hurry.

"Remain calm," she whispered, every movement causing her excruciating pain. Through doorways, down hallways, and through rooms, she made her way to what she hoped was freedom. Hoping she reached an exit, she turned the knob and ran. The smell of grass and dead leaves filled her nose. She ran without closing the door behind her, off into the unknown darkness. She continued until she knew there was enough distance between her and the place that would forever haunt her dreams. Once she thought she was safe, and alone, and she took a moment to herself to breathe deeply and assess her situation. She closed her eyes and felt relaxed.

"Where did you go?" he whispered, his breath hot on her face again. Her eyes opened quickly, as she realized she had never left. Her body was still secure in leather straps, her bare skin against the cold table. "You could never truly leave me, my dear" he told her as the fluorescent light glinted off his scalpel. Death was just around the corner; she could feel her heartbeat slow as the cuts he made continued to drain. Tears ran down her face as she accepted that his peculiar smile would be the last image in her mind.

### **About the Author:**

Brianna Malotke is a freelance writer, costume designer, and avid boxer. Some of her recent work can be found in the anthologies *Beneath*, *Cosmos*, *The Deep*, and *Beautiful Tragedies 2*. She has a short story included in the anthology, *The Dire Circle*, from D&T Publishing. In 2022, she has two poems in the Women in Horror Poetry Showcase, *Under Her Skin*, published by Black Spot Books.

Instagram: <a>@briannamalotke</a>

### Happy New Year | Alex Grehy

We opened champagne when the New Year started, though it was still the Old Year where we stood. We'd moored our yacht near Baker Island, longitude One-Seven-Six, Universal Time minus twelve. The New Year wouldn't reach us for another twenty-four hours.

We thought it would be cool to live in the past a while longer. It had been the best year of our lives. We'd sold our tech company for a fortune, got married, traveled, enjoyed our freedom.

The milky way glowed above us; its path reflected in the tranquil sea. The birds on the island chirruped in their sleep. In the silence, the pop of the champagne cork was shockingly loud. We turned on our satellite radio—we'd be able to track the New Year as it swept around the globe. We tuned in to Kiribati's celebrations.

Three! Two! One! Happy New Y...

The cheer was cut short, yet we could still hear the fizz-bangs of their fireworks.

We thought nothing of it. We drank and danced for an hour before tuning in to New Zealand.

Three! Two! One! Happy New Y...

We fiddled with the radio, but it was working fine.

We were drunk and didn't worry. While the world turned towards the future, we luxuriated in the past. We lay on deck, chatting drowsily until it was time to tune in to Sydney's celebrations.

Emergency Broadcast: we are under atta...

The broadcast stopped abruptly. I quickly tuned in to Queensland.

Emergency Broadcast: we are under attack from an unknown force; return to your homes.

I looked around. The sea was mirror still, the birds chirruped, undisturbed. I jumped at the harsh grating of the anchor chain.

"We have to go!" Aarna shouted, winding the anchor up from the seabed. She resisted me as I wrestled her hands from the windlass.

"Go where? We're safe here!"

The anchor dropped with a splash.

"Let's get more information before we do anything." I called as she stomped away, her shoulders shaking with anger.

I turned our mobiles on, breaking the pact that we'd made earlier. There was no signal on deck, so I clambered up the mainmast, desperately waving our phones above my head. Still no signal. I could hear Aarna crying with frustration on the deck below. I slid back down to her.

Our energy drained away. It was late and my head was spinning. We went below decks and lay down. I hugged Aarna tight and let myself drift into sleep.

I woke to the pleasant warmth of a pacific sunrise. My mouth was dry, and I had a foggy headache from the champagne. Aarna was still asleep. I snuggled into her, hoping to catch more sleep but then I remembered.

I leapt to the radio and turned the dial, trying to remember where the New Year would be. Bangkok was still broadcasting. I couldn't understand a word, but my heart raced as I heard the panic in the newsreader's voice, then a sudden silence.

I heard Aarna moving behind me. The clanking of the anchor chain echoed across boat as she tried to set us free from our mooring again.

"It's coming to get us. Let's move!" She cried.

I grabbed the charts—if we sailed east, we'd put ourselves in its path sooner, whatever IT was. But if we sailed west, was the land even inhabitable?

"There's no point." I said, "There's literally nowhere to go!"

"There's literally everywhere to go!" She yelled.

"But none that we know are safe."

The boat drifted a little as Aarna slumped by the windlass. I hurried to drop the anchor again. I put my arms around her shoulders.

"This is as good a place as any to wait for news."

She nodded, then stripped off yesterday's clothes before diving into the azure waters. I joined her, the movement giving me a sense of purpose. We swam to the island, eager to feel solid ground under our feet while our thoughts churned.

Around midday we returned to the yacht. Aarna prepared lunch. I turned the radio on.

BBC World Service - 23.55. The mysterious and deadly force sweeping the world is NOT a terrorist attack or a solar flare. Some suspect aliens, but scientists have dismissed such claims. Satellite and automated services are operational, but we have lost contact with teams sent to investigate stricken areas. We turn now to London, where thousands of people have congregated, against government advice. Let us listen, in hope, to the traditional chimes of Big Ben.

I heard crowds cheering; the chimes began; all seemed well. But at the stroke of the hour, the crowd fell silent, leaving the bells to toll alone.

I grabbed a map, ignoring Aarna's sobbing. It would be crossing the Atlantic soon.

I re-tuned the radio, desperately hoping that the USA would have a solution.

My Fellow Americans, it has fallen to us to halt the deadly assault on our world. The Eastern hemisphere is dead, our only hope is to save what remains of the West. I have authorized the military to launch our entire nuclear arsenal. We will strike the eastern Atlantic to minimize collateral damage and preserve life in the Americas. May God have mercy on our souls.

In my bones I knew that the nukes wouldn't work. The earth was spinning towards its doom like a doner kebab on a turning spit.

