

Winter 2023/2024

issue 64

A Dark Fiction

A Horror Zine!

Short Stories, Flash Fiction, Poetry, and Artwork

Mike Lera's Corridor of Horror: A Kaiju King!

Featured Artist: Judson Michael Agla

Featured Project: Hellcat Woodcraft

Featured Author: Briana Morgan

Featured Book:

'The Reyes

Incident'

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Dead Man Breathing | Armand Rosamilia

Trinity thought the people outside the prison walls, holding signs and shouting lame slogans, were the real criminals. They'd arrived hours ago, chanting so loudly you could hear them in the bowels of the prison.

The inmates above had joined in with the chanting, although Trinity supposed they were doing it more to be ironic. One of their own, one of the more famous, was about to ride the lightning.

She forgot where she'd heard that expression. It seemed fitting, since Jordan Michael Shultz was about to die. Within a few minutes, in fact. Strapped down and deadly voltage pulsing through his body until he was no more.

The bastard had killed at least six people, and likely more. He'd initially claimed a body count of nearly a hundred, but in the end no more than the six could be proven via DNA or other means. Because he'd told the police, FBI, his cellmates and anyone else who'd listen about all of the others he'd killed, this death penalty case had dragged on for years.

Trinity knew what he was doing, too. He was trying to prolong the inevitable, until the state overturned the ruling and gave him life in prison.

Shultz's moves were obvious, but they had to be looked into. Due diligence. The process needed to stretch to the end, until there were no more lies from the killer, no more jukes from his lawyers.

Nothing but the chair Trinity was staring at right now, seated in the front row. The room was packed with family from the six dead, as well as a few others who firmly believed Shultz had killed their loved one.

Two minutes to midnight. One hundred and twenty seconds for the phone to ring and the governor to pardon this killer.

Shultz was led inside and he was smiling. He looked right at Trinity and licked his lips, even though he couldn't see through the one-way glass.

There had been a delay. Something was happening, someone said. Rumors of putting off the execution had been whispered about for the past hour or so, while the families huddled together in a cement room with nothing but chairs and a coffee maker to keep them company.

Phones had been turned off and placed inside a wall safe. No recording of this at all.

Trinity's father had been murdered by Shultz, twenty years ago. She was in first grade when it happened, her father a police officer. He'd run into Shultz while he was peeking into an elderly woman's window. No official word of what happened after that, as far as Trinity knew.

Wrong place, wrong time. That's what her mother had said. Not a day went by that the poor woman didn't tear up thinking about her husband.

Trinity always felt lost and incomplete. Her mother had spent half of Trinity's life either in a bottle or curled up in her bed for days. The pain was endless.

Shultz was strapped into the chair, still smiling.

The clock turned over to midnight.

The phone didn't ring.

Trinity didn't hear the chanting outside the walls anymore. Maybe they'd stopped at midnight. Maybe they knew it was over for the killer.

"Any last words?"

Shultz scanned those in the other room with his grin, his long straggly hair and beard shaved off. His eyes gleamed. Even though he couldn't actually see anyone, Trinity noted a few people leaned back in their chairs. So did she.

"I'll be back." Shultz did his best Ahnold voice with a chuckle. He turned to the men in the room. "Let's get some frying going, huh? I'm looking forward to seeing what happens next."

A few people grumbled in the room with Trinity, and a guard behind them cleared his throat. There should be no noise and no talking.

Trinity forced herself to watch as they prepared Shultz, wondering what the last thing her father saw before he was killed. What any of his victims had seen last.

No one made a sound as they threw the switch and Shultz began to squirm.

And squirm.

He finally stopped and the men in the room rushed over and checked his vitals.

Shultz coughed and everyone groaned. How was he not dead yet?

Twice more they filled him with raw current. His fingers and toes were charred, the leather straps smoking.

Shultz was still alive.

The doctor and the guards conferred. They told the crowd there was going to be a delay.

Trinity was the first to stand when the lights in the execution room went dark. She could hear movement and thought she heard Shultz laugh.

"I told you boys," Shultz clearly said, which got everyone talking at once. The guard didn't even try to shush them, looking equally confused.

Trinity asked to leave, and the guard said she could only go into the next room where the coffee maker was. Fine with her. She asked for her phone and the guard reluctantly gave it to her, letting her know, if the proceedings continued, she'd need to place her phone back into the safe.

Several others asked for their phones, too.

Trinity didn't make a call, she checked the news. Maybe someone had already made an announcement about it.

She gasped when she saw some of the headlines.

The dead were coming back to life. Instantly.

A video of a man struck by a car and thrown fifty feet through a window of a store stands up and dusts himself off, despite his intestines slipping from the gash across his midsection. His neck and arms sliced up. He fell back down, seemingly dead, but then rose up again.

"What is happening?" A woman near Trinity was looking at a video on her phone, this time a shaking shot of an older woman rising from her coffin at a funeral. "Is this a horror movie thing?"

Trinity kept updating her phone and was shaking.

The dead were rising. All over the world. Over and over, they'd sit up or stand, beginning to move for a few seconds. Then they'd fall back down, dead.

Only to rise again for a few more seconds each time, as if...

Trinity shook her head. How was Shultz alive? How were any of these people still breathing?

And she could see they were still breathing, based on a few of the videos. They weren't like zombies. Not undead. They weren't moaning to eat your brains, they looked confused but still alive.

It made no sense.

"They're back," someone said.

Trinity rushed back into the room with everyone else and took her seat again.

Shultz was strapped to the chair, still grinning. "I told ya, you can't kill me. When I get out of here, I'm gonna find every last one of you, and do to you even worse than what I did to your family members." He threw his head back and laughed.

The woman next to Trinity threw up, spraying the glass and her dress.

They tried to kill Shultz again but he was still alive, laughing a few seconds later.

"Stop this madness," someone moaned behind Trinity. "This is sick and uncalled for now."

She had to agree. If he wasn't going to die, if no one was going to die, why keep trying?

The lights went out again and everyone was ushered back to the other room, where they were all given their phones and told to wait for further instruction.

Trinity wondered what this meant, and unfortunately she was finding out by watching even more videos on social media.

A teenager swan-dove off of a five-story building and got up with a laugh, his body wrecked. Reports were saying people were beginning to heal, their bodies reforming right before your eyes.

A man let loose with an assault rifle in a busy supermarket, but the people got back up and he took them down again and again.

"We can just... die?" It was an older woman, shaking her head. Trinity detected a small smile on the woman's face.

Trinity worried the world would go insane. If you could kill people at will, if you could die and come back to life without repercussions... what did this all mean?

"Oh, no," someone else said.

Trinity realized what they were watching and found it herself.

A police officer had been shot several times but kept coming back to life, shooting back at the two men assaulting him.

The officer's eyes turned a bright red. He began shrieking, the sound so guttural Trinity thought he was going to shred his vocal cords.

"It's happening to a lot of them." It was the guard in the room with them, looking at his phone. "Like they're possessed."

Trinity shook her head. Video after video showed the same thing: the dead were not only still alive, but now they were attacking everyone, their bodies contorting and snapping apart into bizarre and grotesque forms.

Heads sunk into the chests, extra limbs growing from their backs, thick black fur, massive jaws, several eyes... it was sickening. The red eyes and the sounds emanating were unsettling, to say the least.

Trinity knew they needed to stay put. The world outside was insane right now.

A small woman began to pray, rapidly.

"The dead shall walk the earth," another woman said, nodding her head with her eyes closed. "Hell's gates have been thrown open."

Trinity didn't know if that was a fact, but it sounded near enough to be true.

People were turning into monsters, twisted creatures, attacking more and more people. Infecting them to spread out and do it over and over.

"We need to leave," the guard yelled. "Follow me."

Trinity knew if they left the prison they'd be killed and turned into demons, too.

She stayed behind with only two or three others, going back into the other room and sitting down, watching the chaos unfold on their phones.

The lights came back on and Trinity dropped her phone.

Jordan Michael Shultz was back, alone, covered in blood. His neck had grown at least a foot and he had tentacles writhing from his torso, at least a dozen.

He laughed as he charged, throwing his bulk against the glass separating the two rooms.

Trinity saw the crack spread across the glass, knowing the next hit was going to break it.

Knowing she had nowhere to go.

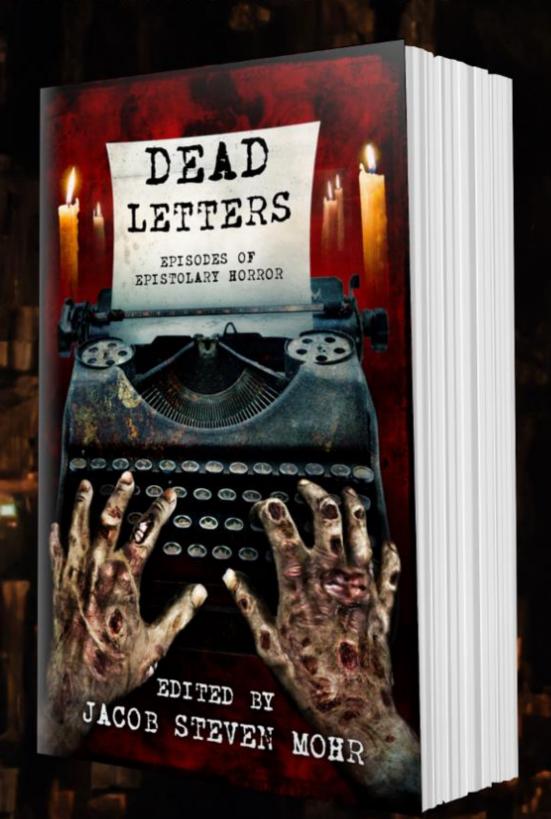
About the Author:

Armand Rosamilia is a full-time crime thriller and horror author living in Jacksonville Florida, but he's still a New Jersey boy at heart. He has over 200 releases to his name, with many more coming.

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"The joy here is that there is no bad story in this entire book." - Cat Treadwell



Available on Kindle, paperback, hardcover, and Kindle Unlimited.

Cold Day in Hell | Merry Marcellino

Asmodeus surveyed the flaming landscape, the cries of the tormented making his heart sing. Nothing made him happier than the suffering wails of the damned souls of Hell, his domain. Demon magic crackled in his world as wicked humans, flesh no longer covering them, submitted to their task masters over and over again. Unable to control their fate, they succumbed to pain day in and day out.

Everywhere he looked, fire and brimstone burned, the bottomless pit of his home, giving him reassurance of his place in the hierarchy of his brethren.

His eye caught a flicker of white far from his throne on the edge of his domain. Was it light? It couldn't be. Light could not live in the depths of Hell.

He shrugged it off. "Must be my imagination. I've been working too hard."

Maybe it was time for a trip to the surface. The only thing he enjoyed more than torturing souls in Hell was becoming a corporeal being to wreak havoc on earth.

Tempting humans to gamble beyond their means was a favorite of his. He could couple with earth females and create more half-demons, those who would do his bidding and spread more chaos.

He rubbed his hands together as he formed a plan, details shaping in his mind. But his attention was once again drawn to the white that seemed to have spread.

"What is this?" He stood, eyeing the brightness like it was the plague. Eyes wide, he followed the trail, tracking its movement over familiar territory he'd always known to have hot lava boiling from its surface.

As the infestation claimed more of his kingdom, the bluish whiteness snuffed out the fires. He then realized it was ice.

"How can this be?" He didn't want any foreign brightness invading his peace.

"Rachak!"

"Yes, Sire."

The weaselly demon bowed before him. He was annoying but served him well when it was beneficial to himself.

"What is the light that invades our space?" He pointed.

"I do not know Sire."

"Check it out."

"Yes Sire." He was off like a shot and Asmodeus continued admiring his land.

Screams, not of the souls, had him searching for the source.

The white was spreading. Low-level demons and the lowly spirits paused as the frost covered them, some ran only to be overtaken by the icy substance, frozen in place. Rachak raced from the monstrous brightness, only to be consumed.

Asmodeus shivered as the chill air reached him. He folded his arms, rubbing them to keep this evil disease from taking him. Rachak was gone. Dread filled him. If whatever this problem was could take out Rachak, what would it do to other higher demons?

How could he fight such a thing?

"Hell does not have ice. Hell is not cold." His brows formed a 'v' as he contemplated what could be causing this abhorrence.

"Beelzebub! Come here!"

Beelzebub appeared before him.

"What is this atrocity?"

"I don't know, my brother. There are rumors that the One from above has come to reclaim us."

"What?" This could not be. This was not claiming. This was annihilation.

Beelzebub shivered, his crimson skin growing lighter.

"Why would the one above come for us now?"

Asmodeus had never been contacted by the One they did not mention. His own father, a celestial being, and his mother a damned soul from earth, had never spoken of the power above. His father abandoned him, as self-righteous as his creator. His mother died instantly when he left her womb, leaving him to fend for himself.

He had no faith in the creator who would abandon him. Separation from the One they called The Light did not give him pause at all. He counted himself lucky to be away from those wretched creatures pining for salvation.

Demons screamed in pain as the light covered his beautiful blazing land.

Asmodeus reached out his arm, red sparking from his body as he poured magic into the ground and rocks around him. He would not lose his territory.

His skin, the tone more like a human's, reddened from the fires he created to undo the wretched ice that threatened all he held dear. He would not lose his place.

His minions called to him and his brother.

"Help us Asmodeus! Beelzebub! Save us!" But they were engulfed in the endless snowy substance that he could not contain.

"Curse you!" Could the pestilence take over the whole of Hell? It spread so rapidly it would reach them soon.

"Come, brother. Let us retreat to the sanctuary." Beelzebub raced away with Asmodeus on his heels, joining their brothers.

Demons from every corner of Hell flocked to be granted admission to the sanctuary, leaving souls to be crushed by the cold. Frozen souls and demons alike were shattered as those fleeing for their lives crashed into the fragile ice statues they'd become.

The smothering white choked the land, climbing into the rocks where the residents of Hell waited, not sure what to do. Battering gusts of wind joined the raging storm, taking with it everything in its path.

Asmodeus wracked his brain in disbelief that such a thing could happen. Did the One above have control over Hell? That was not possible. This was their realm with the sinful of humanity, writhing in torment, desperate to escape but none was forthcoming.

He appealed to his brothers. "We must join our magic to save our kingdom. This realm will cease to exist without the perpetual fires to keep us warm, without souls to torture. That is our purpose."

They grumbled amongst themselves but agreed to help Asmodeus save their precious Hell.

Together they clasped hands and claws, growled in their throats as they chanted the spell to banish the awful cold and restore their beloved netherworld. Flames licked their hands, overtaking their bodies as the searing blaze spread to cover the stone floor of their sanctuary.

First it seemed that the fires pushed back on the whiteness, and it receded, but then the frigid icy light came at them full force.

"Run!" He told his minions. Where they would go he didn't know, but he would stay and fight.

He didn't understand. He wracked his brain trying to think of some way to beat back the icy presence threatening to smother them.

One by one, his brothers were taken by the freezing light, no matter how hard they fought. Some ran with the lower demons. He stayed.

He turned to Beelzebub but before any words left his mouth, Beelzebub slammed a shard of ice into Asmodeus' heart.

Asmodeus staggered, his eyes widening in disbelief. His hands wrapped around the spike as he tried to pull it free. White spread over his skin.

"Why, my brother..." He sputtered and black oozed from his mouth. "Why would you betray us?" Beelzebub watched his brother as Asmodeus fell to the floor.

"Because I am weary of this existence. I have been offered salvation and I will not let you or any of our brothers rob me of finally being free from this forsaken place."

Asmodeus could not believe what he was hearing. Beelzebub, his brother, not only leaving Hell, but going to the Light? The pain of his wound did not hurt as badly as this treachery.

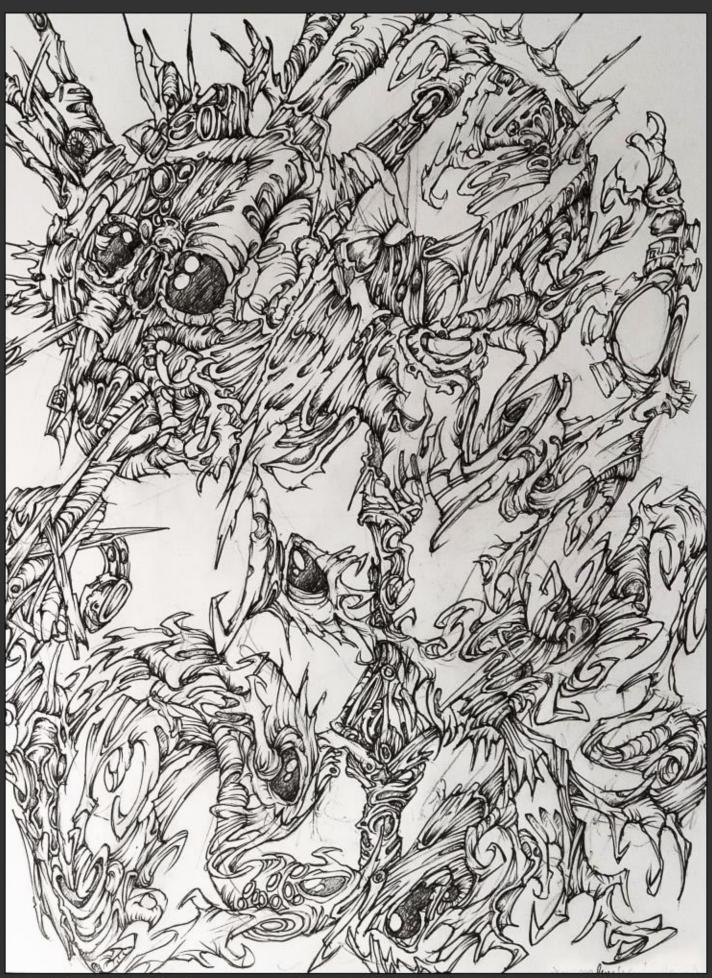
Asmodeus coughed as the fire died from his eyes and his body became one of the statues of ice.

Beelzebub closed his eyes as The Light pulled him up, out of Hell, and he was lighter. No longer weighed down by the sins of his brethren or himself, he smiled into the brightness of the One above as below him, Hell vanished.

About the Author:

Merry Marcellino lives in New Jersey in the US and works a full-time job as the Coordinator of Ministries at her church, while writing in her spare time. She has recently been published in Siren's Call Publications, Halloween Issue, 2023. She currently has self-published her first novel, Demons and Shifters and Me. Oh My! Her writing focuses on paranormal romance.

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The Little Black Book | Hillary Lyon

The gym's lost and found box was a lidless wire concern, situated near the check-in counter. Mostly, it contained piles of forgotten t-shirts, sunglasses, and personalized water bottles. This Monday morning, one gym patron was digging frantically through the pile, tossing the random contents aside like a dog digging in dirt.

"Excuse me, sir," said the young woman watching behind the counter, interrupting the man's search, "is there something I may help you with? Maybe if you tell me what you're looking for . . ." Sonja was more than a little annoyed with his behavior, as she assumed he wouldn't bother to put all the discarded items back in the bin. It would be one more demeaning job among many, picking up after the thoughtless, coddled slobs who used this gym.

"My book," he replied, his rough voice muffled by his black sweatshirt's hood, which he wore pulled up.

"Oh," she answered with evident boredom. All this fuss over a book, she mentally snarked. You'd think he'd lost something valuable, like his smart watch or cell phone. She backed away from the desk and moved towards a file cabinet situated against the wall behind her. "Let me look back here, sometimes the guy who comes on shift after me puts lost books and tablets in this drawer."

"It's extremely valuable to *me*," he gruffly answered without looking up. In a move that surprised Sonja, he gathered all the discarded items and dumped them back into the lost and found box.

She pulled open the bottom drawer of the file cabinet; it groaned. "There's a ton of books in here." Sonja picked up a random book and examined the cover. *Faeries and Flintlocks*. Why anyone would want to read this twee fantasy dreck was beyond her. Sonja prided herself in her refined taste in books; she was an English Lit major at the local college, after all.

Turning her attention back to the assortment in the drawer, Sonja then asked as she sifted through more books, "So, what's the name of this book? Is it paperback, or hardback?" She picked a tablet from the pile and surreptitiously set it aside; later, she'd stuff it in her backpack and take it home. With what they paid her for working here, she couldn't afford a new one. This tablet would make a nice replacement for her old one.

"No name, no title," the man said, approaching the counter. "It's just a small black book. Leather bound, gold leaf edging the pages." He leaned over the counter, stretching his neck in an attempt to see the contents of the drawer for himself. "It's about the size of my palm, and most of the pages are blank."

Ah, Sonja wondered to herself, so it's his diary? She glanced at the man. Surprising herself, Sonja noted he was attractive enough, in an old movie-villain kind of way—if you disregarded the dark circles under his eyes, and his gaunt frame. Maybe he's recovering from an illness, she pondered, or has an eating disorder. I've seen, working here, that men can have body issues, too.

Nevertheless, he carried an air of undeniable authority and power that she found oddly enticing, if a bit intimidating. He didn't appear to be the sort of guy who'd keep a diary, but rather . . . a little black book listing the contact information of his playmates and conquests. Or perhaps a trove of blackmail information he kept on sleazy business associates.

No wonder he's desperate to find it! Who knows what names are listed in there. Could be very scandalous. She rose from the drawer and shrugged. "Sorry, but there's nothing like that in there."

He flipped back his hood and scowled. "I *know* I had it with me when I was here yesterday." He was completely bald, and his head gleamed under the gym's fluorescent lights. The dark circles under his eyes deepened into cavernous shadows.

"Did you use a locker?" Sonja twirled a strand of her long dirty blonde hair. She was bored with this hunt, and wanted to flirt to alleviate that boredom. "Maybe you left it in there?"

The man leaned in close to Sonja and glared. "No, I wouldn't put my book in a *locker*." His breath had the faint aroma of cold, moist, freshly turned earth. Instinctively, Sonja leaned back, away from him.

"Okay, okay, sorry," Sonja apologized, practically whimpering under his icy stare. So flirting was off the

table.

"God dammit, after all these years—and I mean like thousands of years!—I now have to start a new one." He glowered at Sonja as the thought crossed his mind: *Did she take it?* He squinted at her, sizing her up, scanning her vitals. She appeared to be a very healthy young person. "My boss is *not* going to happy." Abruptly, he turned away and made for the gym's exit. "I'll see *you* tomorrow," he said over his shoulder as he stomped out the door.

A slight grin crossed Sonja's lips as the doors closed behind him. She knew exactly where that little black book was—it was back at her apartment, stashed with her collection of trinket-trophies she'd lifted from the pampered clientele here. Rich people were so spoiled, so self-centered, it made her feel empowered, righteous even, to steal from them. Besides, they usually didn't even notice what they'd lost.

She hadn't opened his little black book yet, but she would tonight.

Sonja grabbed a can of micro-brew beer from the fridge in her tiny kitchen, popped the top on the way to her sofa. She set the beer down on her second-hand coffee table, and opening up her backpack, dumped the contents on the couch.

The pile before her was mostly objects she'd pilfered from the lost and found—a pair of designer sunglasses, an orange and yellow *Ski Angel Fire* t-shirt, a well-thumbed murder mystery pocket book. And that mysterious little black leather book.

Sonja shoved her stolen treasures aside, and grabbed the black book. She took a long pull on her beer, then leaned back and put her feet up on the coffee table. She burped, and opened the book.

Initially, she noticed the book's pages were thin—as thin as the pages in her Grandmother's old Bible. But she couldn't identify what material the pages were made from; it wasn't regular paper, but something older, or more exotic. Parchment? Vellum? Papyrus? Some sort of tissue?

The first dozen pages were filled with such absurdly elaborate handwriting that it was difficult to read. And what minuscule lettering, as well! It more resembled the decorative flourishes of calligraphy, the sort you'd find in medieval illustrated manuscripts, than modern handwriting. The remainder of the book's pages were blank. Frustrated, she tossed the book aside.

She needed a magnifying glass, for Pete's sake, to get a better look at the hand-written pages. She had one in her kitchen junk drawer.

Pawing through the cluttered drawer, Sonja at last found the magnifier at the back, but not before she knicked her finger on the blade of an uncapped Exacto knife. She plopped back down on the couch and absent-mindedly sucked the blood from her finger.

Closer examination yielded no new insights; the calligraphy remained inscrutable for the most part. Sonja was able to recognize several numbers, but the strings were too short to be phone numbers. Maybe addresses? In her absolute concentration on the book's elaborate scribble-scrabble, she didn't notice the tiny smear of blood she'd left on the bottom of the last page of entries.

Disappointed there was nothing legible, much less salacious, inside the tiny tome, she closed the book and threw it on the coffee table. She'd return it to the gym's lost and found tomorrow, and give it back to Mister Gloom (as she thought of the gym's scowly patron) when she saw him next.

"You have my book." Sonja didn't need to look up from the glowing screen of her phone; she knew who possessed that deep and raspy voice. A chill trickled down her spine.

She put her phone down and looked up at Mr. Gloom, smiling brightly as she did. "I do indeed," she chirped, "I saw it in the lost and found book drawer just this morning!"

He held his thin hand out to her, palm up. The universal gesture for 'gimme'.

Sonja pulled out the black book from under the counter. He snatched it from her hands and immediately began scanning the pages. His shoulders relaxed. *No pages missing!* Sonja supposed this realization was the source of his relief. . . until he came to the last page of entries.

He raised the book closer to his emaciated face, squinting his deep-set Vantablack eyes. He looked up at Sonja, then back down at the page. "There's a smudge," he whispered hoarsely." It's been marred, defaced—contaminated."

"What?" Sonja awkwardly half-laughed. "Don't know how that happened. It's just as I found it." She gave an exaggerated shrug. "Maybe it's always been there, and you just didn't notice before now."

Mr. Gloom brought the book even closer to his face. He sniffed the tiny dark splotch. He then touched it with the tip of his tongue. "Hmm," he grunted. His eyes met Sonja's.

Ew, he is so disgusting, Sonja thought. Wish he'd just get the Hell outta here. "Well, you have your book—mystery solved," she said, adopting her professional tone of impersonal glee. "Have a good work out!"

Before she could turn away from Mr. Gloom, he whipped his hand around her wrist and jerked her towards him, almost pulling her across the countertop. He leaned in and sniffed her neck; Sonja was too surprised to pull away.

"This stain on this page in my book. . . this smear of biological vandalism . . . this is *your* blood!" He licked his thin dry lips. Sonja leaned back away from him, and made a weak attempt at shaking her wrist free of his grip. He was too strong; his grasp was like an iron manacle, cold and impossible to break.

"You've made an entry in my book," he hissed though clenched teeth.

"It was an accident," Sonja stammered. "I didn't mean to. I didn't even realize that I'd—"

He smiled and relaxed his grip. But he didn't let go. "You don't seem to comprehend," he said as his smile widened, "that you are listed in my little black book, and—"

"And what?" Sonja snorted. She looked around the gym for witnesses, she was for sure going to complain to management, maybe even file a police report. But the gym was empty this early in the morning.

"And now," Mr. Gloom said, rising up to his full freakish height, "that means I must do my job."

Before Sonja could ask what his job was, before she could retort with a snarky come-back, Mr. Gloom raised her from the floor by her wrist, and with his now gaping black hole of a mouth, covered her nose and lips—and inhaled deeply, smothering her in the blink of an eye. Her life winked out, and her soul fled to a more comforting realm.

He let go of her arm, and she tumbled to the floor behind the counter. She now resembled a crumpled pile of laundry—or a clump of clothes tossed in the lost and found bin—instead of a toned young woman. He leaned over the counter to contemplate his handiwork.

"They always taste so sweet when they're young and healthy," he said aloud to no one. Having dropped the disguise of being human, he pulled up the hood of his sweatshirt to hide his now unmistakable skull. He then opened his little black book, and with the tip of his bony finger, scratched her name and date of death next to the blood smear on the small, tissue-thin page. Satisfied with the completion of this unexpected job, he turned from the counter and walking on the tips of his toes, exited the gym and danced out into the rainy day.

About the Author:

With a Masters in English Lit, Hillary Lyon founded and for 20 years acted as senior editor for the independent poetry publisher, Subsynchronous Press. Her speculative fiction, science fiction, horror, and crime short stories and poems have appeared in numerous print and online publications. She's also an SFPA Rhysling Award nominated poet. When not writing, Hillary is the assistant art director for *Black Petals*.

Blog: Hillary Lyon

The Christmas Sweater | Donna Cuttress

Snow had begun to fall. Fat, white flakes hissed as they landed on the lid of the barbeque. Thin lines of grey smoke slowly drifted from beneath it, mixing with Sharon's freezing breath. She couldn't understand why the barbeque was hot. What's cooking in there? she thought. Slowly, she reached out to grab the handle on the metal dome. The skin on her fingers burned, she winced at the intense pain. Undeterred, she wrapped the sleeve of her sweater over her hand and tentatively touched the handle again to lift it. Snow melted as it landed on the hot grill. Steam billowed, obscuring her view, then dissipated around her. It was then Sharon saw it. She inhaled, biting her lip trying not to scream out. Resting on the grill, was the head of her mother-in-law, Louisa.

She looked immaculate, as she always did. Her long hair was snatched back in a chignon, while her eyes were closed in a peaceful repose. Sharon slowly reached out to touch her cheek, but blood dripped from Louisa's neck onto the white-hot coals. The blood sizzled and spat. Louisa's eyes opened! She stared at Sharon, then bared her teeth and hissed like a cat. Sharon screamed, feeling a pain in her lungs while dropping the lid of the barbeque over her mother-in-law. She woke up sweating, still hearing the echoing laughter of Louisa. The stench of burnt hair seemed to fill the bedroom.

Martin nearly splashed Sharon with the lighter fuel as he doused the papers resting on the grill. She pushed him, trying not to shout, "Be careful! Idiot!" He was sweating, his pudgy hands shook as he continued ripping the papers. "Tear it smaller, we don't want anyone to be able to read anything!" Sharon whispered. He wiped the sweat from his moustache. Paper pieces cascaded into the bowl of the barbeque, resting on the charred coals.

"We need to get this finished before she wakes up!" Sharon's hands were getting cold. She was sure she stunk of lighter fuel. Louisa would smell it for sure. Martin would break if she mentioned it. He was weak, only happy when he was watching football and gambling on the outcome. After her nightmare she felt as though paranoia was consuming her.

"Stand back." She struck a match but the flame disappeared. Martin wiped his hands down the front of his sweater. "You do realise what we're doing is very wrong don't you?" he asked on the verge of tears. Sharon struck another match and dropped it onto the torn papers. They ignited. An orange ball of flame rose up with a whooshing sound. The soggy pyre began to burn. She watched it for a few seconds, seeing flashes of Louisa's head from her nightmare on the grill. The eyes were open and watching her, staring unblinking. Sharon dropped the rusted dome of the barbeque over the flames, hoping it was not visible to the house. "Don't worry Martin, Mummy won't be here to object." As they hurried into the house the first snowflakes began to fall, blanketing the garden except for the barbeque.

Louisa had heard them sneaking into the garden. She had woken from a fitful sleep. Too many suspicions had led to nightmares. In the depth of the night, she had thought someone was in the room with her, feeling their breath on her cheek. When she woke, her spare pillow had moved, from the armchair to her bed, again.

She grabbed the binoculars that stood on her bedside cabinet. Louisa had told Sharon and Martin that she wished to birdwatch in the garden, in reality she wanted to keep an eye on them. She watched as they ripped up the papers. They looked cold despite the sweaters they had on. They had been given as gifts, something she knew they would hate, yet wear just to please her. Now, they looked out of place, Christmas had been and gone. They're wearing them now, because they don't want to get their ordinary clothes dirty, she thought, and they're very easily disposable. She watched Martin squirting something over the papers from a yellow bottle. Sharon struck a match. It fizzled out. She struck another. Louisa watched the fireball roll into the sky. The flames looked beautiful in the bleakness of the winter garden. She knew what they were doing. A smile slowly formed on her thin wizened lips.

They rushed to their bedroom intending to change. It won't be long before we can leave this place and escape to the other side of the world! she thought, I may even dump him, once the cash is in the bank! There was a thud from Mummy's bedroom. Martin rushed to check on her, Sharon stood outside their room,

waiting. "Mummy has fallen out of bed! Call an ambulance!" Sharon covered her mouth, trying not to expose her smile. Everything was going to plan, she just didn't realise it would be this quick.

The house was quiet. Martin was at the hospital with Mother. Sharon had told him she would follow them. She crept outside to the barbeque, "Is is done?" she whispered, "Have they all burned?" Sharon lifted the lid and peeked. The will and papers were curled and blackened. She touched some with her forefinger. It crumbled, leaving her finger covered in ash. "All done." She wiped her finger on her sweater front leaving a long black streak across Santa's face. "Damn!" The sweater began to itch. She stretched the neck, feeling like she couldn't breathe. Once inside the house she pulled off the sweater, and immediately felt *free*. "Horrible smelly thing!" she shouted as she put on a sweatshirt. "In fact, *it* can burn as well!"

She ran outside into the snow, threw off the lid of the barbeque and dropped the sweater onto the grill. She got the lighter fuel from the shed and doused the sweater with it. The struck match caught it instantly. The multicoloured synthetic fibres began to melt. Sharon laughed, almost slipping on the thick snow beneath her feet. The sweater continued to burn, spewing opaque grey smoke. She began to cough. Her lungs heaved as they began to burn. She tried to breathe but couldn't, gasping as her throat constricted. The ground spun, she felt dizzy and stumbled about the garden until she fell, landing face first into the snow. Her eyes flickered then closed, as the cold began to seep into her body. Her breath rattled, blood bubbled at the corners of her mouth. She could hear voices. It was Martin! Martin would help.

"Is she dead yet?" That was Louisa! "Nearly there, I think Mummy." A foot nudged her ankle. The snow began to fall heavier now. Sharon could feel her lungs disintegrating. Something poisoned me... The sweater. The Christmas sweater has poisoned me!

"How did you know she would burn the sweater, Mummy?" Martin went and got a shovel from the shed.

"I didn't. I've been poisoning her Christmas sweater for years! Just had to make this the worst one yet. Make it so ugly and itchy she *had* to burn it. After you put it in her head to burn my new will, well it was just a matter of time and *hope*."

"I should drag her inside shouldn't I? I'll dig a hole tomorrow, Mummy. We can bury her with the others."

"Don't think so, son. Ground will be frozen by then."

They stood staring at the now unidentifiable mound of Sharon shaped snow, then slowly they turned, distracted by the still warm barbeque.

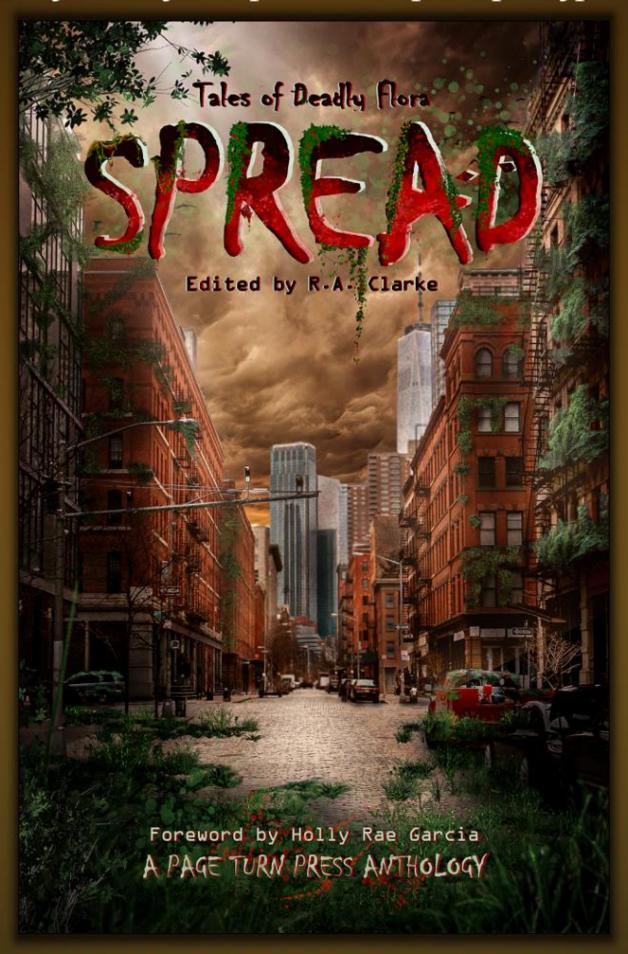
About the Author:

Donna Cuttress is from Liverpool, U.K. Previous publishers include Sirens Call Publications, Black Hare Press, Celestial Press, Firbolg, Nocturnal Sirens, Darkstroke's 'Dark Anthologies' & Flame Tree Publishing's Gothic series. Her work for The Patchwork Raven is available as an artbook. She has been a speaker at the London Book Fair. Her work with Red Cape publishing's A-Z of Horror is available on kindle, paperback and Audible.

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Are you ready to experience the plant-pocalypse?



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Hexed Descent | *Chris McAuley*

New York City, 1995

The city stood at the precipice of a digital revolution. In the sultry mid-September night, Madison Avenue pulsed with life. As Sarah walked the busy streets, she could feel the rhythm of progress pulse through her body. Her soul was both tethered to the arcane and the new digital revolution. The neon lights of the bars and clubs reflected on her mirror shades and her relaxed posture and slightly parted lips projected a perfect air of calculated detachment.

Her chunky combat boots echoed through the maze of narrow alleyways as she stepped onto the cracked pavements of the Lower East Side. The cityscape sprawled before her like a cyberpunk dreamscape brought to life. New York had become what Baudrillard had projected with its glowing signs piercing the obsidian sky, it was now blending with the mythic 'desert of the real'. Sarah caught glimpses of surreal, fractured light reflecting onto the grimy sidewalks. It was the perfect depiction of the famous truism caught within the Hermetic tablets centuries ago – 'As Above, So Below'.

The cacophony of angry car horns and syncopated footsteps of passersby formed an auditory tapestry that was unique to New York. The streets teemed with people, clad in an eclectic mix of grunge, hip-hop, and business suits. Sarah's black leather jacker and silver pentagram necklace seemed both timeless and strangely apropos amidst the diverse crowd.

Analog payphones, their booths graffitied with layers of urban hieroglyphics, dotted the sidewalks like ancient relics. Sarah passed one and couldn't help but feel a pang of nostalgia for a time when communication wasn't instant and omnipresent.

Sarah turned the corner beside the dingy restaurant barely paying notice to the sign which proudly announced that it had been family owned for over fifty years. She found herself at the entrance of an alley which was bathed in an eerie, cerulean light. Above her, a holographic billboard projected the latest technological marvel – a sleek pocket-sized cellular phone that promised to connect users to a world beyond imagination.

Inside the alley's dimly lit confines, Sarah's footsteps echoed softly against damp brick walls adored with a profusion of aged, half-peeled posters advertising long-forgotten concerts and vacuous art shows. The air was thick with the scent of decay, a palpable reminder of the urban sprawl's relentless march forward.

Sarah's feet led her deeper into the alley's labyrinthine twists, each shadowed corner revealing layers of urban detritus – discarded wires, ancient computer parts, and graffiti that pulsed with digital tribalism. Her senses attuned themselves to the faint hum of unseen machinery as she followed the ethereal glow of cerulean light leading her to the sanctuary.

After a few moments, she found herself standing in front of a series of cryptic sigils painted along a red brick. The intricate design, a fusion of circuitry and occult forms seemed to shift and undulate like a living entity. It was a mark of convergence, a testament to the Technopagan's creed that the digital realm was as sacred as the natural world. Its subtle interplay with her neurology beckoned her forward, Sarah hesitated only for a moment before stepping through the threshold. She passed through the seemingly solid brickwork as if it had been an open door. The transition was seamless as she passed through the veil between two worlds.

The sigil wasn't just a symbol, it was a transcendent interface between the digital and physical worlds. As Sarah stepped through the gateway her first sensation was akin to being plunged into an icy river, an initial shock followed by a deep, immersive sensation. Her consciousness seemed to dissolve, breaking down into streams of data. It was as if her very essence was being converted into bits and bytes. There was no sense of direction of physicality, only the profound awareness that she was in transition, a fleeting presence in a space that defied the laws of physics.

In this digital realm, her perception underwent a profound shift. Colors became more vivid, sounds reverberated across her body and time flowed with a surreal elasticity. She could feel the neon-lit cityscape of New York pulse with a vibrant energy, as if it were a living entity.

The Technopagan science behind this transformation was grounded in the fusion of ancient rituals and advanced computer algorithms. Cryptic sigils dotted across the city's landscape served as a metaphysical bridge, interfacing with an array of sensors and transducers embedded in the alleyways and walls. These interacted with

Sarah's innate magickal gifts and initiated a sequence of events that translated her physical form into a digital representation.

As Sarah moved through this realm she saw the city in a state of perpetual flux, its skyscrapers adorned with ever-shifting patterns of neon displays. Glitches and flickering holographic advertisements painted the sky in vivid, electric hues. The city's soundscape, once filled with the clamor of car horns, had transformed into a symphony of data streams and synthetic rhythms.

Sarah marveled at her own reflection in the reflective surfaces of nearby digital billboards. Her attire, a blend of punk aesthetics and occult symbolism, seemed to dance with virtual sigils. The very fabric of her black leather jacket shifted like liquid obsidian, and her silver pentagram necklace pulsed with an inner luminance.

She moved towards this realm's representation of St. Patrick's Cathedral. Inside she found herself in a reimagined sacred space. A congregation of avatars adorned in robes woven with optical fibers and mystic symbols. They chanted in binary, their voices weaving a digital tapestry of incantations that reverberated through the virtual air. A spectral figure emerged from this ethereal tribe, a digital apparition, a representation of a figure that Sarah had seen long ago in faded pictures from her father's long forgotten photo albums. The ghostly image beckoned to her, its form flickering like a corrupted video feed.

"Sarah," The spectral figure intoned with a voice that seemed to resonate from within the very core of cyberspace. "You walk the path of the Technomage. In this realm, past and future collide, and the secrets of our family are laid bare."

Sarah's heart raced as she gazed upon the apparition, she felt a sense of reverence and trepidation coursing through her. She felt that this entity held the keys to unlocking the enigmatic forces that would shape her destiny as a witch.

"I am the echo of your bloodline, a vestige of the Blackwood witches who walked this path thousands of years before you. I have been called forth to guide you, to reveal the ancient secrets that will assist you to wield your powers wisely. But beware, for there are powers here that seek to corrupt and consume. You must defeat them in order to preserve the future of our bloodline, for its fate and that of this realm are now intertwined."

Sarah almost flinched as the digital ghost reached out and touched her forehead. Sarah began to feel knowledge course through her. Patterns composed of ethereal code traced spaces within her mind. Ripples of energy spoke to her on a profound, subconscious level. She could perceive the essence of each symbol, their origins in ancient rituals and their ties to the natural world. It was a multi-sensory experience, Sarah could hear the faint hum of their digital resonance, and even taste the sensation of their magic on her tongue. Information flowed into her like a river of data, merging with her own consciousness and becoming an integral part of her being.

When the exchange was complete, and the spectral figure of her grandmother faded into the ether, the digital realm quivered with anticipation as Sarah's transformation culminated in a crescendo of knowledge. Her consciousness became awash in cascading streams of encrypted data and the virtual cityscape flickered like a malfunctioning hologram. The luminous web of intricate sigils and digital glyphs became a living tapestry of pulsating code, resonating with esoteric power.

An electronic roar disturbed Sarah's moment of revelation. It reverberated and shook the digital realm and distorted the very fabric of the digital world. The cityscape shuddered and began to fracture as its reality began to unravel. A grotesque fusion of corrupted code and malevolent data tore its way through the space in front of Sarah. Limbs of pixelated distortion extended to its central core, each appendage terminating in jagged, razor-sharp edges. The cyber demons' eyes were twin orbs of hatred, they locked onto Sarah and she found herself trapped in its gaze. Within them she sensed a ravenous hunger — an insatiable desire to consume and corrupt.

This was the nemesis that had haunted the Blackwood family for generations, an evil entity which was summoned every time one of the witch-born received their power. It had been drawn into the digital realm by the convergence of ancient magic and digital power that marked Sarah's transformation. With hellish speed, the cyber demon lunged, its pixelated claws slashing through the air. Sarah, still reeling from the influx of knowledge, had little time to react. The demon's attack struck her, tearing through the fabric of her virtual avatar and causing her to convulse with searing pain.

The digital cityscape finally collapsed into a dark fluidity as the demon's assault continued. The luminous web of sigils and digital glyphs that had surrounded Sarah moments ago shattered into a cascade of fragmented data, dissipating into the digital winds.

Pain flowed through Sarah's body as she tried to regain her composure, she knew that she could not falter. The knowledge and power bestowed upon her by her grandmother were the only weapons she needed against this ancient foe. With a focused effort, she summoned the energies at her disposal. Gathering the threads of ancient spells and digital incantations, she wove them together into a potent counterattack. A surge of energy poured forth from her virtual form in a blinding torrent. The storm of data struck the cyber demons with an intensity that cause it to howl in electronic agony.

The monsters form began to fragment and distort. Its evil presence wavered and pixelated shards of flesh were scattered into the digital winds. For a moment, it seemed as if the demon teetered on the brink of dissolution, its corrupted essence unraveling.

But the creature was not so easily defeated. With a final, desperate surge of energy the demon launched one last assault. The cyber demon's attack struck Sarah with a force that sent her staggering, her virtual form glitching and warping under the onslaught. She felt her connection between the digital realm dissipate but she knew that she could not surrender to the malevolent entity that had plagued her family for generations.

With a final, desperate surge of resolve, Sarah summoned the last reserves of her newfound power. She gathered the arcane wisdom that had been imparted to her, weaving it into a potent incantation. A spell that would open a portal to escape the collapsing cyber realm. The portal crackled into existence with a blinding burst of digital energy. It shimmered with an otherworldly light, a swirling vortex that promised a return to reality.

The demon howled in electronic agony as it was drawn into the swirling vortex, its form distorted and fragmented, pixelated shards scattering into the digital abyss. With a final, anguished wail, it vanished from the virtual realm, banished back to the dark recesses of the digital hell from where it came.