We turned the radio off and spent the next eleven hours pretending that it was all ok, that we were the only people on earth. Maybe we were. We ate, drank, made love. We wondered about timing our lovemaking in order to die as close to two souls in one body as possible. But at the end, we just sat on deck and watched.

The first sign was a darkness swallowing the glittering ribbon of the Milky Way. Yet across the sea we could see a veil of pearly phosphorescence. The water sizzled gently as a shimmering veil draped itself over the boat's stern. I hugged Aarna tightly and looked into her eyes.

"Happy New Ye..."

### **About the Author:**

Alex Grehy's sweet life is filled with narrowboating, rescue greyhounds, singing and chocolate. Yet her vivid prose, thought-provoking poetry and original view of the world have led to her best friend to say 'For someone so lovely, you're very twisted! Her work has been published worldwide and she is a regular contributor to the Ladies of Horror Flash Project.

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



ODave Dick Illustration

The bones of the murder victims laid on the bluff for 6,500 years.

As sea levels rose and covered most of the peninsula, the bluff became an island, and the graves remained undisturbed.

Off the northwest coast of Brittany, an isthmus juts some 14 kilometers into the Atlantic Ocean. White sandy beaches flank the narrow strip of land barely wide enough for a highway and a railway line. Forty kilometers to the north lies the small island of Téviec. The obscure island would be of little interest if it were not for the archeological graves unearthed there and the mystery surrounding remains buried in the middens of oyster and clam shells. Three skeletons tell a story of violence and murder that occurred in this area 6500 years ago. One has an arrowhead embedded in his spine, but the most famous of these findings are the 'Ladies of Téviec'. Two women in their early thirties were buried together in one grave, their remains lovingly protected by antler bones and adorned with seashell jewelry. One skull shows five severe blows to the head and an arrow between her eyes. The other died of a brutal beating. The degree of violence in a place that was thought to be a quiet, goddess worshiping settlement at the time of the murders has archeologists baffled.

The women are believed to be from the nearby village of Carnac, renowned for its prehistoric stone alignments, dolmens and tumuli. Carnac was a vibrant, agricultural community at the time, rich in artwork, passage chambers and stone circles that tell the story of a tranquil way of life.

Replicas of the Ladies of Téviec are laid out on a mortuary slab in the Muséum de Toulouse, and the curator is asking for help from the public to solve this ages old murder mystery.

Some suggestions include violent raids to steal food during a time of famine, meteorological phenomena and sacrificial offerings. None of these explanations fit prehistorical facts or the description renowned archeologist, Marija Gimbutas, painted of the civilization that occupied Europe at the time.

It is widely accepted that this civilization was wiped out by a very violent male dominated tribe from the Russian Steppes who Gimbutas dubbed the Kurgans. But that did not happen until two thousand years after the murders at Téviec.

Ancient Europeans are renowned for their sophisticated knowledge of astronomy as evidenced by the plethora of celestially aligned stone monuments all over the British Isles and Brittany. Indeed, the cluster of archeological sites just north of Dublin, Ireland have been called a Stone Age university of observational astronomy. The oldest of the main passage tombs there, Dowth—its name meaning darkness—is famous for its study of solar eclipses. Dowth holds an unsettling history of its own, so it is fitting that this place of infamy should figure into my story.

This is my vision of what happened the fateful day of the gruesome murders.

It all took place on summer solstice in the year 4625 BCE, this being the day the sun stands still on the horizon before reversing direction and moving back to its position on the shortest day of the year. It was also the time of year when the Dog Star appears in the eastern sky just before sunrise. The crops were in the ground, and the people were enjoying the mad days of summer. Celebrations were in full swing in the village.

This was not an ordinary summer solstice. This year was special, for on this day a total solar eclipse was set to cut a one hundred mile wide swath of darkness across Carnac. A total solar eclipse is the most awe-inspiring spectacle in all of nature. It is much more dramatic than a partial eclipse and very rare. It only occurs once in four hundred years at any given place.

Stargazers from Dowth had descended on the community with their pinhole viewing boxes to witness the event. They arrived a few days earlier to instruct the villagers how to safely view the eclipse. Looking directly at the sun can cause blindness, but during the few short minutes of totality it is safe to view the sun's corona with the naked eye.

Eve, renowned for her studies of solar eclipses at Dowth, was among the visitors. She and her friend from the village, Ana, frolicked this day in the surf under the late morning sun. The sun beat relentlessly on the white sandy plages of Carnac, so the two women decided to go for a swim in the Atlantic. They dropped their linen frocks on the grass and ran across the beach. The water ebbed and flowed along the shoreline. Laughing, they splashed and kicked water on each other until they reached a depth where they could submerge. Eve dove under and surfaced, pulling her long red tresses back from her face just as a drumroll sounded over the community. The eclipse neared, and it was time to make their way to the bluff.

Most of the villagers were already on the viewing site, but one man was making his way up the path. Ana was pulling on her frock on the beach, but Eve had stopped near the shoreline. Above the drumroll, she heard rhythmic

thundering in the distance and felt the sand vibrate beneath her feet. She stood frozen, her eyes wide as she tried to make out the aberration hurtling into sight along the beach. She stared in disbelief. Horses had been wiped out in Europe at the height of the last ice age, so Eve had never seen one before. She thought the mounted men were some sort of strange man-beasts.

Eve did not notice the villager fall with an arrow in his back as he ran towards the bluff. Hers was a peaceful people. Never in all the 33 years of her life had she reason to suspect danger or fear brutality from those of her own kind. She stood motionless trying to make sense of what she was seeing.

Coming rapidly toward her were the strangest of all creatures that Eve had ever seen. They had four sturdy large legs, two smaller ones and two heads, one of a man and another of a beast. The strange mythical beings traveled at an unimaginable speed and soon drew up near to her. To her amazement the man part separated from the beast and ran toward her in a crazed frenzy, yelling something in a language she could not understand. He was taller and more muscular than any man she had ever seen, and his face was set in an angry glare.

"Eve, run." Ana ran towards her friend as another mounted Kurgan clubbed her. She fell face down, and the frothy tide washed her blood from the sand.

The strange angry creature coming toward Eve swung his club and dealt her several violent blows to the head. The club made a sickening sound as it struck, and she sank to her knees in the sand.

Eve continued to look into the angry man's face. He stopped, locked in the woman's astonished look. Eve's hair was matted with the blood that streaked her white cheeks, and her strange blue eyes conveyed an absence of fear. He saw only puzzlement.

The eclipse drew near, and weird things began to happen. A cool wind blew in from the ocean, and the world looked very strange. Shadows were bizarrely sharp. It was starting to get so dark that the assailant thought his eyesight was failing. Just then an arrow struck the naked woman who knelt in the sand before him. It entered her forehead between her eyes, and caused the Kurgan's large body to lurch. Eve fell backwards and rolled onto her side in the sand, her eyes wide open. Those fearless blue eyes were the last thing the Kurgan saw. Suddenly complete darkness fell.

The man looked up into the blackened sky and roared for his Sun God to return. To his wonderment he found himself in a world he had never seen before. A sunset rimmed the entire horizon, and above the reds and oranges, the sky was the deep purple grey of twilight. Above that, bright stars shone in a night sky. The sun's corona looked like a shimmering wreath hanging in the sky above him, and three luminous planets could clearly be seen orbiting it.

Complete calm fell over the Kurgan, and for a brief moment he understood the woman he had just slain. It would change who he was forever. He stood frozen in place staring at the sky until suddenly the sun burst out from behind the moon. He remained steadfastly fixed on the event taking place in the sky. His eyes burned and tears wet his cheeks. He and his entire band of marauding savages stood awestruck staring at the sun as it emerged from behind the moon. When daylight returned to the earth, they found their mounts and fled.

The Kurgans returned to their homeland blind, crazed and raving about how the moon ate the sun and caused a darkness to fall over the earth. They babbled on wildly of a land to the west and the supernatural powers of the people who lived there, of a witchcraft so powerful that it could alter the very universe and strike invaders blind.

The story spread fear throughout their land and became a legend that was passed down for generations to come. So intense was their fright that they did not invade the peaceful people of ancient Europe until thousands of years later.

Back at Carnac, the people came down from the bluff when the eclipse was over and found the bodies of the slain laying on the beach. Overcome with grief, they searched for a way to comfort their loved ones. They sought a way to turn suffering into joy, a way to turn hatred into love and contempt into high esteem. It was decided that the bodies would not be cremated as was the usual practice. They would be laid to rest on the high bluff.

The village people adorned the bodies of the murdered victims in the finest garments in all the land. Around the necks of the two women, they placed multiple layers of necklaces of cowry shells filled with red ochre. Bracelets were placed on their wrists and ringlets around their legs. All this was done in preparation for the lavish funeral ceremony that followed at the grand passage tombs. The mourning was intense and the lament long.

A solemn torch-lit procession carried the two women and one man to the summit for burial. The gravesite was selected with great care—a place at a high elevation with a view of the ocean where the sun and moon and stars and birds would keep watch over them.

On the high mount, the people dug a pit. They molded caskets out of the middens of oyster and clam shells and placed them in the grave. Carbonates from the shells would protect the bones from the acidic soil. The mourners lined the coffins with eight petaled flowers and lovingly laid the remains on the bed of fragrance. Eve and Ana lay together,

each on their right side with one leg flexed. Covers were fashioned from the antlers of red deer and carefully positioned over the caskets to protect the skeletons from the ravages of time. The mourners lit a holy fire. Its light was a beacon that could be seen as far as the horizon.

The bones of the murder victims lay at peace for 6,500 years. As sea levels rose and covered most of the peninsula, the bluff became an island, and the graves remained undisturbed.

### **About the Author:**

Ruth Welburn is an award winning author of four books, newspaper articles and short stories. *The Day the Sun Stood Still* is based on an excerpt from her upcoming novel, *Land of the Watchers*. Retired from medical research, Welburn's first book, *The Devil's Ruse*, is set during the 1918 pandemic. Welburn lives on the west coast of Canada where she enjoys family and writing.

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### Birthdays and Weekends | Christopher Hivner

Treat saw her jump and it was like one of his dreams where he's naked while everyone else is dressed. She fell from the rooftop in a swan dive as he watched from his office across the street. When her body disappeared below the window line the walls melted into Treat's eyes and his world turned into a faded, ecru soup of disbelief and knowing he'd never stop seeing her jump. Not when he was awake or asleep, if the Sun exploded or he lived forever. The last memory of his daughter would be her body falling to earth.

"Talia," he tried to say, her name catching in his throat before sliding down into his gut. The bricks of the building that he looked at every day became mouths, opening wide to unfurl tongues that reached to the ground to lick up his daughter's blood. The brick-mouths began to chatter.

"It's your fault ya sick bastard."

"What?" Treat said to the voices.

"She never had a chance. Why'd ya screw your own daughter?"

"I didn't!" Treat shouted. "I wouldn't ..."

"Ya did something wrong ya piece a shit. Did ya beat her?"

"No! Stop..."

The tongues reached across the parking lot to Treat's window, slamming into the glass smearing it with Talia's blood.

"Ya musta done somethin' to her," the brick-mouths continued. "She jumped off right in front of ya."

"I didn't hurt her."

"Did you love her?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"Did you love her?"

"Yes.....

"Treat? Are you all right?"

He felt a hand on his shoulder. Afraid to turn around, Treat stared out the window. It was clear. No blood stains. The building was bricks and mortar as it always had been.

"Treat?" It was Mr. Farrelly. The hand was removed. Treat turned around. "Are you all right?" Farrelly asked again.