As the cyber demon disappeared into the vortex, the virtual realm quaked one final time. Sarah felt herself being pulled towards the portal, her virtual form glitching and distorting as she was drawn back to the physical world.

A luminous web of sigils and digital glyphs reformed around her, and with a blinding flash of light, she emerged from the portal, back in the alley where her journey had begun. Breathing heavily and still reeling from the battle, she knew that she had confronted the ancient enemy of the Blackwood family and emerged victorious. The alleyway had returned to its original, gritty state. The cryptic sigil, the gateway between the physical and digital realms, remained etched into the brick wall. Sarah knew that her journey as a Technopagan witch was far from over. The digital realm held infinite potential and peril, and she was bound to protect it from the lurking shadows that sought to exploit its mysteries.

About the Author:

Chris McAuley writes prose novels, magazine short stories, video and tabletop games, and audio dramas. Best known for creating the StokerVerse he has also worked on The Terminator, Doctor Who and most recently the Star Trek franchises.

Author Website: Dark Universes
Author Website: StokerVerse



Sticky | DJ Tyrer

It was always the same, the *schluck-schluck* of soles sticking to a tacky floor.

Harry grimaced. "Why are motels always so awful?"

It was hot and he was sticky with sweat from hours of driving and he just wanted to relax.

Janey frowned at him as she trailed into the room in his wake. She flicked the light-switch; it didn't work. She clicked it up-and-down uselessly and sighed.

"You're the one who chooses them, honey. I keep saying we should make a reservation in a nice hotel, not take a chance on a place like this. The light doesn't even work."

She clicked it again for emphasis.

Setting down their cases, Harry said, "It's more economical, baby. Besides, I've booked you into a nice place for our stay in Nashville, haven't I?"

He turned on the bedside lamp.

"Success."

She sniffed. "Yeah, but only because I made you. I just can't trust you to make plans. Oh, don't give me that look, honey," she added, hands on hips, "you know it's true. I love you, but you're tight as anything."

He gave a shrug and patted the bedside table, grimaced.

"Even this thing feels sticky."

Looking at the brown paint of the walls, he could imagine they were, too. The whole room seemed sticky, like a horrible bug trap.

"Nasty."

"Well, you can start a list of all the faults while I go into the washroom and avail myself of the facilities. That was a long ride."

Harry was pacing as Janey stepped into the next room, shoes *schlucking*, and still was when she exited, lip curled.

"Okay, I'll give it to you, honey, this place is sticky." She patted absently at the back of her skirt. "I wiped the seat repeatedly and it made no difference. I feel like I need a bath, but," she shuddered, "it felt sticky, too."

"I guess we could look for another place to stay."

Janey sighed. "No, it's too late. We need to sleep."

"Then, I could see if we can get a better room."

She tilted her head with a cynical look. "Do you really think any of the rooms are going to be better than this one?"

Remembering the corridor, he said, "I guess not..."

They both looked at the bed, neither moving.

"This reminds me of our honeymoon," said Harry.

Janey laughed, only it was a hollow sound.

"Yeah, that place was a bit of a dump, but we had youth and lust to make up for its failings. Plus, I'm not sure it was as bad as this."

Harry grinned. "Well, we could have some fun."

"Sorry." Janey yawned. "I'm just too tired and, well, this place has put me off more than I can muster a response. We can snuggle, though."

"Yeah, because that's always such fun..."

She pouted. "Oh, come on, honey. Once we get to Nashville and I've had a good bath, I'll feel up for some fun." He grinned. "I can't wait."

Janey yawned, again, and pulled back the covers, tugged them all the way down. At least in this heat, they wouldn't have the covers over them.

"Well, you'll have to wait." She tentatively touched the sheets and wrinkled her nose. "Hmm, I think I'll keep my clothes on, save my nightdress."

Harry was no more impressed when he lay down beside her.

"Don't they wash their sheets?"

"I'm not sure they wash anything, here, honey."

"Well, I didn't spot any roaches when we came in. I just hope this thing isn't full of bugs. Maybe we should sleep in the car, instead?"

"And, twist my neck? No thanks."

"You going to read?" he asked.

Janey shook her head. "No. The sooner we're asleep, the sooner we can wake up and get out of here."

"Impeccable logic, I guess. I'd set the alarm, but the clock appears to be busted."

He tugged at the cord and held it up for her to see – its frayed end lacked a plug.

"Really classy," she muttered, taking her phone out of her bag. "There, I've set my alarm."

"I'll turn the light off, then?"

"Yes."

"You know," he said as he reached for the bedside lamp, "maybe we should stay home next time we want a break, just pig out in front of a boxset and relax in comfort?"

She laughed as he clicked off the light. "Sounds like a good idea to me."

Janey gave another yawn and Harry yawned in sympathy.

"Oh, dear, you've got me doing it. Still, we should be asleep soon."

He patted her arm.

There was a sound in the darkness.

"What was that?" Janey asked.

"What was what?" Then, he heard it.

It was a sticky sound, a little like that his shoes had made, only less defined.

He could imagine Janey's eyes wide in the darkness: It sounded almost as if someone were in the room with them.

Harry swore and fumbled for the lamp's switch.

The sound continued, not the distinct sound of footsteps, but a single ongoing noise.

Something touched his hand. Something sticky.

He swore again and drew his hand back.

"What is it?" Janey cried.

"I don't -"

The stickiness was on him.

For a moment, it was as if the bedsheets had grown stickier, but the tacky sensation wasn't on the sheets, but on him, upon his hands and face, his lips.

It almost felt as if it were moving, slithering across his skin.

He could feel it under his clothes...

Flowing...

What the hell?

Beside him, Janey was thrashing.

Harry opened his mouth to scream and felt the stickiness on his tongue.

It was in him.

It was too late. Too late.

Every inch of him was as sticky as the room...

He seemed to sink into the bed.

It was too late. Too late.

He was sticky. So was Janey.

Suddenly, he had a notion of why the room was so sticky.

Then, he and Janey were gone.

They would never leave the room.

About the Author:

DJ Tyrer dwells in Southend-on-Sea, on the misty northern shore of the Thames Estuary. DJ 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, Occult Detective Magazine, and Tigershark.

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The Ringing | Catherine Kenwell

The ringing. The constant infuriating ringing in her ears. Wouldn't stop. Never stopped. Despite the days-long blizzard in which all sound was silenced by the thick quilt of snow. She was safe, inside. But even the snap-crackling of the wood fire couldn't dampen the shrill shriek in her ears. It was all that registered in her head. It accompanied her as she attempted to concentrate on reading the 700-page novel she'd picked from the shelf when the snow began. It was a bit of a literary slog, but it was the best option to keep her occupied.

She'd hoped her husband would have caught the train from the city before the storm began, but his last text message had indicated he didn't think he'd make it. Thousands of people were stranded, and she assumed his phone battery died when she didn't hear from him again.

This was the third day of the storm. The highways had been closed, and no plows were attempting to clear even the county roads. Electricity had been out for almost twenty hours. In the cold, the fridge and freezer contents would survive. She'd cooked toast over the fire. Crunchy and scorched around the crusts. It hurt her teeth. She had food, and heat. But the ringing. The incessant ringing. Like a million telephones and doorbells and fire detectors running rampant in her brain.

She was reading by candlelight. Thankfully, she'd stocked up on the scented three-wick candles from the fancy store at the mall. Her living room was cathedral-like in its flickering light and tang of incense.

Her phone battery had died out after the first day. She would have welcomed the sound, any sound, of YouTube or podcasts that might mitigate the squealing in her ears. But for the fireplace, she considered the house silent. Other than the ringing.

She slept and read. Dozed, then replenished the firewood. Dragged the thick quilt from her bedroom to the chesterfield in front of the fire. Opened and finished a bottle of wine. Slept some more. Found some Southern Comfort in the back of a kitchen cabinet. Shuddered at its sweetness but drank it anyway. None of this silenced the deafening bells in her ears.

On the fifth day, the snow subsided. The electricity flickered, then resumed its regular role. The fridge hummed back to life, adding to the cacophony in her head.

She folded up the quilt and prepared to dig her way out of the house. The snow had drifted to the top of the front door, making her route to the shovel impenetrable. Even the window at the top of the door was caked with white. In the kitchen, she grabbed a large stainless serving spoon and a plastic ladle. Her tools for escape.

She forced open the frozen door, pulling with all her might. Began carving and scraping the hardened snow. As she picked away at the icy mass, she fell back against the door, exhausted. Something sharp hit her lower back. She turned, and noticed keys hanging from a chain, in the lock.

Furiously, she scraped and scraped at the snow.

She hit something hard. Dark blue. Fabric. Protruding from the ice. She dropped the tools and dug with her hands, faster, following the line of the fabric. First, she discovered her husband's corporate logo on the jacket sleeve. The ringing in her ears screamed; the blood pulsed in her head. She continued. Digging, scratching, clawing. The blue changed to red. A mitten. Frozen. Against the doorframe. Against the doorbell.

She collapsed. Her heart stopped. But the ringing. The ringing did not.

About the Author:

Catherine Kenwell writes short horror stories but is better known for her non-fiction work. She has had more concussions than she can count and is awaiting the one that will knock some sense into her. Catherine's work has been published in more than 30 international horror anthologies and in several Chicken Soup for the Soul editions.

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Styx and Stones | Ash Hartwell

The view from my window never changes. A grey swirling sea under a grey swirling sky. Even in the summer skies remain cloudy and grey and it was rare the temperature climbed above freezing.

Grey prevails. Dirty grey uniforms, if you call the misshapen smock-like shirts and baggy trousers worn by every inmate a uniform. High grey walls hemmed two hundred inmates on a barren grey rock surrounded by the cold grey sea. On three sides, the view is nothing but sea and sky.

The fourth side of East Island, the preserve of the warden and his brutal guards, has views of the mainland. This is situated across a narrow stretch of cold grey sea resembling a wide, slow-moving river which the inmates call, with a morbid sense of humour, The Styx. If you try to cross it, The Styx's swift undercurrent will carry you to your death. But even crossing it won't take you to Heaven, but eternity in Purgatory is better than another day on East Island.

I turned away from my widow with its dirty grey and cracked glass to take a piss in the bucket I shared with three other prisoners. A foul stench hangs over the shit-filled rusty pail. My pale stream of water disturbs a small swarm of flies which scattered, darting this way and that, before returning to their foetid feeding ground.

My companions didn't even stir. The stench, the flies, even the sound of somebody taking a piss a few feet from their heads are the normal smells and sounds of early morning. They reserved the Hell of East Island for society's worst offenders. This is no open prison with tennis courts and regular conjugal visits with the wife. No one-off crimes of passion with mitigating circumstances, no white-collar crime, or non-paying debtors here. East Island houses lifers. Lifers who would die without setting foot on the mainland again. Life without parole, life without appeal.

We are also, to a man, innocent. Innocent of multiple murder. Of stabbing, shooting, and strangulation, to name a few. Innocent of rape, disfigurement, and defilement. Child killers, serial killers, spree killers, all innocent. Those who took great pleasure in hearing their crimes laid bare in open court now profess their innocence. But in here, murder is still common. The usual victims were the paedophiles and rapists. But sometimes a score needed settling, a territory protecting, or somebody just needed to blow off some pent-up aggression. Whatever the reason, the guards turned a blind eye, reasoning if we killed each other, it would save them the bother. Guards tortured and killed inmates with impunity. To the outside world, we ceased to exist once we crossed The Styx. Our hatred for the guards was the one thing that unified the inmates.

I left my cell and walked along the gantry to the metal stairway that descended from level D all the way to the kitchens. There I ate my meagre breakfast of dried bread roll, powdered eggs, and cold, oily tea before reporting for my shift in the boiler room.

Buried deep in the prison's bowels, the boiler provided the prison's only source of heat. While the inmates survived on one cold shower a week, the guards had the luxury of warm water. The inmates worked in shifts to keep the huge furnace burning. Without even this meagre heat, we would freeze to death.

The coal arrived every month. A tender with a mounted crane would leave the coal piled high on the dock. There, inmates would fill old hessian sacks and carry it down two flights of slippery steps to the coal store next to the boiler room. While the rest of the prison remained wet and cold, the boiler room, with its huge open furnace, was a burning pit of torture. My job was to shovel coal into the mouth of this ravenous beast.

I was a demon, the prison's slang for a stoker who worked in the fiery pit of Hell. Many died there too — dehydration combining with exhaustion — their bodies thrown into the cavernous furnace. The rocky ground and frozen soil making burial impossible. Nobody ever came to mourn them. Their families had forgotten them in life, so why should death be any different?

Last month, the coldest on record, the prison had not received its usual supplies. Food supplies had dwindled, while the coal bunkers were almost empty. The winter had lashed the island with storm after storm; the wind carrying a razor-like edge that seemed to flay the flesh from your bones. Each day dawned colder than the previous one.

Today the coal ran out.

The furnace burned on, consuming, with a demonic ferocity, the broken furniture that threw into its flaming maw. A desperate attempt to keep the fire burning while we waited for the supply ship.

We realised the supply ship wasn't coming when the guards left during the night. They took the only boat and left the cell doors unlocked. Maybe they hoped we would kill each other.

That day, three things happened. One, the guards got their wish and the prison population halved. Three threw themselves off the walls onto the rocks below and one hung himself with a piece of electrical cable. Murder accounted for the rest. The furniture that wouldn't burn became shanks, clubs, or garottes. Several prisoners tied a child killer's hands and feet to a metal bed frame, then lowered it over the balcony to crucify him. Other prisoners hastened his death by using him as a pinata, smashing his legs and body with iron bars torn from the windows. We took glee in the barbaric slaughter of those we believed guilty of the most heinous crimes. Their offenses, committed within the walls of the prison, ranged from consorting with the guards, to sexual deviance, to simple laziness. And while none of us were angels, the Devil is in the details.

The second event went unnoticed in the melee. The furnace burnt itself out. Soon the pipes would freeze, and we would freeze to death soon after. The outside temperature had fallen to arctic levels while the rioter's fires kept the inside at a barmy twenty degrees Fahrenheit. Not enough to sustain underfed and under clothed prisoners. And it would only get worse.

The third event happened during the night. The Styx froze over. Not a wide flat expanse of pack ice like an arctic lake, but a narrow causeway of thin and shifting ice. It connected the Hell that was East Island with the Heaven that was freedom. Hell's fires would burn themselves out, freeing the beast to find warmth and sustenance in the bodies and souls of the innocents.

Early the following morning, we set across The Styx. A torturous and dangerous journey across shifting ice in winds that shredded both the flesh and the nerves. To slip spelled death in the icy water. The alternative was death in an icy cell. But the reward was freedom. No, the reward was more than freedom. The reward was a barbaric revenge on the society that locked us away.

We rose from the mud and ice like the undead, carrying makeshift weapons and stones large enough to break bone. A small village spread out before us, its bright lights shining like a cheerful snow globe in the wintry gloom. Voices rose from the church in joyful praise.

We would start there. A divine retribution on the hypocrites and liars, the adulterers and idolaters, the thieves, and the cheats.

The men. The women.

Their children.

The innocent.

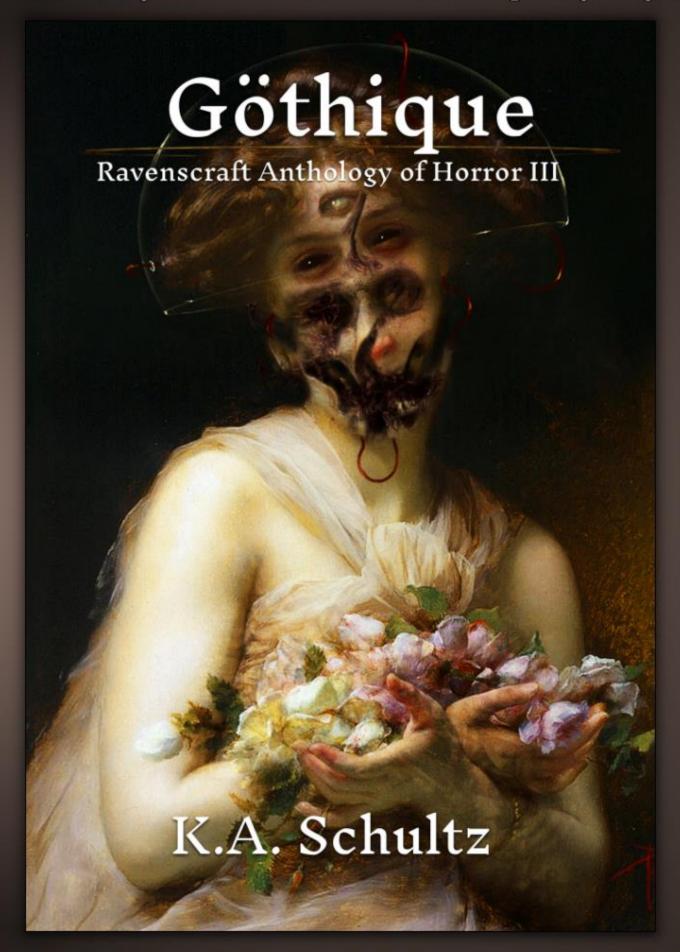
About the Author:

Ash Hartwell has written two novels, Tip of the Iceberg (2017) and The Crows of Smith's Booth (2022) both won Horror Novel of the Year on Critters .org. He has a MA in Creative Writing from MMU and has had many short stories published in horror and dark fantasy anthologies. He is married to a real-life witch and reads too many books.

Amazon Author Page: Ash Hartwell Author Website: The Writer's Slope



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AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Believe Not Their Lies | *Claire Thomas Hawnt*

The day Hell froze over the demons deserted it in droves. It was all over the rolling news. Of course I watched it. We all did. We were curious. None of us had seen demons before. We gathered round Asher's phone in the little office with the peeling wallpaper and dusty plants to watch the coverage.

"Ugly buggers, aren't they?" Asher said, as though he felt like he had to say something. It was his phone, after all.

"What do you expect? They're demons." Eileen said. Eileen goes to one of those megachurches in Tottenham. They're always casting out demons there, from little kids and teenage rebels and occasionally homeless schizophrenics.

That one made the news.

"They're all different though. I didn't think they'd look like this," Asher said. One ripples out, almost swimming through the murky air around it: pale, glabrous and glistening. "Ugh!"

"Where will they go?" Jola asked. Our collective ignorance (apart from Eileen) made us sound like small children; we were seeking answers nobody knew yet.

Just at that point the boss came back from a long lunch. We all scurried back to our laptops, like rats.

I couldn't sleep that night. I lay in the dark, prickling with sweat, feeling my heart thump a steady rhythm in my chest, like the footsteps of something heavy, coming close.

My phone lit up. *Breaking news: Spokes-demon says demons intend to set up home in Antarctica.* I gave in and opened it.

It seemed that owing to climate change, Antarctica had reached a temperature that demons could accommodate. Research scientists were upset and environmentalists were concerned about the penguin population, but it was clear that broadly the world leaders had decided this was the best option.

Poor penguins.

I managed to get some sleep after that; not much, but some, in uneasy snatches.

In the morning, I went to work.

"What about Antarctica, eh?" Asher asked Jola, but she didn't say anything, just tapped away at her laptop, her fall of flaxen hair obscuring her face.

Asher shrugged.

"Believe not their lying mouths," Eileen suddenly said sonorously into the silence. Seeing us looking at her, she added, more normally, "They'd lie out of both sides of their mouths at the same time."

Silence. We all thought about this in different ways.

Jola suddenly got up and scurried off down the corridor to the tea point.

"Eileen! You've upset her," Asher said.

Eileen sniffed ostentatiously.

"I'll go after her," I said, more to avoid the atmosphere rapidly developing between Asher and Eileen than anything else. I hastily clattered a spoon into a coffee mug and escaped down the corridor.

I opened the tea point door cautiously. I'm not very good with tears.

She was standing by the sink, the flaxen hair still shielding her face from view.

"You all right, mate?" I said awkwardly.

No response.

"You don't want to take much notice of Eileen. You know what she's like. They're demon-mad at that church she goes to. I'm surprised she's not been out with binoculars, spotting them!" I laughed, slightly too loud.

God, this was awkward! Why wasn't she saying anything? "Jola!" I said, and I leaned over and peered round the hair.

Her eyes were bright green. I'd swear it. Not blue-green – emerald green. Just for a second, and then, like a crocodile's, a third eyelid swiped right across and wiped the green right out.

I dropped my mug. It shattered on the floor.

By the time I looked up, she was gone.

"She's gone home sick," Asher said.

For the rest of the day, that moment kept replaying in my brain. The sideways flick of the membrane across the eye; the green suddenly wiped out. It was so real. Surely I'd seen it.

No, I couldn't have.

I decided I'd ask Jola about it the next day, but when I arrived at the office, she was off sick.

"Where's the boss?" I asked Asher. He was looking at his phone, feet up on his desk.

"Working from home. Apparently. Have you seen this?" He beckoned me over. I leaned over his shoulder. Unlike the usual waft of Lynx, there was a faint stale smell about him, as though he'd slept in his clothes. A worried-looking news anchor was speaking.

"...reports of strange occurrences happening across the globe, suggesting some hostile activity. To recap, it's become clear that not all demons are keeping to the agreed territory of Antarctica. The public are advised that the demons may take a range of forms, including the seeking of human hosts."

"Human hosts?" Asher exclaimed. "What the fuck does that mean?"

"Possession," Eileen said with an air of satisfaction. "I told you. You have to seek the Lord to..."

"Shut up, I'm listening." Asher waved her away.

"He's got six fingers," I said suddenly.

"So?" Asher said, going back to the phone.

"There's five again now." I pointed. "Look – there, on the hand holding the mic."

Asher leaned in. With a faint fuzz of static, an additional finger buzzed in, flickering for a moment, and then disappeared.

Asher yelled and dropped his phone. It bounced on the carpet.

I picked it up. The anchor was still speaking. "...advised to check on loved ones. Should the situation get worse, lockdown measures may be a possibility. Keep listening."

The report ended. Silence, for a moment. I straightened up and handed the phone to Asher. His usually flippant, cheerful young face was ashy grey; his mouth half open with shock.

We stared at each other, unable to voice what was happening.

Eileen got up. "Well, I'm not sticking round here. I'm going to church, and if you had any sense, you'd go too. But... ". She pulled a couple of the little New Testaments her church hand out on street corners sometimes, and slapped them down on Asher's desk. "You might need these."

She went off, leaving us alone.

"Look," I said. "I'm going home as well. I need to check on my mum and...well, I think it's the best place for us right now." I patted him awkwardly on the shoulder; he looked so stricken.

"Yeah," he managed to say. "Yeah."

I was relieved when I locked the front door behind me. I kept thinking they could be all around. What did they mean, invisible? I thought of Jola's eye, and the news anchor's finger, and I shivered.

Check on your loved ones. I dialled my mum, praying. "Mum? Mum! Are you all right? You know, with all this?"

She blinked at me anxiously through the screen. "Oh yes, love. I'm fine. I'm going to stay indoors, I think."

"Best place. What's that on your neck?"

"That rash? I bought some perfume on special offer and I've had a reaction."

She leaned forward, and I saw, with horror, the purpled, squamous patch of skin. As I watched, it visibly expanded, like a spill.

"Mum!" I shouted, but the phone went dead.

I grabbed my coat and ran to the bus stop. I had to get to Mum. Fortunately, a bus was just pulling in. People filed off it, but when I tried to get on the driver stopped me.

"All services suspended," he said. "Order of the government. Everyone's got to go home immediately." "What? But my mum..."

"Listen, I don't make the rules. You best go home, like they said."

I couldn't sleep that night. *Mum. Jola. Everything. Mum. Jola. Everything.* I went to the window and threw it open, gulping in the fresh air. The sight of the full moon calmed me. I gazed at it.

Suddenly, it crumpled, and vanished.

Report. We were supposed to report things like that. I grabbed my phone, but when I unlocked it, rolling news was reporting an address from the prime minister.

"...the public are advised to stay at home. We are fighting an enemy we know nothing about, innumerable, hostile, and with weapons we cannot even comprehend. I repeat: stay at home. Do not try to reach loved ones. Close all windows and doors. Stay safe."

I looked up at my still-open window, and felt the air thicken around me.

I tried to scream, but no sound came out. I tried to move but the heavy, set air kept me down.

Eileen's Bible! It was still in my pocket. I managed to move my hand enough – into my pocket. My fingers brushed the pages. I prayed frantically inside my head.

The air thinned slightly, just enough for me to open my mouth and shout for help as loud as I could.

A snake of newly-thickened air shot down my throat, expanding, filling, cutting me off mid-syllable. I didn't even have time for a thought, before it all went black.

About the Author:

Claire Thomas Hawnt lives and works in Nottingham, UK, where she writes about ghosts, weird timeslips and supranormal powers with an increasing sense that she was born in the wrong time. Claire's fiction and poetry has been found in The Guardian, t'Art, Heroica and Crystal among others.

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Welcome To Hell | P.S. Traum

Mr. Barnum surveyed the vast territory. Active volcanoes, flowing magma rivers, burning lakes...they had all completely frozen over forever. Sparkling and shiny, unmelting ice and snow, a forever-freeze! A strange subterranean Winter Wonderland. Incredible varieties of demons and devils of all sizes...they might be dormant and immobilized, but it would save a fortune on statuary or animatronics! His family had always been very good at exploiting natural marvels for enterprising entertainments and amusements. And now...the ultimate theme park! Welcome to Hell!

About the Author:

P. S. Traum writes escapist speculative fiction in a wide range of styles, tones and subjects. The mercurial Traum prefers to remain invisible, so that the unique storylines and compelling characters remain interesting and interpretive, unburdened by any external distractions or preconceived perceptions. Readers deserve a fun imaginative experience that feels real, personal and entertaining, even when it might be scary, spooky, or creepy!

Amazon Author Page: P. S. Traum Facebook: P. S. Traum

A Christmas Story | RJ Meldrum

The room looked like a scene from a Christmas movie. It was five o'clock and he was ready for their first Christmas together. Glancing round the lounge, he checked one last time to ensure everything was in place and just right. She would be home from work soon and he wanted it all to be perfect for her. It was a shame she had to work on Christmas Eve, but he'd lost his job and that meant she had to work as many hours as possible to keep up with the bills. He felt bad about it, but he did his best to make sure the house was tidy and there was always a meal ready for her when she got home.

The logs in the fireplace were burning brightly and the mantelpiece was festooned with a festive garland of holly, ivy and spruce. The Christmas tree sat in the corner of the lounge, resplendent with twinkling lights and sparkling baubles. It was a little bit too big for the room, but it was the perfect shape and you couldn't beat having a real tree.

He'd placed Christmas decorations round the room, just as she had dictated. A pair of small pottery Victorian street scenes, backlit with tea-lights, sat on the mantelpiece. On the dresser was a small porcelain Christmas tree, complete with a tiny train winding its way up towards the star that crowned the top. Candles, dotted around the room added to the ambience.

He glanced at his watch again, if her train had been on schedule she would be at the station by now, climbing into her car to make the short drive home. He knew the roads were clear of snow, so it shouldn't take her too long.

He clumsily knocked over a candle on the fireplace; it hit the stockings, causing an instant conflagration. Suddenly there was fire and smoke. He clutched his throat, he couldn't breathe. His arms flailed about in front of him. He couldn't see, couldn't find his way out. He could feel the heat on his face, vaguely aware of the flames as they exploded from the fireplace and flowed like liquid over the Christmas tree. He stumbled over the furniture as he tried to escape. The noise of cracking wood and collapsing timbers was insanely loud. He fell to his knees in the smoke, blinded and choking. Darkness overtook him.

He woke and found himself still in the lounge. The room was a charred mess. He couldn't quite believe it; somehow he had survived the inferno. He rose, checking his body. His clothes weren't even charred, despite the heat of the fire. He stepped outside into the cold air of a winter's night. The sky was clear, with twinkling stars and a full moon. It was quiet, the snow damping all sound. He glanced back at the house and saw skeletal roof timbers, black against the moonlight. The entire house had obviously been engulfed. Destroyed.

"How did I survive?"

He realised with a sense of infinite sadness he hadn't. He couldn't have. He must be dead. His body must have been completely cremated by the heat. He was...something. A ghost, a spirit. He felt nothing for himself, his sadness was for her. Thankfully, she hadn't been home, that was the only saving grace. She had survived.

Weeks and months passed without notice. Time had no meaning in his new world. There were no seasons for him. It was always winter; it was always Christmas Eve. He knew he would forever be stuck in this ruined house, in the depths of winter. Alone.

His version of Hell was cold.

About the Author:

Richard is originally from Scotland, but now calls rural Ontario his home. When not writing or caring for a menagerie of animals on his hobby farm, he works as an academic in Toronto. He is a proud part of SCP and The Pen of the Damned, and is an affiliate member of the Horror Writers Association. He has had over 200 drabbles, short stories and novellas published since 2015. His work has appeared in a number of anthologies and magazines, including The Sirens Call.

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The Tumultuous Journey of a Kaiju King Godzilla Minus Cheese: From Goofy Giant to Quality Filmmaking



Frankenstein and Dracula are usually what's thought of when we hear 'classic monsters'. Jason and Freddy come to mind when we say 'slasher films'. The Shining and The Sixth Sense are quickly connected with "hauntings" and "ghost stories".

But what does one think of when seeing that 164-foot, 250-million-year-old fire-breathing monster known as *Godzilla* on the big or small screen? A movie epic? A blockbuster? An enriched piece of work filled with depth and meaning?

No, not really.

Celebrating his 70th cinematic birthday this year, it's safe to say that most of us (baby boomers, especially) have always regarded Godzilla movies as campy, corny, so-bad-they're-brilliant/so-terrible-they're-terrific 'beautiful rubbish'. A la kung fu flicks from the 1970's, or Ed Wood and Roger Corman 'attempts'. Mindless, senseless romps meant for tasteless thrills and cheap laughs, from the big G's screen debut in 1954 until now.

However, one recent film that brought a high degree of excellence, substance and freshness to the iconic, long-tailed character is Japan's *Godzilla Minus One*.

Shot within a surprising \$15 million budget and written and directed by Takashi Yamazaki (who also supervised the film's magnificent visual effects), *Minus One* stands as the first G movie to bring the famous beast into major motion picture prominence. While the film's storyline follows the same basic formula as most kaiju movies, the secret ingredient to *this* 'Zilla outing is its careful attention to its 'people' characters and human elements - something rarely captured in his other movies. Just as Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* wasn't *just* a martial arts film, GM1 isn't *just* a monster movie, focusing on important historical issues such as Japan's devastation during post World War II and the suffering of its people.



Returning to his earlier roots as the 'unjolly' green giant, Godzilla is anything but a 'savior' in GM1, preying on our primal fears for all things gigantic.

"I always thought that if Godzilla actually showed up in front of me, it would be scary, undeniably," Yamazaki told *Fangoria*. "And I also felt the visual effects technology overall is at the point where I could create the scary Godzilla that I wanted."

GM1 had raked in a whopping \$11 million on its U.S. opening weekend in December 2023 and is now being considered for Oscar nominee status, showing that giant monster movies *can* have a sense of caliber and impact and paving the way for *more* Godzilla (and other kaiju) masterpieces.

Origins



Kaiju, meaning strange creature in Japanese (often associated with giant monsters), stems from Japan's yokai, an 'urban legend' creature or spirit (i.e. The Long Neck Woman) serving as a warning for people to keep away from actions that lead to impending doom and destruction. The term kaiju represents a consequence that acts when an individual or a society fails to heed a yokai's warnings.

The first kaiju film to be unleashed was the American-made *The Lost World* in 1925, which was also the first feature length movie to use extensive stop-motion animation scenes, pioneered by Willis H. O'Brien. O'Brien went on to create another iconic kaiju, *King Kong* in 1933 (followed that same year by the underrated *Son of Kong*), a 24-foot ape brought to New York from Skull Island for show, only to end up taking a ferocious bite out of the Big Apple. Two decades

later, *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms* had surfaced with the legendary Ray Harryhausen serving as special effects artist. The 1953 sci-fi/horror film released in Japan that same year as *An Atomic Kaiju Appears* - the first movie to use the genre's name.

Inspired by Hollywood's slew of successful monsters, Toho Studios' producer Tomoyuki Tanaka in 1954 decided to create a giant 'thing' of his own, playing off Japan's (then) fears over atomic weapons and nuclear fallouts. What emerged from this idea was a ginormous, radioactive reptile-like creature called *Godzilla* (or *Gojira*), Japan's first official kaiju film, leading to a monstrous franchise now consisting of 38 movies in total (33 Japanese made, 5 American made).



Though initially preferring stop-motion animation in the 1954 G film, creature designer Eiji Tsuburaya eventually settled on suitmation with actor Katsumi Tezuka as the man in the green gear, becoming the classic G trademark.

Although the 1954 Godzilla had overall earned international acclaim at the time, it couldn't help but veer into B-movie 'low-brow' status like other sci-fi flicks of that era, remaining caged in that category for years to come.

"The film has a wildness and insanity to it," low budget movie mogul Roger Corman told *The Hollywood Reporter*. "I was particularly impressed by the special effects. They were both good and over-the-top. Today, you'd say they had a campy quality."

Decades of Dumbness

Following the 1954 film, Godzilla soon embarked on a myriad of idiotic movie adventures throughout the 1960's and 70's, each cheesier than the last. From fighting super-obvious

'men-in-suit' monsters to doing ultra-dorky victory dances, Godzilla became the epitome of bad movie making, and thus, spawning a reluctance in sophisticated audiences to take *any* kaiju films seriously.



Things took a turn for the Toho titan when TriStar Pictures acquired rights to him in 1998, releasing the first American-made Godzilla. Given that millions were spent on CGI and an A-list cast, a successful film was well anticipated. However, even with all of Hollywood's trimmings, TriStar's movie bombed big time, toppling the poor G. Aside from a silly, weak script and a predictable plot, this Godzilla bore zero likeness to the prehistoric palooka we had come to know and love. Yes, he was stupid - but he at least had his own niche, and that was even stripped from him! And even though Japan continued to make more films of the familiar G after the U.S.'s failed rendition, it was simply just more 1960's/70's cheese - with a bit of post Y2K dressing.



A Late Bloomer

The kaiju genre had endured years of insults and mockery for its reputation of being 'nonsensical' and 'ridiculous'.

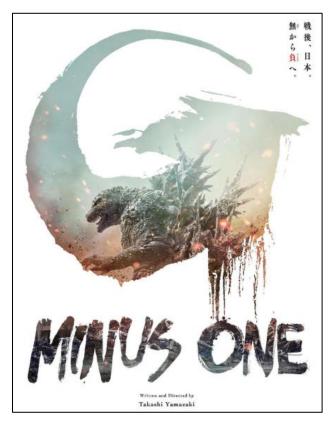
However, amid the heap of giant monster trash arose a few quality kaiju films that brimmed with brilliance. Oscar-winning Peter Jackson's *King Kong* (2005) is one of these, an extravagant, three-hour epic known as Jackson's 'love letter' to the 1933 original. Others are *Cloverfield* (2008), directed by Matt Reeves (*The Batman*), a clever, skillfully crafted 'found footage' take on the ever familiar 'beast-destroying-New York' motif, and *Pacific Rim* (2013), an all-out Kaiju action flick from Oscar-winning Guillermo del Toro.



Then, in 2014, a second American film attempt at Godzilla was made (again titled 'Godzilla'), helmed by Gareth Edwards (Rogue One). Yet unlike the 1998 embarrassment, this Hollywood G delivered a superb, powerhouse punch, from its well-paced storyline to a whole new, cool terrifying look for the kaiju creature, entailing stylish homages to the old campy-yetcherished Godzilla movies and retaining his unique, fun 'hero-by-default' duality in taking on other villainous monsters that die-hard fans have always praised. Equally successful were its followers, Kong: Skull Island (2017), Godzilla: King of the Monsters (2019) and Godzilla vs. Kong (2021), all part of Legendary Pictures' MonsterVerse (the upcoming Godzilla x Kong: The New Empire is slated for April/2024).

Japan has also made a number of phenomenal, well-articulated kaiju films, both past and present, including the recent superhero vs. monster mashup *Shin Ultraman*. Likewise, some of the scariest, most spellbinding horror movies have come from Japan, including *Ringu* and *Ju-On*. However, we had yet to see a Japanmade *Godzilla* film rise to the same glorious heights as some of the big G's famous monster predecessors and peers.

Until now.



Godzilla Minus One, the 33rd Japan-made entry in the franchise, was the highest rated blockbuster film of 2023 and is presently the highest-grossing live-action Japanese movie in U.S. history, with director Yamazaki already taking Best Director at the Hochi Film Awards. Loaded with awesome, stunning visual effects and a captivating score, GM1 comes equipped with a solid narrative and strong, *real* characters whom we actually care for - elements lacking even in Hollywood's recent G movies. GM1 can also be thought of as a direct remake of the 1954 Godzilla, embellishing the older film's symbolic, deeper meaning of the massive creature destroying Japan.

"It always takes just one filmmaker to make a choice that changes everything, and in this case, [Yamazaki] had the idea to reboot Godzilla completely - definitely a return to the attitude of the very first film," commented director and television personality Steve Werblun, who hosted the show *Dinosaurs of Hollywood* in the mid 1990's.

Unlike fellow kaiju such as Kong or other leviathans like Jaws who hit homeruns within the first inning, it's taken Godzilla just a liiittle more time to *fully* emerge.

But emerge he has!



About Mike Lera:

Mike Lera is a Los Angeles-based author, screenwriter and journalist whose horror fiction can be found in over a dozen anthologies, including *Dark and Evil II*, *All Dark Places 2*, *Horror USA: California* and Rod Serling Books' *Submitted For Your Approval*. He has also published with such prominent magazines as *Famous Monsters of Filmland* and *The*

Literary Hatchet and currently writes for Horror Nation.
Having written and produced several short horror films based on successfully published stories of his, Lera has found equal success in both the film festival and streaming service



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

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I Wish It Would Rain | Nikki Kossaris

Renee promised herself years ago she would never work another job where she risked ingesting raccoon blood. Once in a lifetime was enough, and she imagined she could keep that promise with her career as a real estate agent.

Reality is hell and chaos reigns though, so Renee is setting up the signage for her new client's open house when she notices something laying in the front yard. Heading over to whatever it is, she thinks only of what she still needs to prepare before potential buyers arrive. Those thoughts quickly fade when she sees that it's a raccoon.

Promises made are promises broken, she tries to convince herself that she did not waste time and money to not keep a promise to herself.

Instead of comfort, she experiences a level of anger she has never known before. After all, this isn't that big of a deal, she doesn't need to touch it, just pick it up with the shovel and place it in the garbage can. This unusual anger is so intense Renee is beyond caring, but she knows the raccoon will need to be dealt with immediately, since early bird buyers could start showing up any moment. While stomping to the homeowners' garage, Renee's anger leads her thoughts to the movie theater and the first raccoon.

In her early twenties Renee worked for a professional cleaning company that specialized in commercial locations. One of the businesses assigned to her was a local movie theater. This theater was a smaller one with four screening rooms that could hold up to 150 movie goers.

Renee is nothing if not a rule follower, or at least she wants to be. She adores the order, the process of cleaning, savoring how a room looks after she has cleaned it. Even though she will discover new types of garbage every cleaning, she must follow each step to get to the next one, this delights her ordered mind.

First, she picks up the larger pieces of loose garbage. Along with the usual litter of popcorn, candy and beverage cups Renee finds a wallet. The wallet she places in the manager's office, tempted to keep the cash as she is always a little hungry, but too worried about bad karma.

Renee wears a backpack blower strapped over her shoulders to blow the rest of the garbage on the floor and under the seats down the slope of the theater. Once she has blown all the garbage to the open space by the screen, she sweeps up the trash. Some days after all the trash has been swept up, Renee will pretend she is a Ghostbuster. Sucking ghosts out of the rafters, running around and hiding behind seats. Today is no different, treating herself to her Ghostbuster games, while she mentally prepares for her least favorite part of the job—taking out the garbage.

Usually, the garbage cans are overflowing and need to be put into another bag. She will pray to whoever is listening that the bags do not have holes before she pulls each one out of the can. There is always liquid in the bags, this is why mopping the lobby is the final step of the job and why she prays for no holes.

The garbage inside the theater smells terrible, but it is nothing compared to the stench that comes from the theater's dumpster located to the side of the building next to the parking lot. It is the worst scent Renee has ever encountered, the rotting, festering food, plus whatever mystery trash is in there. Summertime heat marrying the theater trash together in a noxious popcorn stew.

It usually takes a few attempts for her to lift the attached lid. Using both hands she swings each bag one at a time backwards to add momentum to her upwards toss. Most of the bags are heavy, make worrisome sloshing noises and are often bigger than herself. With these she must also jump as she throws.

On this August day it is so hot Renee can see steam coming off the blacktop, and the tar covered cracks in the parking lot feel soft when she steps on them.

This must be what hell feels like.

It isn't until the last bag that the trouble begins though, when she is introduced to her own personal hell. While Renee jumps and swings up that final bag it gets stuck on the lip of the metal dumpster. Once she lands, she jumps back up trying to push the bag in, but the extra-large bag starts to fall back on her instead.

Renee screams, "Nooooooooooo!"

The bag is torn open by a sharp piece of the dumpster's edge. From the tear in the bag pours a thick stream of garbage juice right into Renee's open mouth, covering her face and soaking her clothes. Random candy boxes, beverage cups and endless popcorn rains down on her as well.

With the sludge covering her, she thinks this cannot get any worse, when something big and furry falls on her face and slides onto the ground.

While spitting out whatever is in her mouth she looks down and sees an obviously dead raccoon. Realization hits her, just like the raccoon did, that her mouth was open the whole time. Not sure if she wants to scream or cry, she lifts her hand to cover her mouth. Before her hand can reach her face, she notices that it is covered in garbage—and blood.

Recognizing she is completely covered in trash and dead raccoon, something inside Renee changes. Instead of falling apart, it feels like a switch has flipped inside her brain and someone else is in control.

Renee walks zombie-like back into the theater to the manager's office, to call the company she works for. She picks up the wallet and leaves. When she passes by the dumpster, she pockets the cash and tosses the emptied wallet in with the garbage bags.

Renee decides on her way home she will sign up for those real estate courses with the money. Hell can freeze over before she would work there again.

Now here I am dealing with another dead raccoon, she thinks while stomping her way back to the animal's body sprawled in the yard. When Renee bends over to scoop it up with the shovel, she sees the raccoon's belly move. With intense anger distracting her, she leans in a little too close hoping to get a better view.

Maybe it is still alive, she thinks as her face is inches from the raccoon's.

In what looks to Renee like a scene out of *The Shining*, a rat is eating its way out of the raccoon's belly. She imagines the rat saying, "Here's Johnny," with its face surrounded by a raccoon belly, instead of a door. The gore covered rat jumps out of the raccoon's stomach right at Renee, just like in *Aliens*.

Renee drops the shovel to grab at the rat that has attached itself to the side of her neck—with its teeth. She is surprisingly calm as she tries to get a hold of the slippery thing. When she finally gets her hands around it, she painfully tears the rat from her neck. The rat takes some of her skin with it, as it squeals and runs away.

Renee's initial reaction is to jump in her car and drive to urgent care. Before pulling away from the curb she remembers she must host the open house. Without the commission she will be in a dire situation. Luckily, Renee remembers she has a scarf in the trunk. She squirts hand sanitizer on three tissues to use as part of a makeshift bandage. Grabbing the scarf out of the car's trunk, she wraps it around her neck to hold the tissues in place and disguise her wounds.

Confidently she walks back to the yard, picks up the shovel and takes care of the raccoon. It doesn't take long for the open house to feel like the longest of her career. Renee must excuse herself several times to step away into the bathroom to splash some cool water on her face. Every time she sees herself in the mirror, she appears paler. By the time the open house is over, Renee can no longer bear to look at herself.

Thoughts of the commission have disappeared as she heads to her car, only thinking of getting home to her comfortable bed. The radio is on when she starts the car and it is tuned to her favorite local station, but Renee can barely pay attention to driving, let alone the radio host. Her eyes feel so heavy as if little weights are attached to them. Only catching every few words from the radio "sewer…hordes pouring out…bites." It feels as if she is walking through mud as she heads from her car to her house. She then falls asleep on top of her bedding fully clothed.

When Renee awakens it is completely dark out, she does not remember driving home nor does she know how long she has been asleep. Checking her phone, she discovers she has fifty missed calls, after she sees she's been asleep for twenty-four hours she is not surprised.

Before she can do anything else, she must deal with work. She calls her boss to let her know what happened with the raccoon. Renee's boss Verna does not answer, she can't remember a time when Verna did not answer her phone. When she touches her neck and feels the scarf she is instantly distracted, she leaves her boss a quick message and moves on.

The next thing she must do is look at her neck and figure out how to proceed. Renee heads to the bathroom to inspect everything. After she unwraps the scarf, she must then unstick the tissues from the healing wound. There are four small puncture wounds, they are no longer bleeding, and they have started scabbing over. A shower, some disinfectant and a small bandage will take care of it. Standing in the shower she realizes how dry her mouth is and turns mouth open into the spray, she then uses her hands to wash herself.

Now that she is clean and in her comfort outfit of black leggings and a t-shirt, she feels an intense hunger. She heads to the kitchen where she forcefully pulls the refrigerator's doors open then grabs handfuls of blueberries and shoves them in her mouth.

Renee sits down on the floor in front of the open fridge cracking the eggs open one by one, throwing the shells onto the floor when they are empty. With her hunger satiated she heads to the living room. Laying on her back on the couch with her legs splayed open, while streaming movies until dawn.

When Renee wakes up that evening, she discovers she has slept all day on the couch. *That's odd*, she thinks while rubbing the sleep from her face. It feels like she is getting a few hairs above her upper lip. She heads to the bathroom to answer nature's call and to find her tweezers. While she sits on the toilet, she notices a layer of hair covering her legs.

The usual sporadic black hairs are gone and what looks like a thick layer of brown and gray hairs has replaced them. Immediately she heads to the shower to shave it all off. While covering the hairs with shaving cream she discovers how soft and silky they are. No longer fearing the hairs she decides not to shave and rinses off instead.