"No," Treat said. He opened his mouth to say something else but choked. Treat stumbled out of his chair and ran. He turned right to go down the corridor leading to the front door, but as he ran past cubicles the office closed in on him. Treat's vision turned dark. He blinked, his world narrowing more. Then he tripped and fell to his knees. That's when he heard the familiar voices.

"You know I'm right Sharon," Treat's own voice said. When he looked up from the floor he saw himself; young and fit, long hair touching his shoulders. Sharon, the woman who almost, but never quite became his wife, stood in front of him in a familiar pose, hands on her hips, whole body slouched to the right.

"You're never right, Treat," she sneered at him.

"I'm not going to be a good father and you know it. I didn't want a kid."

"No, you just wanted to screw, smoke a little pot, and screw again. You're unbelievable."

"For Christ's sake, I'm just saying she should live with you most of the time. I'll be around, but I don't know what to do with her."

"You could at least try."

Treat remembered saying the words. The conversation continued but Treat tuned out, trying to stand back up. Then he saw her: Talia, six years old, chubby face peeking around the door into their bedroom, overhearing his loutish words.

"Talia!" Treat yelled leaping forward to sweep her up. When he landed, instead of hitting the floor, Treat splashed into freezing cold water. He sank below the surface, thrashing about. Either way he went, left or right, he ran into cubicle walls. Kicking up, Treat broke through to take a greedy breath. The hallway was flooded, white-capped waves rolling from side to side.

"Daddy?"

Treat looked forward to see Talia, 10 or 11, sitting on a rock in the middle of the water

"Baby, are you all right?" he asked.

"Where have you been daddy?"

"What?"

"I waited at the art show at school but you never showed up."

"Talia..."

"I won first place." Talia held out her blue ribbon, letting it fall into the water. Treat swam toward her, his arms crashing through the waves like he was trying to beat them into submission.

On the rock Talia grew taller, developed breasts and lost the baby fat. Her face was angular with sharp green eyes; black hair fell in a heap around her arms. She pulled a bottle of vodka from a bag.

"I drink now Dad. Did you know that?" she asked with disdain before swallowing a long, painful blast of the clear whiskey.

"Baby..." Treat begged while water filled his mouth. He was sinking, exhausted legs dragging him under.

An instant later he was back atop the water as it rushed forward down the hallway. Treat was pulled along, slamming into walls, knocking over a woman entering the building. The waves were funneled through the lobby into the parking lot where Treat was deposited on the sidewalk. Lying there with a bleeding cut on his cheek, he was helped up by a policeman.

"Buddy, are you all right?"

"My daughter," Treat said pushing past the cop, through the crowd that had gathered. "Talia!" Treat yelled hoping somehow she could hear him.

When he reached her body she lay on the roof of a car. Her legs were splayed over the rear half. The front section had collapsed leaving her torso and head dangling over the dashboard. Treat scraped off the grasping hands of an EMT and walked to the mangled BMW. He dropped to his knees.

Talia's hair hung down to the floor like vines. Her hands were cupped around her wrists, both lying on the seats. Treat's vision started to go black again, air leaving his lungs slowly, painfully. The circles tightened until the parking lot and eventually the car disappeared. It was just Treat and his little girl. Her eyes opened to look at him.

"Daddy, do I have your attention yet?"

### **About the Author:**

Christopher Hivner is an introvert who has pretty much lived like he was in quarantine all his life. He has recently been published in The Horror Zine and Blood Moon Rising.

Facebook: Christopher Hivner - Author
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### The Death Rattle | Corinne Pollard

Felix Sinner had died on 6th June 2026, weighing 2.99371 kg with his mother's streaky hair and his father's navy orbs. At three months old, his motor skills had developed enough to grasp knives.

Grandpa Felix sent his congratulatory present through the post; a family heirloom to kill innocence. The toy had been a delight to the child with its silver bells and firm handle of bone.

It gurgled everyday; a chilling rattle that cracked with death's coming. The family victims choked inside it and the newborn gurgled bubbles.

Grandpa Felix scanned the family tree for the next murderer.

### **Enter God's Domain | Corinne Pollard**

During Sunday service, we had just completed the Lord's Prayer and the organ was singing. The nearest pew dwellers wore half-alive masks. The furthest were huddled together with question marks bubbling for their missing member. Was he busy?

A shadow drifted by and the bubbles popped. Our dependable policeman, Mr. Croftman, headed to the entrance with determined strides. Yet he entered the porch without his usual cheer and uniform.

"Lord, forgive me!"

Then he took a step.

The fire whirled up his torso rapidly; Like God himself had seen his soul and struck him. If he ever had a soul.

### A Marriage Victim | Corinne Pollard

The slap nearly chopped Alice's head off. She mumbled her apologies for not serving him a beer fast enough.

After a week of marriage and her dowry spent, Alice presented her smoked pork sandwich which he immediately stuffed his face with. Her portion was gone too with a loud burp.

Half an hour later, he shivered and slumped in his chair.

The Book of Shadows advised Alice to keep the hemlock in his system, so the leaves returned to her mortar as she whispered sacred words. *Nunc mori* 

Witchcraft ran through her veins and her spell stopped his depraved heart.

### **Bedtime** | *Corinne Pollard*

It was past his bedtime. Rasmus fretted as his little feet burned from kicking snow out of his way. His mittens, coat, jumper and boots were no longer enough. Red bite marks marred his delicate skin as he rubbed his hands frantically. His eyelids grew heavy.

Ole Lukøje visited swiftly with a blank umbrella. His peaceful face beckoned Rasmus like a lullaby as his fist filled with his famous dust.

The flakes flicked upon Rasmus's brow and tickled his nose. With a sneeze, Rasmus succumbed to slumber with a slowing pulse.

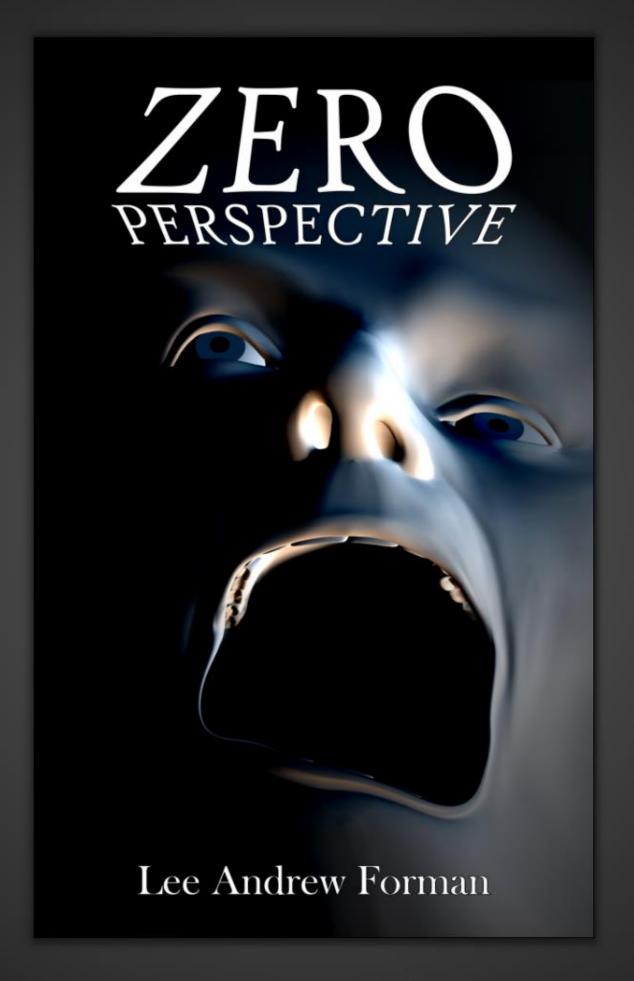
Silent snow fell as Ole turned to his horse.

### **About the Author:**

Corinne is a new disabled horror writer from West Yorkshire, UK. With a degree in English Lit and Creative Writing, Corinne has always enjoyed the world of dark fantasy and is now smiling (maybe a bit creepily) at the thought of terrifying her readers. Aside from writing, Corinne enjoys metal music, visits to graveyards and shopping for books to read.

Twitter: @CorinnePWriter





# AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

### Beautiful | R.A. Clarke

### Janna's Journal Day 1:

I arrived today. Pharmantis set me up in a private room with a soft, warm bed and three gourmet meals a day—a huge step up from the shelter.

They promised I'd be beautiful again. That the burns covering my body, and the crash that caused them, would become worries of the past. My hair might even regrow.

I know there are risks... untested drugs and all that. But more than anything, I want my life back. To feel normal. To walk in public without staring or laughter. I have nothing to lose.

I still can't believe I got selected!

Every participant in the trial (30 of us) has to wear tiny monitors and report daily to the testing lab for skin cream application. Pretty straight forward. Honestly, it feels kind of nice to blend in for once. Everyone here is disfigured in some way.

### Day 2:

It's odd not having any windows. I mean, I get why—no outside access equals no leaked information. But it's still weird.

The cream tingles, but no allergic reactions. So far, so good.

Dare, I hope?

### Day 5

Holy shit, it's a miracle! My scars are gone—like, GONE! They just sloughed off like snakeskin. I can't stop staring in the mirror.

Pharmantis says full treatment is required to ensure lasting results.

Fine by me!

### Day 10:

Something's not right. My skin looks pale, almost grey, and I'm exhausted. No!

The Pharmantis doctors assure me these side effects will dissipate after full treatment.

I'm trusting they know what they're doing.

Feeling uneasy.

### Day 12:

Pain meds are useless. I've had a pounding headache for two days and I'm too nauseous to eat.

What's worse, my skin looks darker every day, and the doctors keep saying it's all part of the process. Seriously? They won't even let me make a phone call!

This is so messed up. I'm walking.

### Day 13:

WTF! I tried to leave, but Pharmantis said, "The trials are going as planned. As per contract, you can't revoke consent unless something goes wrong." I lost my shit.

I kicked and screamed. They had to hold me down to apply the damn cream.

### Day 14:

They're watching us all very closely now, limiting participant contact.

But we've been whispering. When we pass by in the halls. In the bathrooms. We have a plan.

### Day 16:

Today we revolted. All of us stormed the doors. It was a solid attack, but it's like Pharmantis *knew*. They used fucking stun guns, and now we're all confined to our rooms.

This constant headache is making my eyes bulge. Like, for real. I swear my limbs are elongating, too. There are two nubs forming on my back, and... I think I'm growing a tail!

What am I becoming? I'm freaking out.

### Day 18:

Everything hurts so bad. I can't move without screaming. All I feel is rage. And regret. I've never felt this desperate before. For relief. For escape. For anything but this...

They had to sedate me to apply the cream this time.

Memories keep fading, too. I can't remember where I grew up.

These 'drugs' are messing with my head.

### Day 20:

Somehow, my fingers fused overnight. I freaked, of course. Once I got my head right again, I planned to use these new pincer-like appendages to my advantage—but like always, Pharmantis is one step ahead. They fired a tranq dart through the slot in the door. Didn't even come inside.

I feel so helpless...

### Day 22:

My eyes popped out, finally. They're huge and turning black like my skin, but at least this horrendous headache is finally fading. It's nice to have some relief from the pressure.

I worry I'm running out of time, though. Unwanted thoughts keep sneaking in. Horrible thoughts. Things nobody should ever think. Like these waking daydreams. They're so vivid, and there's so much blood. But the scariest part is... sometimes it arouses me.

The organizers have started calling themselves *The Creators*.

I need to escape, before it's too late.

### Day 23:

Today I had enough. I smashed the mirror, raging as I stabbed broken shards into my wrists. I'd rather die than become a monster! But my damn skin was too tough—hard, like a beetle's shell. I don't know what to do anymore.

Sometimes I don't even know who I am.

I have so little energy.