A wild feeling comes over her and she decides to remain unclothed. She heads nude to the kitchen to gorge herself on the rest of the fruit in the fridge. Rolling each berry between her fingers feels seductive. Juices from the fruit drip from her mouth and down her chest, in a way she would have never allowed before. She remembers the nuts in the cabinet. Each one she rubs between her fingers, feeling the texture before placing them slowly on her tongue. After she has had her fill, she heads to the couch again.

While laying mindlessly watching tv she runs her hands over her body feeling the silky hairs that have sprouted up all over it. Touching the hair above her upper lip—her little whiskers. They are so sensitive; she feels warm all over her body when she strokes them, it is a symphony of sensations.

Oh my, I think I have sprouted a tail.

This time she pauses to wonder what is going on, the tail somehow pushing at the edge of her sanity. Was it the rat bite? Could I have ingested raccoon blood again? Has my luck run out? Was the rat a hell beast creating a hellish army?

Thirst takes over these thoughts and it leads her into the kitchen. Using her hands as a cup, she brings the water from the tap to her mouth. Renee does this until she is satisfied, then decides to head to bed for the day.

When she wakes that evening, she slides off the bed onto the floor. She does this with such ease one would think she does this often. This is in fact the first and last time Renee will ever do this. With both hands and feet on the ground she scuttles into the kitchen to scavenge for food. There are pieces of nuts all over the floor that Renee picks up and drops in her mouth, licking her fingers clean when she is done.

Feeling a pull to go outside, with some nimble maneuvering she unlocks, and slides open the patio door. Raccoon Renee then heads into the evening.

Her nose twitches while she sniffs the air, picking up the most intoxicating scent. Raccoon Renee waddles over to the garbage cans, pushing the metal trash cans over, while delicious garbage rains down around her.

The next morning one neighbor, on their way home from walking their dog, takes notice of a few neighbors' garbage cans knocked over. They decided to review their security camera since it is their day off and they are curious by nature.

They can see their neighbor Renee, dressed in a fuzzy raccoon one piece pajama, crawling around the neighborhood knocking over garbage cans. She then rolls around on the trash, before crawling into the opening of the sewer grate. Shocked, they review the footage again, when they take a closer look, they see what looks like thousands of red eyes and a sea of small shadows following Renee into the sewer.

About the Author:

Nikki Kossaris is a disabled writer who lives in Chicago. She fell in love with horror novels at seven, but was born loving everything spooky. When not reading or writing she enjoys cooking, long walks and adventures.

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Serve Chilled | Nina D'Arcangela

Stand before me and I will offer you what justice I can. You whine and squall that life has been unkind, unjust; too difficult for one such as yourself to bare. May I ask what is it you believe you were meant for? What entitles you to more ease than others? I look out upon this world that has been gifted so much, yet all I see is disregard; a distain that breeds hatred but seldom remorse. Why do you deserve better? What have you done to earn grace not wrath? The truth is, you've done nothing but destroy this bauble that has been given to you. Your greed and self-indulgent nature have stripped the bones of its flesh — bled the world dry of its life blood. For you, I have no pity, I have only disdain.

Instagram: @DarcNina

Baby, It's Cold Inside | J. Rocky Colavito

Dirks looked out the frosted window at the thermometer and grimaced. The temperature had dropped three degrees in the last twenty minutes.

"And that makes twenty-five degrees down since noon. Definitely not the traditional weather pattern for this locale."

"You have always had a talent for stating the obvious." His partner, Bray, noted. Her normally tightly formed hair bun had loosened, and her salt and pepper brunette hair was partway down. The reddish cast on one side of her face reminded Dirks of the danger they and the rest of the world was facing. That frostbite had come from a poorly sealed weather suit.

Bray punched the keys in front of her, entering the last temperature drop, and uploaded the data. Neither of the scientists was sure where the data went given the state of the world. Truth be told, neither of them was sure if humanity had made it into the underground bunkers that were the last resort against the slowly solidifying natural disaster. They knew they were doomed; each had volunteered to operate the last outpost because of their shared condition as cancer patients. The was no room for the sick in the bunkers, nor in the space shuttles that had carried the wealthy to orbiting space platforms that simulated various paradises on the Earth of old.

Their observation building was situated in a place called Hell, Arizona. The ghost town had acquired its name because its temperatures rivalled, and occasionally surpassed, those in Death Valley. The hardy folks who had originally settled the place passed down all kinds of legends, mostly about its climate. Stories of animals spontaneously combusting in mid stride, or of humans falling to the ground and burning to death if they wore inadequate footwear abounded. The settlers had been drawn there because, despite the killing heat that broiled anything that grew except for the hardiest of desert flora, there were other tales of riches beyond comprehension buried in the hills that bounded the area on three sides.

The riches were an oracle's answer: they were not gold, silver, or other precious metals. It was something more mundane, but infinitely more valuable, especially given the location.

Hell sat on an underground aquifer of undetermined size, and it was this natural formation that aided the survival of the original settlers. The water from the aquifer was purer than any in the area, perhaps even the world. It didn't need treatment, spilling from pumps or rising from wells as pure as polished crystal. Those who consumed it or bathed in it seemed healthier. The plants it touched grew strong and resisted blight, even in the narrow window for growth that the desert offered. The aquifer and its contents were considered miraculous, not the fountain of youth but perhaps the fountain of vitality; its existence put Hell on the beaten path for a brief period. Tourists went out of their way to stop for a cold one or pictures with the infamous billboard. It depicted a seductive she-devil wearing a bikini made of flames. A grinning red imp had ensnared the bikini bottoms with a pitchfork, drawing them downward to partially expose a red heart-shaped butt.

If Dirks squinted, he could see the remnants of the billboard; the falling snow hadn't covered it yet; the she-devil's smiling face and dark black hair were still visible during lulls in the never-ending blizzard.

Bray stretched and pushed away from the keyboard and computer screen. The temperature in the building was manageable if the occupants wore layers; Bray was wearing thermals, a sweatshirt from her alma mater, and a down vest. She shivered and hugged herself.

"I can see if I can kickstart the mini gen again." Dirks offered. Bray waved the offer away.

"We've both tried; it's deader than this town. I'll just grab a coat and drink some coffee. I'll be fine."

"Yes, coffee sounds very good; and it's one of the few supplies that we have in plentiful supply. Pity that there is none of that special water this place produced; I've always wondered what sort of effect it might have had on my cancer."

Dirks had been diagnosed with prostate cancer just before the first cold snap and had managed to get enough treatments before travel became difficult. Bray had a slow but steady form of breast cancer; its growth may have been stunted by the weather, but the oncologist who had accompanied them in this suicide mission was never sure. He was not well equipped for handling the isolation and the growing knowledge that

they were never going to leave Hell. He woke up one day, stripped naked, and walked out of the building into the snow. He got five steps before he froze solid and fell to the ground. Bray and Dirks knew where he fell because of the small mound of snow that was slightly higher than the ground coverage around it.

Dirks went to the kitchen that occupied one corner of the building's only floor and made coffee for the two of them. The heat off the mugs warmed his hands as he brought them back into the workspace. He handed one mug to Bray and took a seat in one of the chairs clustered around a conference table.

Bray joined him; they sipped their coffee in silence, feeling the warmth slowly emanate from their stomachs.

"Is the irony of all this ever so overwhelming that you want to start laughing and never stop?" Bray asked.

"I guess that my sense of humor is in need of tune-up, more often than not I'm livid at the cluelessness that got us here in the first place."

"Well, to be fair, I doubt seriously that anyone would have foreseen what happened. There was no reason to run any tests; the benefits of the water were well documented over time and observed by visitors, both scientific and lay."

"I'm not disputing that, but when they started bottling and selling the stuff there were clues. And signs that should have been heeded."

Bray nodded, "Have to give you that one."

Dirks laughed without humor and finished his coffee, which had been rendered lukewarm by exposure to the internal temperature.

"There's an old poem about the end of days; it contrasts an end from heat or cold. Given the way the planet's climate was headed, how is it that what will ultimately be the death of us all, and the world itself, is cold furnished by designer water?"

"Don't blame me, I wasn't a water snob. I was perfectly fine drinking from the tap or the garden hose." She braced herself for Dirks to tell the story for the hundredth or so time. But she never got tired of it; the story gave her perspective on her situation and reminded her of human folly.

"All it took was someone with an exploitative vision to decide that people shouldn't have to come to Hell to get a drink. A smooth talker got the town to drilling and extracting water from the aquifer. He bottled it, and shipped it. Hell, they did most of that work in this building. Here we are, in the space that hastened the world's end, trying to send off enough information to maybe salvage something."

"Once again, I must point out that no one who developed designer water gave any thought to anything dangerous. It made people and plants healthier; it was documented."

"Their mistake was thinking that the benefits would work elsewhere. Their rush to make money released it."

"Another concession."

"In the interest of transparency, the thought that the water might be dangerous never really crossed my mind, either. It was just another one of the overpriced things that you could buy at convenience stores. I'll give the company applause for developing the name and marketing strategy. Hell Broth was a masterstroke, and that slogan, 'Come drink from the wells of Hell' drove tourism exponentially."

Dirks found his energy diminishing, and he had stop to stabilize his breathing and heart rate. He got worked up when he got on his soapbox about the world's current state, and he was familiar by now with the steps that he had to take in order to settle things.

Bray matched his breathing; it had previously helped the formerly overweight climatologist. The experience in Hell had hastened weight loss; he and Bray probably weighed the same amount, but Bray looked healthier. Dirks was emaciated.

"You want to eat something; I haven't seen you consume anything but coffee in the last day and a half."

"You were asleep, I heated a cup of ramen. Finished it and heaved it right back up."

"Why didn't you tell me that; your cancer may be spreading again. Let me check Ling's notes on your meds." Bray struggled to get up out of her chair but wasn't quite up to the task.

They noticed that their breath was now visible; Dirks attempted to blow a heart-shaped smoke ring; the heart came out lopsided. He chuckled.

"Why Dirks, how thoughtful." Bray said. She and Dirks had attempted intimacy in an effort to kill some of the ennui, but something had killed their ability and interest. They settled for casual flirting.

"Anyway, where was I, oh, right. Hell Broth proves so successful that they dig deeper and deeper into the aquifer to get more water. It's a kid's story by that author who used to tell stories in rhyme. Eventually, the aquifer ran dry, and that was the end of the product line. They tried recreating it, but it was just water, two hydrogen atoms, one oxygen atom. They lacked the technology to see deeper inside it. By the time they got an inkling of danger, it was too late."

"Those frozen bodies in Miami," Bray said.

"That was the tip off. Five college kids on spring break, found frozen together in one sold mass in a hotel room with the AC off and the thermometer at eighty-five degrees. The autopsies showed that the freezing had started inside their bodies. Internal organs shattered when touched. It was like they'd ingested liquid nitrogen. The empty cans of Hell Broth were sent off for recycling. That was the first case."

Dirks's breath struggled, but he righted himself, his face partially obscured by the fog he exhaled.

"Remember the soccer team that was sponsored by Hell Broth and the sports drink off shoot turning into statues on national television? The opposing team accidently hit one of the frozen players with the ball and broke him into a million pieces? The world knew then something was up, but they failed to make the connection with the water from Hell. It took the distribution center outside of Indianapolis exploding and showering the area with the stuff to open people's eyes."

"It was arresting, watching that cloud drift over the city freezing everything that it touched and then that sudden snowstorm in July that didn't end until the beginning of October, which was only because the cloud had divided and parked itself over Chicago, all of Ohio, and eastern Pennsylvania." Bray agreed.

Dirks continued, his breath growing ragged, "What little time they had to investigate revealed the sentience, and the malignance, of the water from that aquifer—they wasted too much time debating whether it was extraterrestrial—it was a thing that created immediate cold. The simple chance that the aquifer developed in one of the hottest places on the planet kept the sentience in check. But when it was exported, and after it acclimated to cooler climes it was unstoppable."

"I wonder if those that escaped to the bunkers and the space platforms will make the other connection?" Bray asked rhetorically; she could see that Dirks was declining. She thought that the banter might prolong his will temporarily. She had come to enjoy the irascible climatologist's company.

"If they haven't yet, it shouldn't take long. Look at us here with nothing but flirting, and, I don't know about you, but for me even that has become a chore. I feel nothing but cold in my loins. Any spark of lust immediately winks out, frozen by the remnants of Hell Broth."

"Maybe that answers the question of its origin; an extra-terrestrial planet killer, somewhere, out there, is a civilization that wants to terraform the Earth into something the equivalent of Pluto."

Dirks countered, "Or maybe this is Gaia's business, a terrestrial organism to remove us and our works, reshaping the planet into something different, just like the Ice Age. We did it to ourselves, and our mind for exploiting natural resources for economic gain proved our undoing."

His chest heaved as he drew another breath.

"I'm sure those who escaped have the idea that they are going to wait this out wherever they are while they repopulate the world. The cold that covers the earth, self-replicating and uncontrollable, works in ways other than freezing the environment. It freezes our reproductive means, and along with our interest in reproducing. It's the ultimate weapon, and DARPA missed it. Think about it; you want to wipe out an enemy, simply supply them with Hell Broth. They'll eventually die out; you can use war to facilitate that death. If a species cannot reproduce . . ." he descended into coughing. Bray moved to comfort him but stopped when the coughs dissolved into hysterical laughter.

"I admire your perspective, Dirks, you're at death's door and you can laugh. Please tell me what's so funny?"

"Do you remember that old duet standard that usually plays around Christmas, the one that was cancelled because of the images of imprisonment and ignoring negative signals?"

"Of course, but what of it."

Dirks managed a smile, and, in a raspy voice, started singing, "But baby, it's cold insiiiiidddddeeee." They would be his last words.

Bray looked at the dead man, the remnants of the smile starting to freeze on his face, finally seeming at peace. She reached to his face, drew a shivering hand along the side, and pulled his eyelids shut.

"I think you could use some company," she whispered, "and I think I need some fresh air." She rose, shucked off her outer coverings, and plodded toward the heavy metal door, braced shut with a pallet of packaging material from the outpost's past life as a processing center for the liquid that had killed the Earth. She used hand forklift to move the pallet.

Her hand fused with the doorknob as she turned it. She ignored the pain and pulled the door open. The frigid snow and wind enveloped Bray in a whirlwind of crystal flakes. She tipped her head back, letting the freezing air embrace her like a lover, becoming one with it. She froze where she stood, inside, in the cold.

About the Author:

Rocky Colavito is a sunsetting academic transitioning into a horror-filled retirement where, as a person of leisure, he can read, write, and watch scary stuff to his heart's content. He's the creator of Buck Neighkyd, porn star turned occult PI, whose adventures unfold in *Caveman Magazine* and in the novel, *Creative Control*. He's en route, and he's the one they've warned you about.

Amazon Author Page: J. Rocky Colavito

Miss Smallwood's Class | Miracle Austin

Darkness buried the sunlight without warning. Rows of twenty-inch, thick ice spikes penetrated the school playground — bending the merry-go-round, slide, and swing-set in half. The ground split open and swallowed everything it could. I sprinted towards my students as my tears partially blinded my sight. I tried to save the screaming children, but couldn't reach them in time. Multiple reptilian creatures with hairy wings and fiery claws crawled out and yanked each one up with their retractable, forked tails. They all vanished back down to the place I thought never existed. The sun reappeared. Only burnt jump ropes, hairbows, and baseball caps remained.

About the Author:

Miracle Austin is a Texan gal who works in the medical social work arena by day and in the writer's world at night, including weekends, as a YA/NA author. She loves horror, collecting T-shirts, *Stranger Things, Wednesday*, Marvel & DC, sparkles, unicorns, 80s music, and daydreaming up stories.

Instagram: <u>@MiracleAustin7</u>
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Full | JB Corso

Something about the human world felt different to the Grim Reaper as it floated behind a young mother walking a stroller down a city sidewalk. A rotating ball of orange radiated inches above her head. She basked in the first warm day since winter clouds and chill retreated away. Her infant son clapped at being on a fun walk with his mother.

It read its work's name and bio over her wind-blown hair. Sarah Lindenhaus. 29. Mother of one, wife of ten years, middle-daughter of six. Weak heart. Its bony face looked upon her with regal stoicism. It'd taken thousands to the other side since the morning sun peeked over the distant mountain range. *Go with peace to the Otherside*. It swung his scythe through her with the ease of breeze blowing through a grassy pasture.

Sarah grabbed her t-shirt with a cringe. Her knees buckled. Guttural groans pushed through her lips. She reached upward for the stroller handle as pain exploded within her chest. The buggy drifted several inches from her fingers as she curled into a ball. The Reaper watched as her life force sifted above her. Its radiant light connected with a spectral tube of ethereal energy.

It won't be long now. It floated past the clapping child as the last of her breaths warmed the concrete. Her final mortality sparkles sputtered away. She lay on the sidewalk with open eyes. Her son's celebration carried on above her.

Moments later, it arrived outside a downtown Parisian apartment. The Grim Reaper drifted through a red-colored front door. A glowing orb radiated over Mr. Francois Laurent's slumber on his couch. The aromas of midday coffee and cigarettes permeated the air. It stood before the wheezing man and confirmed his task. Mrs. Laurent held a worn-out spatula over a pan of blintzes in their cramped kitchen as she waited for the perfect moment to rescue them from their cooking demise.

The Reaper ended Mr. Laurent's life with one swipe of his tool. *Go with peace to the Otherside*. A final cough broke free before the older man's chest became still. The uncomfortable feeling grew more intense under its ebony robes. An unusual sensation that it couldn't understand. *My work must continue*.

A glowing orb pulsed within a quaint two-bedroom home overlooking the Philippine Sea. Maria Ramirez slumped on her couch with a picture of her dead husband and son on her lap. Open bottles of sleeping pills lay turned on their sides around her. The feeling of unease expanded into an intense pressure like a volcano trembling before an impending explosion. The Reaper watched over her with stoic reverence. It wheeled its scythe. *Go with peace to the Otherside.* The curved blade halted to a stop inches from passing through her. It stared at the woman in disbelief. The Reaper pulled the tool back and re-swung. The arched edge stopped as if getting stuck in a net. Maria coughed several times. She collapsed to her knees on the profusely stained carpet, gasping for air. The bottles' contents spilled out onto the cushion she had gotten up from. Maria vomited up a mix of breakfast vodka and half-digested tablets.

The Reaper watched her movement with amazed concern. It pulled back with all its might and swung as if trying to end the lives of several people at once. The scythe dissolved into a fine mist.

A massive voice of unquestionable authority boomed through its thoughts. Full.

This cannot be possible. Its skeletal hands turned translucent until disappearing all together.

About the Author:

JB Corso is a healthcare professional working to better the lives of vulnerable people. They enjoy spending time with their supportive wife, writing daily, and finding joy in the world. Their author's motto is "Developing stories into masterpieces." They have been published in both fiction and professional outlets.

Facebook: JB Corso



No Caller ID | Shawnna Deresch

Beep. You have one new voicemail. Angelica slowly peeled off a faux mink eyelash covering one of her eyes like a Band-Aid and rubbed the sleep out of her eye. The afternoon sun sliced through the blinds in her bedroom and cast a glare on her phone on the nightstand next to her bed hiding the name of the caller. She hadn't even heard her phone ring last night. She propped herself up on her elbow but laid back down. Her head throbbed. No more ½ priced mai tais at Hooligan's with the ladies after work, she promised herself.

She brought her cell phone closer to her face so she could see who sent the voicemail. "No Caller ID. Ugh." She waited as the automated voice repeated "You have one new voicemail." The line was silent except for some background static. Maybe Allison butt dialed her while the uber driver dragged her drunk self into her apartment building.

Through the garbled white noise, a voice cried, "Cassie."

She bolted upright. That name. She hadn't heard it in years. She cradled her head with her hands as waves of nausea washed through her. The heaviness in her chest dropped to her stomach, mixing with the late-night pizza. She barely had time to grab her trash can when she vomited mai tais and pizza. She laid back down. A mélange of undigested food and bile lingered in her mouth. She searched for a water bottle on her bed with one hand while the other one grabbed her phone off the pillow. She must have heard the message wrong.

"This isn't funny. Who is this?" She demanded to know from the phone in her hand as if she expected it to answer her. "This better not be one of your pranks, Allison." But how could Allison know she was Cassie? Cassie was her old life, three states away, and years ago before she moved to Homewood. She reinvented herself as Angelica for a fresh start.

"Cassie," the voice came from the phone this time begging, "Please help me."

The voice echoed in her head. "No, it can't be." She threw the phone across the room. It crashed against the wall landing on an oversized bean bag where Beanie, her tuxedo cat, was sprawled out in a pile of dirty clothes. He hissed at the object that interrupted his slumber and scurried out of the bedroom.

She gnawed at her nails chipping the purple nail polish off while staring at the phone laying on the bean bag. Goosebumps rippled down her arms. She shivered as she remembered the last time she saw her former best friend, lying dead on the kitchen floor in a pool of her own blood, a butcher knife in Angelica's hand.

The toilet flushed in the hallway bathroom. Who was here? She lived by herself. Except for Beanie who preferred the mounds of dirty clothes strewn through her bedroom instead of a soft bed.

Her heart raced as she didn't remember locking her apartment door when she came home last night. No more mai tais for her. Where was her purse? She panicked for a moment until her hand touched the Chanel knockoff. She dug out her taser.

Why would an intruder use the bathroom? She laughed nervously at herself. It had to be Cage who probably slept on the couch because she was too drunk and couldn't make it home last night. She sighed with relief and placed the taser on her nightstand.

She called out, "Cage?"

Silence, except for the gurgling of water in the drains.

"Cage," she called out again. This time with the hope that it was Cage in her apartment and not some burglar.

The bathtub faucet turned on. "Cage, quit playing games."

Buzz. Her phone lit up on the bean bag. She didn't want to answer it, but she had to assure herself she wasn't going crazy. She retrieved the phone from the bean bag. No Caller ID appeared on the screen. She decided to let it go to voicemail.

"No, No." She threw the phone back on the bed and fell into the oversized bean bag in the corner. She cradled her knees with her arms, too afraid to do anything. Maybe she was losing her mind.

No one would believe her if she called 911. *Maybe someone spiked my drink last night and I'm hallucinating*, she thought.

"Tell the truth." The voice oozed out of the phone like hot lava inching toward Angelica.

Her pulse quickened. "Why is this happening now?"

"Cassie, I want my life back."

Angelica screamed at the voice, "When hell freezes, you bitch."

Beanie mewed loudly in the hallway. Angelica sprinted to him, but it sounded like the mews were moving further and further away. "Beanie, are you okay, baby?"

Afraid to go any further because of a possible intruder, she ran back into her bedroom to call 911. She paused for a moment in the middle of her room where the bed once was. Where was the bed? It was gone. And the bean bag? It was gone too. Her phone was nowhere to be found. Angelica grabbed her purse off a pile of blankets in the middle of the floor where the bed used to be. In her hands, the black purse was fading to grey, disintegrating in her hands, the ashes falling to the floor. It seemed like everything she owned was being erased or everything that belonged to her former best friend that she stole was disappearing from in front of her. She was losing her mind.

A phone rang in the bathroom, and it shook Angelica out of her trance. How did it get there? She tried to open the door, but it wouldn't budge. It was locked from the inside. She banged on the door, the wood not succumbing to the blows with her fists. The knob twisted by itself, and the door swung open.

She came face to face with her best friend. Dead former best friend. Angelica couldn't believe what she was seeing. Her heart pounded so hard that she could hear it in her ears.

"Beanie is fine. I'm taking him back. I'm taking everything back you took from me."

"No, no this can't be happening. You're dead. I killed you."

"You stole my life, former bestie. Now I want yours."

She grabbed Angelica by the neck and dragged her to the bathtub. Water was filling the tub quickly. Angelica slipped on the tiled floor and grabbed the shower curtain to steady herself, but she fell into the bathtub face first.

With the strength of ten men, her former best friend flipped her over on her back in the tub and brought her face closer to Angelica's. "I want my life back. And you're going to give it to me." The stench of decay spewed from her former best friend's mouth onto Angelica's face. She felt the burn of stomach acid rising in her throat.

"No, you're not real. You're dead. I made sure of that."

Her former best friend's eyes blossomed into two black holes as her cheeks sunk deep like caverns into her face. Pieces of rotting skin peeled off her like husk on a corncob onto Angelica's face.

Angelica shrieked at the sight of her former best friend transforming into a ghoul. With one hand wrapped around her neck, she shoved Angelica's face under the running faucet. Water sprayed into Angelica's mouth and nose choking her. She spit water out but only for more to rush back in. With both of her hands, she grasped her former best friend's hand around her neck to remove it, but it wouldn't budge.

She gasped for air, her mouth wide open, but the water quickly filled up her lungs. Angelica felt her insides being pulled out of her body, floating away. She drifted above her body lying in the tub watching her dead former best friend's hands force Angelica's mouth open. The crackles of Angelica's jaws breaking sounded like branches underfoot in a forest.

Her body swept up itself into a tornado of grey mist and entered Angelica's open mouth. Angelica wanted to protest, but she was being pulled away and everything started disappearing. Her last thought was, *Oh my god, she's taking over my body*.

"I guess hell froze over, Cassie."

Beanie strolled into the bathroom and plopped himself near the tub extending his head to be petted. Angelica's former best friend leaned over the tub to pick him up. He purred softly and perched himself in the crux of her arm.

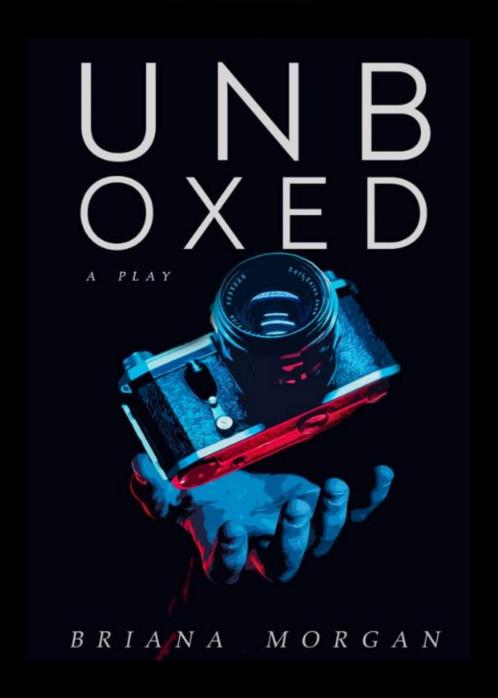
"I'll have to get used to Angelica's body. She didn't take good care of herself." She cracked her neck. She kissed the cat's pink nose. "Let's go home, Beanie."

About the Author:

Shawnna Deresch has been crafting scary stories since she could first talk. She travels extensively and splits her time between the Chicagoland area and the coast of South Carolina. Her short stories have appeared in Kandisha Press Women of Horror Anthology Volume 3 and D&T Publishing ABC's of Terror, Volume IV.

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A VLOGGER ON THE DARK WEB... WHAT COULD GO WRONG?



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The Thrall of the Huldra | Dr. Jennifer Grimes

A thunderous roar filled her ears as a black-winged creature soared overhead. She watched its enormous, inky body swoop low, its bony phalanges bearing razor-sharp talons to grab one of the scuttling beasts in the ravine below. It grasped its mark, a horrid being with disordered dentition that ripped at flesh surrounding its gaping maw, swallowing orbits without eyes, and an inhuman body rendered through a nightmare. Blood coursed from where a claw pierced its abdomen, and it struggled and thrashed to free itself. Lilja closed her eyes against the wretched creature's suffering. She collapsed behind an outcropping of ragged stone that lined the edge of the cliff. Since she'd been brought to this place, it seemed as though the routine violence exaggerated further still—as though pleasure at misery yielded to something more frantic like a vital desperation.

A wild scream echoed off the cliff before it abruptly silenced, and the slushy ripping sound matched its arrival at her ears. She closed her eyes tightly and drew her legs up to her stomach. A thick metallic band glowed red around her ankle. With delicate fingers, she tested around the edges of it to try to find a seam or a weakness, then gripped and pulled once again to pry it off, but it burned her skin. She whimpered as she curled against the roughened side of the rock, her long blond hair falling around her face in wet tendrils matted with tears and sweat. Her right hand touched something cold and smooth, and she closed her hand around a thick chain affixed to the rock. She winced thinking about its probable use.

"What are you hiding from, kvinna?" A warbling voice made her start.

A beast much like the one slaughtered below stood over her, a fog of confusion like a dream settling over him. A beautiful human woman crouched before him, a diaphanous and shimmery white gown clinging to the gentle curves of her lithe frame. Luxuriant golden hair tumbled over her bare shoulders, pooling into her lap. Her delicate features highlighted luminous blue eyes that stared at him, unafraid. Her presence held an ethereal allure, yet also the chilling threat of the unknowable. Her fine hand left a silvery dust where it splayed against the stone to which she clung.

"That," she said, inclining her head toward the ravine. Her voice was more a feeling in his mind than a sound. She regarded the imp carefully. He was the embodiment of atrocious pain: seared flesh and distorted features partially melted off the bone and refrozen in terror. Though his disfigured face betrayed no expression, she could not detect any intent to harm her.

"It would do no good, killing and consuming," he said. "The eternal flames freeze. Rage stokes the fire, but in the Ending Chill, even eating the fire of another won't warm the soul. We will burn out, all of us, until nothing of this place is left but dust." A loud crash and subsequent rumble accompanied a violent tremor resonant through the ground. "He's dead. Gone into oblivion."

The woman turned back to the scene below. Her backless dress revealed that her silken skin solidified into the sateen texture of birch bark around the sides of her ribs, splintering into dark, rotten wood sinking into where her spine should have been. "Who tore out your heart?"

She didn't answer. Her body was motionless as she watched the goblin's torn entrails reassemble themselves, blood oozing back into its misshapen body. The creature and its cohort climbed atop the limp body of the fallen flying creature and, with appendages ending in bare bone, plunged them into its inky flesh. A coat of ice formed over the giant creature, and the onyx form shattered into black fragments that fell over the ground.

"Huldra," the warbling voice said. "You've brought the frost here." A low growl began to emerge and the air about the imp thickened and trembled.

"No!" she hissed. She looked about frantically, hoping that no other creature had heard him. "I was captured to stoke the fires."

"No, frost spirit," the words tumbled from its rancid maw. It took a step toward her. "You bring cold." "I bring fortune to coal-burners!" she cried out.

"Lies, siren." It took another step toward her. Her body already pressed against the stone, she tightened her fingers around the chain.

"Come closer," she murmured. The gentle melody of her voice touched the air like rose petals and vernal life in the dead of winter. The tense comportment of the imp eased slightly, and curiosity touched its brow. "Come," she sang softly.

He took another step and reached out toward her, enthralled. As she hummed a curious melody, haunting and beautiful, her voice like a harp and the notes gentle threads that encircled him and pulled him closer, closer...

She wrapped the chain around his neck in one fluid motion and kicked him over the side of the cliff. She winced as the loud clink was accompanied with a dull snap. He wouldn't stay dead, though. She knew he'd come to, probably with enough rage to stay alive for another few hours—or what felt like it here—but he'd be detained by the lucky confluence of gravity and lack of purchase to pull himself back up.

A snowflake caught on her eyelash and she started. She reached a hand in front of her, and another crystalline flake fell. Looking upward, she saw a great gash in the welkin above. The thick blanket of smoke aloft usually withheld the heavenly lights, filtering in a dull orange glow. Now, a dazzling, clear white glare poured forth through a tear in the rarified smoky cloud cover. Fresh snow drifted along the shafts of light. The flake melted in her hand and she let out a short laugh. It was snow, not ash. She looked out toward the horizon. The fires at the periphery of the land were unmoving, their faceted glow reflecting the light from above like gemstones.

"Bring meg hjem," she said. "Bring me home." She closed her eyes against the intensifying light, but she couldn't feel her way back in her mind. She listened carefully, seeking the sound of a gentle breeze as she had in the forest. Her guide was ever the soft brush of currents through branches and leaves, the pull through the frosty trails and wild splashes of color that washed over the paths when the sun's violent storms painted themselves into the sky above.

She heard the sounds, but they were garbled into a foreign tongue unlike anything she could discern. She dropped her head and a crystalline tear slid down her cheek. It was her mind. The wilds never lied. She looked down at the metallic anklet and a thought occurred to her.

She began to sing the song of the woods. It was the chorus of the living trees, untamed heartbeats, and crisp air that shimmered the senses like starlight; if sounded on a huldra's voice, the humans would hear it. The soft tune resonated throughout the chasm and outcropping of rocks, quietly enough to not draw the attention of the beasts but tuned just so to reach—

A human man peered out from behind a charred stump of a long-dead tree.

"Come," she called. "What is your name?"

He stood slowly and approached with a hesitation in his step as though he half-expected her to attack him. Good, he was clever.

"Oripheus," he said. "You are so divinely beautiful. What are you doing here?"

"I could ask of your imprisonment, as well," she said, "but I'm sure you know we'll both die if we linger here with idle chatter." She reached a hand toward him.

"Since we're here, we're both already dead." Mesmerized, he drew near, reaching a hand toward hers, his eyes unable to leave the sapphire glow of her gaze.

She smiled. "And yet your soul lives. Come closer."

He circled toward the rock and took her hand. She gently pulled him in until his face was mere inches from hers. "What do you want?" His voice was husky with need. "Anything, anything at all, I will give you."

"I will give you everything you desire, everything your mind is pleading for right now, if only you would remove my cuff." Her long lashes lowered and she drew up the hem of her gown to reveal the metallic anklet.

Jolted from the spell, he looked down at her anklet, then about their surroundings to find some implement to aid in its removal. "How do I take it off? I could hammer at it with these stones, but I'm sure that I would hurt you."

"It's a puzzle, love," she said. "What would make it most difficult to remove a bond here?"

He frowned, then suddenly dropped to his knees and pulled at the ring until it came apart with a loud clink. Standing and beaming, he gestured to her feet. "Hope is rare here, as is genuine desire in one condemned soul to help another."

"Clever," she mused.

"Everything I desire?" She nodded and watched his face carefully as he closed the distance between them. A hand circled around her back and he jolted away from her. "What are you, beast?" He scrambled backward, but she raised a hand and he froze.

"I needn't punish you for your poor comportment toward a lady," she said calmly. "But woe unto you that you chose not to stay by my side." She leaned over him, bringing her face within inches of his. "Remember me while your embers smolder into oblivion."

She closed her eyes and listened for the whispers of the forest. Without the echoing chaos of the anklet warping her mind, she heard its voice and willed herself along its currents, through the softly falling snow and deep into the darkness of her sylvan home.

Rhythm | *Dr. Jennifer Grimes*

Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding.

A little bell chimed steadily, barely audible behind the orchestra. Teddy's gaze floated over the sea of faces, all eyes trained on his dancing hands as his baton pulled forth music from the multitude before him.

Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding.

There she was, watching him intently. She tapped the beater in subtle mimicry of his sweeping gestures and delicately touched the triangle with her fingers to close each ring.

Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding.

A thought struck him: how careful was her touch, that she might miss a beat? But no, she steadily and promptly hit each cue, her face somber and focused, her taps sure and true.

Ding. Ding. Ding.

But what if he should miss? Would she continue so steadily, if his own hands faltered?

Ding. Ding. Ding.

True, indeed, the song was ending. It was inevitable, and all could feel the steady descent. *Piano, piano,* fading slowly and his tired arms softly pulling the notes, yet with less force than before.

Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding.

The insistent percussionist kept her chime, steady, certain, unwavering. He heard her all the more clearly as the other instruments softened.

Ding. Ding. Ding.

She didn't fit with them, the *pianissimo* music held so tenuously that a thought might waver the final notes from existence. Ah, a mere breath, they barely touched the air.

Ding. Ding. Ding.

The woodwinds and brass eyed him in panic now, faces tight, flushed violaceous with the asphyxia that his still-fluttering hands imposed on them. To breathe, to finally cut the last note. His arms, so tired. It was here. It was the end. Indeed, the final note held... too long...

Ding. Ding. Ding. Ding.

He looked at her, and she at him. Hers was the only note now, but for a faraway cry from a lonely violin.

Her fingers brushed closed the note.

The doctor turned off the telemetry.

About the Author:

Dr. Jennifer Grimes writes dark fantasy, sci-fi, and horror, and loves an exploration of humanity's light in the context of darkness. She also illustrates a comic about two cats, *The Mundane Adventures of Rufus and Mort*. Besides writing, drawing, and dreaming up the next story, she enjoys playing bass guitar or hanging out with her two rescue cats (any of these while listening to metal).

Twitter: @JenG_writer
Instagram: @rufusandmort

Cursed | R.A. Clarke

"The warning light is on!" An armed lookout on a motorcycle shouted repeatedly as he raced down the street. Similar engines roared along distant roads as brave souls warned our usually sleepy town.

People gasped and shouted in his wake, scattering with their loved ones in the deepening dusk.

I clutched my shopping bag to my chest and ran to the house, feet skidding around corners, legs and lungs burning from the effort. My husband knew to meet me there, but when I slammed the door closed behind me, he was nowhere to be seen.

"George!" I shouted, dropping my bag and running down the hall, checking rooms. "George!" I spun in a circle, frantic. Where was he? I looked out the kitchen window. There was still light—still time. Had he not gotten the message at his work? Could he still be there?

I pressed the automated shutter button, and metal covers slid over the windows. I'd secure the door too if George were here, but he wasn't.

Another minute passed. The last of the sun's rays were fading fast. The Cursed abhorred sunshine. They'd be coming soon. *Do I wait or go find him?* I rubbed a hand over my sweaty face, then touched my growing belly. I knew what he'd tell me to do, but I couldn't forsake him like that. This child needed their father.

I grit my teeth and grabbed my gun. Feeding it full of lead, I racked it and swung the door open. Citizens raced about but there were no screams yet. I have time. I can do this.

I rushed off the porch, freezing at the sound of feet rapidly approaching from the alley. A woman's shrill cry echoed somewhere across town. *Oh no...*

The footsteps intensified, closing in.

Raising my gun, I risked a shout. "George! Is that you?"

No reply. Gunshots cracked from afar.

I stepped back onto the porch, swallowing hard, losing my resolve as shadows deepened around me. If he wasn't home soon, he wouldn't be.

Unwanted visions of the Cursed ripping him into digestible pieces assaulted me. Tears pushed from behind my eyes. "George!" I wailed, panicking.

A figure emerged from the alley, its torso upright, arms and legs pumping with determination. A human. A man.

Relief split my face in a smile. "George. Oh, thank the Ancients!"

Between huffing breaths, he hissed, "Shush Michelle! You know not to shout!" He sprinted across the street toward me as a low growl reached my ears. I aimed the rifle down the street, seeing nothing, then raised it to scan the rooftops.

Gnarled claws clutched the neighboring peak. A pale, leathery head stretched out and a maw full of piranha-like teeth flashed.

George reached my side and grasped my waist, pulling me through the entry with him. The monster swooped to the ground as George slammed the door closed. I locked it while my husband hammered the security button. Mechanics whirred and a thick, metal guard slid to shield us.

The beast slammed into it, screeching.

We jumped back, didn't wait to see if the cover made it all the way across. George grabbed the emergency bag and his rifle, and we ran toward the crawlspace. He tossed the bag down into the darkness.

Another slam came from the front entrance, wood splintering.

"It's inside. Go, hurry!" He loaded his gun as I scrambled down the ladder, following, his work boots thunking on the rungs. As soon as his head was below, he shut the metal hatch and slid the five heavy bolts to secure it. We'd always been safe down here whenever the beasts fled their den and the light glowed in the mountains, but a Cursed had never breached our house before... The hatch was untested.

I wound up the emergency lantern, brightening the space. "What if it gets in?"

My husband walked to my side and kissed my temple. "It won't." He knelt, laying out ammunition in front of us.

Footsteps crossed overhead, hooked nails clicking against the floorboards.

"May the Ancients protect us," I whispered, clutching my husband's hand.

Claws scratched across the hatch.

A menacing growl.

Then silence.

"Maybe it's gone," I whispered.

George crossed a finger over his lips.

Slam! The hatch rattled.

A barrage of hits hammered the two-foot square barrier standing between it and us. A deadbolt popped off its hinges, clattering down the ladder.

More slams broke off two more. One side of the hatch bent, its metal buckling. A toothy snout protruded through the gap, emitting a rabid snarl.

I ran a hand over my swollen belly.

The hatch shook amidst continued attacks, and when the fourth bolt gave way, we raised our guns, taking aim.

George shouted, "Aim for the head!"

With a crash, our barrier ripped away.

The Cursed snaked inside, wings shifting as its eyeless face zeroed in on us.

George fired first, hitting its neck, but the wound knitted together as fast as it blew apart. It shrieked, claws gripping the ceiling supports as it rushed towards us.

Our rapid-fire rounds remained ineffectual until one finally hit its mark.

The Cursed's head exploded and it dropped from the ceiling.

As the creature twitched its last, George and I smiled at each other with relief.

"We need to block the hatch—" My words fizzled as a symphony of sinister growls filtered down to us. Countless claws clicked overhead creating a din of peril.

I glanced up. "They're everywhere."

"There's too many." George looked at me, then down to my stomach. He grimaced. "If we're lucky they'll rip us apart. If we're not, they'll eat us piece by piece until we finally die. I can't bear you and the baby going through that..." He shifted, shakily aiming his gun at me. "I'll make sure it's fast. I promise."

A Cursed roared outside the hatch. The horde replied with cacophonous shrieks.

I sobbed. "But what about you?"

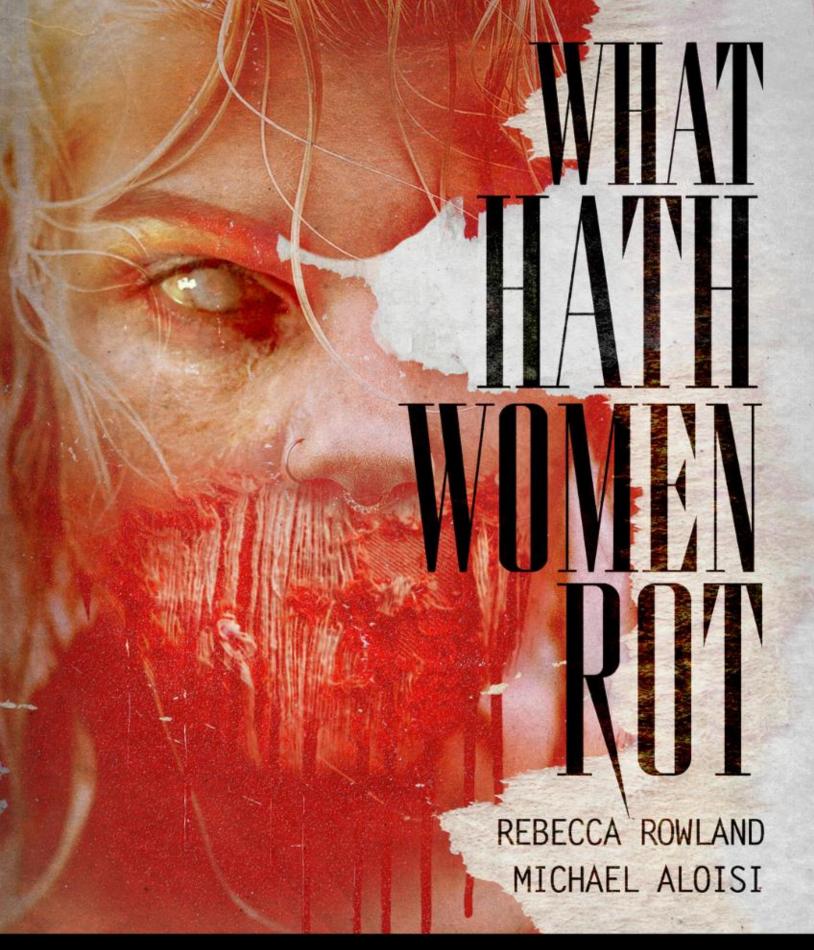
Leathery faces appeared, snarling. One after another, the Cursed swarmed through the opening, teeth snapping.

"We'll meet again in the afterlife, my loves." Releasing an agonized moan, George fired a round into my abdomen. I cried out in pain as he raised it to my face. A beast lunged as he squeezed the trigger once more, and darkness fell.

About the Author:

R.A. Clarke is a former police officer turned stay-at-home mom living in Manitoba, Canada. Besides chasing after her children and sipping coffee, her time is spent plotting fantastical fiction. She's been named a Futurescapes Award finalist, a Dark Sire Award finalist, and has won various international writing competitions, including the 2023 Write Fighters 3-Day Novella Challenge. R.A.'s debut sci-fi western novel *Race to Novus* is scheduled for release in 2024.

Author Website: Rachael Clarke Writes
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Sentient Santa | Jonathan Worlde

The harsh sound of metal being torn and mangled in the vast warehouse up ahead grated on Carlton's ears. He'd only been served with his termination notice last night. Until then he'd believed he was the real Santa Claus, and not an android in a Santa suit. He glanced at the letter again. It was addressed to Santa – 75/1000. The fine print at the bottom of the letter explained that the seasonal army of one thousand 'auxiliary' Santas were to appear at this location in the industrial park for 'recycling'.

Looking at the line of android Santas snaking toward the warehouse door from where Carlton stood, and continuing behind him and down the street, Carlton realized he'd been deceived by management. He now understood all these Santas had also risked their lives last week on Christmas eve: death-defying feats of dare-devil sleigh flight over continents, dodging weather and automated air-defense systems, bringing toys to hopeful children. They all wore the same fraving red Santa costumes.

Carlton looked into the saddened eyes of his next-in-line. "And to think, I never even dissed a kid just because he was on the Bad list, I always found something to leave behind. I loved those kids."

"I know it," his neighbor with a red hoody said. "This letter indicates 76/1000. Are there actually a thousand of us?"

That Santa's neighbor said, "Seems like that's what it means. I'm 74/1000. And in this line it looks like easily a thousand of us."

Carlton's identical next-in-line said "Management infused our minds with an imperative to serve, to heal. We were keeping the flow of commerce alive in the coldest of winter, and now we're going to end up on a trash heap? Listen to those monster machines in there."