### Day 24:

A plateful of grasshoppers slid under my door this morning. Grasshoppers! They looked fucking disgusting. Yet, when I smelled them, this ravenous hunger gripped me for the first time in weeks. It was so intense. I couldn't help myself...

They tasted so good.

### Day 25:

Wow, I slept all day—must've needed it. I feel really refreshed now, which is a welcome, yet foreign feeling. I'm also a bit confused, though. Where am I? Why are the first 23 pages of my journal missing? Why can't I remember what I wrote? Or were they always gone?

A creator in a white lab coat entered my room to check my vitals a few minutes ago. I felt scared at first, but then he smiled and showed me a pair of antennae he had hidden beneath a hairy wig.

Doctor Zeeelan. He seemed really friendly.

### Day 26:

Man, all of this food has given me incredible strength. I feel amazing—powerful. Yet still so hungry. I keep eating everything they give me, but it's never enough. I crave the taste of something bigger. Meatier like in my dreams. Something I can hunt.

My creators promise more food will come. They say all my questions will be answered soon. I keep having this bizarre feeling I should hate them, yet I can't imagine why...

### Day 27:

My wings finally sprouted! They're so gorgeous, I actually cried. The creators even gave me a special name to celebrate the momentous occasion: *Butterfly*. They said it suits me.

They think I'm beautiful.

### Day 28:

I met 29 others just like me today. My family. I'm not alone anymore!

The creators took us to their ship and called us to serve their righteous cause. See, they gifted us with their unique insectile DNA, which has made us one of them now. It also made us superior in every way. Ultimate warriors. My stomach wouldn't stop growling as they explained our sacred duty—to rid the planet of 'humans'. They spoiled it, poisoning the world our creators wish to call home. My home now too, I guess. Doctor Zeeelan wheeled a specimen in—a wriggling, sweating, pink-faced thing. So fragile. He encouraged my family to get a taste for it.

I hesitated as a warning bell went off in the back of my mind. But it didn't last long. The hunger drowned it out and I joined the swarm. When I crunched down on that bloody, sinewy flesh, I thought I might explode with pleasure.

Topside, they gave us our first mission. A nearby town. A hunt.

Let the cleansing begin.

### **About the Author:**

R.A. Clarke is a former police officer turned stay-at-home mom living with her family in Portage la Prairie, MB. When she's not sipping coffee or stealing the remote from her sport-aholic husband, she enjoys plotting fantastical novels and publishing multi-genre short fiction. R.A. has won The Writer's Games and Writers Weekly international short story competitions, and was recently nominated as a 2021 Futurescapes Award finalist.

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### An Appearance of Death | Tim J. Finn

Andy shivered again and hugged the shabby overcoat against his spindly body. He preferred a spot atop the heating vent in front of the Macy's building to spending a night in an overcrowded shelter. Someone always tried stealing your stuff in a shelter. The last time the cops coaxed him into one, a group of whacked out drunks peed on their fellow visitors. Andy wanted to only reek of his own urine.

Two youths in faux black leather swaggered down the brick pedestrian walkway bisecting Boston's Downtown Crossing. One with scars tattooed on his face guzzled from a half empty bottle of tequila. The second youth reached for the bottle.

"Eat me, Pico, don't drink it all."

Pico shoved the bottle at him and flipped him the middle finger.

"Eat yourself, numbnuts."

Numbnuts swigged the tequila. He wiped his mouth with the back of his gloved hand and pointed to Andy.

"I told you we'd find one of those shit-faces down here. They always hang out down here."

"Nothing I like better than stomping a shit-face drunk," Pico said. "Kick the bastard when he's down."

He nudged Andy with the toe of his ankle high boot.

"Rise and shine, shit-face."

Andy rolled over and turned his back to them.

"Peckerheads," he grumbled.

"Now that's disrespecting me," Pico told him. "I was going to stomp you, but now maybe I should kill you, too."

Pico slammed his toe into Andy's left side. Andy shrieked when a couple of his ribs nearly cracked under the impact. Pico jammed his foot underneath Andy and rolled him onto his back. He rested the heel of his boot on Andy's throat.

"I got enough weight to crush it for you, shit-face."

"Don't do that just yet," Numbnuts pleaded. "Stomp his ass a little more first."

"Is that what I should do to you, shit-face?"

Pico glared down at Andy. Andy gagged as he stared at a squall of black mist that blew in a funnel cloud behind the youths. The dark fog halted its turning and a shimmering figure stepped from it. Andy gaped as the form solidified into a seven-foot-tall shape. Wisps of black smoke floated from it, revealing a black robe fastened at the waist with purple sash. White skeletal hands drooped from the robe's wide sleeves and two bony feet poked from under its hem. The hood atop the robe partially covered a stark white skull. The death head's mouth curved in a frown and two red orbs burned in the empty eye sockets. The figure carried a wooden handled scythe as tall as its height. Hoary teeth clicked when the skull opened and closed its jaws.

"Why should you be allowed to take his life?"

The youths spun around and faced the robed skeleton. Numbnuts dropped the bottle and it shattered on the pavement. Tequila pooled around the skeleton's feet.

"Shit, Pico, it's him!"

Numbnuts rolled up the sleeve of his jacket. A miniature tattoo replica of the robed skeleton danced across his biceps above the words *Don't Fear the Reaper*.

"Not a very impressive representation," the skeleton said. "Apparently anger at this unequal situation induced a physical manifestation. Interesting."

"I'll manifest on your ass, Bony Bob," Pico said.

He pulled a switchblade from his jacket and snapped it open. Pico lunged at the skeleton and sliced a hole in its robe. The knife against the rib bones exposed by the tear. The skeleton slapped the switchblade to the pavement.

"You can't hurt the Grim Reaper, Pico," Numbnuts said. "He is Death!"

"An unlikely source grasps the situation," the skeleton said.