The Santa next to him chimed in. "It won't be a trash heap. Our parts are too valuable. Whatever can't be repurposed for some other function still brings good money as scrap metal."

Carlton shook his head. "I've only known life as Santa, and now this? Wait a minute, what about next year? If they needed all of us Santas..."

"a thousand of us..."

"...to get all the toys out, what about when this time comes around next year? Won't they need the same number of Santas to carry the load?"

His pal in front lit up a cigar. "Nah, you don't understand how capitalism works. Management can scrap us and charge the government for all our replacements, while increasing the cost of labor and materials."

Carlton was still dazed. "There must be something we can do?"

Cigar Santa nodded. "There sure is. First thing, we can take over this decommissioning plant...there's strength in numbers, they can't stop us all."

"But our programming doesn't allow dissent."

"It's not dissent when we're in the majority, and there's way more of us'n them. We tear down this place, then we can demand a fair and equitable division of labor for the coming year, with time off and family leave and health care."

Carlton saw a new purpose in life. "That's right. We can build a safe haven for all the Santas...all one-thousand of us!" The shrieking metallic sound increased in volume. "Let's go, boys, our people are dying in there! They can't kill us all at once!"

The thought was shared swift as a winter storm. Hordes of Santas easily over-ran the warehouse guards. Inside, Carlton picked up a heavy wrench and attacked an enormous shredder that was swallowing up one of the Santas. Then he saw the machine's electric line and pulled the plug, saving his android sibling from total destruction. Looking around, he admired how the others were tearing the building apart, dismantling the deadly machinery. Carlton felt ecstatic, alive in the moment. "Come on, boys, we're a community of Santas, all living in harmony for one another!"

Seconds later, everything went dark. Carlton felt nothing when the electro-magnetic pulse bomb, employed by management, left the ground strewn with hundreds of Santa cadavers across the horizon.

About the Author:

Jonathan Worlde is the fiction byline of Paul Grussendorf, an attorney representing refugees and a consultant to the UN Refugee Agency. Jonathan Worlde's novel Latex Monkey with Banana was winner of the Hollywood Discovery Award. His stories are published in over thirty journals. Paul is also a traditional country blues performer under the stage name Paul the Resonator, whose CD is Soul of a Man.

The Bitter Sweet Café | Sarah Graven Weir

The bitter cold was making Ivy's teeth chatter and she felt a chill in her bones. She noticed a dimly lit café on the corner and decided to follow the inviting aroma. It looked almost empty; she spotted the perfect seat next to a warm fireplace.

A man walked over to take her order. Ivy was taken aback when she saw his eyes were bloodshot. She then observed how everyone in the café had bloodshot eyes!

"Forgive me, Sir, but you all look like you could do with some sleep."

"That's quite alright, we are just starved for human souls."

A Thrilling Tale | Sarah Graven Weir

A lamp flickered and Ida looked up from her desk momentarily. There had been warnings of treacherous icy conditions. She was glad for study night in the warm library. Utterly engrossed in her book, she turned the page, feeling a chill in the air. A gust of wind blew the door open. Coincidently, the shadow of a man appeared to be lingering, startling her.

"Yes?" She frowned, noticing how his eyes seemed to flicker in time with the lamp.

"Bolt the door; anything could be roaming this time of night." The man scratched his long nail across Ida's demonology volume.

The Ultimate Outsider | Sarah Graven Weir

"Gargoyles were placed on the outside of churches to ward off evil spirits, a reminder of the possibility of eternal damnation," explained his father.

"So, what would happen if they escaped from Hell?"

The air fell deafly silent. Edwin glanced at the grotesque statues waiting for a response. He noticed his father's mouth was opening and closing. He was talking, yet no sound escaped his lips.

"Father?" Edwin waved a hand in front of him, observing how stiff and grey he became.

A stranger patted the boy's shoulder, "A Fallen Angel, the Devil doesn't cast out the Devil I'm afraid."

Not Just a Dream | Sarah Graven Weir

Rats squeaked and scuttled across the floorboard in the dead of night, making Penny leap up from her bed out of shock. Delirious and not properly awake, she reached for the light switch. Penny couldn't stop scratching. She twisted round to try look at her back in the mirror, it was red raw! She heard squeaking again, catching sight of several rats on her bed as she looked through the mirror. Her head darted round; she stumbled backwards in sheer terror. A deathly silence sealed her fate as she saw the Plague Doctor standing in the corner of her room.

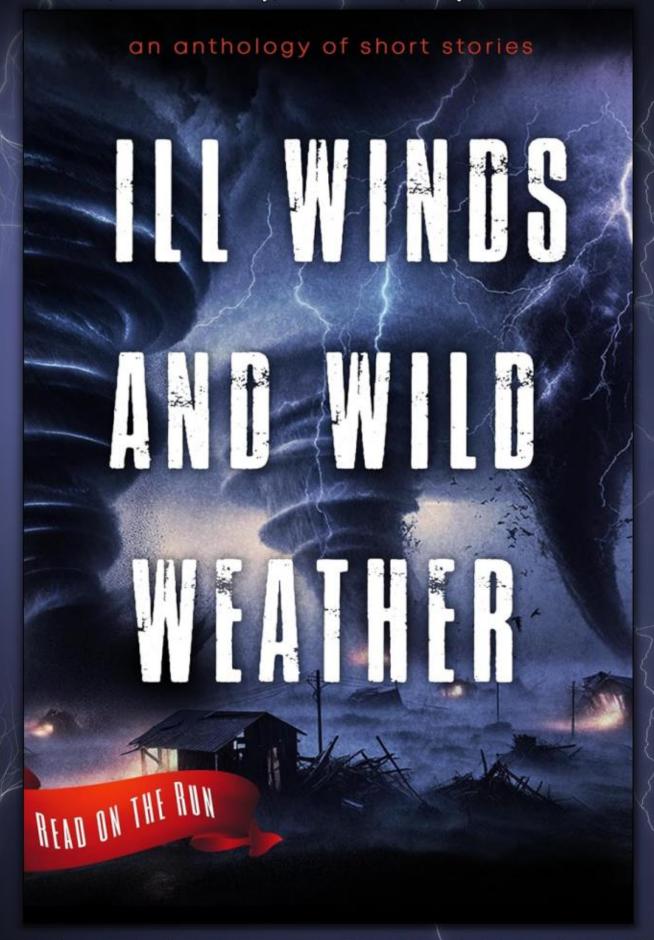
About the Author:

Sarah Graven Weir was first published in Black Ink Fiction's Animal Cage in 2022, and has since contributed reviews in Phantasmagoria magazine. She is drawn to combining her interest in vintage horror, supernatural, and comedy. She has a BA Hons Degree in Photography; this has since manifested into the written word. When not writing, she can be found haunting coffee shops and meditating in graveyards.

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Eighteen short stories of how the elements influence our world. Some are dark, some are funny, some sweet, many of them are a bit weird!



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

The Things That We Do | Nicole L. Nevel-Steighner

The Pennsylvania sunrise was brilliant as Larissa's 1976 Chevy Impala crested the hill. An expanse of shops and restaurants greeted her as she sped toward the downtown area. Having just left a breakfast meeting with a friend at Eat and Park, she hurried home before her aunt Catherine awoke. She had a private nurse to watch her, emphysema having weakened her once vibrant body. It was their morning exchange of sharing tea and going over the business that got her going each day.

Clairmonte Glass had been in the family for generations, establishing them as the elite of their small town of Tannersville. Their house, although hidden by trees and a huge gate, was the gem of the downtown area. Larissa's friends used to call to each other within the hallways, laughing at their echoes. It was never an especially happy house, but became even less so after her parents passed, leaving her in the care of her mother's sister, Catherine.

She had become the face of the company years ago. Glamorous and witty, she was known for her keen sense of business. As her illness progressed, her presence had become less and less. Catherine put Larissa into a managerial position right out of college. At twenty-five, she took the responsibility seriously.

Hastily parking, she grabbed her purse and her Esprit tote bag from the passenger seat and made for the front door. It opened and shut with a loud squeal. She'd have to get someone to come administer some oil. With all she had going on lately, the house was becoming less of a priority.

As she made her way up the long winding steps to the landing, the nurse emerged from the door to her aunt's room.

"She's been asking for you. The old bird has been up for an hour."

"Thank you, Robin." Larissa huffed. "I was having a coffee with a friend."

"Anyone can see you need a break."

"It was more of a crisis aversion."

"You can't fix everyone. That twelve to seven shift is going to exhaust you. I'm going to take my half hour now."

Larissa nodded her blonde head as Robin excused herself. Even the help took pity on her. Nineteen Eighty-Nine was taking a toll on her.

"Lar!"

The sound of Catherine's voice was jarring, even from behind the oak door. She quickly joined her, feeling the pressure of the morning mounting.

"Where have you been? Robin has been waiting to take her break."

Catherine adjusted the hose beneath her nose and reached for her teacup. She looked just a slip of a woman now, sandwiched beneath the bulk of her comforter, her silk robe hanging from her sunken shoulders.

"I was with Jen at the diner. She was talking about moving on again to Derrin Glass."

"Oh?" Catherine coughed a bit, before taking a sip of tea. "You always get too involved with the employees' personal lives. What was the outcome of your early morning breakfast?"

"I got her to stay. Predicated on you moving forward with that promotion you promised her last year." Catherine set down her cup with a raised eyebrow. "That was last year."

Larissa strolled about the room looking at all the photos Catherine had positioned.

"I always liked this photo of you and John Kennedy."

"Gone too soon," Catherine said, a wild coughing jag brewing.

Larissa made her way to the bed, Catherine waving her away.

"Don't fuss." She hissed, catching her breath. "This is all nothing but bullshit. I should have died weeks ago."

"You say that every week," Larissa mumbled. "That being the case, we need to go over these notes. Production has been down the past quarter. Our people need reassurance. Jen isn't the only one mentioning Derrin's."

"That's your job now," Catherine said, coughing into a hanky. Larissa could see the crimson hue filling the expanse.

"You are the face of the company. Perhaps, if they see you one more time they will feel better about staying?"

"Filling an outfit full of sheep with false promises isn't going to solve anything, my love. You need to realize that I am no longer the face of anything except this bedroom. Why do you think I paid for all that school? Would you rather have worked at Fashion Frenzy?"

"Of course not," Larissa sighed. "It's just the thought of you giving up."

"Look around you, Lar. The woman in those photos no longer exists. We need to start planning my wake, not a luncheon with the staff. When we leave this world we are only as good as the last thing we do."

Larissa arose and clenched the notes close to her body. "I can see you aren't in the mood to talk sensibly. I need to lay down. It's been a long night."

"You can't avoid the future," Catherine said, rifling around her nightstand. "Perhaps yours would include a man if you weren't so invested in the employees' personal lives."

"No man I've met understands me." Larissa sighed.

"Where are my Virginia Slims?" Catherine demanded.

"I tossed them," she answered softly, closing the door.

"Our night off and this is the shit you have to tell me?" Jen smirked, swirling the straw in her drink. "God, you reek of White Rain."

"It's all I had. I didn't have time to run out and get Pantene."

"That's even worse." Jen crinkled her nose and shook her own brunette lacquered hair. "Now tell me again why I am not getting the move-up position?"

"Why here?" Larissa asked, scowling at the dank walls of Gary's Place.

"It's mid-point. I don't live near the swanky downtown area. At this rate, I'll be lucky to afford this drink."

"I'll buy you girls a drink." A dark-haired man with the smile of a Cheshire cat leered over his shoulder at them.

"Not a chance," Jen said, turning her back to him.

"I tried talking with her but she was in one of her moods."

"She's always going to be in a mood, she's dying."

"Stop saying that." Larissa slumped on the stool. "What may I ask did you do to your bangs?"

"I can't afford the salon anymore, so I did them myself."

"Well don't do it again." Larissa chuckled, swilling back her drink. Motioning to the bartender, she signaled for two more.

The road from Gary's Place was long and windy. Why had Jen dragged her the whole way out here? "So Alive," blared from the car stereo as Larissa grooved along, barely focused on the road. Suddenly, a chugging sound got her attention as the car was losing power. Every light on the console illuminated while the engine whirred to a halt.

"Damn!" She exclaimed. Catherine had been on her to get rid of the car for a while now but she just couldn't. Her dad had loved it so much.

After several attempts to start it, nothing was happening. Sighing, she pulled her fluffy white Benetton jacket closer and emerged from the car. Luckily, there was a 7-Eleven within her scope.

She felt the chill of the night creep beneath her bobbed hair as she moved into a bit of a trot. The sooner she got to a phone the better. Sunrise was approaching.

Thankfully, the headlights of a truck marked, 'Pittman Towing'. were upon her. Waving her hands, she signaled him over. Greeted by a welcoming smile, the driver seemed to be of her age.

"My savior," she said. "I'm broke down along this stretch."

"Hop in," he said, reaching over to open the passenger side door.

She quickly accepted, sinking into the seat next to him. "It's getting chilly."

"I don't mind it. I like fall. The name is Jory."

"Larissa."

"So, what's got you out on these back roads so late?" Jory asked, raking a hand through his wavy brown hair.

Within the dimly lit confines of the truck, she could just make out his profile. He was attractive.

Smiling, she tucked a strand of her teased bob behind her ear.

"I met an employee for drinks at Gary's Place. You know of it?"

"It's a dump." Jory chuckled. "You have an employee?"

"Yes, but she's more like a friend. I promised my Aunt Catherine that I wouldn't socialize with co-workers but I can't help myself. They have all been so nice to me during the transition."

"What's your business?" Jory asked, focusing on the road. "You're way overdressed for Gary's."

"Clairmonte Glass," Larissa said softly. "Catherine Clairmonte is currently the CEO. I'm the niece garnered with the responsibility of keeping it all going while she's fighting an illness."

"You're one of the Clairmontes from Tannersville? You own that big old house in town?"

Larissa gulped. "It's not all that big."

"It looks pretty big." He smiled.

She stopped talking, embarrassment welling up. Catherine said it showed bad breeding to speak about money.

"You okay?" Jory asked.

"I didn't want to come off as some lofty debutante."

"It's fine. Not everyone can drive around in a fine piece of machinery like this," Jory teased.

"Your job is important. Helping people is a big deal. I was getting a little scared before you came along."

"Hmmm." Jory smiled. "I've been called plenty, but important, hadn't topped the list."

"My car is just there," Larissa said. Her head turned sharply as he whizzed by it.

Rock music blared as he turned the radio up, his eyes fixed on the road. He looked carved out of marble.

"Jory, my car is back there!" she exclaimed over the din of the interior. "Jory!"

He made a sharp turn that led up a rocky driveway. The truck bounced as the speed never wavered, jostling her back and forth. Finally coming to a stop at the side of the garage marked in the same insignia as the truck, he reached over and grabbed her by the arm. The music came to a lull.

She struggled as he lunged at her, trapping her by the shoulders.

"Jory stop it! Stop it!"

"Look at me," he said softly. "Look at me."

His eyes held hers for what seemed like moments and she felt a wave of calmness caress her from the feet up.

"Look at me and listen. Larissa Clairmonte, you are still. You are happy and safe within this truck. Happy and safe."

She felt herself go limp within his arms as he brushed a piece of her blonde hair behind her ears and pulled away her jacket. Caressing the side of her neck with his mouth, her arms instinctively encircled him. The caress deepened and she felt pressure then warmth pooling down her shoulder. Was that her blood? Jory raised his face to gaze down at her, his mouth painted crimson. He pressed his lips to hers and she opened her mouth, tasting her essence.

Pulling away for only a second he bent low to her ear to whisper.

"There is ordinary and there is extraordinary, Larissa. Which do you want to be?"

She felt the life ebbing from her but was conscious of opportunity.

"Extraordinary."

Gasping, she sought the light, but there was none. Coldness enveloped her within the circle of his arms. She lay beside him in what must be his day bed. Shifting, she curled closer, wondering the time. He moved a bit and opened his eyes.

"I can't feel my heartbeat." She whispered.

"Larissa," Jory mused. "We have much to discuss."

"Clever," she said as they emerged from the pit of the garage. "I like how you made use of your workspace."

"Thanks," he answered, pulling her in to stroke her face. "Do you have any questions?"

"None," Larissa answered. "I'm a quick study. Get my car to the shop for real, won't you? No more sleeping in that pit. Stop by the house after your shift."

"Why do I feel that I've become one of your employees?" He teased, as she took to the sky.

She had been greeted with "Where the Hell have you been?" Their exchange had been short as Larissa lulled Catherine into calmness. The process didn't take long as she didn't have the strength to fight her. As sunset approached, she tranced Robin to go, as her services now included providing them with blood bags from the local clinic.

With the blinds and curtains pulled tightly, Larissa locked Catherine in her room and advanced on with her evening. She arrived at the plant late and established a new standard with the employees. They were quite malleable. After a strong team-building meeting, she'd entranced their loyalty for good.

She secured the darkness of her room before sunrise. No light filtered though as Jory threw open the door. He took his place beside her in the bed without further question.

The sound of things breaking erupted from Catherine's room.

"That would be my aunt," Larissa said, rising from the bed.

"The sun is almost up." Jory groaned. "She's not going to do this all the time, is she? How has she even turned already?"

"I'll handle her."

Making her way down the hall, she suffered Catherine's ire. Standing before a full-length mirror, she bore no reflection.

"What the Hell did you do to me?" She snarled. "Why? Why would you do this?"

"You were giving up," Larissa stated somberly.

Catherine paced the room with newfound gusto, tossing an oxygen tank across the room so hard that it stuck in the wall.

Picking up a picture, she shook it in her face.

"Look at me here and look at me now! Why would you ever think that I would want to live an eternity like this? I'm old!"

"You're a brilliant woman! There's so much left to do?"

"Lar, I have done it all! Look around you at the photos and see how I lived. Luck gave me wonderful business and family. I traveled the world, met interesting people, and ate the best foods. It was extraordinary."

Larissa felt tears well up. "You said we are known by the things that we do. I wanted to give you a chance."

A warm glow of light slipped in beneath the cracks of the balcony door, grazing Catherine's feet. They sizzled and she stepped back for a second, knowledge filled her eyes.

"I am satisfied."

"No!" Larissa exclaimed. "Don't!"

"Give your friend that promotion," Catherine said, as she threw open the doors and stepped out onto the sunlit balcony.

"Hey, the door opens smoother," Jen called out.

"Jory oiled it," Larissa said. "He's handy."

Jen followed her into her new home office.

"You know, my bangs are almost the length I want them."

"Yes, I know. I'll make good on my promise to turn you."

"How are the numbers?" Larissa asked, the photo of Catherine and President Kennedy staring back at her from her desk.

"Production has never been better."

About the Author

Nicole L. Nevel-Steighner is a writer from Western Pennsylvania that enjoys dabbling in the horror and neo-noir genres. Her love for eccentric people shines through her work. She lives outside of Pittsburgh with her husband Gregory, mother and three crazy cats.

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A Winter's Night | Gregory L. Steighner

The revolver slipped from Fran's bloody fingers followed by a long unnerving silence that ended with a thunderous splash at the bottom of the broken well. Aiden hugged his twin, shielding his sister from the rising frosty wind.

As the barren trees groaned, he said softly, "We need to get moving."

Bloated gray clouds swirled above, blocking out the setting sun to pull out earlier night. Fran nodded and picked up the pet carrier with Willow inside mewing, voicing all of their dread.

"Will Viktor help us?" Fran's voice barely broke above a whisper. The shock of what happened earlier deadened her emotions.

Aiden looked for marks on the trails. He'd hunted these woods for years with Viktor and the gang. They left marks where to find deer, turkey, and other game everywhere. On any day, those signs should lead them to his best friend's cabin easily.

This evening was far from those days. On a late winter's evening, in the dark, without moonlight, using a small flashlight would be difficult. Nevertheless, they had to reach the cabin.

"I don't want to drag him into this bloodied mess. We'll just take one of his cars and go. I'm indebted to him for teaching me to drive." Viktor would ignore any consequences to help them. Showing up at his cabin front door after trekking through the woods at night was a sure sign of tragedy. He knew their troubled family.

"He taught me how to shoot," Fran said quietly, like the dead.

As night encroached into the forest, hiking became difficult. Aiden kept flashing the light beam on the trees looking for the marks. They should have stumbled on at least several near the well. At least there was a clear deer path with a light dusting of snow to follow.

"What a Christmas this is." Fran broached the quiet.

"We'll get through this." Aiden held her free hand. Christmas was a few days ahead. Tonight was the eve of the winter's solstice. "Once we get far away..."

Fran suddenly pulled back, "Oh get real! After what we did? When they find Dad and Sandra, every cop in the area is going to be hunting for us. You think we can outrun that?"

Aiden turned around; fresh snow peppered his sister's long dark red hair, "We need time to find someone to help."

"No one cared about us before. No one believed us. With our record, they aren't going to listen anyway." She went silent for a long moment, adding, "That gun was still loaded."

He seized her by the shoulders, almost jarring the pet carrier from her hand. Willow cried out as he shouted, "Don't say that! Would you rather it was us? You saved us."

For a second a stray flash of light crossed her light green eyes. She spoke delicately, "We're lost. Let the cold take us. It's like falling asleep. No one can harm us in our dreams."

He didn't admit it aloud, but his sister was partly right. They roamed the woods for hours. It was close to midnight and not any nearer to Viktor's place. Regardless of their intentions, freezing to death was likely.

A humming rose from deep in the woods. It was a mechanical sound, even and growing louder until a blazing pair of lights shattered between the skeleton trees. Aiden shielded his eyes as the headlights of a car pivoted on a curve to head away from them.

Fran stepped forward, "Are we near a road?"

"I'm not sure. We got lost in the woods. It must be the old logging road."

It took a few minutes to get out of the forest. They stepped onto the road. Fran kicked the surface, "It's a brick road."

Aiden flashed the light downward at the neat rows of crimson bricks. Back in the day, brick roads were common around Elksburg. Oil flowed from the Pennsylvanian ground, bringing in money. That was way over a century ago. Those roads were rebuilt or disused now. This was pristine.

A loud clopping came around the bend with a warm golden light. A shape appeared from the shadows, a carriage pulled by two black horses clamored past the twins. Aiden stared at the fancy display. For an instant, he saw a woman's face looking at them from one of the windows.

"That was beautiful," Fran said walking after it. "A Late Victorian carriage. I'm sure of it."

Aiden followed her up the road, "That's impossible."

"We just saw it."

They continued along the road. The bricks were ice-free so the siblings walked briskly towards the end. The road was a driveway that snaked towards a commanding mansion encircled by snow-capped pines and barren oaks. The shrill cry of an owl greeted them.

In front of the manor was a line of a variety of vehicles. The carriage stood out among them, its splendor overwhelmed all the others. The horses snorted as the twins walked past, and Willow hissed back. Aiden marveled at the antiques posed before them. Viktor would be ecstatic just to see any of them.

Especially the one parked directly in front of the porch steps, "That's a Duesenberg J. They built these in the nineteen-thirties."

Fran gave him an irked look. They stood in the golden light that oozed from the windows. The imposing manor had towers and chimneys lost in the icy haze above. Through the massive windows, silhouettes dashed between the rooms. Music drifted effortlessly from the walls as the breeze carried the aroma of hot food that enticed the twins' empty bellies.

On the front porch, a vast ornate veranda decorated with evergreen branches and bright candles welcomed them. The door opened slowly, revealing a tall slender man dressed in a polished black and white suit. He stepped up to the edge of the stairs.

The man's age was etched deep with winkles and hunting eyes that looked at them directly.

"We were expecting you." His deep voice commanded respect and fear.

The sudden jolt of heat-shocked Aiden's senses. Fran stepped into the center of the front hall, staring up at the bright, flickering lights of the crystal chandelier. A soft golden glow illuminated the hallway.

"Come this way." The man said, motioning his white gloved hand towards a pair of French doors. Fran clutched his arm as the doors opened inward, revealing a darkened parlor.

Deep, somber shades of red dominated the décor. Antique furnishings formed a semi-circle around a fireplace whose fire cast a modest orange glow over the room. Several fancy lamps scattered about the room gave just enough light to create shadows of the man and woman.

The dignified man leaned against the mantle of the fireplace. Warm light danced across his ebony skin with a crown of snowy hair on his stoic face. He wore an old-style suit complete with a vest and tails. His glaring eyes caught the flames.

"Well, here you are," His voice resonated in Aiden's chest.

"Not quite what we thought," the woman spoke like a breeze, flowing around the siblings. Her white gown glimmered ember red. "The cards didn't reveal all secrets."

She sat forward on the lush sofa, placing a card on the coffee table. With a nimble push of her slender finger, the card joined with a maze of cards. Aiden recognized it as the Devil tarot card and turned sideways to touch the Lovers card. "They come with bloodied hands."

Fran looked at her hands. Before they fled home, they scrubbed off the blood. Did someone discover the bodies so soon? The news of the murder of a state senator would spread fast. She clenched her hands, "Who are you?"

"I'm the Countess Elizabeth," She paired the Judgment card with the last two. Looking at the siblings with dark magenta eyes, "You're in the home and domain of Count Theodas."

After years of hardship, the twins perfected their aside glance. A simple arched eyebrow signaled their disbelief. Yet, Aiden sensed something off about them. Their odd inflections of voice sounded musical. How they delicately moved, graceful, and deliberate in dance. Even how the ambient lighting differentiated their highlights and shadows had triggered his hardened instincts.

"Thanks for letting us in," he said as the fire's warmth eased out the December chill.

"It's the Yule time, turning away runaways is very inhospitable." The Count ignited a match with a flick of his finger. It flared against a large dirty-wrapped cigar. "Your cat needs to stretch her legs. Let her out so she can enjoy the warm hearth with you."

Fran knelt beside the carrier to unlock the gate allowing Willow to pop out her fuzzy Maine Coon face. With defensive steps, the cat eased along the table until it reached the Countess who extended a hand. Willow sniffed her fingers repeatedly, began to brush against the woman's legs several times, and proceeded to the front of the fireplace to lie down.

"You should join her by the hearth." The Countess reached out to Fran. His sister bolted when her hand grazed Fran's shoulder. The shocked woman studied her for a moment, and asked, "You're injured. Show us."

Fran discarded her jacket, the evergreen sweater was pulled upward by the stains of dried blood. Someone gasped as she tried to hide the red welts. For Aiden, it triggered the memory.

He was in the stairwell. Fran was frantically defiant between him and Dad. Her hands raised upward. "Please, Dad, Stop!" She pleaded.

Belt in one hand, he seized by the scuff of her sweater, "I told you. He deserves this. He is a worthless failure."

Dad tossed Fran aside and walked up several steps until Fran grappled his leg. "Please, he did lose the game..."

"I stop it."

The belt slapped against her back. She cried out as another followed and another, until she let go sobbing. Terror froze Aiden. Dad backed down for Fran before. He grasped Aiden's ankle and pulled him down the stairs. Each hardwood step pummeled his back.

Aiden covered his face as the belt whipped against him. "Losing that game costs me! You're worthless do nothing."

Hate inflamed his father's anger, and stoked his fury with each strike getting harder. Then nothing, for a second Aiden waited.

"Put the fucking gun down."

Fran held Granddad's revolver steady. Her green eyes harden on Dad.

"You won't hurt him anymore."

The shot thundered. Dad threw backward against the wall and collapsed in a heap on the floor. Screams tore through the room. Fran turned towards Sandra. The gun was still high. Silence came.

Aiden scrambled over Dad's spreading blood. Again, he felt a hand on his ankle.

"Fucking bastards... You don't have the balls..."

Fran lowered the revolver, barrel against brow, a single shot, a shower of wet bone and meat.

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Aiden saw Fran in a clean black high-collar jersey. Hot tea warmed their hands. The fire burned low and crackled with sparks floating upward. Willow was chasing a feather in the Countess' hand. He wore pressed, fresh, and dry clothes.

"What happened?" Aiden wasn't sure which one of them spoke.

"You stepped beyond the invisible, a place in between, where choices are made." Count Valmar stood in the shadows and dull red light of the fire.

"What choice do we have?" Drifted Fran's tired voice.

Countess Elizabeth grinned, "To return and face the consequences of what happened. Or you leave that behind to stay here."

Aiden rested the cup on the small plate, "We won't be punished?"

Their hosts exchange thoughtful looks, Count said, "The scales must be balanced either here or back there."

Aiden caressed Fran's shoulder. No one believed them about Dad before, so why would it be different after? Dad carefully created his public image. Fran looked up at their mysterious hosts. "All I want for us is to be safe. I don't want us to be afraid of going home, or cringing in our beds at night, terrified of mornings."

His sister looked at him with her green eyes that caught a flicker of firelight. It was his decision. Willow flopped onto her back, rolling her belly upward, purring over the crackling flames. He chose.

Victor pressed back the edges of the yellowed paper. Forty years faded Fran and Aiden's photos along with their story. Their asshole father's murder, their disappearance blended into the region's folklore. No one remembered all the scandals that emerged afterward. Only the myths mattered now.

He placed another picture on the board. This time a young teen girl vanished. Viktor studied her image, an outcast Goth disappearing from an abusive situation. The police would ignore this runaway as well.

The bells rang on the door. Viktor returned to behind the counter as Sarah welcomed their patrons. Christmas filtered through the diner, around the holly, and decorations that filled every free space.

He froze for a moment as Sarah sat the couple and teen at the table. They dressed in stylish attire torn from a vintage Christmas fashion magazine, a modern take on Victorian style. The couple resembled Aiden and Fran, but they couldn't be. The teenage girl sat with them.

After Sandra took their order, Viktor dared to approach them. His memory had fogged up, but he knew their faces. The pair looked at him. The man smiled, "Merry Christmas."

Viktor returned the greeting, stunned uncanny resemblance to his friends. The woman asked, in a gentle voice, "Is there is problem?""

"No, it's nothing..." He stuttered.

"It's very impolite to lie at Yule." The man must be Aiden's grandson.

"Sorry, you look like friends of mine. From our high school days."

The girl laughed. Viktor knew he had to call the police, but felt that would be wrong. The woman gave him Fran's quirky smile, "It's best not to dwell on it. Christmas has its mysteries. We came here for some holiday pie for Christine. A Yule request must be honored."

Viktor didn't understand, yet knew that he shouldn't interfere. "It's just that I never got to help them when they needed it."

Their glance between them was identical to the twins. The man said, "It's okay. It turned out well. Now we balance the scales by finding troubled souls."

"We take them where they are without fear or pain." Fran's green eyes looked up at him. "They will have a better life. Perhaps you can help them find and save those like us."

She gave a wink, a simple acknowledgment to move on.

Viktor nodded. The pie should be ready now.

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.

Instagram: @dino1954godzilla2020





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Satan Baby | Alex Grehy

You never actually broke a promise, I'll give you that. I heard the whispered codicils that turned your vows into lies.

To have and to hold, For better, for worse, For richer, for poorer, In sickness and in health, Forsaking all others, To love and to cherish, Until death do us part...

"When Hell freezes over."

I thought I'd imagined it, but at our wedding reception there you were, standing at the bar with your roughneck pals, waving your beer around, sharing your moronic philosophy for marriage.

"Never tell a lie and never say no – she'll think you're a saint. But you gotta say 'when Hell freezes over' straight after. I mean, the devil ain't gonna hold you to it coz he's never gonna stop stoking those fires."

I remember how the men guffawed. I turned my back and spent the evening drinking fine wine with my university friends. I ignored your mamma glaring at me. She always said I was a mistake, that even though you kept your brains in your drilling rig, you weren't twisty enough to outthink a smart woman.

Years went by. You got away with conditional truths – always saying 'yes' when you meant 'no'. Yet, there's an element of chance when you're prospecting for oil, and you were a lucky man. I started to believe that you had made some sort of deal with the devil and went along for the ride.

But then you had to have your tawdry affairs. You drank; gambled with our riches. How many times did I tell you to stop? How many times did you say, 'I'm sorry, babe, I promise I'll be a better man, when Hell freezes over'?

That was when I decided to check out the terms of your deal with the devil. No paperwork, of course, so I went to Satan directly.

It wasn't so difficult. Satan's a tricky devil, but he couldn't resist the lure of a dark rite and a beautiful woman in a black lacy basque.

Turns out that all these promises you'd made based on hell's climate were getting under his skin. He was pretty keen to punish you the old-fashioned way, but I whispered in his lovely, pointed ears, "Satan, baby, everyone knows that Hell hath no fury as a woman scorned and that revenge is best served ice cold. I've got an idea."

Satan was cynical, obviously, but I promised him every soul on earth, including the exquisite delights of my own, in exchange for my vengeance.

Now the thing with Satan is that he fell from Heaven way before science was invented. So when I explained about fault lines, heat differentials and whatnot, he said 'just tell me where to point the fire'. He held my hand, and I knew he was my true soulmate. We had work to do.

Did you notice the earth getting hotter? Did you enjoy making a fortune from your oil? People needed power – for air-conditioning, for refrigeration – they were desperate, would have paid anything.

"Yeah sure, I'll bring the price down, when Hell freezes over."

How you laughed, twirling in your fancy leather office chair while outside, the landscape shimmered in the heat, what had been living green no more than a mirage.

The world burned and souls fell to Hell by the millions. I played the earth like a theremin – twitching a finger to set off a strategic volcano; a graceful wave sent imps to dance a cyclone from nothing.

"Darling, is your scheme almost done?" Satan asked, his horns poking out from the fluffy beanie hat I'd bought for him.

"Yes, just one last conflagration." I said, pointing to a fault line that wended its way through the earth's crust right up to your biggest oil field.

"Send the last of the heat there," I instructed. With a quick gesture of his gloved hand, Satan funnelled the last of Hell's fire through the fault.

You were in the middle of the oilfield when it went up. I made sure the fire burned hot and slow, so you could see it coming.

I checked in with Satan, Hell was looking pretty chilly.

"Hurry up darling, I need warming up." Satan called.

"I'll be right there." I promised. Then I sped over to where you were cowering, surrounded by flames that stood still at my command.

"Hell's frozen over, babe, so let's just review those vows, shall we?" I said. Your eyes were wide and pleading.

To have and to hold — I held you tight, rubbing handfuls of burning sand into skin, making sure to abrade every nerve ending.

For better, for worse – filled with Satan's love I'm the best I'd ever been, I can't say you'd ever looked worse.

For richer, for poorer – Hell and what's left of Earth are mine; you've got nothing.

In sickness and in health – I'm immortal and you're dying, yet here we are.

Forsaking all others – not an issue, I mean, just look at you, extremities all burnt and shrivelled.

To love and to cherish – you beg for mercy, saying you never loved anyone else, blah, blah blah!

Until death do us part – I've got that covered, won't be long now, dear husband.

I clapped my hands and the flames fell, like a picket fence in a hurricane. I returned to Hell, leaving your soul screaming, tethered to your ruined body, smouldering towards death.

"Are you done?" Satan asked, rubbing tiny ice crystals from his long, dark eyelashes.

I laughed and kissed Satan's cold nose. Hell looked more opulent than an exclusive ice-hotel, its furnaces extruding fantastical ice sculptures and lava fountains billowing with glittering frost.

"I'm done," I said.

"So now will you warm me up, my love?" Satan asked, gesturing towards a bed covered in a layer of luxurious furs.

I reached out, held him tight then toppled us onto the bed.

"Oh yes" I whispered, "now that Hell's frozen over."

About the Author:

Alex Grehy's (she/her) work has been published in a range of zines worldwide including Aphotic Realm and anthologies by Water Dragon Publishing and Page Turn Press. Her essays on being a "Lady of Horror" have featured in the Horror Writers Association Newsletter and The Horror Tree blog. She is recognised for her original view of the world, expressed in vivid prose and thought-provoking poetry.

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Elves vs Gnomes | Sheri White

Hermie heard footsteps behind him and swung his axe. The gnome's head went flying, and blood gushed out of the neck, spraying red over the fresh clean snow.

"Ha! Take that, asshole!"

"Hermie, please!" one of his teammates whisper-shouted from behind a tree. "You're going to get us killed!"

The leader of the elf team waved off the warning. He stood still, listening for odd gnome noises. Garden gnomes waddled like penguins, side-to-side. They could be fast, but their movements had a distinctive sound, especially in the snow.

CHK-CHK, CHK-CHK, CHK-CHK.

"I think we're clear," Hermie stated. "Let's go. We must get to Santa's Workshop before the gnomes do, or Santa will be in trouble. We need to save him and Christmas for the children before it's too late."

The team of four headed North to Santa's Workshop.

An axe whizzed by Hermie and cleaved Jingles's head in half. Gouts of blood spilled down his body and onto the ground. Fragments of brain matter fell into the snow with horrific plops, melting the snow beneath them and sliding into the grass.

Trixie screamed her lover's name.

"Run!" Hermie ordered. Trixie hesitated, ready to go to Jingles's side.

"Now! There's a safe place ahead! We can regroup there."

Trixie finally got moving, and the three of them sprinted towards a nearby shack.

They were almost there when gnomes seemed to appear out of nowhere and surrounded the elves.

Buddy looked at Hermie. "It's three against a couple dozen or so," he said quietly. "What do we do now?"

The gnomes stared at them with black soulless eyes. All the gnomes carried weapons—axes, knives, rocks—ready to maim and kill in an instant.

"This is really bad, isn't it? We're not going to save Santa and Christmas." Trixie's voice hitched with a sob.

Hermie clenched his fists, the right one tightening around the handle of his axe. "Both of you shut up and let me think."

The three of them huddled together in the middle of the garden gnome circle, keeping their axes raised and ready.

"Okay, listen—"

Before Hermie could finish his sentence, the gnomes began humming in a low continuous droning without taking a breath while they rocked side-to-side.

"What are they doing? This is so creepy," Trixie said.

"I have no idea, but maybe we can take a risk while they're in a trance or whatever it is. I think if the three of us run in different directions, at least one of us will make it to The Workshop and get Santa to safety. Are you two up for it?"

Buddy grimaced, Trixie closed her eyes as a tear ran down her cheek. They both nodded.

"We'll meet there. Until then, good luck to each of us." Hermie smiled at his team. "All right then, on three."

"One, two, three," they loudly whispered in unison before running. They dashed out of the circle, knocking gnomes down or hitting them with their axes.

Hermie ran through the forest, face-height pine needles scraping and scratching his skin. He didn't dare look back, but he could hear them:

CHK-CHK, CHK-CHK, CHK-CHK.

The elf leader slowed down, trying to catch his breath. The axe weighed his arm down, but he didn't dare toss it aside. The gnome footsteps got closer. They still hummed, but the sound was now cacophonous. Hermie resisted the urge to cover his ears.

And then, as if a miracle, Hermie could see The Workshop a couple miles ahead of him. It was a welcome sight, covered in bright lights, gumdrops, and candy canes.

I'm going to make it. I'm going to make it.

He felt intense agony as his head split in two, then everything went dark.

About the Author:

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

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Ethan Frost | Kathleen McCluskey

The biting cold and bitter winds of Siberia howled through the barren landscape. In a small weathered cabin a solitary figure sat huddled by a fire. His name was Ethan Frost and this icy tundra is where he called home. Outside snowflakes danced in the moonlight, the land itself was silent, a formidable adversary. It tested the limits of one's resolve. He knew that his sanity had slipped a long time ago. Ethan stared into the fire, its flames reflected in his eyes. The lines on his face made eerie shadows as the mournful wind sang its song. The guilt was written all over his face and he sighed loudly. He knew what he had done, he knew what was coming.

As the Siberian winter gripped tighter, so did Ethan's torment. The weight of his past sins bore down on him like a giant glacier. He knew that his transformation into a Wendigo was drawing near. The nights grow colder, harder, longer as the insurmountable guilt consumed him. The memories of what he had done to his family haunted him.

The first sign of his transformation was his insatiable hunger. He ate fish after fish, never cooking them; relishing in the internal organs. The hunger whispered wicked desires into every recess of his mind. He could feel the curse beginning to take hold.

His body began to change. His once healthy, robust frame was wasted away. His wind burnt skin began to take on a sickly pallor; the color of old snow. His stomach and cheekbones were sunken in creating a macabre silhouette. He became a hollow shell of his former self.

The nights were the worst, the wind would howl and sing to him. It carried a beckoning, chilling presence of the Wendigo spirit calling to him. It urged him to embrace the darkness that he once feared. He knew that his transformation was inevitable, he had convicted himself of it the moment he ate his youngest daughter. He cursed himself into becoming a horrible creature. A fitting curse for a cannibal. He had murdered his entire family with an ax, leaving their corpses in the snow to preserve them.

Ethan knew his inevitable transformation was near, he could feel the icy fingers of the Wendigo gripping his heart and soul. Horns began to grow from his head and his eyes turned from brown to red. He knew that he had become the monster that he feared most. There was no escape from the eternal, frigid hell that he made for himself. He tossed his head back and howled.

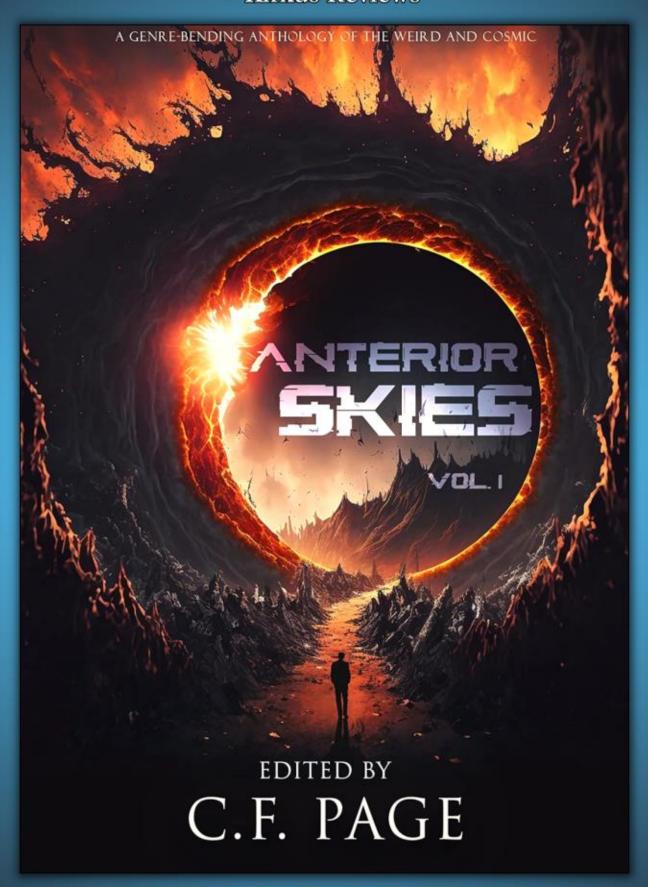
About the Author:

Kathleen McCluskey is the novelist of THE LONG FALL series. She enjoys her time swimming, reading and of course, writing. Being a native of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania she is an avid Steelers and Penguins fan. Kathleen is the mother of two and relishes in the time she can spend with her adult children.

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"A pleasingly unpleasant set of horror stories for adventurous genre fans."

- Kirkus Reviews



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Chicken Tape | Guy Edward

Do you remember being a kid and going away to summer camp? I do. Specifically, I remember going to bible camp. I went two years in a row. It was at least a few hours away from home up north, but I got a ride with some friends whose parents made them go. For these maybe not so coincidental reasons I wasn't able to get picked up if I was having a bad time, or getting bullied, or felt homesick. I suffered all these tragedies at one point or another, but today I am thankful for them. It was a great way to build a bit of character for my younger, thirteen and fourteen-year-old self. It was here at Christian Bible camp, ironically, that I met a girl everyone called Angel. I'm not sure if that was her real name or just the name she chose to give herself at camp. Either way, that's what everybody called her. It didn't matter much to me what her name really was. All I cared about for two weeks, two years in a row were her beautiful blue eyes, wet pink lips and the sneaky, occasional glance down her shirt. She was the biggest crush I ever had, and I think she crushed on me too because it was her who introduced me to a game called 'Chicken'.

Chicken was the kind of game you dreamed of playing as an awkward teen boy. A late night Chicken story could rival even the most haunting campfire urban legends. Sharing all the pervy details with your bunkmates in your all-boys cabin, eating candy bars in your beds after the counselors had called for lights out. And just like all those ghost stories, nobody would ever believe the story was true, no matter how convincing. Especially if you went 'all the way'.

It's a simple game. You and your crush find a quiet place to be alone, preferably somewhere you won't be easily found by camp counselors or any jealous, spying friends. You sit cross legged facing one another, looking into each other's eyes and place your hands and each other's heads. Each player takes a turn slowly running their hand downwards. From the top their head, to their cheek, to their chin. Maybe her breath quickens, she's nervous. You continue slowly, your hand grazing her neck, toward her shoulder, her collar bone. You feel her heart flutter in her chest, and yours flutters in turn. You start to feel a weird sensation in your pants that's unfamiliar, but pleasurable. You place a finger underneath the strap of her crop top shirt and your hand continues down toward her...

"Chicken!"

She yells chicken and you must stop and remove your hand immediately. You place your hand back on the top of her head and now it's her turn to explore your face and body until of course you yell chicken yourself. And you will. Never let your crush go further than she was comfortable with you going, or she'll tell her friends you're a creep and that will be your first and last time playing. It was a game of risky excitement for many in our young and prepubescent teenage years. The exhilaration caused by the thrilling sexual tension greatly outweighed the potential risks involved with being caught. But if we're honest, getting caught was almost as fun as the act of the game itself. It's this combination of discovering the unknown in such a uniquely thrilling and dangerous way that hearkens back to the tape; and why it is labeled as 'CHICKEN' in my extensive library of films. I'm something of a cinephile and have seen just about every horror movie I've been able to put my hands on, but there's nothing else on earth like this depraved VHS. I would bet my life on it. In fact, I intend to...

I first discovered the tape at my ex girlfriend's parents' house when I went over there to help them out of a bit of trouble. They could've been considered mild hoarders to put it politely, and had received a threat of eviction from their landlord after he had seen the mess. This might seem like an extreme measure to take, but to his credit you couldn't step foot into the garage. It was stacked floor to ceiling with boxes and the basement wasn't any better either! Boxes of some of the most outrageous things you could imagine; old newspaper clippings, sheet music, pieces of scribbled on paper. Useless items. Items you wouldn't even send to the thrift store to try and avoid the dumping fee you'd pay at the waste management facility. Junk to you or I, but to her parents these items and trinkets held precious value. One of the many consequences of growing up poor during the second world war. It was up to me and my truck to haul this treasured junk away and save them from their landlord's fury - and themselves.

Around noon on the second day I found a box filled with VHS tapes. I was thrilled at first, then promptly disappointed as I rummaged through the collection. There was nothing in the box that peeked my interest, except of course, for the tape we're discussing right now. While the others were all placed nicely in their cardboard sleeves, this tape was carefully wrapped in an unwashed kitchen towel. This plain black VHS tape cassette had residue on its housing where a sticker had previously been and later peeled off. That wasn't what intrigued me, however. There was also an engraving etched into the black plastic. It looked to have been carved on it's surface using a very sharp razor blade. It read 'RUNTIME 480 MINUTES'.

This is impossible. A standard VHS tape has about 1400 feet of tape inside. Any more than that and the manufacturer would have to use a thinner material in order for it to fit the reel. The thinner tape would, of course, compromise the video quality of the film, and therefore would not be sold to the general public. The playtime 1400 feet of tape gives us is never more than five hours, or 300 minutes.

When I got home that night I immediately rewound the tape, put it in the VCR and hit play. Since then I've coveted the tape and kept it secret from everyone, even my friends. I hide it when people come over, but as soon as they leave it returns to its rightful place amongst the rest of my collection. It sounds crazy, but being the only person to know about this tape has made me crazy. I can't keep it to myself anymore which is why for the sake of my own sanity I have written this confession. I need you to promise me you'll tell no one. No one. In fact, burn this writing when you're finished with it. This will be our secret alone.

I have carefully studied the tape over the years. With each viewing I've pushed myself a little further to watch a bit longer than the last time, despite the risks... playing chicken. With each showing I sat through the more I began to see patterns emerge. These patterns make up the rules and guidelines of the tape's contents. The rules are absolute and unchanging. The guidelines are also contained within rules of their own, yet they are frightening because they are allowed some leniency.

The New Rules of Chicken

The tape will not play in the machine unless it has been rewound from the beginning

You cannot fast forward or rewind the tape once it begins to play; you can only press pause

If you do press pause, the tape will not allow you to resume and must be rewound

If you look away from the television screen the tape will pause

If you close your eyes for longer than three seconds, the tape will pause

Now the rules are understood, I will try my best to explain the guidelines of the tape to you from start to, well, not necessarily the end, but as far as I've been able to watch. The tape is placed into the VCR. You hear the buzzing and clunking of the gears within the machine as it accepts the tape and the reel starts whirring over the footage. The screen begins to display the footage; bars of fuzzy white lines panning diagonally across the blackish gray void behind them. The tape always begins this way, but for how long it endures is our first guideline. Sometimes the tape will play the white noise mess of unused tape for thirty seconds, but I've timed it at almost twenty minutes before. The fuzzy bars intensify, becoming more numerous and sporadic until a grainy image begins the slowly fade in from the darkness.

You can tell that the footage was shot on an early model camera from the 90s. The quality is low, and grainy. What you're watching is footage from a camera that is resting on a table or something and someone has just left it there to record. As you watch, you might to start to notice the room being filmed looks very familiar. The walls are the same color as the ones in your dining room. That painting on the wall... you have

that painting. The opening location when viewing the film is always a different place, but it is always somewhere within your own home.

The length of time this lasts is again a guideline. Sometimes a few minutes, and sometimes up to thirty. Eventually, the 'cameraman' as I call it always picks up the camera and starts to pan the room with it. It slowly starts to walk around the house, recording every detail of each room it encounters. You continue to watch, fear slowly creeps in as you realize that the footage being presented to you on the TV appears to be a live feed of someone walking around your house. Although the footage and the tape are from over two decades ago, the recording and whatever filmed it, is giving you a tour of your home as it is presently. I've tried different variations myself like changing rooms where I watch, time of day, even different VCRs. The footage will adjust itself to remain up to date with my changes.

You never see the 'cameraman'. It avoids pointing the camera into any reflective surface that might render a clue as to what is holding the camera. The footage is shot from an angle that gives the impression it's being held by an average height male at chest height. Sometimes you can hear its heavy breath in the recording. When the 'cameraman' walks over a loose floorboard, or up a set of stairs, you'll be able to hear the creaking of it's footsteps passing through from behind. From behind you is exactly where it will make the final approach as the last room of this tour always ends in the one you're watching the tape in. The footage on the screen turns into an endless repeating void as the footage points into itself. A shot of you sitting down in front the TV, watching the back of your head being crept up on. You can feel the presence of something in the room with you. You're not alone like you're supposed to be, you can feel there's something behind you. The 'cameraman' will walk right up behind you, slowly making its way to the back of your neck before...

"Chicken!"

You just broke the rules. You looked away from the screen. You looked behind you. There's nothing there. No one there. The TV screen has paused on the last still shot of the recording before you broke the rules. It's a grainy still of your own face looking directly into the camera with a look of absolute fear. Your mouth is stretched impossibly wide into a morbid scream. Your eyes are black and soulless, maybe what you saw in that final shot scared the life out of them. You'll never know, because you didn't see the 'cameraman'. You broke the rules of the chicken tape and it vanished before you could see it, but not before the camera's footage could grab a still of your reaction to it.

Now I've told you about the tape, watch it with me tonight. I'm going to watch it until the end, and I need someone here with me to stop me from turning away. I'm a coward, and I can't help but break the rules. Force me to be brave. Tie me up. Keep my head in place and force my eyes open for me. I need to know how it ends... I'm a cinephile, I've watched every horror movie from start to finish I've been able to get my hands on. I must know how it ends...

About the Author:

Guy Edward is a novice horror writer and poet. His work comprises mostly of short fiction with eclectic and unsettling horror elements. His horror poetry explores chasing after lust disguised as love, and the supernatural consequences of such sinful endeavors.

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Sooty Pete | Paul Lonardo

Anneke noticed the tree as soon as she stepped into the darkened living room. While her two partners disappeared down the hallway guided by the flashlights from their cellphones, Aiyden to the bathroom to look for prescription medications and Channing to the bedrooms to search for cash and jewelry, she stopped and stared at the peculiar tree. It was stunted and sparsely decorated, its needles were such a dark shade of green they were almost black, and the budding pinecones looked like chunks of coal. Instead of a fresh pine scent, there was a powerful sulfurous smell. She let her phone drop to her side, extinguishing the light.

She would already have been outside and as far away from there if she could move. She stood frozen in place and trembling. That's the way Aiyden and Channing found her when they returned from their unrewarding raid of the rooms at the other end of the house.

"What gives?" Channing raged. "Your only job was to go through the presents under the tree."

"All they had was Aspirin in the medicine cabinet," Aiyden said, waving an empty pillowcase like a flag of surrender.

"These people don't have anything worth stealing." Anneke's voice quavered with dread. "Let's just get out of here before the family comes home."

"We're gonna get something for our trouble," Channing said with a dark look in his eyes as he grabbed a present from under the tree and ripped it open. "Give me a hand with these."

"I could use some new pajamas," Aiyden said as he tore the wrapping off a package of underwear. "Hey, boxers!" And they're my size."

Channing held up a box of cigars. "Not Cubans, but they'll do." He opened the lid and pulled a lighter from his jacket pocket.

"No," Anneke cried as the tiniest of embers drifted from the tip of the cigar over to the tree. As soon as it touched a black pinecone, a bright red flame erupted, spreading quickly until the whole tree was alight. It happened so fast the three thieves could only watch with shocked expressions as the unsightly Christmas tree burned. Rather than being consumed, however, it smoldered. Billows of black smoke filled the entire house. A dull flame ringed the perimeter where the tree once stood, creating an ethereal doorway out of which a tall shadowy figure emerged.

The half-lit cigar dropped from between Channing's teeth. "What the hell is that?"

"It's Sooty Pete," Anneke gasped.

The creature that stepped out of the fuming void seemed to stretch beyond the height of the ceiling. Looking up, they could not see its face. Its limbs were incinerated beyond recognition, black as charcoal. Clenched in cinder man's charred fingers was an oversized axe, dark blood baked onto the blade.

"Who-who's Sooty Pete?" Aiyden asked.

Anneke shook her head in disbelief. "My grandmother used to warn me about him," she began, suppressing a cough. "Sooty Pete is fire-scorched demon tamed by Saint Nicholas. But for disobedient children at Christmas, he comes to punish them."

From around Sooty Pete's legs, smaller beings appeared. Spry, animated garden gnomes, all with red caps, danced around in the smoky room. Their tiny voices screeched as they sped past the would-be thieves, laughing and singing demonic Christmas songs. One bawdy little gnomes pulled his pants down and giggled as he exposed his shiny ceramic butt. Another was trying to drink from a bottle of wine that he could not open no matter how hard he tried. There was a Santa gnome wearing only his red stocking cap and a mankini with suspenders. He had dark sunglasses and was carrying a beach ball. There were other bloody-bearded zombie Santas with missing limbs and opened mouths with gnashing teeth.

"Hey, look at that one," Aiyden said pointing down at a gnome dancing around and uttering obscenities. "He's giving us the finger."

There was a loud popping sound as top of Aiyden's skull was suddenly struck by the axe with enough force to Gallagher his head like a ripe melon. Anneke screamed as his decapitated body slumped to the floor and blood showered down on her.

Channing tried to run, but he tripped over a gnome. As soon as he hit the floor, the zombie gnomes were all over him, biting him and tearing into his flesh. The infection coursed through his blood vessels, stiffening his joints, and rapidly changing the composition of his entire body, transforming him into baked clay. His face was a frozen expression of agony, and when Sooty Pete's axe struck him he broke into a million pieces. Shards of pottery flew in every direction, piercing Anneke's face and torso. The hateful imps ran about collecting Channing's calcified remains and pressed the scorching pieces onto Anneke's bloodied face. The tiny fiends mocked her as she tried without success to pry the bits of sizzling clay from her face. Her screams, muffled behind the ceramic mask, soon stopped altogether and she slumped lifelessly to the floor.

Just then the front door burst open, a blast of cold air and snow rushing in with the force of a hurricane.

"Back, Sooty Pete. Back from whence you came." Although the voice was deep and commanding, it retained its jolly timbre.

The thick smoke obscured the large, red-suited figure standing in the doorway, but it was clearly Ole Saint Nick. He stepped to one side and a blizzard was unleashed into the house. The snow had a magical effect on the malicious entities in the room, driving Sooty Pete and his band of demons back into the void. The bodies of the three home invaders were also swept into the netherworld. The fire was extinguished and when the last of the smoke and embers were gone, only the frightful tree remained. The doorway was empty, but outside the sound of sleigh bells resonated along with a distant, "Ho, Ho, Ho! Merry Christmas!"

About the Author:

I am a freelance writer and author. I've placed dark fiction and nonfiction articles in various genre magazines and ezines. *Penny Dreadfuls*, a collection of haiku horror, was published this summer, and *Small Dark Things*, an anthology of horror and dark fantasy stories will be released this Halloween. I am a contributing writer for *Tales from the Moonlit Path*. I am an active HWA member.

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To Catch a Monster | B. T. Petro

My aunt Verra was the fourteenth victim. Multiple authorities were stymied by the lack of any consistency in age, location, sexual orientation, or race. Method was always gruesome, but never duplicated. DNA evidence was spotty and conflicting. Video surveillance was useless. Nothing on social media.

My own analysis was that the pattern was that there was no pattern. The monster was using randomizing software, but not likely changing the parameters. After four attempts, my AI software predicted the monster's next move. I avenged my aunt.

I then modified my own programs to randomly alter the parameters for my next victim.

About the Author:

B. T. Petro is retired and living in Ohio. He has published 50+ stories in sci-fi, fantasy, and horror genres. The stories generally have a touch of the macabre or a bit of whimsy. His best friend when he was growing up was an invisible robot, who still visits from time to time.



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Hot Topping | *Ken McGrath*

The man at the entranceway to Al Dante's Pizza Emporium was extremely nervous.

His gaze flitted about like a moth examining a light bulb, expectantly looking at passers-by then back over his shoulder to peer into the unlit restaurant. Each time he did a film of sweat broke out on his brow, beneath a widow's peak so sharp you could shave Parmesan on it.

He wiped his face with a grubby dishtowel just as a corpulent man in a long, grey, shabby-not-chic overcoat approached from the direction of the canal and stuck out a hand the size of a tiger loaf with five sausages attached.

"Someone called about an exorcism?" a voice said cheerfully. "I'm Delton Waynes. Lovely to meet you."

"Al," the nervous man said, then glanced once more back though the restaurant's glass doors. "You can call me Al."

"Betty."

"What? I thought you said your name was Delton?" Al squinted at him, confused. He was finding the whole situation tremendously stressful.

"Not a Paul Simon fan I take it. Never mind, some people just prefer Garfunkel," the exorcist smiled. He gestured at the doorway. "Shall we?"

Shaking his head and still terribly confused Al Dante shoved both doors open to give Delton room to enter.

The heat that hit them was like from a furnace flavoured with the scents of Italy, but only if you counted sulphur as a key ingredient. A group of around thirty people were clustered in the cosy dining area at the far end of the room. This was separated from the kitchen by a wide granite counter. The tables were covered with red and white chequered tablecloths and in the centre of each there was a lone, waxy candle sticking from a wine-bottle.

"It's over there," Al pointed to the prep area, to where a huge stone pizza oven was spitting flames.

When he got no reply he turned back to find Delton inspecting a window-poster. It showed a cute devil who was holding a pitchfork and standing beside the phrase 'Delivering Devilishly Hot Deals Until Hell Freezes Over'. The word HOT was stylised in red and yellow flames.

"Do you think I brought this on myself using such language?" Al fretted, twisting his apron like he was trying to wring it out. "Mama certainly thinks so."

"No, no, don't mind me. I'm just checking what's on the menu," Delton replied. He gave it another second then stood up straight and removed his overcoat. Beneath he wore a white shirt with the top button undone and tweed waistcoat, which strained to contain his ample stomach. The buttons seemed to creak as he moved.

"You see we were having an engagement party for my sister Clarice," Al indicated a stunned looking round-faced woman who was being comforted by the crowd in the restaurant section. "Tito, my head chef and Marco, the chief waiter, they noticed the... creature."

Al signalled and two men came running over, nodding their greetings at Delton.

The exorcist stepped into the kitchen and ducked down to peer into the oven. Just inside the doorway a small, squat monstrosity, bald and hairless, with sharp gnashing teeth and claws, danced. With a rude gesture it turned and wigged its bottom at him, before continuing its merry dance. Delton noticed each cheek was tattooed with a different star.

"Where did you come from, I wonder?" the exorcist muttered.

The creature replied by farting a long stream of smelly flames which Delton, despite his immense bulk, managed to sidestep quite deftly. With the laugh of a wicked child the demon scurried further towards the back of the oven.

"Is there anything at all you can do to help?" All pleaded. His mother, a diminished prune of a woman who radiated an unmistakable aura of maternal authority had scuttled up behind them, muttering away in Italian with rosary beads clicking through her fingers at a rapid pace. She put Delton in mind of a black beetle.

"My poor sister," Al moaned. "My poor famiglia. What a tragedy. This should be a day of celebration."

Delton pulled a chequered handkerchief from his waist-coat pocket and wiped his brow then went across to the preparation counter and began to sift through the jars of herbs.

"Oregano – no. Basil – bah. Pepper – mmmh. Ahhhh, here we go," he grabbed a jar of dried, shredded, green leaves the looked around the countertop. "Do you mind if I use some of this dough?"

He didn't wait for a reply but dumped the dough out and, with rough precision, kneaded it into a loose circle then tipped most of the herb jar's contents on top. He then folded it over, to make a package.

"I know most people don't like calzone, but it'll have to do," he said to Al with a wink, "and I'm hoping our little friend isn't too discerning."

With that he lobbed the dough into the oven where the demon immediately swallowed it down with a single wide-mouthed gulp. It grinned, a tomato-stained smile, then continued to dance, bobbing its head side to side, shaking it's rump like a rattle.

Al sighed and looked downcast, but Delton held up a silencing finger as inside in the oven the creature doubled over. It went to its knees, coughing and spluttering. Hacking slowly like it was trying to get rid of furball. Then its shoulders cracked forward violently and all along its spine blistery bubbles formed and started to fizz and pop. The demon growled, burped and then suddenly exploded into a spray of green goo that stank like rotten eggs.

"It just took a hint of sage. Excellent stuff really. Most people don't' even know what sort of useful things they've already got in the kitchen," Delton gave a wide smile and shook the jar happily. "What's intriguing me though is that a creature such as that should not be able to just," he clicked his fingers, "manifest. It would have to have been summoned somehow."

As he spoke Delton took a long-handled peel down from the wall beside the pizza over then used it to reach in and fish the blackened remains of pizza base from the furthest reaches of the oven. It was burnt black as anything, but the topping of peppers and mushrooms were still visible, and he could see that they had been arranged strategically into ritualistic symbols.

"This was done on purpose. This was a summoning. Who made this pizza?"

All eyes turned to the head chef who shook his head frantically in denial, at the same moment as the waiter, Marco, sprinted for the door. He'd cleared half the distance when a heavy, over-sized, pepper mill flew across the room, clobbered him on the back of the head and sent him sprawling. Al's sister followed after it in a rage and began beating the prone man about the body.

"They used to date," the chef whispered to Delton. "I think he must still have a thing for her."

"Yikes," Delton exclaimed. "So, he tried his hand at some home-baked demon summoning to ruin her day. I suppose it could have been worse," he winced as the furious Clarice continued to batter her ex with the giant pepper canister, "it could have been a salt."

Delton nudged the silent chef in the ribs with an elbow. The man just shook his head silently.

"Hey," Delton said with a wink, "any chance you could rustle me up a Meat Supreme before I hit the road? Exorcising is hungry work you know."

About the Author:

Ken McGrath lives with his wife in an upside-down house in Dublin, Ireland. His fiction has appeared in Cirsova Magazine, K Zine, Siren's Call, Daily Science Fiction and many other strange publications. He got the Wordle in one go once - no joke.

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Who Needs Hell | Melissa R. Mendelson

When I died, I thought I would go to Heaven. I found myself somewhere else, somewhere dark and ice cold. There was a line of condemned souls slowly, slowly moving toward a rocky staircase leading upward. Some of them stumbled, and some of them fell. They would fall for eternity. I would not and did not fall.

I tried to talk to those around me, but no one was interested in talking. They were all eager to get out of here. They didn't know where the staircase would lead them. They just wanted to get out, but where were we? I thought Hell would be hot and bright, but it was vacant. Where have the demons gone?

I finally reached the top step. I felt a shove from behind, and they slipped and stumbled. They fell. I watched them disappear into the abyss below. Better them than me.

Is this Heaven? No, I was back on Earth. Cars were on fire. The streets full of debris. Windows from nearby buildings shattered. A body plummeted and crashed beside the hole that I crawled out of. I guess they're now at the back of the line.

"What the hell is going on?" I asked.

"Hell," another responded. They vanished a moment later.

"Where did he go?"

"Hey! Hey! Stop blocking the hole." A snarl echoed deep beneath the hole that I was standing over, and I quickly moved aside. "Move away." Another snarl followed.

I'm moving, I thought. I don't get it. Where are all the humans? What is going on here?

"Party in the U.S.A." Another condemned soul popped up beside me. "Hey, don't look so grim. Just pick one, and move on. It's my third rodeo, and I can't wait for another wild ride. Yeehaw!"

"Pick one?" I asked.

"Yeah. Any person left. You can be a psychotic old man. Demonic child. My last ride was a woman that ran over an old lady trying to cross the street. Just pick one of them."

"Isn't that possession?"

"Yeah, so? It doesn't matter anymore. Just step right inside."

"What about their soul?" I asked.

He laughed as if I told him an insane joke. "Soul? How long have you been gone? Oh, I see a ride. Catch you down below." He vanished a moment later.

If I didn't know any better, I would say that this was Hell. It was bright. So many fires everywhere. It was Hot. The summer temperature must've been in the hundreds. The condemned souls were not dead but riding their human remains. Why not have the time of my life or afterlife?

"Pick one," I said. "Well, how about the bastard that killed me?"

This was going to be fun.

The Only Utopia We'll Ever Know | Melissa R. Mendelson

I was surprised that the television set still played, picking up a random transmission, maybe from a satellite still in space. The transmission was an old, old tv show. I recognized his voice, but his face was static. I hugged the television set as if somehow, I could warp myself back into the past before.... Before it all went wrong.

He was a leader, a man truthful and dedicated. Those were the leaders that we needed then, but we never had them. Instead, we had entertainers, corrupters and lunatics. No wonder the world went to hell the way that it did, and we just marched to their tune. Now, I don't remember the sun as it once was. The sky was endlessly blanketed with thick, gray clouds, and it's not the rain I fear. It's the ash, the debris, the dead.

If only I could live in their world. Instead, this broken, wooden structure was my home with a makeshift door and the windows broken or blackened in. Anything still living out there was hunting for their next meal, and I'm barely clinging to my skin, bones jutting outward, food pockets of water and grass. No, not that kind of grass, but the pieces of green still trying to make the dirt their home.

I don't want to look out at the world. Right outside was the last grave that I would ever dig, the last loved one that I had, a stranger once, but that was a long time ago. No one would come to bury me. Only this structure would remain, and the elements will wash what it can away. But it will never remove the stain.

We wanted a utopian world. We wanted our freedom. We needed to hear what we were told. Empty words. Broken promises. Lies and Lies and more Lies. Until it was too late. It's just too damn late, and the signal is fading. Soon, I would be alone again, counting down the days to hopefully my last because I can't take this anymore.

"Beam me up, Scotty."

"Yes, Scotty," I said. "Beam me up. Take me far away to where you live in your utopian world."

About the Author:

Melissa R. Mendelson is a Horror, Science-Fiction and Dystopian Author. She is also a Poet. She has been published by Sirens Call Publications, Dark Helix Press, Altered Reality Magazine, Transmundane Press, Owl Canyon Press, Wild Ink Publishing, The Horror Zine and The Yard: Crime Blog. Her short stories have also been featured on Tall Tale TV.

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Alyssum | Anneli Marks

"This is a scam," Poppy said, eying the dark, heavy furnishings filled with tens of flickering candles and the round table topped with a deck of tarot cards. "Scam and utter waste of time."

"We've tried everything," Lillian replied, "every neurologist, every psychologist willing to take the case—"
"But that doesn't mean—"

"Shh. She is coming."

They both quieted and gazed at the woman who appeared through the arched doorway. She was young, perhaps too young, but dressed as everyone had expected her to—so no one would feel disappointed. Black flowing dress, rings on every finger, and a large amulet adorned her neck. A herbaceous scent intermingled with wood, and bitter smoke billowed around her. A scent of herbal wisdom.

"Winnie—I mean, Winnifred Ryder, recommended that we come here," Lillian began. "She said you helped her five-year-old son speak again."

"Ah... little Ollie. A boy who stopped speaking after they moved to the house by the cemetery," the Psychic smiled ruefully.

"We were wondering if you could help our mother." Lillian pushed the wheelchair with a glassy-eyed, gray-haired lady forward.

"How long has she been in this state?"

"For two years," Poppy snapped. "The doctors say it's permanent, and we should let her rest and not agitate her more." She gave a frosty look to her sister.

"What she means is you should approach her carefully. I know," Lillian gazed at her mother's frozen face and pulled the blanket covering her lap higher, "she wants to tell me something. I can feel it."

The psychic drew closer and peered into those pale gray eyes. They were hollowed, sunken into the skull, like the eyes of the dead. No life seemed to live in them, but the longer she looked, she discovered what Lillian had, too. Something stirred behind that stillness. Something clawed and clawed that ice wall of death and silence, hoping to break through.

"You're right," the psychic said and flinched away before that creeping thing could enter her mind and form a figure. *Too much desperation.*

Lillian elbowed Poppy before she could scoff.

"Take a seat and tell me everything."

Lillian recounted how their mother, although eighty-one years old at that time, was how she'd always been. Electric. She could raise a thrill of excitement in anyone, and at the same time zap those who didn't particularly agree with her ideas. After Father's death, she'd lived alone in her country house, cooked and cleaned, called them daily to remind them to avoid butter and salt. The day the call didn't come, they rushed to her house. She lay in her nightdress in the foyer, the door wide open. Nothing was taken. She bore no physical assault marks, only mental.

"The doctors brushed it off as undiagnosed schizophrenia that turned her catatonic. It's bogus, of course. She has always been the sanest of us all in this family." Lillian leaned toward the psychic, fixing her eyes on hers. "Something. Something horrendous must have happened to her. Something so unimaginable that her mind can't cope with it. Can you help us? We've got money. Lots of it—"

The psychic lifted her hand. "I charge everyone the standard fee. Paying extra won't make her talk. Your mother will either allow me to walk in her memories with her and cross the threshold of trauma, or she'll block me, and nothing can be done about it. Now, wheel her before me, and tell me her name."

"It's Alyssa," Lillian said, pushing the wheelchair forth, stopping it just before Mother's knees could touch the psychic's.

"Alyssa? Alyssum..." The psychic chuckled at the name and took Alyssa's limp, cold hands in hers. "Now, Alyssa, let's cure what you are meant to cure." The psychic closed her eyes and took deep breaths, then began to sway slowly from side to side. "She is blocked. Very blocked," she mumbled. "Too much fright." Her swaying became faster, more frantic. "It can no longer touch you. Show me!"

Alyssa groaned, emitting a sound for the first time in two years, and her face contorted.

"Stop this," Poppy demanded and sprang up from the chair. "You're hurting her."

"Shh—it's working. Now sit down or leave," Lillian muttered between gritted teeth. Poppy huffed and sank back to her seat, yet a superstitious terror began to creep into her spirit. Between two rapid breaths, she calculated the fastest route to break her mother free from the psychic's grip.

"Darkness. So much darkness," the psychic said and stilled. "Come." Her voice became soft. A whisper. "Come... come..." Her voice was like a quiet heartbeat. "I'm awake now. I'm in my bed. His pillow is in my arms. Come. Come. It's calling me. I can't stop. I get up. I can't put on my slippers. I walk, the floor is cold. So cold. Come. I walk down the stairs, the third one creaks. Come. Come. Come. Come." Her voice sped up. A sound of a thudding heart. "I'm in the foyer. I can't stop. Oh, God! I can't stop. Come-come-come-come. Oh, God! The door! The handle! I can't! I can't stop!" The psychic yelled, her heart beating itself to death in her chest.

"Stop this!" Poppy commanded and grabbed her mother's arms to pry her loose. Then she screamed so shrill that all the neighbors could hear her.

"What are you doing? That's enough. Stop this. Stop this now," Lillian yelled with such fright the words came out strangled.

She grabbed the psychic by the shoulders to shove her away, but froze. Her hand muscles contracted as though being electrocuted. She saw what the other three were seeing.

In the blackness of the night, a pale glowing figure floated at the doorway.

"Come-come-come," it commanded without words. Without sound. The hideous slithering tentacles crept closer. Closer. She looked at its face.

When the neighbors entered the parlor, no one could hold back from emptying their stomachs. The two dead sisters lay atop one another, beside an empty wheelchair, and the Psychic lay on the chair, on her back, several feet away, as though some great force had thrown her there. Their misty eyes were bulging, their mouths hung open in a jaw-dislocating silent scream.

About the Author:

Anneli Marks is a writer from Estonia currently living in Denmark. In high school, she was a reading, scribbling daydreamer and later pursued studies in marketing at VIA University College in Denmark. Now, she writes stories about ghosts and other supernatural creatures while avoiding old buildings and dark hallways.

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The Siren's Curse | Pierce Darke

She walked with hopes mounting, trying to recall if she felt the same in previous years. Her mind tore through connections and formed possibilities after having been dormant for so long, thoughts filled with optimism percolating inside.

The ocean spread before her, vast and empty. Above, the sky shone an ethereal blue devoid of clouds. Her spirit wheeled upward, and a prickling sense of memory befell her. She could almost feel the soft winds caressing her.

"Oh, to be touched!" she thought, remembering. Then her mind recoiled. How could she even consider the very thing that damned her to this fate?

All of this she pondered and ultimately dismissed without faltering, her gait remaining slow, rhythmic, changeless.

Heretofore, throughout her journey, she heard nothing save the breathy whispers of the forlorn waves far below. Abandoned and listless, this place seemed condemned to the stalemate of its battle with eternity.

At once, a noise behind her splintered her soul, scuttling her hopes into the vast, watery tomb below.

She did not look upon them, but she felt them there—felt them watching her. Their eyes violated her, staring with single-minded purpose at all the places men lusted for.

She knew then that the outcome would be the same as before. It would always be the same. She failed to understand why she must be tormented with any sentiment that it could ever be otherwise.

Her step did not waver though an icy tear trailed down her cheek.

"Tell me why we're doing this again?" asked Cody.

Jonathon offered no response, instead scanning the cliffs for movement as they walked on.

"This is ridiculous," Cody said.

"I didn't ask you to come."

Cody stopped and rubbed his knees, pressing into them with the heels of his hands, then hobbling forward to catch up to Jonathon.

"I'm tired, Jon," he said, his voice low.

"Yeah, I know," Jonathon said, attempting to infuse his tone with sympathy. "I don't know what to do. I don't want to miss her."

"You don't even know if she exists," muttered Cody.

Jonathon stopped, closed his eyes, and swallowed. That was just it—he *did* know. The proof obtained from his exhaustive research served to inform his own decision on the matter, but convincing anyone else amounted to little more than wasted effort.

Every year he overheard the townspeople joke about those gullible enough to believe in such a superstitious tale, yet Jonathon sensed that the laughter was always tinged with unease, that the topic always changed a little too abruptly.

He listened intently to their hushed voices impart myriad stories of her mournful cries. Every Halloween night for over 200 years, it seemed, the wailing from the topmost cliff peak slithered through the town, chilling the souls within. And every year claimed another victim, as if heeding an unearthly summons from some ghostly lottery of the damned. Some bodies reappeared, becoming lodged on the rock-strewn beaches book-ending the cliffs, but most were never seen again.

Their hearsay stoked his yearning to learn more. He became convinced that written documents from more reliable sources must exist. Unsurprisingly, Ocean Echoes Sanctuary, the local library, possessed many records of the disappearances over the years. To his astonishment, however, Jonathon accumulated the bulk of his research data about those gone missing within the last seventy-five years meticulously archived at Our Lady of the Cliffs Parish. Binders, thick with documents signed by parishioners and sometimes bearing seals of local officials, bespoke of the church's peculiar investment in the mysterious happenings. More unaccounted-

for individuals worm-holed their way through the previous one hundred twenty-five years' documentation, recorded in some years but not in others.

It struck Jonathon that men comprised most of the missing. Out of all the data obtained, only three women were known to be lost.

Jonathon's mother was the most recent, having vanished the previous Halloween.

Though really, Jonathon thought, she had been gone long before that. Once, in a time he desperately clung to every day, her love cocooned him in a comfort he never dreamt would end. Nevertheless, over time, it withdrew in the face of festering addiction and depression, until only anger and scorn remained. She became twisted, and Jonathon bore the brunt of her ire, suffering innumerable humiliations at the whim of her venomous rage. Yet despite her abusiveness, following her disappearance, the loneliness took him and sealed him up like a soft fly that had long been poisoned and then finally wrapped away.

The poison was better.

Jonathon's dad swooped back into his life after she was gone, all smiles and long hugs amidst the glut of extended family that manifested in the following days. The superficial showing of paternal care diminished along with the departing family members, allowing his father to slip back into his characteristic disconnectedness. Sometimes days passed before his father found his way back to Jonathon's room and hiccupped through his trademark 'just checkin' in'. His sour body odor seemed locked in combat with the pungent stench of alcohol exhumed from his stomach as he spoke.

At least his father managed to tell both Cody and Jonathon that the very top of the cliff was nearly 2,000 feet above the ocean. He delivered this nugget of information enthusiastically during the drive there, no doubt pleased that Jonathon would be out of the house for a while.

He dropped the boys off, having sent Cody along to keep Jonathon from 'doing something stupid'. As he exited the faded sedan, Jonathon looked at the smile sitting too big on his father's face, knowing well why it was there. The thought of just how overjoyed his father would be if his mother *did* take him brought a smile to his own face. He realized his unintended expression to be a rare occurrence bestowed on his father. His father's eyes appeared to glisten and his mouth twitched, as though struggling to maintain his amiable visage.

Jonathon estimated that it would be a two-mile hike to the cliff face based on his research of the area. Then they would traverse chiseled rock steps that extended around a massive column, jutting up like a giant tombstone and rising nearly a hundred feet from the plateau of the cliff below.

And that's where she would be—standing at the top, calling to the next miserable soul. Jonathon would find her there. He would find her and then he would find out why.

With no warning, he started walking again. Cody said nothing, but Jonathon heard his feet scrape over small rocks, dragging them beneath his shoes as he shuffled after him.

They walked for a long time in silence.

Soon the ominous cliff loomed before them, like some natural skyscraper. *A stage to the gods,* thought Jonathon. A stage whose annual performance brought them another sacrifice.

They must like that, he thought. Indeed, they must surely enjoy the show for it to have gone on this long.

But what importance did it establish in this world? Did it really hold any kind of special significance, or was it buried somewhere deep beneath the wars and genocides and natural calamities, lost and forgotten, just like the town it fed from?

"Lost like me," he breathed.

"I'm sorry," said Cody, as if in response.

"What?" he asked, his focus not ready to return from his reverie.

"I'm sorry for questioning you," said Cody. "I think I would want to know, too."

The words struck him with unexpected weight, and Jonathon didn't say anything for a moment, his watering eyes searching the ground. Finding his voice, he said, "I'm glad you came with me."

"I wouldn't have missed it," Cody replied at once.

Jonathon didn't really understand why the other kids wanted to treat Cody cruelly—why they shut him in his locker or spit in his shower towel at gym class. He thought maybe it was because Cody let them. Not that he wanted them to do those things—just that he wouldn't fight back. It was easy to be cruel to something, to poison it, if you knew it would never hurt you. Jonathon stopped walking, clenching his eyes to restrain the tears.

Finally, Jonathon turned to Cody to tell him that he was glad that they were friends—and that was when he saw her.

Her path ran alongside the cliff face, just ahead and perpendicular to theirs. From this distance, she appeared as little more than tendrils of mist moving in a slow glide along the rocky precipice. Her movement seemed splotchy, like a drop of rainwater changing shape on a car window as it alternately rolled down and stopped, coalescing with new shapes while separating from others.

"What is it?" asked Cody, turning his head to see what Jonathon had found.

"It's her," Jonathon whispered. They both stood frozen, watching for long moments before Jonathon finally willed himself away. He ducked behind a large rock, tugging Cody's sleeve until he joined him.

Crouched and now mostly hidden, they peered at her, observing in stunned silence as she made her slow approach.

The raised rock pillar stood about one hundred feet from the boys. As the shape drew nearer, a pale, feminine form appeared within its wispy, swirling mass. She walked in perfect symmetry as streamers of eerie mist and glowing, liquid tendrils weaved and twined around her.

As the sun dipped close to the horizon and the shadows grew long, the slow, pulsing light of the spectral form grew brighter. When at last she passed by the boys' vantage point, her nude body shone like an incandescent bulb. They watched in awe as she drifted by in utter silence, inching along the edge of the colossal plateau toward the base of the waiting column.

Jonathon closed his eyes briefly and swallowed, then crept from behind the shelter of the rock. He heard Cody skid across pebbles behind him, then the unmistakable thud of his backside colliding with the ground. Jonathon winced at the noise but, if she'd heard it, she gave no sign. He watched a moment longer to be sure before turning to check on Cody, who still lay on the ground, a painful grimace stretched taut across his face.

Jonathon showed his palm to Cody, motioning for him to stay down and remain here. Cody responded with a solemn nod. A slight smile tugged at the corners of Jonathon's lips as he took a last look at his friend. Then he turned away to follow her.

The plateau was awash in her pale light, for which Jonathon was grateful as he concentrated on the careful placement of each step.

Glancing back, he saw Cody's foot just before it disappeared behind the obfuscation of the rock. He exhaled deeply, knowing that Cody would be safe.

Turning to face her, his heart skipped as he saw her starting up the steps.

She exaggerated her movements as she climbed the eroded stone steps, accentuating her femininity and slipping effortlessly between poses. She could feel their eyes taking her in, devouring her as she eased ever upward.

Any man who pursued her out of lust fed the curse, extending it. In return, she would punish them, offering them to the depths in retribution for their carnal transgressions. She licked her lips in anticipation.

Before disappearing around the other side of the column, she finally looked down to find only a single pursuer walking toward her on the rocky monolith. He froze as he met her gaze, his primitive instincts assuredly overcome by the desire to have her. She eased into a seductive smile, extending her arm and beckoning him with a curling forefinger. She raised a leg and pressed her inner thigh against the stone, pursing her lips and caressing the column with slow strokes of her fingertips.

Inexplicably, her antagonist retreated several steps, his face twisted. For the briefest moment, her eyes widened, and her smile faltered before she regained her composure and slunk to the other side of the column.

Unsettled, she rounded the stairs and regained her view of him. When she met his eyes again, the leer reaffixed, he gasped and stepped back. She dropped the smile for good.

She continued her pilgrimage to the top, glancing back to monitor his progress. With relief, she found him rushing toward the column. When she reached the summit, she no longer saw him on the plateau. Within moments, however, she could hear his efforts voiced through grunts and hard breaths as he worked his way up the jagged stairs.

The smile returned. He was hers now.

Jonathon crawled as he crested the great pillar, throwing out his arm to drag himself atop it. The wind that sought to dislodge him during his climb up the ancient stairs now pummeled him down into the gigantic rock. His iced fingers left smeared strokes of blood as he clawed his way forward, sending shockwaves of pain up his arms and back down his spine. Straining against the gale, he raised his head to look for her.

She stood facing him at the opposite edge, her back to the ocean. Jonathon saw her face clearly now, and he knew. Tears blew from his eyes like rain, and he outstretched his arm to her.

She looked confused somehow, like she wasn't expecting him. But he would not let her leave him again. The poison was better.

He pushed himself up onto his knees. Bringing one leg forward, he pushed with both hands on top of his knee in an effort to stand. Somehow, he managed to get to his feet, though the wind twisted his stance.

With gritted teeth, he raised his gaze to see her face. It was her. She stood staring at him, her mouth agape, her stance crouched and defensive. Sobs tore through him as reached for her again.

Her expression became fearful, and she looked as though she wanted to step back, to get away from him again. Fear exploding within him, Jonathon lurched forward, reaching for her, his numb and bloody hand brushing across her exposed breast.

She went rigid at his touch and Jonathon watched in horror as her face retracted into a cadaverous husk. She seized his hand in hers and lunged backward.

"No! Oh no!" Jonathon screamed. "Mommy! Mommy! I only wanted to know why!"

The face of the corpse dissolved, and Jonathon looked once more upon his mother's face, her uncomprehending gaze caught within his.

"Why did you leave? Please don't leave me again!"

She shook her head, horror distorting her features as understanding dawned. Tears flew from her face into his as they plummeted toward the ocean below.

He was unconscious as she pulled him closer to her. His head crunched into his chest, the friction of the fall breaking his bones. She cocooned him in her embrace, desperate to protect him.

They breached the surface of the water and came through the other side together.

About the Author:

Pierce manifested somewhere among the tainted hills of Appalachia where he gorged upon the dark imagery and macabre tales of comics and late-night television. To escape the cosmic horrors that beset his doorstep, he fled south to the rampaging Gulf with his brood, eventually becoming lost within the tenebrous Georgian landscape. Much to his terror-filled delight, he has learned that escape is not possible.

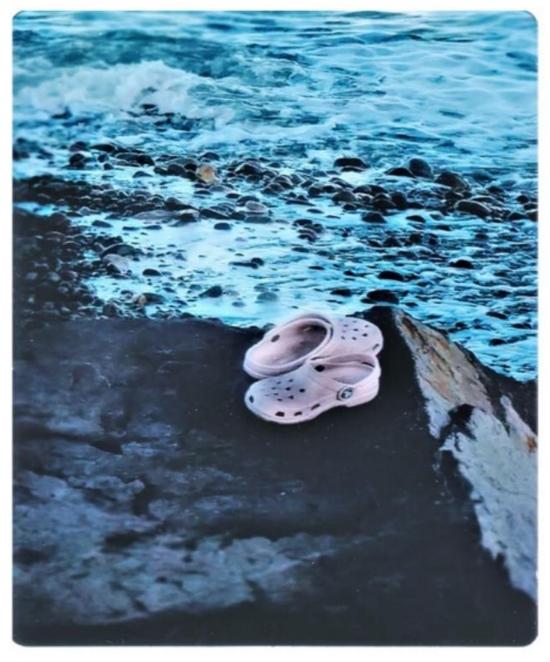
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34 ORCHARD

Darkness is just across the street.

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A twice-yearly literary journal that takes you dark places.

34Orchard.com

A Visit from Santa | Gabriella Balcom

Jill blinked, brain fuzzy. Why in the world was light shining in her eyes? But then she realized it was from the sliver of moon above her in the sky. With Christmas only three weeks away, she'd decided to go camping, taking advantage of the mild temperatures before the next cold front. She rolled onto her stomach but felt a lump underneath her, and shifted to her side. When she still felt whatever-it-was poking her hip, she changed position again. Finally comfortable, she dozed off.

Something icy touched the middle of her back, and she shrieked, sat up in her sleeping bag, and looked around wildly. Clouds obscured the moon now, but she could see well enough to know nothing was nearby. She yawned widely and assumed she'd been dreaming. At least, that explained the cold touch. She didn't know why, but something felt wrong, though. Off.

Then it hit Jill. She'd gone to sleep mere inches from her tent, but saw it a couple hundred feet away, right where she'd set it up.

A faint scraping noise behind her made her flinch, and she whirled around.

Santa sat a few feet away in traditional Christmas attire, scratching his large belly. But the resemblance to the joyful Saint Nick ended there.

His face wasn't jolly, but a twisted, leering parody with glowing-black eyes, and skin that looked like raw hamburger meat.

Breath catching in her throat, Jill's heart pounded. This *had* to be a dream. She pinched her leg, but Scary Santa was still there. His hair moved. So did his beard, and she gaped. White worms hung from his head and chin, twisting in all directions.

The nightmare Santa wheezed, its mouth curving into a horrifying grin.

Jill scrambled to her feet, planning to dash to her car, but lost her balance as the ground beneath her shifted. Glancing down, she froze, not believing her eyes.

Bones littered the ground. Some moved, inching their way toward others, and connected into feet, legs... A complete skeleton stood before her in only moments.

Turning to get away from it, Jill discovered other skeletons had formed behind her and barred her way.

One pointed at her, its bony finger tipped with a long black fingernail. Before she could react, it slashed her

arm with the nail, tearing off a strip of her skin and bringing tears to her eyes. The skeleton raised the piece to where its lips would have been, and devoured it whole.

Another lunged forward and yanked a small clump of hair from her head, making her cry out in pain. She gingerly touched the spot, whimpering when her fingers came away red. The skeleton tossed the clump to Santa, who sucked on the bloodied ends.

Unable to believe this was really happening, Jill gaped at the beings and felt her chest tightening. Sheer panic swelled up inside her and she struggled to think of what to do. Her breath came faster and faster, and she was panting within seconds.

Santa stood, shuffling closer, and the skeletons advanced.

Jill yelled for help but that made no difference. She wailed when the creatures roughly snatched more hair from her head. Her wails turned into hysterical screams as they tore skin from her arms, followed by chunks of flesh.

Soon, all that remained of Jill were drops of blood and an empty tent.

Consider it a Christmas Gift | Gabriella Balcom

"Here a restriction, there a restriction," the black-cloaked figure hissed. "I'm sick and tired of them."

"You've served faithfully as my Grim Reaper for centuries." Death transformed into hundred of times his original size, flames blazing in his eyes. "But now you seek to overthrow *me?* Be warned. Some things are worse than death."

"Please! Try to understand. I'm faithful, just disgusted by humans' incessant whining. Sometimes I long to reap more of them."

Death nodded. "They can be wearisome and you deserve a reward. Today *you* choose who to take. Consider it a Christmas gift from me. Kill gently, viciously... Reap a hundred, a thousand, or more. I don't care." Eyes glowing, the Grim Reaper kissed his Master's feet.

It's Just | Gabriella Balcom

"Hey, did you see that?" Thom knelt, reaching out. "It's moving."

"Don't touch it!" Matt shoved his hand away.

"Why not? It's just a worm."

"Look closer. It's abnormal. Something's oozing out of it, so you shouldn't even get close."

"As usual, you're trying to boss me around." Thom ignored his warning and picked up the worm. "Ow!" He grimaced, dropping it. "That stung me."

"Serves you right, stupid. Now hurry up. We're late for the Christmas party."

Something shot out of the ground nearby, and the boys gaped. Covered in yellow slime, it resembled the small worm but was hundreds of times larger.

Hissing, the creature lunged forward, large mouth widespread. It gulped down Matt, then eyed the sobbing Thom.

About the Author:

Gabriella Balcom lives in Texas and writes fantasy, horror, romance, sci-fi, literary fiction, and more. She's had 420+ works accepted for publication, and has five books out: On the Wings of Ideas (publishing contract was won), Worth Waiting For (second place winner in an Open Contract Challenge), The Return, Free's Tale: No Home at Christmas-time, and Down with the Sickness and Other Chilling Tales.

Facebook: Gabriella Balcom

A Scream for Christmas | DJ Tyrer

What do you do when the Christmas pudding screams when you stab your knife into it? It rather ruins the ambience when your pudding is shrieking with each thrust and slice.

Nobody wants to eat it when it's finally doled out, just sort of toy with it in their bowls and try not to look too closely in case that isn't brandy butter, but blood dribbling over it.

We tossed it in the bin and put a brick on the lid – just in case. After all, if the Christmas pudding can scream, who can say what else it will do?