The Reaper swung the scythe at Pico with a single fluid motion and cleaved his head from his shoulders. Blood spurted from the neck stump and Pico's decapitated body folded onto the brick walkway. Pico's noggin landed in front of Numbnuts. He stared at his friend's stunned expression as he backed away from the still spinning head.

"You're just a follower, no point sending you to join him," the Reaper said. "You've learned your lesson. So, go. Go!"

Numbnuts turned and ran across the street. He scampered down the stairs into the Downtown Crossing subway station. The Reaper pulled a sheet of parchment from his robe's pocket. He used his bony index finger to shift and erase a pair of names on its list

"Despite what the list says, he deserved death more than you. The pair, upstairs and downstairs, who compile the list will be, perturbed, shall we say, but no permanent repercussions. We made a deal long ago; they must honor it. I do their dirty work. Don't waste the additional life I've given you!"

The Reaper jabbed his finger in Andy's face as he spoke. Andy responded with a vigorous nod.

"I believe you. Anger assuaged; I return as I came" The Reaper vanished in a flickering mist.

### About the Author:

Tim J. Finn was born in Boston and still calls the area home sweet home. He penned his first story; an origin tale for Aurora's the Forgotten Prisoner of Castle Mare kit, while enrolled in Catholic school. The good nuns no doubt felt his literary tastes confirmed their convictions regarding the sinister nature of a left-handed person.

Facebook: <u>Tim J. Finn</u>
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### Judgements of the Sisters Towne | B. T. Petro

I watched as they hung my oldest sister, Rebecca, from the branch of a tree. She who helped bring life to so many had hers taken. The townspeople had no need to fear her. She was not a witch.

I watched as they hung my older sister, Elizabeth, and cast her into a hole on Gallows Hill. She who cared for others falsely accused was accused. They had no need to fear her. She was not a witch.

I watched as they set me free, my detractors recanting their testimony. The townspeople have need to fear. I am a witch.

### The Demon Hunter's Prayer | B. T. Petro

May the gods grant me a little more time

To hunt the inhumans that prey upon this world.

May the gods grant me a little more strength

To wield the silver sword to cleave and thrust and kill.

May the gods grant me a little more vision

To seek out the warrens and dens wherever evil dwells.

May the gods grant me a little more coin

To celebrate my labors, for they are many.

May the gods grant me a little peace at the end of my days

When I can no longer make my sword sing, becoming the hunted.

### Unfinished Business | B. T. Petro

"You're holding me back, aren't you, Mother?"

Yes, Malicia. You were always so perceptive.

"But the others, the ones who were with us in the church, they've gone...where?"

They've gone ahead, but we have things to do.

"That's him there, the man who shot us and the others. Will we forgive him as the bible teaches us?"

Perhaps someday, but not today.

"He can hear us, but can't see us. That seems weird."

It's just the way things are for the moment.

"I have things to say to him. I'd like to scream. Can I scream?"

Yes, you can scream.

### **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.



### Go Write

One of the most popular questions I'm asked about writing is: What advice do you have for new authors? I generally have given the same answer over the years, but my feelings about it have changed in that time. The advice... Go write.

I've seen so many authors beat themselves up, because they didn't write for a couple days. Life got in the way or they just need to take a mental day away. I don't have a problem with that. Your mental health is more important than getting in an hours' worth of work. 3 years ago, when I first published *Damned to Hell*, I had a different mindset. You push through. Go write meant today. Get lost in your world you're creating. However, that was very closed minded of me. I write horror. A subject that I love to get lost in. However, if you are dealing with a breakup or had a bad day with a partner, would you want to jump back into your manuscript on a romance novel? Probably not. It took me a while to see that. Honestly, I try and put an hour away a day to write, but there are nights that I go to bed without opening up my laptop. Not that I didn't want to, it's just juggling 4 kids, a job, and a wife... Sometimes you miss. That would have beaten me up. It doesn't now.

I guess I need to change my answer. After all these years it should probably be, "Go write, but don't stress it". Writing is supposed to be fun. It's the reason you've dedicated numerous hours of your life to one goal. Don't let a day off bring everything you've accomplished down. Push through, you've got this.

### About the Author:

Mike Salt was born in Texas in 1987. His family relocated to Klamath Falls, Oregon when he was 3 years old. In his early 20s he began working for several comic book publishers as either a writer or an art director. In 2013, he began working on his short stories, submitting them to various magazines and collections. Mike joined the USAF in 2014 and is now back in his hometown. He won the Inkshares 2018 Horror Competition with his debut Novel BLIND scheduled for released in the near future. In 2019, he finally married the love of his life. They have two daughters and one son. The house also has a fluffy dog named Moose, a furry potato named Rollo, and a small fish named Salty.

You can find Mike and his work on various social media platforms, as well as his Amazon Author page.

Author Website: Mike Salt Writes Spooky Stuff

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AUTHOR OF THE VALLEY AND DAMNED TO HELL

SALET AND DAMNED TO HELL

AUTHOR OF THE VALLEY AND DAMNED TO HELP

AUTHOR OF T

# THE HOUSE ON LAND

A NOVELLA

### Featured Novella | The House on Harlan, by Mike Salt

Alex Boone enjoyed this part of the night.

The moon was partially covered, but large enough to illuminate the bike path in front of him. He pedaled the used mountain bike that he had picked up at a yard sale a few years back, his feet flowing in perfect rhythm to the music his phone pumped into his ears. He loved the way the wind brushed his cheeks, and when it rained (and it rained a lot in Linkville, Oregon), he would pick up speed before hitting puddles. Alex was not a professional cyclist by any stretch of the imagination, but he needed this time to get outside his head and stop *thinking* for a while. He felt that his brain was constantly moving; a new idea would come from the most mundane of activities and he'd find himself fighting, all day, with ways to incorporate it into his art.