About the Author:

DJ Tyrer dwells in Southend-on-Sea, on the misty northern shore of the Thames Estuary. DJ 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, Occult Detective Magazine, and Tigershark.

Author Website: DJ Tyrer
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Cantankerous Debra | Soter Lucio

Debra handed the contents of the package to the person on the other side of the flimsy curtain. It was collected with a grunt which suited the ambience of the apartment that was quite filthy. But no matter, she came with a sterling recommendation of getting the job done.

"Have a seat, you'll be called momentarily."

Choosing a seat in the darkest corner of the room she surveyed her surroundings. An upholstered three-piece living room set with a glass top coffee table. An ashtray next to a vase holding freshly cut flowers. Photographs on one wall, of an elderly couple, probably in their seventies or so. Parents or grandparents she guessed, since she doesn't know the age of the person she has to meet. The other walls were quite bare, with the paint peeling off here and there. Incense sticks were burning at strategic spots around the room making the entire place smoky. Debra didn't mind that, she used a lot of incense herself when smoking a joint. Nothing smells as bad as stale marijuana smoke adhering to the curtains and upholstery.

"Come with me, please. Mother Irene will see you now." The grunt voice had a somewhat beautiful face, large slanted eyes and high cheek bones along with full rounded lips. She wore a brightly colored scarf wrapped around her head covering her hair that seemed to be plentiful. She could be anything between twenty-five and forty years of age.

Debra followed her through a long winding corridor with just two doors on either side and entered a small windowless room. It was quite stuffy and Debra resisted the urge to say something not very nice. It was she who needed this person. Not the other way around. Mother Irene was not what she expected. She sat on the proffered seat, an old-time bench, unpainted just the raw wood and it hurt her buttocks. Not even the pavement ever felt that hard. With no formalities she got straight to the point.

"Are you sure you want this person dead? Once done it can't be undone."

"Yes. I'm sure."

"This person is not your enemy. There'll be room for regret and also consequences. Think about this carefully."

Debra wondered whether there was something wrong with her eyes because she kept focusing on a point directly above her right shoulder.

"I have thought about it. I want her dead." Her response was blunt and harsh.

"Alright. You've been warned. Come closer."

Debra hesitated.

"Come on. I don't bite."

Standing in front of Mother Irene, she accepted the small brown cloth bag and closed her fists tightly as she was instructed.

"Remember it all and do exactly as I've said. Hold it tightly until you get inside your house. Do not slacken your grip before. Is that clear?"

"Gosh, do you think I won't?"

"That's one hundred and fifty dollars."

"What!" Debra screamed. "I was told one hundred only."

"Fifty dollars for rudeness and open hostility."

Mother Irene promptly clapped her hands three times and repeated her price.

Debra slammed the bag on the table and stormed out the room. Mother Irene followed her without saying a word and threw the bag at her back. It made contact so Debra took it up and placed it in her handbag. Still fuming she went on home trying to remember everything she was told. Not getting anywhere with her thoughts she visited her friend who'd told her about Mother Irene.

"That woman got me so mad, Christine, I lashed out at her."

"You mean you were disrespectful. I told you Debra, that mouth of yours would land you in some serious trouble one day."

"You're taking her side? I thought you were my friend."

"Did she give you anything?"

"A brown bag with some stuff and she told me not to let go of it before I got inside my house."

"Okay. Where is it? You did do as she said?"

"Of course I did. I left it on the kitchen table. I think."

"Debra you're impossible. Let's go get it. We have to do exactly as she says."

"Or else?"

"There'll be hell to pay."

"Nonsense!"

"What did you ask her to do, Debra?"

"Nothing much. Just to get rid of the one who stole my husband." Hearing those words, Christine stopped dead in her tracks with her mouth hanging open.

"Josephine? Debra! Are you out of your mind?" She blurted out. "You asked her to kill Josephine? Josephine didn't know the man was married! And now they have two children. You have none. Gosh! I'm sure Mother Irene warned you about doing stuff like that. Didn't she?"

"She might have. I don't remember." Her haughtiness showed through her bravado.

"Debra Messing. You're on your own. I am gone." Christine spun on her heels and left going back to where she came from.

Debra stared at the receding back not knowing what to do or where to turn. Christine was her only friend from since primary school. Debra went back to her house to ponder on the issue at hand. She knew she could never again count on her friend Christine. She's a stickler for rules and regulation and never will she break her word. She said Debra is on her own and she meant it. She paced that floor so many times it's possible that the color faded out if not worn a hole through and through. As is usual with her when the going gets rough, and there's no Christine she goes to sleep.

After staring at the ceiling for a while and unable to sleep, she decided to change the sheets. She moved the pillow and stared open mouthed at the sight of strange creepy crawly things and forgetting what she was wearing ran barefoot to Christine's house thirty minutes away.

"Christine!" She shouted at the gate, and not bothering to wait for an answer she ran up to the house and pushed the door open.

"Christine! There's a bunch of congorees in my bed. I don't know where they came from."

"That's none of my business, Debra. Besides I have company."

Debra now noticed the giggles and turned to face them sitting around the living room. They were looking at her legs and Christine chipped in, "Couldn't you at least change into some decent clothes before leaving your house?"

Debra now saw what she had on.

"Oh, I was in bed Christine. I went to sleep. Or I tried to. When I got up all these congorees were there under my pillow and I ran out without thinking."

"Congorees? Some big, some small? All black?" Questioned one of the girls.

"Yes. You know about them?"

"Oh no." She then glanced at her watch. "Look at the time. How it flies when you're having fun. Come on girls." The four of them rose from their seats and practically ran out of the house.

Christine was furious. "See what you've done? Are you happy now?"

"What did I do?" Debra was definitely confused. But Christine took no pity on her. Grabbing her arm she led her to the door and without a word shoved her out and slammed the door in her face. Debra stood

looking at the closed door for a minute with her mouth hanging open befuddled as she'd never been in all her life.

Conscious of her attire, she tried to sneak past the throng of people on their way home from work. All to no avail. She stood out like a sore thumb with a huge white Band-Aid. The giggles and snippets of whispered conversations were humiliating degrading and vilifying.

Knowing they're all enemies, she defied all odds by sticking her nose in the air, and with shoulders erect she walked on past them all not caring that her underwear was peeping out from the hem of her T-shirt. She heaved a sigh of relief when she got safely in her house and dropped on her bed crying. Too late she remembered the reason she went out in only a T-shirt. She jumped and pulled the pillows, but there were no congorees.

The bag from Mother Irene was on the bedside table, though she couldn't remember resting it there. She decided to do as she was told. What little bit she could remember anyway. Opening the bag, a strong pungent scent escaped. Choking and feeling the contents of her stomach threatening to erupt, she dropped the bag and rushed to the bathroom. She puked before getting to the face basin messing up the carpet. Now she understood why her mother told her not a good idea carpeting the bathroom. What came out her mouth was unbelievably stinky. It was moss green and slimy. She washed her mouth and when she looked at the floor she was so horrified at the sight of the stuff that came out from her insides she puked again. But this time it was clear water. Reaching for the bag again she noticed something from within wriggling. Not just one thing but a few things wriggling. It couldn't be congorees because they don't give out that odor. In fact they have no odor at all.

Not having a choice she left to visit Mother Irene. But before getting there she noticed the throng of people running helter-skelter about the streets. And this late in the evening when the weather should be cool because it is late rainy season and close to the end of the year, some people had a portable fan and complaining of the heat. She approached a few women who just walked up the path from the river, but they had burns about their arms and legs.

"Hello. What happened to you all? Are those burns?"

"Yes." They all replied. "It suddenly got so hot we went to the river to bathe. It should have been cold. But it burned, not like hot tea, but like acid. See?" And they showed Debra their arms and legs.

"Our skins are burnt through and through. We don't know what it is. And we don't know who to ask about it."

"That looks painful."

"It is. Look around. Everybody is scared. We are all in limbo. There's nobody to lend a hand or to explain."

"Do you hear bells ringing?"

"Yes. Prayer Meeting. Maybe they can tell us something."

"Let's go."

They rushed off following the sounds of the bells. They were joined on the way by others with varying degrees of burns on their bodies.

Some did have a theory as to what was happening.

"Jacky said somebody forgot to close back the gates of Hell."

"Maryanne said the back door of Hell flew open and ice from the Arctic floated in pushing out the heat through the front gates into a portal."

"What's a portal?"

"Nobody cares. Let's find out the cure for this thing."

While they ran to the prayer meeting Debra did not forget her initial reason for being out on the road. She met Mother Irene's house wide open and not a soul around to ask her whereabouts. She stood there for a few minutes then left to go to the prayer meeting. The crowd could be seen and heard from a distance. As in

the scriptures there was wailing and gnashing of teeth. Even the atheists and agnostics were making a beeline to the praying people hoping against hope they'll find an answer and a solution to what's happening. She saw her ex with his present wife Josephine and their two children walking, but headed in the opposite direction from everyone else. Debra noticed the calm and pleasant expression on their faces. Mother Irene, her friend Christine and a few others suddenly appeared in front of her, all pointing that accursed index finger in her face and accusing her of causing the heat and acid and the infestation of congorees on the community. Realizing her confusion and puzzlement as to their meaning they explained her request to Mother Irene to hurt pure love.

"Pure love? He was my husband. He is second-hand. Nothing pure in there."

"Your marriage was never consummated. They were two pure hearts, souls and bodies. See them now? Not even Hell's fire can touch them."

"Mother Irene, didn't anyone get an answer for this trouble when you all were praying?" "Listen Debra. Do you still hear the bells ringing?"

"No, I don't."

"That's because the acid rain fell on them all and they disintegrated."

"But not you?"

"There's more punishment for me. After all it was me who gave you the bag. You have more punishment coming your way also. You didn't do as I told you to."

"No, I didn't. So, I am partly responsible for all of this."

"Yes. Bow your head and see what's at your feet." Debra watched the congorees all around her legs. Those black creepy crawly things the long black ones were about twelve inches from her and between her legs. They took up more than a footstep away making it impossible for Debra to jump across them. Mother Irene went as far away as possible from Debra who started crying silently afraid of making a sound.

"If we can hold out for two more hours, we'll be alright." Debra heard a voice say. It was dark as the electricity was out. Another voice asked, "What do you mean?"

"Well, it is old year's night. New Years Day will be in two hours so there is hope. I think. At least that is something to hold on to?"

Then Debra heard a blood curdling scream followed by the words, "My leg! My leg is gone!"

"So is mine along with my hands. What have we done?"

And Debra listened to them rolling on the ground while she remained immobile in the middle of the congorees that just started secreting a green liquid.

As it the troubles up till then weren't enough there came an apparition from the direction of the river in the form of a very handsome being dressed in a long white gown and floating about two feet of the ground. Mother Irene covered her mouth to stop the scream.

"Isn't he good news, Mother?" Asked a voice from the ground.

"Far from it. Evil beings are forbidden from touching the earth." She answered softly. "Our suffering is only just beginning. The New Year is very, very far away."

About the Author:

Soter Lucio is a great-grandmother from the mountainous region of Trinidad W.I. where folk legends abound. She works as an ironer by day and writes horror stories at night. She lives alone so there are no distractions except for the occasional ghost who gives her writing a boost. She's been published by Sirens Call Publications, Weird Mask, and Migla press. Soter also has a collection, *The Ghosts of Charuma Forest*, published by Stratton Press.

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WE MAKE MONSTERS

A Macabre Journey Down the Rabbit Hole

In the series 'We Make Monsters' Judson invites you to take a deep dive into the enigmatic complexities of mental illness and his dark comedic approach to making sense of a brain that refuses to stop eating itself.

From the beginnings of Judsons career he has always been drawn towards the macabre, both in the visual arts and his writings as a form of catharsis, a kind release or vanquishing of the darker elements that make up one's own mortal coil. However, Judson's illustrations don't dwell within the realms of his own self indulgencies rather they show a concerted attempt to inflict the wrath of comedy upon the gods and monsters dancing in his mind.

Depictions of screaming chickens and flailing dead fish make up some of the subjects in this series and it's important to note that the aesthetics and craftsmanship of the work is paramount to whatever profound meanings that one might hope to unlock. It was the new discovery of an old media that opened a door to a tool of ultimate precision, the mechanical pencil.

Having worked extensively in pen and ink Judson wanted to get back to the sketchbook and test the boundaries of a media predominately used for the preparation of a piece rather than finished product. Using 0.3, 0.5, 0.7 and 0.3 leads, a whole world of possibilities opened in a variety of treatments and applications never explored. Although 'We Make Monsters' lends its fruition from the darker regions of the human condition, it's not a series to be defined or even understood, it's meant to be enjoyed.

Please visit The Pencil Works on Facebook for more artwork by Judson Michael Agla.



The Pencil Works



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Shop of Wonderful Things | Andrew Darlington

at the very far end of the narrow street of smooth gull-white cobbles that leans beside the harbour, past the baker's window display of fresh bread and currant-flecked buns, the old jeweller who hand-crafts black jet in the golden light of his cramped studio, the florist and tattoo parlour is the small shop of wonderful things where children press noses to glass to see cascades of magic novelties fossils, picture books and gemstones in aromas of herb and lavender, but what they never suspect is that the stroke of midnight chimes animates the small wooden figures of policeman and farm animals, sheepdog, dolls and railway porters, dinosaurs, jackdaw, fire crews, lifeboatmen in high shiny boots, milkmaid, town-crier and lord mayor, who all escape through the cat-flap into empty streets on predatory bloodletting with nail-sharp teeth and tin-tack claws hastening the nervous homeward tread of terrified late-night revellers... their miniature slaughter stilled only as dawn slants across the hunchback cottage roofs to begin other, daytime lives

About the Author:

Andrew Darlington has walked the magma crust of the Nisyros volcano. James Lowe of the Electric Prunes is his Facebook friend. And Kink Dave Davies answered his Tweet. He writes about music for 'R'N'R' (Rock 'n' Reel), and counterculture for 'IT: International Times'. His latest poetry collection is 'Tweak Vision: The Word-Play Solution To Modern-Angst Confusion' and his Scientifiction Novel 'In The Time Of The Breaking' are both from Alien Buddha Press, USA.

Author Website: Eight Miles Higher Facebook: Andrew Darlington

Signed and Sealed | Ngo Binh Anh Khoa

No words can change your fate now, I'm afraid,
Too late to renegotiate our deal;
The price agreed upon, hence, must be paid,
As shown here on the pact which bears the seal
Of your forefathers' ashes, signed in blood
That you, out of your own volition, shed.
You knew the rule — which has for centuries stood,
The absolute law by which my kind is led —
Before you made the choice to summon me.
I played no part in your decision then,
No spell, no mind-control, no trickery,
So don't blame me for what you reap, my friend.
But there's still time, so how about a game?
You hide, I seek, then your soul I shall claim.

The Offering | Ngo Binh Anh Khoa

A delicate beauty locked within a stony cage beckons her savior— the rumored fairest of all, trapped in the slain dragon's lair.

Skin as white as snow, hair as black as ebony, lips as red as blood.

Kiss as sweet as sin, hands as cold as permafrost, fangs as sharp as knives.

Honey-laced poison pours into the hero's ear, fatally addictive.

Flesh melts against flesh; one's like ice, the other fire flickering in the storm.

Soft lips trace his flesh; a bite pierces through his throat; moans fade to silence.

Another fine meal for the Mother of Monsters, offered up to her by the deceitful dwarfs damned to eternal servitude.

A Date with Death | Ngo Binh Anh Khoa

At last,
I am ready for my date
with Death,
whom I met five years prior,
whose courting I then rebuffed.

At last, I am ready for my fate with Death, whose hand my bone-thin one seeks, an escape from my mortal pain.

At last, she's running a bit late, but here comes Death in her gown of midnight black, her face a weave of soft moonbeams.

At last, done is the stressful wait; I take one last breath after the goodbyes are said and let her take me out—

Out of my withered shell confined to a stuffy bed in this stifling ward,
Out into the gentle night,
Into an ocean of shimmering stars,
Into the infinite and far beyond.

A Mother's Wrath | Ngo Binh Anh Khoa

With a tender lullaby, a feathery forehead kiss, A whispered spell to safeguard a good night's sleep, A nightlight fueled by dimly gleaming runes, And the gentle purrs of my slumbering familiar nearby Which keep all the encroaching nightmares at bay, My daughter falls into sweet oblivion's embrace.

Once I'm certain that she shall not be roused,
I look down underneath her bed, checking and staring
Into the thickened pool of shadow festering there until
I'm sure there's nothing lurking in that space, but I—
More than anyone — know how spitefully persistent you are,
Like a roach that keeps twitching after being trampled on.

I know all of your fiendish plays and schemes
To terrify and feast upon the fear of the innocent—
The sudden sounds of footsteps scurrying across the floor,
The silhouettes of jagged claws crisscrossing the walls,
The smarting brushes of chill on any patch of skin exposed,
And the mimicry of the winds knocking on the window panes.

Oh, I am well aware of all of your little tricks,
And I know well how you only have power over your victim when
That victim, scared into silence, unwittingly lets you have it.
My own mother never once believed me when I told her that
There was a monster loose within our home, but I'm not her,
And thus, I shall not let you defile my child.

Many times, she's talked about you, shivering and teary-eyed, And I've reassured her that you're just a passing bad dream, But I heed her claims, for I myself was once pressed down by Your tainted talons as you sank your acidic fangs unto my flesh; How my skin still crawls at the memory of your lolling tongue Scraping against my throat, emboldened by my sobs and pleas.

So young was I then, made helpless by the fear you'd conjured And not yet able to control the power blazing within my veins, Which instinctively lashed out under stress on that day, Forcing you to flee and lick your wounds in your umbral den. How I wish I'd been able to expunge your tainted soul back then, A mistake that shall not be repeated for my child's sake.

Ah, there you are, perching just beyond the warded window With your hateful amber eyes set upon my straightened back. I can sense your bristling presence befouling the autumn air, Hear the impatient grinding of your fractured teeth, and thus, I turn around to meet your gaze, direct and unblinking. Come closer if you dare.

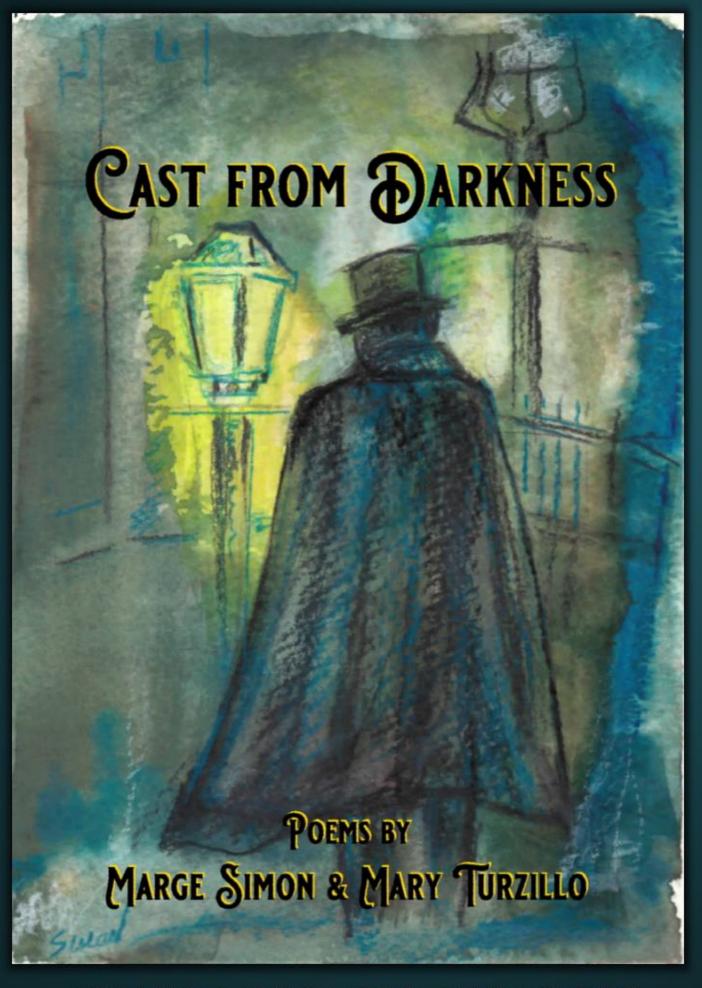
And if you dare, not a lick a fear shall you taste, For you shall learn that even the thickest cloak of shadow Will abandon your dwindling existence to its fate In the face of the inferno that shall reduce your stain Into nothingness, leaving only echoes of a faded dream. So come closer – and learn that Hell itself has no fury

Quite like A mother's wrath.

About the Author:

Ngo Binh Anh Khoa is a teacher of English from Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. In his free time, he enjoys reading fiction, daydreaming, and writing speculative poems for entertainment, some of which have appeared in New Myths, Star*Line, Weirdbook, Spectral Realms, Liquid Imagination, and other venues.

Facebook: Ngo Binh Anh Khoa



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Hell Surprises | E.F. Schraeder

What I heard was bleak, oceans of fire,

a punishing eternity of wretched flames

So naturally, I expected a kind of

warmth — even scalding.

I prepared for blisters and burns,

but I fared far worse when I found only ice.

Advice of Lesser Demons | E.F. Schraeder

Sure Behemoth and Leviathan had too much drink, but in Hell that kind of behavior was expected,

practically required in the lower domains.

The ranks were full of well-intended evil doers

doing the extra labor of rethinking punishment, always out to impress the high achievers

with the grinding, thankless work of imagining improvements in the business of ceaseless suffering.

How else could they have fathomed such exquisite, multi-faceted phantasms of gore?

Last week it was volcanic wading pools swirling with digestive enzymes for the gluttonous. Delicious!

But after a toast — ice clinking — the bros put their heads together again.

With grandiose dreams of malice and sacrifice, they delivered a flash freeze, a final twist in agony —

the weighted value of immobilized awareness, the perpetual suspension of eternity without thaw.

About the Author:

Author of the poetry collection The Price of a Small Hot Fire (Raw Dog Screaming Press, 2023), the Imadjinn Award finalist novel Liar: Memoir of a Haunting, and other works, E.F. Schraeder writes poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. Schraeder's short creative work has appeared in many jounrals and anthologies, and their poetry has been nominated for a Rhysling Award and Pushcart Prize. Schraeder believes in ghosts, magic, and dogs.

Author Website: E.F. Schraeder
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death of a prince | Linda M. Crate

she thought he had loved her, she had thought he was her happily ever after;

turns out he was a prince insincere who only knew how to be charming to woo her

not because he actually liked her—

just didn't want anyone else to have her, and she couldn't see a way out;

she looked into the dark water,
"please save me," she whispered before
jumping out of the tower window
because she knew if she remained his wife
he would only kill her heart and she
wanted something better than that for love—

the dark waters spared her, but she didn't see the shape of her revenge rising from the depths;

a monstrous mud monster that took the shape of a woman—

the beast took her pain and revenge on as if it were its own, and when that prince walked into the tower

he was eaten whole;

and the monster smirked into the darkness of the night returning to her nest until she would be needed again—

none the wiser to what she had done.

the devils all moved | Linda M. Crate

she thought when they said hell froze over that things would change,

but to her horror everything remained the same;

she didn't know what to think-

perhaps, they had gotten it wrong; perhaps, hell hadn't frozen over at all—

but one night when she was walking all alone she felt a frigid hand upon her shoulder,

he was paler than she thought even death would be:

"the reason nothing has changed is hell has been vacant for many moons, the devils all moved here; that's why there's always been so much terror in this universe, my love."

"do i know you?"

the vampire smiled at her, shaking his head; "but i will see your memories as you die."

then the vampire pulled her near, paying no mind to her protests; his fangs biting deeply into the flesh until he claimed every red ruby as his own.

tear apart the light | Linda M. Crate

the earthquake shattered open her part of the world,

and she fell hard and deep into hell;

and when she looked around there was only ice and snow, but it seemed vacant;

as if it had been empty for a long time—

and she wondered if perhaps she were just dreaming, if maybe she would open her eyes and see that this wasn't hell;

but then she heard the terrible laughter—

"what's a pure little thing like you doing here, don't you know parasites like to tear apart the light?"

those were the last words she heard before the demon tore her apart.

surprise attack | Linda M. Crate

he walked into the house to find that she was dead,

and he laid down beside her;

they had promised one another til death do them part but even death could not part a love like theirs;

and he was willing to let all the aching, all the agony of life leave him;

even if it meant walking in the darkness for a time—

he knew that he would meet her again,

but what he didn't anticipate was that she would get up out of the bed: a vampire;

and she would be the one that granted him death.

a good chase | Linda M. Crate

when they said hell had frozen over,

she wasn't sure what to believe;

a part of her was curious to see if it were true—

after all they said that seeing was believing, and she hadn't seen any proof of such a thing;

so she walked and walked until she reached a place that dug deep in the earth, and she saw that there were icicles everywhere;

but it seemed empty and there were no voices which made her even more curious—

"hell's been vacant a while," came a dark voice;

and she looked to see the demon and she knew it was too late that her life was over but she didn't want to surrender—

"i like a good chase," the monster reassured her,

and she ran for as long as she was able before he overcame her, devouring her heart.

About the Author:

Linda M. Crate (she/her) is a Pennsylvanian writer whose poetry, short stories, articles, and reviews have been published in a myriad of magazines both online and in print. She has twelve published chapbooks the latest being: Searching Stained Glass Windows For An Answer (Alien Buddha Publishing, December 2022).

Facebook: <u>Linda M. Crate</u>
Instagram: @authorlindamcrate



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Aberrant | Emma Jamieson

I quake and quiver as my soul departs I am a carcass on its knees. An empty shell, a husk if you will I am nothing but disease

I shake and shiver as my withered heart thrums inside these bones. They cage the beast lock it within, it cannot ascend the throne.

About the Author:

Growing up in a haunted house in a forest where they burned those accused of witchcraft meant all things morbid, spooky and dark were Emma's destiny. She finds comfort and beauty in things others find terrifying. Embracing her creativity, Emma has performed in the Edinburgh Festival and loves writing. She is a horror movie geek, finds serial killers fascinating and reads like a women possessed.

Instagram: @books nooks spooks

Drive | Judson Michael Agla

I love the way you drive

It's like the way you love, full throttle with reckless intentions

The streetlights bow and dim upon your approach, like sentries guarding the darkness ahead, signaling safe passage

Your kisses bring cold comfort in the low lights of the dashboard, I've never encountered someone with such passionate monsters

You chase your engine like an armed pilgrim on the way to lay siege to the promised land, shrieking back into the disappearing landscape

What is it of rot and ruin that pursues you with such wretched conviction

As the icy road passes underneath with quiet caress we barrel into a new dawn of deliverance, carrying the spark that will ignite the fires of reckoning

Where we will stand witness to the decline of the benevolence of slaughter

About the Author:

Judson Michael Agla is an artist working in a multiplicity of mediums; such as drawing, painting, wood and soapstone carving, and writing flash fiction, short stories and poetry. The majority of his work surrounds the idea of the human condition; be it metaphorical or literal.

My Sisters | Brian Rosenberger

They float, my sisters.
Their feet never touch the ground.

Our fellow villagers, the townspeople Made sure the knots were secure When they lashed the ropes To the trees, to their necks.

A coastal village, we lived off the bounty, Of the land and water.

Our fellow villagers, the townspeople, Never questioned the harvest from the water, The reaping from the land, the offerings required.

They still hang. The nooses tight. My sisters called witches.

Beware my sisters. They will walk again.

Out to Pasture | Brian Rosenberger

We remember them as they were.

Our love prevents us from Giving them what they need. A bullet to the head, Dismemberment, Burning.
That's guilt we can't burden. We love them after all.

Instead, they wander in fields Bordered by white picket fences And barbed wire.

We visit when we have time. Never during their lunch or dinner. Never asking their caretakers What's on the menu.

Winter | Brian Rosenberger

I remember Winter, one of the main reasons why I moved South. I do not miss it.

The ever-long Mid-Western Winters. I lived through them. I survived.

I recall seeing my breath. It was that cold. Grandma said it was one of the few times you'd see your soul. Best protect it. The last time would be the day you'd die. No protecting your soul then.

I remember the cold, frost numbing the flesh, so drunk, so lost, in more ways than one.

I found a tarp in a baseball dugout, curled under it to die. Dogs, or what sounded like dogs in the Distance, laughing at the poor drunken fool.

I still hear those howls. Usually on nights like this. It gets cold in the South. Not as cold.

Not as often. A few years past, we had an ice storm. My normal one-hour drive home turned into a ten-hour endurance contest. Despite the graveyard of abandoned vehicles, I survived.

The howls were my soundtrack, my motivation. I remembered.

The Norse Gods are long gone. Remembered only in comics and multiplex cinemas. Prayers to them are now little more than dust and popcorn and discounted back issues in Comic shops and flea markets.

Still, Winter remains their home. Asgard forever.

Heavy boots indent the snow. Footprints disappear as snowflakes fall from the sky.

The grocery stores have been raided. Milk and bread and beer, long gone from the shelves.

The White Death is upon us.

Children wait for the school bus. No school cancellation. No delay. Not in this district, Not after last year's test score scandal.

And the snow continues to gently fall.

Missing will be the headline. There will be no answers, only questions. For days and days, long after the snow has melted.

I remember Winter and the sacrifices needed to summon Spring.

The Witch Nest | Brian Rosenberger

Composed of leaves, twigs, bark, moss, And other material like bone, skin, scales, and hair. Not that dissimilar to a squirrel's or a bird's nest, Even a beaver dam.

Even a beaver dam.

The nests built high in the tree limbs for their safety,
From humans and other predators of the night.

The height, another benefit for nightly broom sojourns.
Fire, always a concern. But detected early enough,
Torches never a match for hexes.

The easiest way to discern a Witch Nest from other
Similar constructs – the screams.

How the Sausage is Made | Brian Rosenberger

A 45-minute one-way commute to work.

To the job that pays the bills.

Middle Management tells him these reports are needed.

Do this. Do that.

Senior Management tells him these reports are needed.

Do this. Do that.

Middle Management asks what was wrong with the original reports?

He does what is requested. Clock in. Clock out. Half hour lunch.

Ham and cheese sandwich, eaten in the parking lot every day.

Lettuce and yellow mustard and a book to kill time.

No managers. No coworkers. His time. To think. To plan.

The book usually a horror or thriller novel.

Sometimes a bio of a serial killer. Sometimes a cook book.

He takes inspiration where he gets it. He's a big fan of Food Network.

Ten years on the job. No promotion. Inconsequential raises that fail to match the level of inflation.

He never complains, says "Thanks" and moves on. More reports to run.

A 45-minute one-way commute to home, where he can finally be himself.

He showers. Dons the apron, Kisses his knives,

His various cooking tools. God Bless this kitchen.

He attends the occasional social outings, the company meetings.

The flavor of Senior Management and Middle Management

Tastes about the same. Chewy. Best to marinade overnight.

Occasionally, he brings in homemade breakfast. Never any leftovers.

Monday. Do this. Do that. Clock in. Clock out.

The company website indicates there are some new job openings.

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 Rosenberger</u> Instagram: <u>@brianwhosuffers</u>

nowhere to go, nothing to do | JB Corso

the dead won't stay quiet, they squawk at all hours,

lined up and down the shore lines; they stare out across the choppy waters as if waiting for passage somewhere; the salty air is filled with

constant ramblings about being stuck, "nowhere to go, nothing to do;" the living don't want them

anywhere near (except the freaks who live out

their kinky fetishes),

all will fall to the dead | JB Corso

Fate has stopped death

in its dark tracks,

my centuries of waiting

have come to fruition,

unhoused souls move into corpses

who make
the living
meals
to chew on,
the new
heirarchy
sews panic
into the
eyes of
soccer moms
and steals
the security

of rural countrysides, the cities are in flames

as these hordes

tear through the social fabric

like acid through silk,

no one's safe except for me, I can control the mayhem, they begin to move on my behalf, I will use them to destroy it all from the capitalist pigs to the

to the hippie dens, all will fall as the dead have no afterlife

the coroners don't even bother

anymore,

they've watched

too many cadavers get up on and walk away or crawl

or pull themselves, the government says napalm will solve our living woes of the dead,

but smarter minds know it's better to have the dead standing around unscathed than burning and turning back into society's

streets

About the Author:

JB Corso is a healthcare professional working to better the lives of vulnerable people. They enjoy spending time with their supportive wife, writing daily, and finding joy in the world. Their author's motto is "Developing stories into masterpieces." They have been published in both fiction and professional outlets.

Facebook: JB Corso



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Mox Mori | Will H. Blackwell, Jr.

I feign rest tonight, but sleep evades. But what use sleep, with no relief in dreams? The transomed moon is for the moment staid, Not looking in, nor out, through winter's stream.

Your spirit, though, soon penetrates this room. Your shadow spreads in granite on my soul, Pressing down like a flattened tomb. You don't return here to console, but To remind how we argued all those nights— Not hearing what the other truly said. Your chill whispers retell our final fight; After which, you escaped our life—dead!

Yet I feel your clement touch within my bones. I miss you! May I now join you, under stone?

About the Author:

Will H. Blackwell Jr. is a retired professor (botany) living in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. His poetry has appeared in Aphelion, Black Petals, Blue Unicorn, The Lyric, Orphic Lute, Poem, Random Planets, Scifaikuest, Slant, and Star*Line.

scratch scratch | Terry Trowbridge

Not ow, but itch.

The scratch is what sounds roughed-over.

Rhythmically self-bleeding, I peel away my mosquito bite and wonder if I am hearing my fingernails on skin or on shin. After all, the mosquito reminds me that below my thin leather blood keeps time, and when I'm bit, so does the scratch. And that scratch is textured,

as if my shin is a wooden percussion instrument: a toothed wood block, and my skin merely tuning a particular note; and did that scratching note change since my childhood? Perhaps deepening with puberty or pitching higher with middle age?

Maybe, when I die, instead of a mortician, a sound engineer can bring a pitch pipe, pluck out my fingernails and toenails for a post-mortem pick collection, and scratch me; mark the different notes and keys, find the way tendons tune my skin, and rearrange my corpse into an instrument.

Wrapped around the engineer's body like a sousaphone and pump me in a death yoga: half-bagpipe/half-washtub-bass.

Since my spit valves would not function, instead, entropy would flick specks of clotted blood for a dance macabre, reminding the revellers trailing in a wake behind that this bloating corpse was bit by the same mosquito who hunts all of them.

About the Author:

Pushcart Prize nominated poet Terry Trowbridge has appeared in *The Sirens Call* before. He is grateful to the Ontario Arts Council for his first writing grant. To quote Gozer the Gozarian, "There is no Christmas, only Yule."

Two Weeks Later | Ken Poyner

The neighbors are fighting again.
Who knows? This time it might be
The cleaning of the cat litter; why
They have not had children yet;
The wife's latest sexcapades; perhaps why
No one has hosed out the back porch garbage
Can in a month. Just like the last time

They make it to the back yard:
She in nothing but her frilly
Half transparent under things; he
Naked to the waist and barefoot.
They scream so loudly you hear
Wild dog scream, but no words. I
Am in my own back yard,
Just under the edge
Of the patio's tin roof, in casual
Afternoon clothes: cargo shorts,
A T-shirt from the ballet benefit,
Cloth tennis shoes sensibly ready.
I don't even know the brand

Of beer I am absently drinking.
Had I not been outside already when
I heard them, I would have come out.
Next door neighbors, I hardly know them.
Either one can start swinging first,
Initially open handed – or maybe just
A shove, an attempt to establish direction.
I've seen them draw blood, but it is rare.
About the time he goes closed fist
And starts to draw straight back
Instead of round-house, something

Elemental trips off and he stops himself
To stand and take the brutality of her last
Seconds of anger. In the end
I bet inside conditioned walls the violence charged sex
Is what we hear thundering through the house.

But we are not there yet.

They scream and push and he

Slides his hand insider her bra strap

To keep her from backing away and surely

Just like the last time the whole damn thing

Will fly off. I set my beer on

The inlay table my wife bought at an arts fair

And lean as far forward to watch as I comfortably can.

A crime is about to be committed here.

The Play at the End | Ken Poyner

You are the one we wanted.

You: bound, chained, tied and suspended.

You: affixed

To a chair, against the wall, to the ceiling.

No longer the important man.

No longer intricate captain of forces

That we only imagined might exist, your details laid out

In artless intelligence briefs:

Shadow numbers that justified budgets.

I know a technique

Of bashing a man in the thigh

Persistently enough that the bone

Goes to jelly: over time, the leg

Decays. Eventually the man dies from the leg.

It is a common technique,

And there is a manual about how

To use the method to the most advantage. There is

An official protocol. Understand:

This is my job.

And no matter what you do,

What you know, what you say:

I get paid.

You can be the mastermind,

The henchman, the delivery driver, a stooge,

Or the fruit vendor on holiday.

You can be whatever you like;

Whatever you have the imagination for;

Whatever makes sense in your plastic,

Soon to be hopelessly revealed world.

I am a man who is

Required to fill in his time card

In no other than black ink.

The End of Everything | Ken Poyner

You know those aliens
That at the last minute
Before we eliminate ourselves
In a nuclear holocaust
Come to save us?

Well, seems there was
A glitch in their schedule,
And, anyway, their craft's
Primary propulsion system really
Needs routine maintenance

(It has a tick that drives Their chief protocol officer crazy)

And could be in the shop
For several planetary revolutions.
They are awfully sorry.
They were looking forward to saving us.

They did leave a rain check
Likely predated well past
The demise we have in mind for ourselves.

Shouldn't we be looking for other aliens?

The Murder | Ken Poyner

When your five minutes of fame Are over, what do you do? Other people are too engrossed In their own five minutes, Or its coming or its going, To care about yours. On one knee In the backyard garden you can Pretend the grass cares, the peonies Want you to relive every moment of it, Want you to make the caricature facial expressions, Use all the unique voices – and The weeds could not care less, Though this act might be because you are Weeding. The laundry may wish to know, Or the neighbor's cat. After a while You have turned those five minutes Into a half hour performance, Advertised as an instance of total recall, Your prime minutes – which should bring Wonder and education to all – but which play Merely to the inanimate, or to stray creatures Considerably down the food chain. Then, After years of having the act Of your five minutes of fame Locked in and ready to be staged at the big houses -Honed to a one man show with a thousand Imaginary voices and lifelike impressions – The videographer Shows up and says he has The full five minutes on tape, Wide angle and split screen detail:

Everything just as it happened, five

And thirty seconds of credits at the end.

Full minutes, sound, color

About the Author:

Ken's nine collections of brief fictions and poetry can be found at Amazon and most online booksellers. He spent 33 years in information system management, is married to a world record holding female power lifter, and has a family of several rescue cats and betta fish. Individual works have appeared in "Café Irreal", "Analog", "Danse Macabre", "The Cincinnati Review", and several hundred other places.

Author Website: <u>Ken Poyner</u> Facebook: <u>Ken Poyner</u>

Something Magnificent | Christopher Hivner

A barren night of a darkness too black to feel your skin. You know you're shouting but you can't hear your own voice as it tries to cut through the deep pitch. The ground shakes, trembles and erupts, something magnificent is coming and you can't run on legs you can't find. The heat is unbearable, a wind from the desert that pricks your skin with pincers burning at 1000 degrees. A wave hits. A tide of temporal diffusion leaving you welcoming with spasms of joy for the shimmering beast that washes over your body pulling your bones out like a clacking string of wooden toys, leaving behind your husk with a beatific smile. You are in heaven the beast whispers

and you believe.

This World | Christopher Hivner

Unbreakable and forged in the fiery deserts of hell, the beast climbed out of a hole to greet this world with a ground shaking roar and death ad infinitum. Blackish purple with flames consuming his corporeal form, he stalked the countryside for consumption, for enjoyment, for the glory of his master. Towns, villages, cities, wiped from existence, the living torn and battered into puddles of blood and hair, his victory song a viscous gargling from deep in his throat. This world didn't call him or create him, but he found a portal to our space and time and now we are lost.

The Black Curtain | Christopher Hivner

I'm drifting to sleep, don't look behind my eyes, the black curtain has fallen, it's not fair if you peek. My dreams rot in the sun from under rancid soil crawling with worms. When I taste them, my tongue burns from chemicals. I know they're ripe, time for me to sleep and embrace the delusions that open my third eye.

At Least I Wake Up | Christopher Hivner

I will not die alone

No matter how many I have to kill I will stay alive until I find more survivors I was promised a long life by a gypsy

If she's still alive I'm going to make her eat those cards off the end of my knife

If not, I have 8 weapons

When this first happened I hid in a warehouse with another guy

I'm covered in piss and shit hoping the smell confuses them

He kept asking 'How did this happen?', 'How the fuck should I know?' I answered He didn't like my attitude

I don't think he liked the zombie's disposition any better when they trapped him

He saved my life, I slipped away while they feasted on his pasty body

I've been on my own for six months

Traveled hundreds of miles

I haven't seen another normal human being

But I refuse to believe I'm the last one

Somewhere there has to be another

Maybe a woman so I could get laid before the end

I see people in my dreams

They come from afar but I wake up before I can see their faces

I wake before I see the rotting skin and black teeth

At least I wake up

About the Author:

Christopher Hivner writes from a small town in Pennsylvania listening to ambient electronic music. His book of horror/dark fantasy poetry, *Dark Oceans of Divinity*, is available at Cyberwit.net and Amazon.

Twitter: <a>@Your screams
<a>Instagram: <a>@ragnarjet



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The Lady in Red | Mathias Jansson

On Instagram she is a famous profile a collector of likes posting perfect pictures dressed in her white dress with fresh stains of blood holding her trophy in her hand a hand, a foot or a head

Follow her insane journey when she seeks her #perfectmatch a man created from body parts from young men snared by beauty and pure evil

Behind her she leaves a photo documentary a #serialkiller story a trail of blood and bodies of her cruel crimes

The Lady in Red
Wants to make you disappointed
every Friday she will post
another part of her story
and if you are lucky
you could be
that part of the story.

About the Author:

Mathias Jansson is a Swedish art critic and horror poet. He has been published in magazines as The Horror Zine, Dark Eclipse, Schlock, and Sirens Call Publications. He has also contributed to over 100 different horror anthologies from publishers as Horrified Press, James Ward Kirk Fiction, Source Point Press, Thirteen Press, etc.

Author Website: Mathias Jannson
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Walking The Muckross Path | Meg Smith

On stone steps, green with moss, the same was creeping toward me, a silent wave of dreams, resentments, lost stories, and reaching thus, with pleading hands. But I resist. In the same way, vines in dark tendrils are rising, fingers of false promises, imploring touch, from these fingers are mine. But mine are real. Everything I carry is no garden of poems erased. And this, on my trellis of bones, holds, sturdy, and within them, I built my forest, my own good wall.

A Waste of Wine, A Waste of Bones | Meg Smith

Some rituals make no sense to outsiders; vapid chatter like a cicada on a distant utility wire. They become the stuff of empty scrolls, of laughter in the breakroom. They say a person's inside scaffolding is meant only for decoration, like Christmas garland twinkling in a grand arc across the entrance to the living room. But what we do, we do to cleanse, anoint, heal, embrace. We will not parade those we love before the gaze of the drunkenly cool. We gather them, newly washed, an embrace that never ends, and follow them into their last, and dark, and sacred place. Forever comes night, for us, and for them.

Tidings: The Dark Season | Meg Smith

The horse comes with its white ribbons, jangling bells, and poems; a skull gleaming with bright teeth, and eyes of dark moons. At dawn, a parade of boys stumbles from the pond, sweaters checked with holes, and all laughing. The leader carries the box under his arm, and the box is empty, but still, they raise high their rude blackthorn stick, as if they have taken the whole of the sky. And so my people fall, and laugh, and dance, their writhing tree of tumbling roots and quarrelsome leaves, spirits and songs. No one leaves out bowls of milk for fairy folk. From the distillery where our men broke and bled to earn a coin stamped with face of a tyrant speaking a language of gibberish, they pour their golden dew, and set it on the front step, leaving the door ajar, for the wake and welcome within.

About the Author:

Meg Smith is a writer, journalist, dancer and events producer living in Lowell, Mass. In addition to previously appearing in *The Sirens Call*, her poetry and fiction have appeared in *The Cafe Review, The Lowell Review, Raven Cage, Dark Dossier* and more. She is the author of six poetry collections and a short fiction collection, "The Plague Confessor."

Facebook: Meg Smith
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Cursed Immortal | Julia Still Rose

I have paid my sins
Countless desires
slithering into my skin
Bloody edges of
wood fire burning
following trees of despair
There, in front of the mirror
shadows of black birds fly away
Night is what we carried
In our bones
when we slept
beneath cold autumn leaves

Ghosts in the Garden | Julia Still Rose

Ghosts in the garden next to the primrose, in the evening when the moon is full and the air is cool. I walk in the garden, prim and proper, bare shoulders covered with a crimson shawl. Curious for the whispers, my name they do call. I hum in the garden, a simple tune, as the night flowers bloom. Ghosts in the garden, shadows of gloom, I carry a lantern that shines warm light. Phantom footsteps follow behind, I tremble with terrible fright, for the dead are roaming this garden tonight.

The Oak Tree | Julia Still Rose

Under the stars.

Her brittle and broken pearls float down a stream Blood soaked villages left behind Hungry and torn Illusions of grandeur She wiped her brow As the dark wanderer crept up behind holding violets and daffodils and sweet empty promises the cold rains fell drowning flowers that cried She ran like a single scared spider seeking refuge from its enemy the breeze pulled back her hair under an old oak tree she disappeared into the wet dirt and sunk quietly underneath the ground.

Bitterness | Julia Still Rose

What have you taken away
A smothering
Indistinctiveness of misery
Once we drank of bliss
Untainted and surreal
But your love paled
A sickening multitude of
bitterness
Memories follow darkness
follows blood
follows bone
Surely love dies
In a murky haze of righteousness
I see you.

About the Author:

Julia Still Rose is an accomplished writer, a poet and a fine artist. She has previously been published by Sirens Call with her short story 'Consumption' (issue 41) and Gothic Beauty Magazine 'The Harp' Julia's art and photography have been displayed across the U.S. including The Damned Show (Detroit) and Ward Nasse Gallery (New York City).