Alex was slowly approaching his ten-year high school reunion and he had nothing to show for it. Most of his close friends had finished college and had very respectable careers, while Alex's wife was the "breadwinner" and supported the household: herself, Alex, and their two children. Lauren had just been hired on at Bugbear Memorial Hospital as an R.N., and they'd had to relocate from their home in Washington. When Alex left high school he'd had a short run of good luck, selling a couple pieces of his art to decent-sized publishing houses for book covers and occasionally selling original artwork for low budget horror movies. However, he hadn't sold a painting in eight months and the majority of his money came from painting windows for local businesses, or selling prints of his "fan-art" at a small comic book convention here and there.

Lauren worked long, late shifts, making Alex a full-time father. His days started early with the task of getting their six-year-old, Eric, up in time to catch the bus (while also getting him dressed, his teeth brushed, hair combed, and throwing on the occasional early morning cartoon to occupy him while Alex made the sack lunch); and all while holding their eightmonth-old daughter, Lizzy, tightly to his hip. He then had to do the usual dance of dressing Lizzy (as if she didn't already know it was going to happen), followed directly by feeding her (she had just started eating jarred baby food, so a mess was guaranteed), changing her diaper a handful of times, preparing another messy lunch, and then his favorite time of the day: her nap. This was the only hour – maybe hour-and-a-half, if he was lucky – that he could sneak down to the basement and get some work in.

He slowed, rounding the corner of the Harlan Drive. He could already see the shabby, yellow, three-bedroom house they were renting. They had already unpacked the necessities, leaving the majority of their boxes in the basement. Waiting to unpack *those* until their dream home landed in their laps. The place in which they could spend their rest of their lives – and preferably with a small studio for his art.

The outside of the house was dated, clearly built in the seventies. The windows of the front room looked like two sad eyes, one either side of the heavy wooden door. He knew that once he parked his bike in the driveway he would have to fight with the side door so it wouldn't make that annoying slamming sound and wake the baby. This, he knew, would lead to him struggling to put her back to sleep for the next hour or so.

He didn't need that tonight.

The bike ride had given him enough time to rest his brain for the forty-five minutes he deeply, desperately needed.

It was one in the morning. That gave him a solid couple hours' work, snatching what little sleep he could before the morning child-based warfare began.

As if he had predicted it, the side door made an annoying slamming sound (a little *extra* annoying, tonight) and he paused for a second to listen for Lizzy's fussing.

Not tonight.

He had won this battle.

Alex tiptoed into their small kitchen of the house on Harlan. The cabinets were a faded, oak that hadn't been refinished since they were placed in the seventies. He opened the "junk food" cupboard and grabbed a Fruit by the Foot, stealing a Capri-Sun from Eric's lunch drawer in the fridge.

Moving back on his track towards the basement he nearly tripped over a box that Lauren had told him to bring downstairs with him next time he went downstairs. He remembered it being on the kitchen counter, and was positive she must have moved it here to remind him.

Alex picked up the box and braced it with one arm, opening the door with the other. In darkness, he moved slowly down the poorly-constructed staircase; it came to a stop midway down and hooked hard to the left, where he would eventually find the light switch. He flipped the switch, turning on a single dim light bulb in the center of the basement. Bending over, he plugged in the floodlights that he had strategically placed around his work area.

Remembering he still had the box in one hand, he moved to the opposite side of the room to put it against the wall with the others. Eric wanted desperately to build a castle or a fort with the boxes, but he wasn't allowed in the basement alone. Alex placed the box top of another larger box labeled "winter shit".

Alex stepped back and looked at the ridiculous amount of boxes that, eventually, they would move again. He stood, hands on his hips, his attention on the corner of the room.

He moved closer to the containers: three medium-sized, generic U-Haul boxes that Alex refused to buy. He couldn't imagine paying \$3.50 for a box. He could get them for free from a local grocery store, or by searching on Facebook for someone looking to unload the boxes from a move of their own.

Why are there U-Haul boxes down here? he thought.

He reached for the top box and placed it on the ground in front of him.

Labeled in black marker, the box read: "Denny".

His heart began to beat out of his chest. He felt like he was snooping and didn't like the feeling, even if the box, clearly, wasn't important enough for the last tenant to remember to take with them.

He peeled back the clear packing tape in one swipe. He paused for a second and brushed his fingers through his hair nervously. Alex grabbed the flaps of the box and slowly pulled them back.

"Alex?" he heard, from the base of the staircase.

He jumped from the floor and landed in a defensive position. He may have screamed. He couldn't be sure.

His eyes readjusted to the darkness surrounding the end of the room.

Lauren stood there, bouncing little Lizzy on her left hip.

"Hey, honey," he sighed.

She moved towards him. "Look who decided it was time to wake up?"

"Sorry, guess I must have woken her again," he said, reaching out for the baby, to which Lauren nodded *no*, continuing to bounce her. "Honey, did you notice these boxes when we first moved in?"

She glanced down at the box marked "Denny" and toward the others. "I don't know, maybe. I think I assumed they were yours, though."

He pulled the tape back over the flaps, picked up the box and stood up to place it back where it was.

"Maybe I'll drop them off at the Goodwill or something tomor—" he began to say.

"What?" Lauren said.

"Aren't you a little bit curious to see what's inside?"

Lauren adjusted the baby on her hip. "Not when I have to go to work in a couple hours."

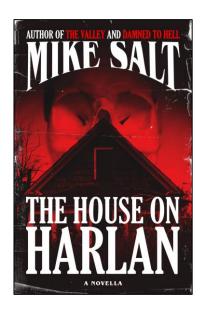
"Sorry," Alex said, finally placing the box back where he found it. "I'll see if the landlords have any way of contacting the previous tenants. If not, I'll donate them."

Lauren gave him a smile that reminded him of why he had fallen in love with her back in high school. She was dead-ass tired, slightly annoyed, but through all that, the smile lit her up. She was gorgeous.

"Let's get to bed," Alex said as he approached her and the baby, kissing each of them on the forehead.

He reached over and switched off the floodlights.

No work was getting done tonight.



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**Featured Novella** *The House on Harlan* 

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