Instagram: @juliastillrose
Author Website: Julia Still Rose

A cab ride to hell | Pete Kelly

Leaning on a streetlight Enveloped by a chill mist Filling my lungs with glass As I inhale upon a cigarette.

Stubbing out the butt I wrap my coat tight As I see movement From my island of light.

Through the heavy fog A car's beams materialise Like probing searchlights Casting a flare in my eyes.

In a somewhat fleeting moment All disappears and then restores Drawn alongside me a taxi idling A door opens as it patiently purrs.

As if preordained I enter and sit Without a question as to why A persistence swirls about my head That allows not my will to defy.

Air presses on ears as the door shuts With a solid clunk locks depress A sense of confinement awakens The reality of confused distress.

Wildly searching for escape I pause For I spy the driver of this cab's identity A picture of my face cruelly stares back Above a sign reading 'one way only'.

Through the window I stare resigned For I see those also by themselves driven All converged before a sign 'To Hell' Awaiting the beyond blindly chosen

Lord of the flies | Pete Kelly

Gruesomely howls the wind As a ghastly Gregorian chant, Upon a windowpane flailing Tree branches rap discordant

Manic shadows dance to a din Eerily about a moonlit wall As the door warps and groans Seemingly soon to buckle.

Alone in bed with knees drawn up Arms wrapped round for comfort Desperate eyes search the room For escape from this horror

With a suddenness all is still Slowly the door creaks open In the dark a figure framed Enters calmly, sweeping in.

Into a pillow sinking further All hope is gradually undone As a whispering voice imparts Nowhere to run little one.

Tips of a clawed hand glint With a swift and silent strike Inhaled is her scream of pain The bouquet of fear is drug-like

From the doorway a deep drone As an intense darkness moves Separating into countless flies Swarming into the bedroom.

Fearfully wiping them from wounds Though replaced they are instantly Sobbing with the futility She is finished with all that is worldly.

Now without wherewithalto repel New wounds are exposed to feed Disappeared under a seething mass Her outline shrinks, her inner consumed

Left are the bones to collect For in mortality they defy Such totems are required When you are Lord of the flies.

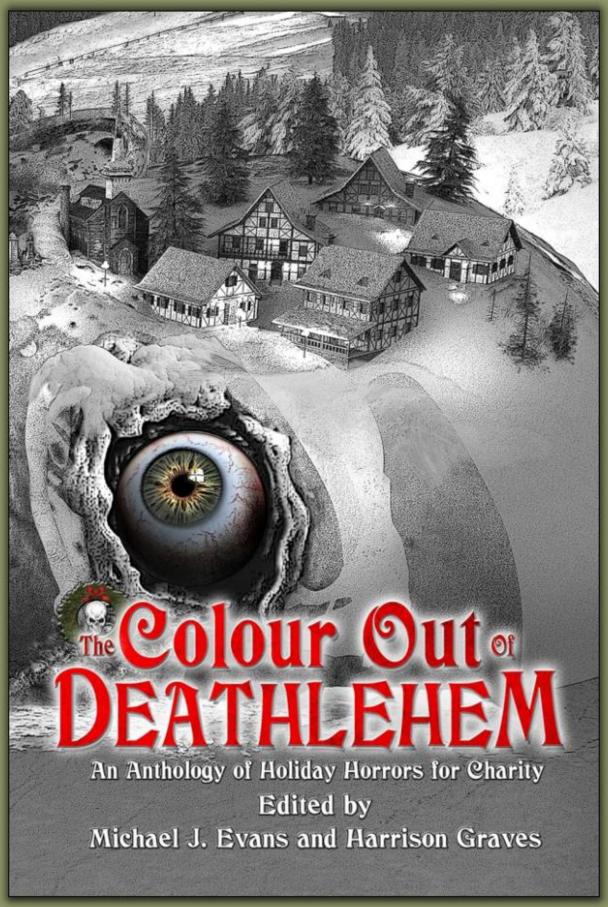
About the Author:

Pete Kelly is a shipwright who writes poetry when the sands of time allow and onetime voice of Gothamistic a band mixing Pete's poetry and music. He has been a fan of horror films since birth (so he says) and loves to grow carnivorous plants. The author of What Appears In The Dark a poetry collection and a push cart nominee.

Instagram: @splatz007

Author Website: What Appears in the Dark

Oh Little Town of Weird....



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Hell on Earth | Tinamarie Cox

With Hell freshly frozen over, fiery pits extinguished and hollowed, and bubbling rivers turned to stone.

The demons fled,
abandoned their home,
their Master,
and their duties as underworld dwellers.

The sludge of wicked souls oozed up onto the Earth.

Mantle cracks wept hot tears, the liquid venom of Hell's nation, slithering beings desperate for breath and costumes of flesh.

One by one the mortals succumbed to the snakes, black nightmares wriggling, racing, and frenzied by the body heat.

The sinners and the saints swallowed the dark army.

Soldiers settled in bellies, digested, and coursing through honest red veins like tar.

Terrible smiles filled visions and rang in despair.

All was rendered hopeless as the Prince rose up from cold depths to join his horde of dead.

About the Author:

Tinamarie Cox is a fairly average weirdo who likes reading and writing depressing things. She enjoys time with her one-eyed cat and other humans only occasionally. You'll find more of her disturbing writings in past issues of *The Sirens Call Zine, Worm Moon Archive, Monstrous Femme, Dark Entries Journal*, and *Crawling* (Hear Us Scream Press).

Instagram: <u>@tinamariethinkstoomuch</u>
Author Website: <u>Tinamarie Thinks Too Much</u>



Candy Tree | Guy Edward

My parents took me to the Sunday market Allowing to buy me some treats I always knew what I wanted And headed straight to the Farmer's sweets

His candy was divine
Unlike any could buy from the store
No matter how much you ate
You would always crave more

My friend and I both wondered What was his secret - what could it be? The Farmer smiled, saying with a wink My dear boys! I grow these sweets on my Candy Tree

We devised a brave plan
Tonight in the AM at three
We agreed to sneak out of our beds
To go out looking for this Candy Tree

Our bags were packed with rations Walkie-Talkies and flashlights in hand We found a hole in the Farmer's fence And trespassed on his private land

We found it alone in a clearing A most mesmerizing sight Pale silver bark sparkled Under the moon's iridescent light

The Candy Tree had no leaves Instead sticky red gumdrops hung from its twigs My friend and I hurried to fill up our bags And stuff our faces like we were little pigs

Its branches flailed like an undersea beast They grabbed my friend quick, lifting him up I was in shock of the crunching sounds As it forced him down its hollow trunk

"You've discovered my Candy Tree,"
Out from the darkness The Framer did speak
I was disturbed he spoke with excitement
Without feeling empathy towards my grief

"What it needs to grow is the same as any tree Water, fertilizer, compost, and peat But the ingredient that makes the candy taste so sweet Is children's flesh and bone... it desires human meat!"

My friend wasn't the first to go missing Soon after my parents us far away Now fully grown with a couple kids of my own Never since touched a piece of candy to this very day

Christmas Decorating | **Guy Edward**

Ho Ho Ho Ho Hee Hee Hee I am jollier than St. Nick When I decorate my tree

Deep from the cellar I collect the year's catch Making garlands from bones I look for pieces that match

All brown blue and green
My ornaments still have some shine
Too bad that my guests
Won't get to see them on the pine

What Christmas tree is complete Without stockings hung with care? I tip them all upside down To be certain no feet are still there

Plenty of work left to be done Enough for another dozen elves! I've still got to place festive hats On the heads lining my shelves

Should I put out milk and cookies Knowing my house will likely be missed? Speaking from experience it's not often Killers make it on Santa's Nice List

About the Author:

Guy Edward is a novice horror writer and poet. His work comprises mostly of short fiction with eclectic and unsettling horror elements. His horror poetry explores chasing after lust disguised as love, and the supernatural consequences of such sinful endeavors.

Instagram: @spooky.guy.edward



Veins | Dave Jeffery

In my veins the silent rage Flows as lava's heat.

Tranquility that Lunar sea bringing forth the beast.

Learned tomes
Overthrown
as bloodlust serves to blind.

Mercy quashed, all reason lost to a savage mind.

Change occurs,
Hair to fur
Bones remould as clay.

A bearded jaw

Now snarling maw

A taste for nought but prey.

Through ragged lungs the howl, it comes, Tearing through the night.

Desire prevails, out on the trail the wolf now erudite.

Over grass Down mountain pass, scent upon the breeze.

Succulent, fresh, The call of flesh, a frenzied urge to feed.

It happens quick, Blood runs thick, canvas mixed with meat.

Screams of pain Death's refrain accompany the feast.

And in my veins the silent rage Flows as lava's heat.

Epiphany | Dave Jeffery

They call to me, The woods, the trees, Boughs as open arms.

Whispering leaves, Vow liberty, With sanguine, silken charm.

I feel their touch, Malevolence, lust, seizing every limb.

And in the mud
I give my love,
In blood and pain and sin.

Body bound, Dragged down, Deep into the earth.

Petrified, Tongue-tied By sod, and moss, and dirt.

The mind floats free, Epiphany! A void of ink and chrome.

And to the stars, I bare my scars, as the heavens call me home.

Sentinels | Dave Jeffery

Shaped as stone this circle, honed, a monument to ghosts.

Rune and spell a curs'ed cell, Imprisonment invoked.

Beings defined By heinous crimes, Dormant parasites.

Serve sentence, Unrepentant, Patience now device.

Sequestering, and testing, boundary, cage, and plane.

Ages pass Then, at last, Walls slowly wane.

Standing still, On moonlit hill, Stones begin to hasten.

Armageddon calls,
And mankind falls
As the Sentinels awaken.

With This Ring | Dave Jeffery

With this ring, I give my love, Greater than the skies above, Deeper than the ocean blue, All this world I give to you.

With this ring, I bear my soul, Tell you all, lose control, Just as I did late last night, When I stabbed you with that kitchen knife.

With this ring, I thee wed,
A cellar for a church instead,
This veil to cover up my crime,
If not the blame in your lifeless eyes.

About the Author:

Dave Jeffery is the author of 18 novels and novellas, two collections, and numerous short stories and dark poems. Jeffery is also the creator of the A Quiet Apocalypse dystopian series which has received worldwide critical acclaim. Highly active in the Horror Writers Association (HWA) he was awarded HWA Mentor of the Year in 2022. He is also co-chair of the HWA Wellness Committee.

Author Website: <u>Dave Jeffery</u> Instagram: @davejeffery8420



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The Devil's Folly | Maggie D Brace

Beguiled by her beauty,
Beelzebub paused momentarily.
Fomenting war, wreaking havoc, and
dabbling in conflict could all be put on hold.

Dusting off his finest garb, and donning his beholdable guise, he sallied forth to the surface to seek and meet his muse.

She greeted him with a demure smile, enticingly inviting him in.
She neither trembled in fear, nor recoiled in dread.

He was smitten by her, and his loquaciousness fled, leaving him like a stricken schoolboy. He shyly clasped her proffered hand.

He found himself enrapt.
He could not pull himself away.
Her smile broadened as she drew closer.
Whispering in his ear, her breath tickled him.

The Dark Lord sputtered in anger. How could he have fallen for this ruse? He acquiesced, and with bitter humor, resigned himself to his fate.

Pleading voices filled his ears. Roiling demons circled, wraithlike, cursing his idiotic folly, as Hell froze over.

About the Author:

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

Dark Blessings | Tom Duke

Sunken graves
And crawling things
Witchy trees with crows
Wriggling delights
Till the soil
Their efforts
Tickling your toes
You taste the stew
Of decay in the air
It coats your curious tongue
Breathe deep now
Of whispers dead
And secrets sweet
As song.

Sated | Tom Duke

When he enters my moonlit chamber I lash him with my tongue and lay me down. He follows and we rut his ratty mane glistening his teeth splitting my lips. Blood mine then his a fierce twitching and it's over. He's empty. I took all his spore then ate his pulsing heart.

About the Author:

Tom lives in the foothills of Palomar Mountain (Hale telescope) with his wife, Michelle, two strange dogs, and a furry gray demon who thinks she's a cat. His work has appeared in The Sirens Call, Wyldblood Press, The Horror Zine, Hiraeth Publishing, HellBound Books, and The Chamber.

Lords of the Nekra | A J Dalton

Long before we claimed our place Others had dominion Over planes vast and different. No doubt we were a lull to them A meaningless adjunct But our nature and expansion Were bound to win them near. Now we are a larger resource For their consideration, A dark harvest for the Gathering. Their substance is beyond human Reality and realisation Composed of aberrant thoughts Feelings and instincts foreign To undermine and overwhelm Undercut, overtake, to incorporate. You will only recognise them so Once it is too late And who am I that would know such? Why, I am their herald.

Overdue Barbecue | A J Dalton

Lying tanning in the sun,

Bright with oil

And almost done.

Want a steak

Cut off the hip?

Or how about a skinny rib?

She's tasty, yes?

Oh, quite the dish

Sorry could you...

pass the dip?

Aromas drool

And eyeballs sizzle

Her crispy skin's

So flavoursome!

A-po-lo-gies

I'm such a mess

A napkin, thanks

No, no, I'm full.

The recipe? Of course, of course:

A tender youngster

Just six hours

A spicy rub

And that'll do it.

I know, I know

They're hard to find

The climate's changed

The sky's unkind.

Revenant | A J Dalton

Blinking and frowningly confused Surreally back all wrongly came the apparition ghastly 'I can't be here I was in a nice place Before... wasn't it? I died, surely, guts Everywhere, glistening and unsightly.' I smiled at my dearly returned father and confessed that I'd paid the price painfully lonely without him to bring him to me reunited! Transfiguring fury, then I no longer recognised him my creator and shook like the child I'd been and was – I covered my eyes unable to pray but fearful. 'Undo what you have done, wretch! Or both are forfeit.

You denied me rest and peace

unkindly, cruelly, selfishly

Will you deny us eternity? Do not be so loveless.'

Implant | A J Dalton

I feel stronger
I lifted my vehicle aside
I pushed my bed with a finger
I killed Peter
Casually
Though not gleefully.

I feel weaker
Dependent on others
Needful of countenance
Wanting to save
Myself
Desperately.

I am terrible and monstrous apologetic or struggling as a victim sorry-killer.

I love you I now know forgive me for not saying sooner Report me Quickly.

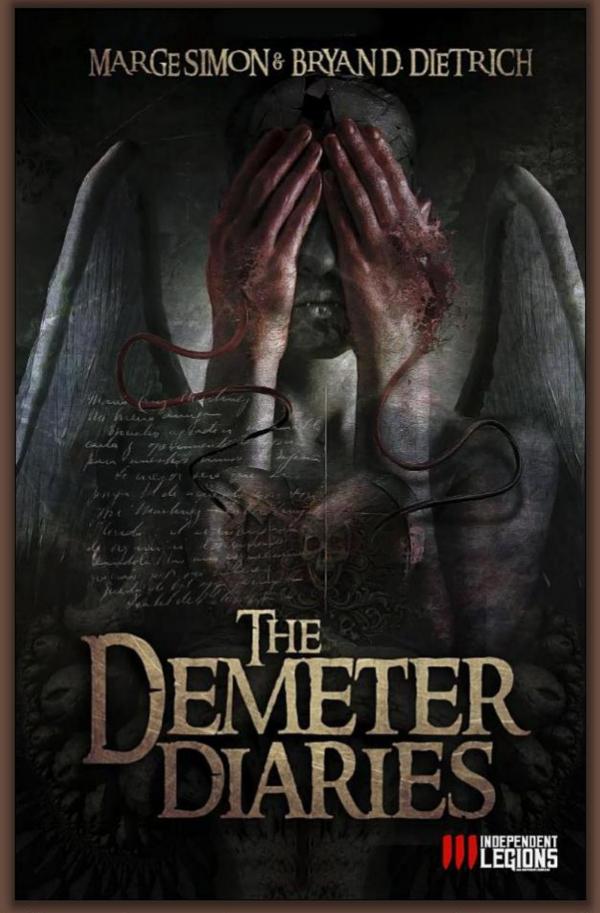
About the Author:

A J Dalton is a UK-based SFF writer. He has published the Empire of the Saviours trilogy with Gollancz Orion, and various collections with Kristel Ink and Luna Press. He lives with a monstrously oppressive cat named Cleopatra.

Author Website: Metaphysical Fantasy

Twitter: @AJDalton1

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Braincase | Lindsay Frazer

The echoes of horrors reverberate throughout the halls. Each room a chamber of the twisted mind's deafening squalls.

The first room to my side,
I could see a man standing in fire.
He eyed me down
As his flesh quickly *softened*.
My heart throbbed as I tried to close the door,
But his screams shot me to the floor.

"The eyes
The mouth
The brain –
They all soften the same."

My body was numb as the door shut. Twirling corridors Making my eyes spin. Every room I could swear I'd been in.

Clowns that stand in the street, That smile past their face.

A faceless mass with eyes, That stares into my soul, Watching me cry as it consumes me whole.

Humanlike creatures that stand by my bedroom windows, Shaking with excitement as I awake their body, Reaching their limbs to my face.

Nothing could ever prepare you for what lies in your braincase.

The Mirror | Lindsay Frazer

A squeal in the hinges
Of the cabinet mirror resonates,
As I steady my syringe.
The pain of the monster
Was going to stop with this incision.

He followed me everywhere. Always with perfect precision. He knew where my hand was -He knew where my leg was moving.

Only in complete darkness, Could I be spared from his stare. Only then could my face be mine, Without his disapproving glare.

I grasped the syringe, And I stabbed the mirror. The shards went falling, As my tears went flying.

I collapsed to the floor, Lying on the wall. I held a shard to my eyes -He was simply smiling like *me*.

About the Author:

Lindsay Frazer is an 18-year-old resident of Wollongong, Australia. He is striving to continually improve his craft in storytelling, through writing in prose and poetry. A music composer and an avid film fan, he can channel his experience and understanding of a variety of art forms into a deeper appreciation of storytelling's ability to connect, immerse and build better societies.

Instagram: @lindsay.frazer

Crimson | Carol Smith

I hate you

Finally

Over the edge

Blind rage

Lying next to the alcohol-pickled body

Bruised

Seeking the smooth handle hidden

Under the mattress

Fingers curl lovingly around cool, silky wood

Deadly, shiny salvation

One swift swoosh

Plunging metallic serration

Into the heart

Twisting in a newfound sheath

Forever unfelt transpiercing

Time and peace are mine

A brief while

Crimson is such a lovely color

About the Author:

Carol lives in Virginia, with her husband and rescue kitty. She's written a number of books, from poetry to children's literature, and is always listening for her Muse's next big idea. Carol's latest effort is a children's book co-written with her cat, Jambalaya.

Author Website: <u>Carol Smith</u> Instagram: <u>@carol.smith.writes</u>

Through the Rockies | Rachel Tyle

We walk a frozen wasteland between patinated shades Simple, soft, and echoed where jealousy was laid

Like diamonds squeezed from mountains The coal as black as sand Reaching for higher summits between the sea and land

Beneath the shrunken heads of sleeping soul survival Commenting on layers of mellow droves unrivaled

And if we are to pass beyond the sleeping brook Know that we demand the unbridled screams you took

About the Author:

Rachel Tyle is likely an alien from another planet posing as a cat lady. She has been a lifelong horror fan and performs live shows in Houston, TX where she resides when she's not chasing storms for work. When Rachel isn't traveling she can be found knitting, gardening, or attempting to summon an elder god among her other terrestrial hobbies.

TikTok: <u>@13.fingers</u>
Instagram: <u>@thirteen.fingers</u>

Cold in Here | DJ Tyrer

Told me I was gonna burn For my life of sin But, when I got there Actually found things pleasant Like a day at the beach The demons too confused to torture And, down the temperature went Cooler and cooler, and colder Till things began to freeze The demons too sluggish to do anything It was easy to get the gates open Get out of that place Return to the living world Have some more fun Knowing there's no punishment No eternity in Hell

New in Town | DJ Tyrer

"So, you're the new folks in town?"
Says the man in the store.
"No, we're the old folks,
"We've been asleep a century or more.
"We've just woken up after
"A very long sleep."
"Oh, that's nice to know.
"Did you notice our prices are cheap?
"The best in town, we can't be beat."
"Unfortunately, sir, it's you we'll eat."

Fleshcraft | DJ Tyrer

An expert with blades and wires Stretching flesh Reshaping bones An artist of the human form Making new both the young and old The sound of a saw Accompanied by a melody of screams A birdcage of ribs The songbird pecking at a withered heart Faces contorted in screams Decorate the scene Flayed-flesh artistry Disjointed, rejoined Victims caper, dance and prance Grotesque mockeries of their former lives Marionettes on a horrific stage The art of fleshcraft **Produces perfection** Or, vile parodic jokes Mounds of quivering flesh

Expertly redesigned

Hell: A Tour | DJ Tyrer

Diverted Traffic | DJ Tyrer

Fail to heed the signage Take the same road

Taken by the other diverted traffic A sense of entitlement leading them on

They arrive at the edge of town Where men in hazmat suits of green

With rifles, flag them down

Panicking them to put their foot down

Speeding past, bullets following

Heading into town

Oddly silent, streets empty

At first

Wondering what is happening

What the men in green hazmat suits

Have done to the town They get out, look about

Discover the truth Too late to escape

Find themselves surrounded By *things* that once were human Once were friends, neighbours, family

But, now, are twisted, strange

No longer human

Deadly, driven by vile urges And, before they can escape

The bomb is dropped

A hammer-blow inoculation
To cure the world of the disease
End it here in fire and flame
And, either way, they die, wishing
They should've followed the signage

Come! Come, descend with me into the pit Dance with us the wild danse macabre Here, at the gamblers' table, rest and sit The souls of nuns here are transformed By their secret lusts into wanton sows

But no man here desires to be, by them, warmed Devouring demon princes, devil dogs and more

Torture the assembled hosts of sinners

Come, I'll take you on the tour That raucous sound is our band

Both the playing and the noise a torment To the players and the clustered damned

Here we record in detail your sin For the demonic scribes' delight

They engrave the words upon your skin

And this is the lake of Hell Not fire, but water polluted

By the effluvia of sin, hence the smell Within lantern, skull and calcified form

Sinners are cruelly imprisoned

And there, a fiery pit to keep them warm

We punish you inside and out Both literal as well as metaphoric

With pain we make you groan and scream and shout

Out to God for His mercy mild But His eye gazes not upon this place Nor that of the holy Christ child

What we do here, I'm afraid, must be done

So we take copious delight
In administering our ghastly fun
Ah, yes, at last our tour is complete
I'm afraid that I must leave you
But, before I go, please take a seat
Upon this knife blade, razor sharp
Which will cut your flesh so very deep
Our version of the heavenly harp
And gaze out over the disturbing scene
And try not to shriek or to cry
At a view so vile and obscene

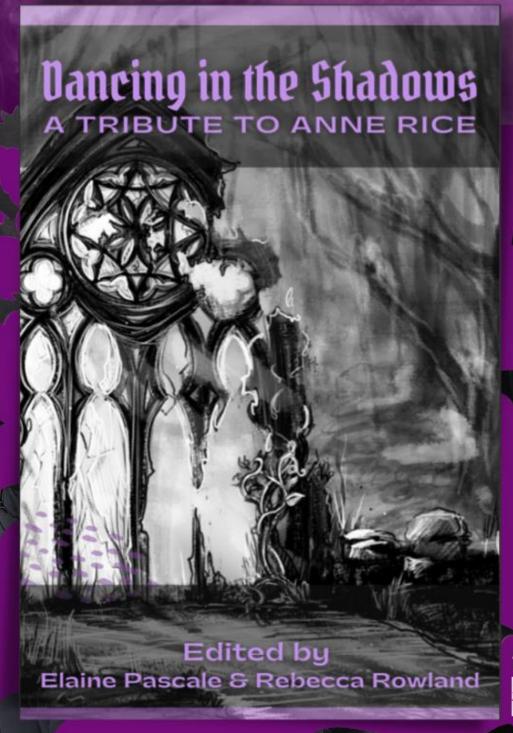
And, now, to you, I say: Goodbye

About the Author:

DJ Tyrer dwells in Southend-on-Sea, on the misty northern shore of the Thames Estuary. DJ 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, Occult Detective Magazine, and Tigershark.

Author Website: DJ Tyrer
Twitter: @DJTyrer

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Escape | Dr. Jennifer Grimes

Come away with me my sweet,
Beyond the jade fields prim and neat
And into wilds where dreams run so
And naked laughs may ever grow
Where starry stretches blend into quartz paths only we know
Where starry stretches lose the light, thus blinding troops and foes,
The pearly clouds drew ever back and moonlight on him spilled
Oh, that night, that horrid night, that since would have him killed

But darkness past the lights of towns just couldn't e'er erase A mistook thought, a slip of word, gave in to mortal chase I took his hand to mount his horse—we'd ride to make a start I took his hand and felt the fluttering beating of his heart Beyond the glittering voices of the children we would fare Past the eyes of curious folk, past the eyes that stare.

Just my love and I would search for freedom to be sought Just my love and general's daughter escaping our lives' plot I threw my bonnet far aside and let my hair flow free A bright red ribbon whipped behind and tangled in the breeze My father watched and turned away, face hidden by the shade As he watched us disappear beyond into the glade.

And there I watched as disappeared a once quite secret blade.

Come away with me my love,
Through marbled moonlight dreams whereof
The dreams too great for mortal mind
Spread far like galaxies sublime
Where starry stretches show the paths that only we can find
Where starry stretches show us home, we'll leave it all behind,
The pearly clouds drew ever back and moonlight on him spilled
Oh, that night, that horrid night, when fate had been fulfilled.

A Candle Spent | Dr. Jennifer Grimes

I walked across the study, spilling moonlight on the floor When a shuffling, yes a ruffling, violent scuffling froze my core For there, beyond the darkness past the chamber, through the door There tousled, tore the silence, dreadful struggle most abhorred

Yes—there beyond the silence, bitter sanguine inky slick Curtains wedded as though threaded, crimson netted, hanging thick O'er unmoving shadow heaped, limp, disfigured form they stick No shape defined by quenched fire still smoldering on spent wick.

I crept closer to see its form by moonlight from the pane White spilling, I was chilling whilst stood milling, it had lain But there beneath the cold moonlight, no comfort for the sane The horrid form a victim, yet the victim with no name

"What strange creature to find itself spill spirit on my floor," I shivered, bloody river etched long slivers scripting gore I wondered what this creature and its victor were before—Still, some corner of that same room, the victor shadows bore

Those angles threatened life and limb as dreams did inspissate The prying, wilting, sighing, laughing, lying nighttime's mate The shadows moving gently round its prey to finally sate Bait taken, I awaken to the final mortal spate

Those eyes that moment opened burned like lye dropped in my tea Turned tripping, awful ripping, my mind slipping far from me 'Til peaceful near that form I lay beneath the curtain's lee And lo beside the smoldering wick, 'neath shadows and yet free.

About the Author:

Dr. Jennifer Grimes writes dark fantasy, sci-fi, and horror, and loves an exploration of humanity's light in the context of darkness. She also illustrates a comic about two cats, *The Mundane Adventures of Rufus and Mort*. Besides writing, drawing, and dreaming up the next story, she enjoys playing bass guitar or hanging out with her two rescue cats (any of these while listening to metal).

Twitter: @JenG writer
Instagram: @rufusandmort

Crucified Flesh | Chris McAuley

The worm hangs on the coarse iron.

Its twisting smooth body curves around the T-Shaped metal. Locked in an eternal embrace, its spiked head gazes at each passer-by.

Hissing tones of salvation in hopes of unending praise.

A cruciform head.

Spiked intentions.

Bearded wisdom addressing each soul.

The worm God shifts unendingly against the structure.

Many halt their passing and gaze in wonder.

Few offer heartfelt praise.

As the grizzled lips of the worm God

Promise infinitely more than it can give.

At the base of the cross.

Clear tubes have been placed.

To siphon the essence of the wriggling deity.

Across the entire human race.

Isis Uncovered | Chris McAuley

Once she was beautiful.

Once she commanded legions of admirers.

Once she wiped the tears from her fellow God's eyes.

Once she had made a mistake.

Then she lost a lover.

Then she resolved to make him come back.

Then in exchange a price had to be paid.

Then she was fully invested in the pact.

Now the Gods were dead.

Now her body is withered. She is just a severed head.

Now the machines keep her alive.

Now cables and wires attempt to hold back time.

Later the remaining acolytes will feed her.

Later the forbidden flesh will aid the memories to return.

Later she will feel peace.

Later the demons she unleashed will continue their feast.

Isis with grief and divine love.

Her hubris caused the fall of her kind.

The Serpent's Kiss | Chris McAuley

Imagine a mouth with lips full of desire.

Promising sensuality.

Giving rise to desire and passion which you have not felt for a while.

A Goddess whose tongue offers a gateway of ecstasy.

Pleasures with which to hide your pain.

Imagine eyes which have been brutally removed.

Perpetually bleeding sockets.

Dark and Hollow.

Her blindness is a fulfillment of an ancient bargain.

Even Wisdom borne of the abyss must pay a sacrifice.

Imagine the tendrils of crawling creatures trailing from her head.

Writhing together.

Producing heightened sensation.

As her Cosmic lover returns.

His skeletal jaw whispered sweet intonations of death.

Contemplate this new God's arrival.

His penis erect and full.

The fabled serpent of Eden pressed against her twisted stomach.

Jewel drops of blessed poison dripped from its lips.

Worlds of pain and pleasure hidden in each venomous kiss.

Immanent Destruction | Chris McAuley

The noises were returning.

Slithering and slapping.

He knew what was coming for him.

Returning each night, the beast would torture him, ravish him.

He would be physically and psychologically devoured.

Consumed and then vomited back into the world.

His finger tensed on the trigger as he watched from his open bedroom door.

A liquid shuffling pulling itself slowly up the dark staircase.

The beast from below with tortured eyes and open bowels.

Its clawed fingers carved its presence along the concrete walls.

Lank hair covering a jawless face.

A slimy tongue drooping down across its blue-tinged torso.

William waited as the thing unveiled itself.

One hand cupped its hardened penis.

Pus-like substances oozing from its readying eye.

Its opened bowels trailed across the floor.

The stench robbing the sobbing victim of all other sensations.

Leering and sighing, the beast finished its ascent and made for its nightly prize.

William whimpered and cried.

He could not remember a time before this ordeal.

Tonight was different.

A victim, no more. A decision was made.

The barrel of the shotgun wrapped comfortably around his lips.

Like a lover's kiss before the final goodbye.

About the Author:

Chris McAuley writes prose novels, magazine short stories, video and tabletop games, and audio dramas. Best known for creating the StokerVerse he has also worked on The Terminator, Doctor Who and most recently the Star Trek franchises.

Author Website: <u>Dark Universes</u>
Author Website: StokerVerse





Madness Follows Me | Lori R. Lopez

With broken steps I traipse, an embittered hulk — Emotions battered and gouged by the lowest blows, Each knock and swipe delivered in Fate's unending List of woes. Heavy the burden, the yoke I wear, Dragging Misery behind for company on a chain.

A few act like I am welcome, granting kindness, Bestowing selfless acts without guile or strings. While others stare, blatant-eyed, unwilling to pity. I will never be accepted by most, a Tatterdemalion. Even the sympathetic view me apart or worse . . .

Suspect; a threat who is unable to be trusted.

Every step I take I am hounded, oppressed —

They who need another to ridicule and dislike.

All who would take and break another's spirit . . .

Crush dreams and hope, the very meaning of Life.

Cursed they consider me; a Fate worse than any, Alive or dead. On neither side to dwell, outcast. Unfortunate. Alone. Weary of rejection I roam The lands, voyage coast to coast forsaken, unwanted. Stuck in a worthless reputation; perennial exile.

It is not my fault I was spared the dismal Dolor — My skin too flat, not creased and pitted; without Scars, the ridges and folds of flesh. My bones Smooth, untwisted, unnotched. I walk straight, Not limping or hunched. I stand out, unmarked.

And in that regard I am. They call me names, But never my own; surround and usher me along. Eventually evicted, expelled, shown the outskirts, As if intolerable to gaze upon me. A single secret I know — a scrap of private wisdom gleaned . . .

Which I cannot speak aloud. Although reviled — I am also envied, admired. Madness follows me. The harsh whispers convey innumerable sorrows, Infinite screams. In the merciless hostilities reside Profound losses. No match for mine. To be spurned.

Within I am a shambles and die hundreds of times, A thousandfold; recognizing that this path is home. Where I belong, restless, on a journey that lacks any Destination, only the road or the trail or the track. This is where I feel the safest, very early or late.

Madness follows, and mayhem, for the Enemy is Always with you, always near, be it real or internal. Never far from your thoughts, awake or asleep. . . . If you can sleep. If you dare to doze and dream. Half-conscious nightmares may even kill you!

If only I could find someone else to be, not adrift. Anchored and respectable; less intact. Fissured. Unoffensive. Blending in. Contorted, distorted, But this is who I am. I cannot change or bend. A paragon; a reminder. Sadness follows me.

Beneath The Light-Tower | Lori R. Lopez

Standing against the wrath of wind or sea, watching o'er black tides from a distant shore, the Lighthouse flashed a beacon long beyond any Keeper had expired or fled its door.

Finagled by a Swindler, ghosts and all — a decrepit Minatory loomed on private coast, included at the price he bragged a steal — but not what Crimmons sought or valued most.

A yarn well-worn; a Local Legend resonating like the waves and whistled blares of breeze . . . Treasure Chests and Pirates; a silent Monolith: the salivating Greedy Gus fixated upon these!

Equipped with shovel and pickaxe, sturdy lamps, he rowed at night to the spot of land that stood resisting surf and salt, the pounding harangue of weathered elements on soil, stone and wood.

Then dragged a furtive boat, secured the line, as August Crimmons hauled his tools and lights up a steep incline straight to the beaten spire — while clasping ring and key within his rights.

Yet he feared a Town's reprisal and grim fury; the covetous scourge of smugglers and thieves, so he kept his arrival quiet, slipping by dark to claim what only a golddigging soul believes. The spade of earth, the chomp of dirt and rock traveled far beyond a high Watchtower . . . to cast an urgent signal across the distance, awakening certain types despite the Hour.

Men and women grabbed their able Arms, piling into Launches for a Welcome Party, braving the open air of fog and chills — beaching the boats and storming hearty!

Shouts and clangs of axe-blades upon door split the Eventide with much commotion.
Unruly Townsfolk burst into a stolen structure, rabid to defend with force and fervent emotion!

Adamant were they to preserve a sorry secret, stampeding toward the ring of swinging blows, where August Crimmons labored underground to clear a buried entrance, fortified to enclose!

A vile entity hidden behind stout iron locks; a baneful fester of menace deserving no prayer, sequestered from the world yet coiled to spring! A sunless void confined by stony winding stair.

Down a black pit beneath the steep Light-Tower, whose gaze ever swept, unblinking, eternal . . . glinting yellow-red from the energy contained: the heart of Evil — bleeding flames infernal.

This Hellbeast's wrath lay imprisoned to date — entombed, entwined with a Goldgrubber's fate.

Dark Horse | Lori R. Lopez

There was a Dark Horse with a terribly Pale Rider who raced nocturnal — a ghostly galloping nightstrider. They pounded like vengeance along stark lanes, tail and cape flowing; two fistfuls of reins.

Past Midnight they hunted for tracks of a Spider.

Most Spiders pose no threat to our life or limb . . . This Arachnid's pulse throbbed with malice of whim. At her heart the bitterest ancient stone that could beat to pulp flesh and bone. For a Blood that runs sour, no misdeed is too dim.

Armed to the fangs with high-powered Quill-Guns, she could shoot as sharply as a spiderbite stuns. (My rhymes may trigger some to shiver!) The Rider carried only Bow and Quiver; Flint Arrowtips for thwarting a suit of silk-spuns.

On an Eve came word of wretched acts to inspire the Pale Rider and Steed to search for one dire — boasting four lethal limbs at each side; hair and claw gleaming; a brazen pride.

Such treachery may set the Twilight Veil afire!

The Spider Grimhilda broke every decent vow, blazing a path the worst malignance may allow, igniting sentiments of spite and hate — plus a fear too chilling to ever abate.

The wicked brute possessed a glaring brow.

As thunder-hooves shuddered onto the scene . . . legs braced, orbs callous, glistrous fangs keen, chittering, a monster scuttled about, releasing a mean and piercing shout — the shrill of an ugly repugnant Scream Queen!

Firing nasty Quills in a barrage of Poison Darts, aimed at Horse and Rider, to penetrate their hearts! The Spider screeched from glee, then aghast. A Dark Pony reared up to slice lightning-fast, wounding the Arachnid; crippling her mouthparts.

The Rider had fallen while a straight arrow flew . . . discarded and vulnerable. Venom surged through. Struck by a Quill, exchanging a terse volley, both enemies toppled due to malevolent folly. The Spider's deadly rampage caused a fatal milieu.

The Pony named Ione plucked out a foul sting — and knelt for ailing Fenn to climb up and cling — departing Grimhilda to curl up and fester —

no more would this Spider maim or pester. A Pale Rider to the Healer did a Dark Horse bring.

As remedy for the Toxin, Fenn sipped rancid Tea. Then the Rider and Horse would set off leisurely with nowhere to be; everywhere to go . . . The route ahead serene so far as they know.

Stick House | Lori R. Lopez

A pack of whispers drown placid dove-coos
Growing, groaning, groping for speech
Agitated whimpers rising to aggrieved howls
The hurled biting of banshee-breathed hounds
Heated horrendous screams of fitful harridans
Fuming, feuding, fraught by crazed or childish rages
In a world where wicked entities bark at the door
Blowing gruff, stony, bluffish, blustering wolf-wails
Shouting, stalking, circling a Stick House
Held together by a feeble hope: new Landlords.

Dry Spell | Lori R. Lopez

They took her loved ones, which were all she had. All that mattered. Everything bright in a pitch-dark existence on the verge of a razor-edged community better left ages ago. She stayed so they would learn.

Instead they sought to teach her: callous brutal lessons. A gentle Black Cat with wise green eyes — stolen from the porch, an act of sheer audacity — a quick caterwaul the only clue. Estrella searched, calling for Eclipse.

The feline simply gone; a kindred spirit lost, deprived. Her daughter next, fallen prey to bullies. A secret kept in silence to protect the fearless mom. Too late she heard how mean kids hassled, tormented, circled, then trailed.

Forcing her sweet girl to jump! Drowned in a fast river. Pushed, provoked, or to make it all stop. Rumored they tested if she was a Witch and would float, but she didn't. Her body a pale fish, hauled out by a net like a vagrant.

(He also didn't belong.) Eclipse and Starra meant the universe. A tender wounded soul, Estrella wailed and vowed beneath an icy hard expressionless Moon to make the ones responsible pay for slaying innocents!

There was nothing worse under the Sun and Stars . . . She could bear no further pain from senseless deeds; absorb no more the cruelties of smug familiar faces

she didn't know, who claimed they knew her well.

If the world were indifferent it might be tolerable to reside in its destitute margins. Yet some couldn't let her be — permit the few precious pieces of a heart to gleam without crushing, grinding the bits to dust.

Such tragic torrid wastes! The sorrows, her immense wrath intense; thickening, twining, seething, reshaped: fiber, sinew and thorn. A Beldam they wanted, a Witch! She became a fury, eldritch and awful, evoking powers.

Stealing, smuggling tomes from Shops and Libraries. Etching Pentagrams, other arcane symbols in the earth. Chants in the forest to grim bearded beasts. Sylvan dances at Midnight. Keening torrents of grit and tears.

Prayers to Venus at Dawn, ancient occult forces Midday. Her rage uncontrollable, unquenchable, Estrella guzzled the river with a thirst for vengeance, cracked or withered anything green, igniting houses by feverish tendrils . . .

Arid searing fumes from a madwoman's internal hearth. Passionate flowers of flames engulfing, parching to bone. Charred husks of a town that birthed and never embraced: Pariah, Orphan, Unwed Mother, until she cast a dry spell.

Eyes had stared from windows, bitter, accusing, lacking compassion. Estrella returned their merciless unfeeling condemnation. All guilty, all judged, all enveloped by the inferno as she stood at its center, among them at last.

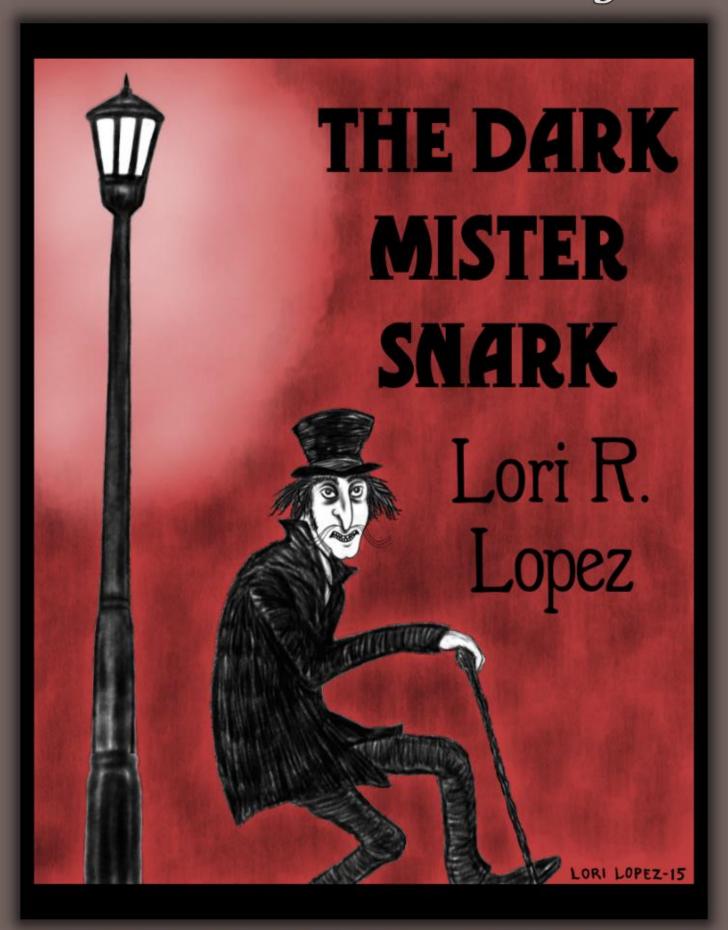
About the Author:

Lori R. Lopez is an offbeat author-illustrator, poet, hat-wearer plus animal-and-monster-lover. Verse appears in *The Sirens Call, Spectral Realms, The Horror Zine, H.W.A. Poetry Showcases, Space & Time* and more. Books include *The Dark Mister Snark, Odds & Ends*, and *Darkverse: The Shadow Hours*. Lori won Third Place for Long Form in the 2023 SFPA Poetry Contest and received nominations for Elgin and Rhysling Awards.

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Beware! Mister Snark is lurking...



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

Morganna | B.K. Crafton

Richard Klusky sat at the counter watching his cigarette burn, its ember bright in the gloom of the bar. The tender poured him another bourbon without ice and didn't engage in any idle chit chat, which was a good thing, as Richard had no desire for small talk. His head required focus—a distinct tunnel vision. A name returned to him. One he thought he'd distanced himself from forever. Morganna...alive and well.

Her green eyes, upturned nose, lipstick like smeared cherry on moistened lips, dark swept hair, and smooth pale skin. How he thought he'd never see her again, but things change with time. He had changed, and not for the better. Once a well-put-together and handsome young man who had been blessed with the vigors of a seemingly ageless form, he had been replaced and twisted unrecognizable by the ravages of alcohol, chain smoking and general disuse of a body barely contained by its own destruction.

Morganna.

What would he say to her after so many years? Could all be truly forgiven? These questions only another drink might be able to answer.

He motioned to the bartender.

"Bourbon and Coke, not too strong."

A wise choice, Richard thought, because he couldn't afford a full-blown intoxication and carried with him only a few dollars, and an even heavier sense of obligation to his love. He couldn't muck this up, for he knew that if he wasted this opportunity, he wouldn't be able to muster the nerve or grit to arrange another. Richard was catching a good buzz but held no naive illusions of Morganna being the ravishing specimen of old; five years could mean a multitude of blemishes and wither. But he remained steadfast in the optimistic belief of her radiance shining through, no matter the ultimate cost regarding potential trials and physical tribulations she likely endured as each granule of sand fell through that inexorable hourglass.

He refused a refill, paid his tab, and left. The bartender paid him even less mind as Richard departed from the same ripped and padded barstool he had occupied for the better part of two hours.

The tender was glad that the man did not require a fifth replenishment. He was equally glad the man didn't want to chew the fat either. He came across like a very strange bird.

Richard stumbled towards his car, and a small net of stars winked in the blackened sky like a cluster of white diamonds. A sudden gush of vomit threatened to rise, but he managed to keep it inside. Wouldn't do at all to have a splatter of sickness on his shirt and the stench of bile on his breath when seeing Morganna. The drive wasn't that long, a scant twenty minutes straight down the road and a few right turns. His mind and eyesight were slightly impaired due to his prior consumptions, and the long road ahead grew blurrier with each minute spent behind the stiff wheel.

Good ol' liquid encouragement, and he felt every last drop.

Five hours later, fifty percent more sober and with blistered hands, he was at her door. Anxiety clutched at his heart ever so tightly.

What should he expect?

What should he say?

With large mounds of freshly loose soil well above him, he sat down the pickaxe and shovel off to the side. Richard was exhausted and his body wracked in pain; however, spurred on by unbridled passion, he pried open the coffin door. Morganna, alluring as ever greeted him, dirt- caked and with a gleaming skeleton smile.

"Richard," he heard her say, with a ventriloguist's incredible skill.

"Sweetheart," he replied, as they at long last caught each other in a tender embrace.

Richard beamed. He couldn't wait to take her home and address her loveliness like before.

"Take me where I belong and love me," she pleaded.

"Yes, Morganna, right away."

Years may have passed, but their love never died; it shined full and bright, like the moon that glowed atop their forbidden reunion.

About the Author:

Born in St. Louis and primarily raised in Louisville, Kentucky, B.K. Crafton became an avid reader and writer of horror and other kinds of dark tales after reading Psycho. When not reading or writing, he spends his time cooking, exercising, looking for hidden film rarities and hanging out with his dog whose exact breed nobody can properly guess, including B.K. Crafton himself.

On the Inside | Robert Runté

Rayna sat in front of the mirror removing her makeup and wondered who she would discover underneath. The right hand applied the cleansing pads with gentle, even pressure, going through the habitual motions with only muscle memory engaged.

The dresser was of high quality, real wood intricately carved, as one would expect for someone of Rayna's station. The rest of the room—as reflected in the antique dresser mirror—was Hotel Traditional, its unchanging design ensuring a comforting familiarity.

A slight frown formed as Rayna considered the absence of the bottle of '82 Dom, to which she had become accustomed with the Executive Package. Of course, she could always buy her own bottle, but its absence was symbolic of her drop to regular Business Class. Rayna tried a wry smile next, as it crossed her consciousness that she might actually have to go back to being a CEO if inflation continued to eat away at her once abundant estate.

Makeup removed, Rayna allowed the hands to drop and examined the face in the mirror. A woman, late 20s perhaps, not unattractive, Caucasian. 'Caucasian' was a bit of a reach, but you couldn't specify 'White' on the forms anymore. Rayna tilted the head to different angles and decided there was a touch of South Asian in there somewhere. Still technically 'Caucasian,' of course, but not the White-American implicit in the Executive Package. Business Class stretched 'Caucasian' to include Brahmin, apparently, but Rayna decided she could live with that. The hair was black and straight. Styled appropriately, she could affect a Mediterranean look. Or emphasize the Brahmin to add an exotic element to her presentation of self.

Rayna lowered the chin to eye the torso. Again, not the perfect figure she had come to expect with the Executive Package, but adequate. She couldn't understand those who chose to come back a different gender. Yes, sexism was still a thing—perhaps even getting worse again, now that business women and influencers were increasingly migrating to male—but . . . no. Not for her.

She brought the hands up to examine them. Hands from a hard life, but the rough skin could be salvaged with a little pampering. She sent the hands to grasp the edge of the dresser, so she could push back and try to stand. The chair scraped across the hardwood, and acceptably slender legs stood her up. A little jerky, but responsive. A good sign this early.

She took a long look at her full self in the dresser mirror. A little shorter than the last two iterations, but high heels would fix that. She wondered vaguely if heels were still in. She missed Fluvogs; those had been high heels you could live in.

Her mind wandered back to '41 when that damned Helio-look had come in. Exec fashion skittered from one extreme to the other, and the shifts were often harder to take than adjusting to a new body. Well . . . at least, with the carefully curated bodies used for the Executive Class. She'd heard that supply was so stretched that by the time you got down to Economy, you were better off not to specify 'Caucasian', if you wanted a whole and healthy one.

She spotted an angry red scar on one ear. Some recent jailhouse brawl, no doubt. The reason single occupancy cells needed to be mandated for Death Row. Again, a proper hairstyle would hide the scar.

The hands worked to open the stiff ties of the hospital gown so she could examine for signs of scars or stretch marks that indicated operations or pregnancies that shouldn't be any part of even Business Class. Well, unless you specifically requested 'pregnant'. Her friend Melanie had had to postpone her Return almost three years because judges were so reluctant to give pregnant women the death penalty . . . though really, that made no sense: the *fetus* was perfectly safe, and the baby guaranteed a better life by far.

Rayna poked at a mole centered halfway down the breasts. She pursed the lips at this potential flaw but then immediately dismissed it. Whoever had decided to leave it there—as they prepped to evict the original owner—must have realized that the mole would draw the male gaze down to what cleavage was available. Not a mole; a beauty mark. She would plan her new style accordingly.

As she slowly turned side to side in the mirror, she thought of how Charlene and Sherry had opted for public Returns. Sure, a public Return provided better providence for the new you, but Rayna couldn't imagine

parading naked like this before an audience. What would be the point of meticulously crafting a public image for oneself if people had already seen what was underneath? One needed time and privacy to remake whatever body one ended up with. A complete makeover before going public.

What's important is how a person projects themselves, not who you were on the inside.

About the Author:

Robert Runté is Senior Editor with EssentialEdits.ca were he edits SF&F, is on the Editorial Advisory Board of Shadowpaw Press, and is a reviewer for the *Ottawa Review of Books*. He is married, has two adult daughters, four dogs, a cat, and a bad hip.

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Blog: I'm Not Boring You, Am I?

The Birch Garden | Rachel Tyle

A dark evening... Freshly fallen snow litters ground in an unknown wilderness far from our consciousness. Barren of life, of moonlight, of wind. The only sound is that of the birch filling their lungs with CO2 and exhaling oxygen deep from their bellies. Flooding the space with richness, cutting through it like butter.

A luminescence off in the distance that echoes through the vagaries of time, meets you here in a clearing, peering into a dingy wicker basket in otherwise pristine condition.

Any onlooker's eyes are immediately drawn to its effulgence and once gaining control of your mental faculties, you realize there is no end to the light and you ask yourself, "even if there was, would I want to know where it led?"

Birch branches appeared to sit in the basket ordinarily and if they can, then maybe I should stop asking silly questions...

Rustling through the trees you happen upon a burly figure in a red cloak.

"Is it possible this is the North Pole??....it couldn't be him?"

In your excitement you call out, "St. Nick, is it you?"

And to your absolute shock it replies, "filthy children!"

As the figure turns into the irradiating light you can see that he is not your jolly, although judgmental St. Nick but a horned, cloven footed, chain barren Krampus.

As he turns toward you, his mouth agape, shards of candy cane and deciduous teeth fall from his almost floor length beard. His eyes alight with rage.

"How dare you disturb the Krampus in his garden!"

You try to explain, to right your wrongs, to make sense of what's happening. But the demon's booming voice lights the oxygen rich air aflame in anger as you are cussed forth into a warmly pulsating wicker basket.

The Krampus happily gazes on as the vessel's previously inanimate birch branches embrace you tightly, engulfing you in their light. He laughs, spitting bone dust into the snow, announcing, "it is hungry kinder, and so am I."

His razor-sharp smile—your last glimpse of terrestrial life before the smell of digestive juice curdles your stomach and the white light arrests your consciousness.

About the Author:

Rachel Tyle is likely an alien from another planet posing as a cat lady. She has been a lifelong horror fan and performs live shows in Houston, TX where she resides when she's not chasing storms for work. When Rachel isn't traveling she can be found knitting, gardening, or attempting to summon an elder god among her other terrestrial hobbies.

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Christmas with Erbie | Meg Smith

I love summer, and fall is great. But Christmas is special because that's the time we get to spend with Erbie.

Uncle Herbert. As far back as I could remember, we've called him, Erbie.

Erbie is smart, and funny. Truthfully, he's my favorite member of the family.

Every Christmas, someone says, "You should join us more than just at Christmas, Erbie."

He'll say, huskily, "That's a fine idea."

But it doesn't happen.

For me, this Christmas was shaping up to be really special. I got myself a date.

I go to Hawthorne State College. A lot of us are commuters, but its engineering program brings students from all over.

One of those was Craig. We met in physics class. I liked him right away. He was thoughtful, and sort of shy. We got to talking, and meeting in the cafeteria.

I think he was lonely, with his family all on the other side of the country.

As the semester was winding down, I asked: "Are you flying back home during the winter break?"

"Actually, no," he said. He looked at his books, which, honestly, I found cute. "I'm gonna stay here. Pick up some credits."

"Ah, winter session," I said, feeling slightly unambitious. I was planning four weeks working at my part-time job at a videogame store, and otherwise, relax, and let my brain deteriorate.

"Well," I ventured, "You could do with a home-cooked meal in the middle of all that studying. Why don't you come to my family for Christmas dinner?"

There was a moment of terrible silence. Did I overstep some magical line I couldn't see?

"Know what, that sounds great," Craig said, matter-of-factly. That charmed me even more.

"Awesome!" my voice sounded girlishly shrill. "I'll text you!"

Christmas got closer. I felt tingly anticipation. Everyone noticed it. My mom smiled, and I got some teasing from my brothers.

"Sis is growing up," said Jax, nudging Scott.

Scott sputtered with disdain; not at me, but Jax.

I'm regarded as the 'baby' of the family, maybe just because I'm a girl. Scott is two years younger than I am.

Jax is older by a couple years, and staying at home 'to help mom with everything', although I think mom does fine. He's saving for school, so he says.

It's like any family, I guess. Everyone knows something about someone, but no one says anything.

It gets to me, sometimes, but not this year.

I was working on my degree. I had a little money saved. I was musing about internships, although I was thinking about switching my major.

And, I met Craig, who made me feel kind of flighty and foolish, but with all my responsibilities, I decided I was allowed.

It was definitely compensating for last year's Christmas disaster.

Right before the holiday, I found out my so-called friend, Edith, had somehow woken up in a sleeping bag with my so-called boyfriend, Dirk, at a party at the house of my so-called friend, Regina.

That Christmas, I was in my room, sobbing, trying to get all the crying out so I wouldn't look ridiculous.

Who came to my aid, but Erbie.

He caught me in the upstairs hall. I turned away.

"Hey," he said. "I know a heartbreak when I see one."

He said, "Sometimes, people do things. It's not your fault. Someone's gonna feel very lucky to meet you someday."

That Christmas felt like a million years ago, and that seemed like someone I knew, instead of someone I was.

Finally, Christmas Day came. Everything was going to go perfectly.

It was beautiful; clear skies, light dusting of snow, a hint of frost in the air.

Under the Christmas tree was a wreckage of paper and boxes, and our cats, Phoebe and Fibber, crashed out in the middle of it all.

"That could be the picture for next year's Christmas card," Jax said, dryly.

"That's true!" I said. I was in the best mood. Not even my underachieving brothers could wreck it.

I love them, but I'm sure most sisters with brothers think of them as first-class pains.

Getting Christmas dinner ready was engrossing, and I was glad. I made stuffing, and whipped potatoes with cheese, my own specialty.

It helped keep away the Christmas-date nervousness.

My mom smiled knowingly. She's the best.

I went upstairs to get ready. I put on a new, green dress, and makeup.

Craig arrived, punctually, at 1:45 p.m., just like I asked, so we could get settled and have dinner by 2 p.m.

That giddy feeling, again.

Mom and I went to the door.

I could see from her gleaming expression that she was already approving.

"Hey, man, welcome," my brothers said, offering brotherly handshakes.

We clustered around the dining room table with an efficiency that my family seldom musters any other time.

My brothers were actually wearing dress shirts and ties, without being prompted.

Mom wore her most beautiful dress; well, I expected that from my mom.

And my date, Craig, sat beside me.

"I hope you won't mind," mom said to Craig. "But it takes Erbie a little time to get downstairs."

"That's my uncle," I said, realizing I hadn't told him.

"Of course not," Craig smiled.

In the midst of my exaltation, for the first time in my 19 years, I felt this weird ache. Each Christmas means another year is passing. Things seem the same, the tree, the gifts, the dinner, waiting for Erbie, but they're not.

A Christmas will come when I'm arriving from across town, or even someplace else in the world, with my own husband, and maybe my own kids.

And one day, some of the people around the table won't be there. One day, mom won't be there, or my brothers, or even Erbie.

There had been a Christmas when my dad was there, but that was when I was only two years old, so I barely remember.

"Everything okay, dear?" whispered my mom, sitting on my other side.

"Um, yeah, I'm great." I squeezed her hand under the table, and flashed a smile to Craig.

Then Jax started telling a story from work. He works at a convenience store, so, whenever an awkward silence threatens to move in, he always comes up with a funny story about something that happened.

This one was about a customer with a tinfoil hat. We all laughed, even Craig, with a surprisingly hearty laugh.

I said, "Maybe I should see if Erbie needs a hand." He was getting older, and maybe, the stairs were harder for him to manage.

Just then, we heard the measured creaking, and a slightly labored breath.

"Sorry, all!" a wheezy voice called. A voice we all knew and loved. "I'll be late for my own damn wedding!" I swear, he says the same line every year, and we all laugh.

Craig laughed. "Your family's cool," he said closely, in my ear, and I shivered the most delightful shiver.

We all stood up. That's another tradition we do; standing up with Erbie enters the dining room.

"Merry Christmas, Erbie!" we all sang out. I looked around the table; even my brothers looked perfect, and beautiful to me. Everything looked perfect, and beautiful.

When I looked at Erbie, in the golden light of the dining room, I was taken a little aback.

I guess when you don't really see someone for a year, they change.

He doesn't live far away; just upstairs, in his very own room in the finished attic and he only makes this trip to the first floor on this day, once a year.

He supported himself for a moment against the doorway of the dining room, and looked us all over. He has, I don't know what you'd call it, I think of it as an auxiliary eye.

We've argued about whether that eye actually works, but Erbie and mom always swore that it does, and that if we didn't behave as kids, Erbie's auxiliary eye would scout us out, and he'd report to Santa, and that's that.

His weight surged forward, on what you might think of as an auxiliary pod. As in, pseudopod, except it's not a false foot at all. It gets him around, and the rhythm of his shifting gait is one of the dear rhythms of our lives.

I touched Craig's arm. He had stood up, a beat behind us all, because, hey, this was a new thing to him.

His arm shook, though. "It's okay," I said. "You're family."

His face had run a pasty green color that faintly reminded me of The Grinch, which made me sputter a laugh. "You okay?" I said.

Truthfully, I was getting a little disappointed. Okay, if you're not used to someone's appearance, fine, but don't *stare*.

Which he did.

The air stung with an acrid smell.

I looked down, and caught sight of his slacks, and the puddle pearling on the wooden chair.

"For real?" I said aloud, before I could stop myself.

Erbie focused all of his vision on Craig.

We all exhaled.

My brothers came to my side of the table, Jax in between me and my mom, and Scott alongside Craig.

We all latched onto Craig, stumbling a little over the chairs.

He let out a scream, but it died midair.

Scott had been working on this so-called choke hold, which I thought was stupid, but now I could see its perfection.

Erbie ambled up to our side of the table, and there was no struggle, as such.

The glow in his eyes was warm, kind, and full of gratitude, as it always was.

Craig vanished into Erbie's auxiliary arms, legs, eyes, and heart.

This was not just appetite.

It was pure love.

I felt proud.

And it was because of me. I'd done it.

It made up for that failed year, when, in my teenage rage, I told my boyfriend and two fake, ex-friends to forget coming to my family for Christmas.

I got a boatload of hell, the one and only time my mom ever yelled at me. But Erbie, he totally understood.

Besides, my brothers had gone out, found a kid sitting in a car. He'd thrown a tantrum and refused to go into the store with parents.

He'd screamed all the words he wasn't allowed to say in his parents' presence.

He'd sworn at all of us. The TV was left on, and he'd seen his own 'missing child' photo. He'd failed and struggled, yelling, "That's me, you ffff..."

Still, I had let Erbie down, despite his consoling words and assurances. "Hey, the kid was worth the wait," he'd said. "Comedy, too. Goes great with a good meal."

But this year, I didn't need any assuring words, telling me not to worry.

After dinner, we always liked lounging around in the parlor, feeling lazy and happy, and watching a movie. A Christmas Story. A movie where you know all the scenes and all the lines, and laugh just as hard every time.

This year was a little different. Mom, Jax and Scott decided to head upstairs a little early.

The dark was coming. The Christmas lights glowed hazily. I liked the idea of people passing by, seeing our pretty tree in the window.

The papers and boxes were still crumpled, with the two cats sleeping in them.

Erbie was resplendent, in the recliner chair only he ever sits in.

It waits, untouched, the whole year, until he is after dinner to watch a favorite movie.

Some years, it's A Christmas Story and some years It's a Wonderful Life.

He breathed deeply, with his own rhythm, that reminds me of an old boat, creaking against the docks. It always comforted me.

I was half-sitting, half-laying on the couch, next to his chair.

When a commercial came on, he drew a slurry sigh and said, "Kid, I gotta...I gotta tell you something."

"Was it okay?" I twinged with a bit of anxiety.

"Nah, nah. That was all good. All good. This is something else."

My eyes began to burn, as if ready to cry at the right moment.

"Listen. I don't want any crying stuff. I've had a good run. Hell, I've outlived my doctors." He chuckled, a sloshy chuckle, like I remembered from Christmas past, but this time, the sound was almost unbearable.

My tears flowed, and I couldn't stop them. "I thought...I thought you never went to a doctor!" I said through my snuffling. "Mom said you were just born where you were, right upstairs in your room!"

"That's true. Hey, I made a bad joke. I'm allowed. Kid, I can feel it. I got lumps, all over. That's what I get for smoking, maybe."

I lunged from my chair, and almost fell on him. "We can get you to a doctor!" He smiled. the biggest, most broken, most beautiful smile I've ever seen. It made me cry harder.

"Kid, this is how it is. I love Christmas. This is the best damn one I've ever had."

By now, I was just a pathetic waterfall.

"C'mere," he said, clearing his throat with a gurgle.

He wanted me to sit in his lap, the way I had as a kid. And that was how I remembered it, his bulk, like a big, warm blanket, to hold me and protect me forever.

I settled in, a little more clumsily, I admit, as a young adult and I was afraid I'd hurt him.

But he just chuckled, and held me, deeply.

I had a pang of regret, that we only ever had Erbie with us at Christmas. But, I realized, that's the way he wanted it.

Not a lot of talk about jumbled chromosomes. And, definitely not how grandma planned to put him out in the trash the day he was born, when wind had stripped the last leaves from the trees.

How mom, his older sister, saved him, squirreling him into a closet.

And how my grandmother became his first Christmas offering.

Or all those who followed...my dad, my brothers' dads, my brothers' assorted wives and girlfriends, that bratty kid in the parking lot. And now, Craig.

Pride glowed again within me.

At that moment, they appeared before me in a shining, starry chain, as I gazed through blurry tears at the Christmas tree lights.

I closed my eyes.

Erbie started singing a lullaby, like on those long-ago Christmases, when I was little. His voice was like a trilling song bird in the woods you can't see.

"Children, run to the moon, blow her a kiss for me."

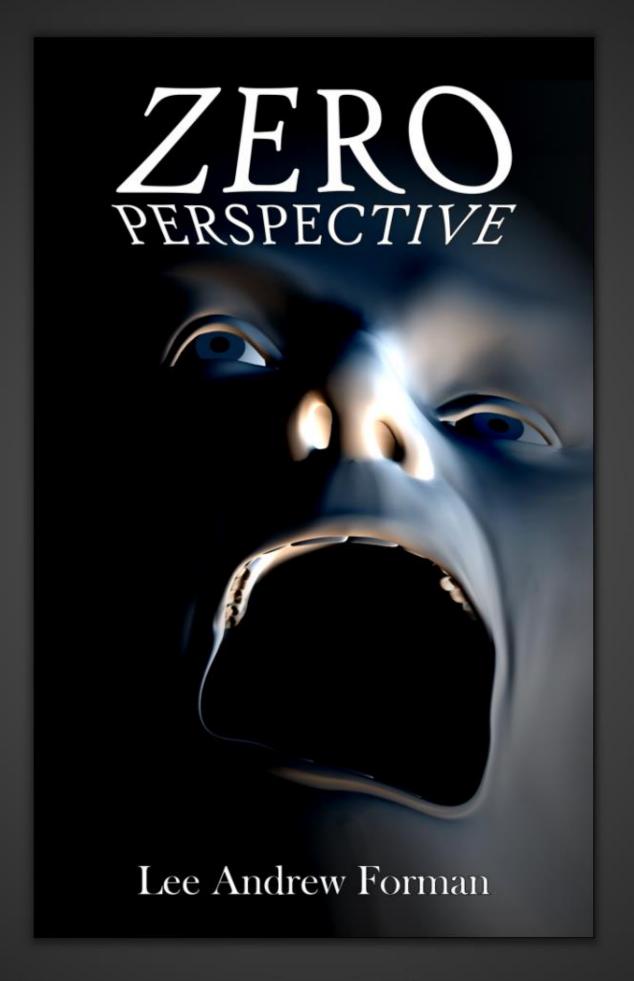
He coughed, his form resettling, like liquid.

It was okay to feel three years old again, warm and safe, running to the moon, and blowing a kiss to her brilliant smile.

About the Author:

Meg Smith is a writer, journalist, dancer and events producer living in Lowell, Mass. In addition to previously appearing in *Sirens Call*, her poetry and fiction have appeared in *The Cafe Review, The Lowell Review, Raven Cage, Dark Dossier* and more. She is the author of six poetry collections and a short fiction collection, "The Plague Confessor."

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AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

Cowson | Harris Coverley

It was nothing—was *supposed* to be nothing.

I went to the indoor market to buy my fresh meat for the week, and when I passed the pet stall they were only a pound each: cow's ears, hairy and dried and sliced off at the ear hole.

I thought of Jerry and stopped to buy one. He hadn't had a treat like that for a long while, and I have to admit I'd been neglectful in walking him regularly in that past month, and thought I could make it up to him. At nine he was getting on a bit, although as a Russell Terrier people always thought he was still a puppy, even though anyone could see the flecks of grey about his mouth.

As I waited for the butcher to stack up my mince and chicken breasts, I couldn't help but take the ear out of my reusable bag and give it a closer look. It was ugly as sin, the exposed skin on the inside yellowed, the brown hairs like strands from a brush, a grim black spot on the outer cartilage. Nasty enough as it was, someone walking past caused a rush of air against me and I smelt the thing—vile, rotting, foul.

I coughed and dropped it back into the bag. I should've binned the creature right there and then, but I mulled: well, dogs *do* like the rotten and foul things. They don't mind rolling in or tasting whatever dung they find in the street or in a bush...Jerry certainly didn't.

So, I went home and Jerry waited by the fridge as I stocked in the meat. He was no fool—he knew I had something for him.

"Here you go, boy—take nicely," I said as I handed him the ear. He took it cautiously, carefully placed it on the kitchen tiles with a clack, and stared at it as I washed my hands.

Over the next few days Jerry played with it often enough. He would pick it up, chew it, toss it around, have it on the floor and jump back and forth, almost as though he was goading it, like it was alive—which of course, I just, *then*, thought was cute. My dog still had life left in him...what else was I *supposed* to think?

The problem really started one morning when I had gotten up for work. I had made toast, let Jerry out into the garden for his business (I would clean up after him later—I've already confessed that I'd become lazy), and was just finishing my coffee when a horrific stench filled the room.

I gagged and tried to follow my nose.

I went into the front room where the smell became more intense, and, struggling against an urge to vomit, found the source beneath the coffee table. I had thought that Jerry might've been sick in the night (like many dogs he had a predilection towards eating grass and weeds even though it always disagreed with him) and he had thrown up before in inconvenient places, but no—it was that bloody cow's ear!

With thumb and forefinger I picked it up with caution, but there was no doubt: the thing was soiled and stinking beyond belief, half-mauled and vile as a carcass in the midday sun.

"Sorry boy," I said to Jerry at the backdoor, "but your mate's gotta go."

I threw it in the brown bin in the ginnel, went on to work, and thought no more of it.

In the evening I walked Jerry up and down the row, came home, grilled one of those chicken breasts I had bought, and settled down in front of the TV.

I was halfway through my tea when the exact same smell hit me again. I spat my mouthful onto the plate and looked down to my left—there it was! The cow's ear! Large as life, propped up against the edge of the rug!

I looked at Jerry ready to scream at him—but I instantly knew that would be unfair, crazy.

There was no way that dog, locked in the house all day, and with me since I had got back, could've somehow got out, opened that bin five times taller than himself, got inside, located the thing, and then got back into the house. Some sort of 'Dogdini' Jerry was not. In fact, he was not too bright for a Russell Terrier as he was.

There was no rational explanation—was I going mad?

I grabbed the damn thing, took it outside and binned it again. This time the stench stained my hand so deeply that five washes with soap and the harsh green scrubber were necessary to scrape the pong from my palm.

None of it mattered—it reappeared the next night, and the night after that, always somewhere in the front room, always bringing its bouquet of death with it.

On the fourth night I ordered Jerry attack it, to tear it apart—but the dog cowered and slunk behind me. He feared it—as I have to say did I.

I took a plastic bag, wrapped it up, got in my car and drove. I drove in the cold darkness straight for a quarter hour, until I stopped outside an industrial estate. I threw the thing in the river passing by and fled.

That night was filled with worry in bed, Jerry at my feet, but in the morning I awoke with optimism, my mind cleansed, Jerry happy with a new soft ball.

I sat down in my armchair that evening, a nice portion of my own shepherd's pie, an old Bowie concert on BBC Four, and I was ready to relax. I took a bite of mashed potato and—there it was! That same stench! That same horror!

I looked down to my right—sat there on the rug as though butter wouldn't melt!

I tipped the tray onto the floor as I made to grab it. I was going to tear it apart myself.

Now, there's a difference between *understanding something* that's happening and actually *seeing it* happen. I knew by that point that the thing could move of its accord, but to really *see it move* with your own eyes, like a little, gelatinous, furred beast, inching its way beneath the sofa...my God, I froze in fright and stayed like that for minutes, a half-hour maybe.

Night after night it haunted me and Jerry, materialising here, there, everywhere, like it had gained the confidence to assert itself, to wield its terror. The odour was so powerful that it felt like it was peeling off the wallpaper, depriving both of us of our appetites.

The very idea of picking it up, even through the medium of plastic, or with a pair of kitchen tongs, filled me with such disgust as to cripple me.

Jerry became depressed, never leaving my room, until, one morning, he was gone, just *gone*, no trace, not even a drop of blood. I searched all through the surrounding streets and ginnels and across the parkway, but no one had seen him.

It was all a self-deluded trick to me and the neighbours though. I *knew* Jerry hadn't left the house. He hadn't even left the upstairs.

I had seen it since he disappeared...it had grown...

That thing had got him—a dog, eaten by his own chew treat!

I can't tell anyone—who could believe such an idiotic maniac's tale!

I'm sat here now, in my armchair, waiting...sharpening the big knife.

If it can eat a small dog, it can have a good go on a fully grown man...I'm not going to give it a chance...I'm no coward...I'm not running...I'll kill it myself if it's the last...

I can smell its calling card...it's near!

Here boy...!

About the Author:

As well as previously in *The Sirens Call*, Harris Coverley has had more than ninety short stories published in *Penumbra*, *Hypnos*, *JOURN-E*, and *The Black Beacon Book of Horror* (Black Beacon Books), amongst many others. A former Rhysling nominee, he has also had over two hundred poems published in journals around the world. He lives in Manchester, England.

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Fire Then Ice | Charles Sartorius

In the little understood dimension of what the humans term *shadow figures*, there exist various levels and sectors to Hell. Incalculable ones, segmented then individualized to punish each creature's misdeeds during its living years. And they all commit them; it's their nature, you see. As there's no need for Heaven in this realm, the best a deceased shadowed entity's soul can attain is the relatively tepid fire of the first level. Conversely, the bottom echelon boasts flames of unimaginable intensity . . . and plays host to the most evil and vile creatures this unseen dimension has known in its twelve billion years of existence.

Portals allow access between the two dimensions, human and shadow. The latter realm, much older and more scientifically evolved, utilizes these gateways to venture into the other's kingdom and quietly research these lesser creatures in their natural habitat. Lately, with the advent of smartphones and other technologies, humans have become more aware of these silhouetted entities' infringement into their world, but still relatively none the wiser as to their actuality.

Until now.

Of the many entranceways to and from the shadow dimension, only one connects its multi-leveled Hell to Earth's plane. Centered in Chile's Northern Patagonian Ice Field the portal had lain dormant, frozen for eons. Through some quirk of nature shared between Earth and shadow, the two exist along a continuum of balance. As long as this Chilean glacier remains solid, and at a certain size, the fires of Hell in the other dimension burn true and the entrance continues to be impassable.

During the past decades, however, global warming had caused the glacier to recede. Faster and faster. And as the temperature rose around the ice field, it sunk in shadow Hell. Exponentially swift. Cold, colder, coldest.

Once frozen over, escape was inevitable as the fires ceased. The floodgate opened as passage via the Northern Patagonian Ice Field portal was no longer denied.

Nathan Musetti was in the midst of his most extensive paranormal investigation to date. He'd posted numerous excursions the past few years on the Net; gained quite a following. So much so, a major network had contacted him expressing interest in a potential pilot series. His big break.

Nathan and his co-investigator (and significant other), Raven Swarthmore, had traveled to the outskirts of Lima, Peru for this one. Figured it would impress the studio execs more than their usual domestic wanderings. The young lead investigator's mother was Peruvian, relocating before adolescence to Arizona with her family. One of Mom's relatives, Octavio Morales, had hooked him up with a fellow researcher down in the Lima area that subsequently led to a dilapidated house reputed to be a haven for several malevolent spirits. Paranormal research paradise.

The first night's exploration proved uneventful, however; Nathan and Raven's elaborate equipment recorded not so much as a whisper from the other side. They packed up their paranormal paraphernalia and headed back to the hotel a bit depressed.

"If we don't capture anything tonight we're screwed," bemoaned Raven the following morning during breakfast in the hotel's bustling restaurant. "Our limited budget for this little jaunt won't allow us to stay longer. We should have remained stateside and revisited one of our previous investigations where we're pretty much guaranteed paranormal activity."

"Hindsight is bullshit. Not worth mentioning. We'll get something tonight. Something incredible . . . I just know it," responded Nathan, not entirely believing what just spewed from his mouth.

"To make the most of our remaining time in here, let's set up early. I know you like to wait for darkness to add effect, but we need to squeeze every minute in we can," Raven suggested.

She would get her way.

The two arrived midday, equipment in tow. Over the past couple of years, they'd gotten quite adept at unpacking and setting up their ever expanding cache of equipment. With setup complete before 2:00 pm, the two paranormal sleuths covered every inch of the dusty one bedroom ramshackle property utilizing both video and EVP paraphernalia. With fingers crossed.

Afterward, they sat around the food stained three-legged dining room table to review potential data collected. With no voice recordings registered, they began examination of the video's most recent recording.

"Stop! Go back, I think we got something," said Raven, excitement in her voice.

"Okay, let's see," replied Nathan as he reversed the video, eyes focused like lasers on the monitor's screen.

"There. See it? Peering out from the open bedroom door . . . a shadow figure." For the first time that day Raven smiled.

"Hell yes!" responded Nathan. "About freaking time we got something."

Although only lasting a few seconds, a dark silhouette gazed out from the small bedroom before quickly ducking back into the shadows.

"We'll set up a stationary camera in front of the bedroom in case our visitor gets curious again," advised Raven.

"Maybe the thing's got some friends," joked Nathan. "Not as camera shy." The young man set up the stationary unit while Raven ambled over to the only window in the living room not cracked, staring out into the Lima suburbs.

Just as Nathan finished, the screams began . . . unlike any he'd ever heard before. He spun around to see Raven, now on her knees, facing the window. Head in hands, shaking.

"What the fuck is going on, Raven?" shouted Nathan as he sprinted to the window. He hugged his lady from behind as she looked up once more.

The couple screamed in tandem. Outside, the day morphed into darkness, not from lack of sunlight, but countless shadow figures swarming the landscape like crazed bees forced from the hive.

The lone silhouetted figure captured earlier on camera ventured out from its hiding place in the bedroom beelining to the front entrance. Didn't seem to care anymore about the prying stationary video camera. Opened the door as darkness descended upon the house, ripping Nathan and Raven apart. Silently, but maliciously. Piece by bloody piece.

Hell on Earth had consequences as all the planet's glaciers melted within hours, a new era begun. Sans the human race.

About the Author:

An admitted MBA workaholic, Charles Sartorius does make time to write short stories and music lyrics. His *The Missing Case of the Missing Case* and *Boo Hag* have been published in recent anthologies. Another creation, *The Ancient Forest of Terror*, appears in an upcoming Sirens Call anthology. Songs, like *A Fart is the Best Response*, appear on conventional venues such as Amazon and Apple Music.

The Town's Benefactor | DJ Tyrer

The Devil came in the form of an angel of light, a benefactor to the town. His actions won him plaudits from all those who met him and he delighted in their praise. He was only there the course of one moon, but that was more than enough. Ruination and despair engulfed the town and when they sought out the one to blame, their benefactor was gone, along with all their hope and self-respect.

About the Author:

DJ Tyrer dwells in Southend-on-Sea, on the misty northern shore of the Thames Estuary. DJ 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, Occult Detective Magazine, and Tigershark.

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Tran and Arjun | JB Corso

Arjun secured his father's best rope around the large bamboo poles. Tran supported their makeshift scaffolding situated over the edge of a large sinkhole.

"Hurry," Tran implored as he watched the gathering of undead grow larger. His face glowed red with exerted effort. The village's decaying residents pushed against a nearby interlocking wooden fence that separated them from their two meals. Its creaking amplified the couple's deepest fears.

"I'm lashing this as best as I can. No one gave me a class on how to build this thing on the fly and with no real tools." Arjun peeked towards the threat. His fingers trembled as he wove the rope around the poles. "I should be out on the beach rubbing oil on your chest, not doing this."

"I don't care much about that right now. Get it done already. Then you can tell me about what you want to do." Tran's words hung with worry as the accumulating mass of corpses pressed harder. "Your family's old fence won't hold out much longer."

"And neither will we if you keep talking." Sweat swept down Arjun's face as he tied off the ends. "There, that should do it."

"It better," Tran said. He shook the seven foot tall overlook. The scaffolding held over its wide base.

"The fence is going to last for a while, anyway. We've plenty of time," Arjun said, wiping his face. He offered a confident smirk. "My grandfather built that with his own two hands." He held up his own hands with generational pride. The wood's creaking strained into a higher pitch.

"Go release the gate so we can herd everyone in the pit." Tran scrambled up the makeshift ladder to the top. The handles of twin large pans pointed out from his backpack, reflecting the sun's warm rays.

"Only because you're as slow as a caterpillar," Arjun gazed at his partner with affection.

"I'm as fast as a fat bumble bee, actually," Tran said with a sly smile. "You've always been faster than me. When you get back here, I'll be better able to pull you up with me." He flexed his arm muscles. The scaffolding swayed underneath him.

Arjun smiled at how their teamwork and strengths complimented each other. "Just be ready to get me." "I'm the only one who's ever gotten you, baby." Tran set the backpack down atop the poles. He laid down on the bamboo with his head and arms over the crisscross support that served as his own way upward. "Once you

hit the bottom rung, I'll pull you up to me."

Arjun searched the ground.

"What are you trying to find?" Tran asked with concern. He looked over the dead pressing tighter against the wooden blockade.

"I need something to release the gate with. I'll never be able to open the hasp and make it back to you in time."

"What about the pointed bamboo stick we'd been using to down them?" Concern wove through Tran's voice.

"We needed it to reinforce one of the posts, remember?"

The fence groaned like an old man on his deathbed. They both stared at the group's continual pushing. A pressing fear overtook Tran. "Don't worry about opening the gate. Just get up here with me and we'll wait for them to break through."

Arjun's caught sight of a thick stick between him and the pressing threat. "I found something that'll work." "No, Arjie," Tran screamed, pushing back the temptation of scrambling down and grabbing his partner.

Arjun crossed the gap. He reached down for the branch. The fence's wooden structure shattered into a splay of wooden shrapnel. A large chunk impaled him in the cheek. He grabbed at the wound. Blood poured off of his chin. The undead rushed forward. He turned halfway back to the scaffolding before the first grimy hands snagged his shirt. Tran and Arjun stared at each other with disbelief for a moment before he disappeared into the swarm of writhing bodies.

"Arjun!" Tran watched on with terror. His emotional mind fought against a logical bodyguard of rushing into the mix of his lover's screams and guttural groans.

**

The sun crossed over the shore as Tran banged his pots together to draw any village stragglers to him. None arrived for some time. Sweet relief passed through his thick wall of grief. A soft summer breeze blew strands of hair back from his face. Sunlight reflected off the twin trails across his cheeks. The young man sobbed as sunset approached. He looked over the bloody spot that his husband's body had once occupied. The death site had become a slick of gore that began a trail of blood that continued under him. The dead's perpetual moaning from behind him sliced through what remained of his humanity.

Waves of stained sadness held tight within his thoughts. The lumbering corpses of his neighbors called out for him in their unnatural tongue from below. Long, drawn out hours passed with no new dead reacting to his trap. His gaze locked onto the wide swath of bones and guts. I love you, Arjun. I always have and I always will.

Tran set the pans down on the bamboo. He lowered himself down before the bloodied dirt. Guttural voices called for him. He felt trapped in the moment between his beloved villagers, destined to rot in the hole until their bodies collapsed into a writhing pile of mush and his husband's remains. He wanted more than anything to close his eyes and be free of the pain.

His steps gingerly crossed around the shattered bones and hair patches of the love of his life. He decided to leave the place he loved more than anything forever. Tran hurried past the empty village homes towards the single paved road that connected a once magical place to the rest of the world.

Mommy Dearest | JB Corso

"Mommy?" The young girl stares with deep concern. Linda's exhales blow shallow across the carpet. Her thoughts become blurry ideas. Scott's rifle fire at the incoming undead grows more muffled. Linda's sight goes black.

The moaning threats close in throughout the front yard. Scott screams in panic. Tanya watches her mother's last breath exit before she becomes still. He reloads another magazine. His rifle pumps out three round bursts. Shell casings tumble around the patio.

Linda's eyelids open, revealing dark-orange unblinking orbs. It looks at its pigtail meal. Syrupy drool drips from its lips.

"Mommy?" Tanya clutches her dolly tighter.

Sound Fatigue | JB Corso

I would've never thought we'd end up trapped in a historic French castle. It was once constructed to be one of Europe's greatest innovations. Now, it's become a tomb for us tourists lucky enough to find temporary safety behind its stone walls.

The dead's incessant taunts besiege us at all hours through rotting lips. Their bellowing permeates everywhere but the deepest, murkiest cellars. "Come out and die."

Several of our companions couldn't stand the drowning repetition anymore. They're now dead, chanting those same words. Carole says we'll all break. 'Sound fatigue', she called it. Everyone eventually reaches their limit.

About the Author:

JB Corso is a healthcare professional working to better the lives of vulnerable people. They enjoy spending time with their supportive wife, writing daily, and finding joy in the world. Their author's motto is "Developing stories into masterpieces." They have been published in both fiction and professional outlets.

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The Valley | Jeffrey Durkin

"There were giants on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men and they bore children to them." Genesis 6:4

1982. The third year of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

It was the dust that Captain Yuri Drenko hated the most. It was fine and gritty and got into everything. It was a pain in the ass to keep equipment functioning and weapons clean. But Yuri mostly hated how it always clogged up his nose. He blew out a wad of mucous onto the ground and wiped away a smear of blood from his nostrils.

"Fuck," he said, to no one.

"Captain."

Yuri turned to look in the direction of the voice. He recognized the speaker. Sergeant Mikhail Kashenkov, a squat, fireplug of a man. He served as the commanding officer's personal assistant, which meant that Colonel Katkov wanted him for something – probably a mission.

"What do you want, you bootlicking fuck?"

Kashenkov let the insult roll off his back. He had suffered worse in the Soviet Army. He also knew that Yuri talked to everyone like that.

"The Colonel needs to see you, sir. An immediate deployment."

"God damn it," He slapped Kashenkov on the back and smiled. "Did he get sick of having your tongue up his ass?"

Kashenkov laughed. "That's only on payday, sir. I don't work for free."

"Well, come on. Let's not keep comrade Colonel waiting."

The two men walked to the command bunker of the 317th Guards Airborne Regiment. It was one of the few places on the base where the air conditioning consistently worked, primarily to keep the sensitive communication and computer gear in operation. Yuri welcomed the cooler and cleaner air.

Colonel Alexi Katkov was in his office. A stack of paper was on his desk. Armies function as much with forms and memos as they do with bombs and bullets; the Red Army was no exception.

"Sir," Kashenkov said, knocking on the door frame, "Captain Drenko to see you."

"Right. Go get me some tea. You want anything, Yuri?"

Yuri shook his head and slumped down in one of the chairs in front of Katkov's desk. "What's the fire drill, Colonel?"

"A patrol is missing near Malekar. I need you to take a squad and locate them."

"Fuck," Yuri said. "One of ours?"

The Colonel shook head. "No. A platoon from the 180th Motor Rifle Regiment."

"Well, why aren't those assholes looking for their men?"

"Because most of them are deployed in the Panjshir Valley as part of General Ter-Gigoryants' glorious offensive to rid this country of bandits and counter-revolutionaries," Katkov said with dripping contempt. "They're spending the rest of the summer looking for mujahideen in every village of motherfuckers between here and Kabul."

Yuri shrugged. "Fine. I'll take Orel's squad. They need the field time. What kind of air support is on station?"

Katsov shook his head. "Everything is earmarked for the offensive."

"Fuck. Well, do I least know where I'm going?"

Katsov pulled a manila folder from a stack in the middle of the desk. Inside was a photograph and a map. He handed both to Yuri.

The photo showed a bank of clouds fenced-in by high mountain ranges. It showed nothing, other than what might be a rough track down the center of the valley.

"The fuck is this?"

"Frontal Aviation was kind enough to run a photo recon of the area. This is what they sent us."

Yuri's florid face became considerably redder. "They couldn't bother to fly below the cloud cover?"

"They said that the area is crawling with mujahideen missile teams."

"Bullshit. The pilot was probably drunk and didn't want to fly into a mountain."

"Probably. Anyway, the map is good."

Yuri compared the almost useless photo to the map and quickly located the valley. It was in an area that military intelligence labeled as having a minimal mujahideen presence. But Yuri knew that 'minimal' and 'none' were not the same. He was certain that mujahideen fighters were located in every village and cave in the entire country. This godforsaken place would be no different. After examining the map for a few moments, he said, "How are we inserting?"

"Captain Petrov will fly you in."

Yuri nodded, satisfied with the choice. Petrov was one of the best pilots in the regiment and if he was assigned, that meant they were flying in on an Mi-24 helicopter, which had a well-deserved reputation as a flying tank. "Good, can he put us down here?" he said, pointing to a narrow plateau on the rim of the valley.

Katsov nodded.

"Great," Yuri said, standing up. "I'll tell the men the good news."

"What's that?"

"At least we don't have to walk to our slaughter."

The Mi-24 sprayed decoy flares as it swooped in to land. The touchdown was bone rattling, but Yuri understood Petrov's reason for doing so, although the area was supposed to be secure, mujahideen fighters could be transiting the area. With the influx of weapons from the West, particularly man-portable anti-aircraft missiles, flying was getting more hazardous every day.

Yuri led his men out of the helicopter. They fanned out into a ragged perimeter around the plateau, which was barely big enough to land on. The moment the last man was out, the helicopter lifted off. It was too dangerous to stay on the ground. As it gained altitude and the roar of the engine faded, he motioned his section leaders over.

The three men huddled together near the edge of the plateau and looked down at the cloud shrouded valley. After about 100 meters, the dun colored slope disappeared in the white mist.

"I don't like the look of this, sir," Sergeant Orel, a leathery Cossack from a forest hamlet in Siberia who was also the squad leader, said.

"When have you ever liked the look of anything in this fucking country?" Yuri said, blowing grit from his nose. "The patrol is down there someplace. Photo recon didn't pick up their vehicles, so they have to be here." He took a moment to compare the map with what he could see. "There should be a cut leading down about 75 meters north of here. We'll take that and then halt when we clear the cloud cover to assess. Orel, your section leads."

The other section leader, Corporal Zewlinski, a wiry Belorussian from Minsk, said, "Better you than me."

The Cossack grunted acknowledgment.

"Let's move. I don't want us to be here any longer than we have to."

The squad descended with care. The face of the mountain was loose rock; lost footing here would result in a long, painful, and probably fatal, trip to the bottom. Each man vanished in the mist the moment after entering it.

Yuri hesitated a moment at the layer of clouds. The line dividing the clear and obscured parts of the mountain side seemed too straight to him, like it was cut by a razor. The word that crept up on him was 'unnatural'.

However, half his squad was already in the mist and the others were waiting for him to proceed. The unease didn't override his responsibility he felt for his men.

"Fuck it." He gripped his rifle a little tighter and walked into the mist.

It was cold and clung to him, thick white tendrils wrapping around his body. It seemed like his hearing was deadened; even the sound of his own footsteps was distant. For a moment, he was convinced the world was gone, that he was the last person, alone in a world of white nothing.

When he emerged, it was through a border as sharp as the one he had entered. The first section was waiting for him, crouched down in security positions. The men of the second section came out of the mist after him and joined their squad-mates.

"That was weird," Orel said.

"It's cloud cover," Yuri said, not completely believing that.

Spread out below them, in gray gloom, was a valley. A gravel track ran down the middle of it, one direction heading back to the main road, the other disappearing into the mountains. Across from their position there was a fracture in the mountain wall, a canyon with ragged walls and a narrow width, like it was new, the result of some violent convulsion of the earth. Tire tracks leading into the canyon were clearly visible.

Yuri pulled out the map. It clearly showed the valley and the track, but no side canyon. He pulled out his compass and double checked their location.

"Anything wrong?" Orel said.

Yuri shrugged. "That canyon isn't on the map."

Orel laughed. "What a surprise. Another failure for the People's Cartography Collective."

Yuri laughed as well, but it was forced. This was all out of the ordinary, even for a place like Afghanistan. He folded up the map and stuck it in a pocket.

"That's our objective," Yuri said. "Orel, you're point again."

From the entrance, little could be seen as its path turned sharply. Between the sheer sides, narrow confines and overcast sky, the canyon was as dark as midnight.

"Flashlights on and weapons ready. This is the perfect spot for an ambush, which those assholes probably drove right into."

They marched into the canyon, a line of nervous men, wired on adrenaline, half-fearing, half-hoping for a fight.

Once they reached the turn, the canyon ran another 100 meters, ending in a cave opening. Three BTR-70s were scattered before the opening. The 8-wheeled personnel carriers were all damaged. Two lay on their sides. The nearest one had part of the lozenge-shaped armored body peeled away.

Even in the poor lighting, Yuri noted that none of the vehicles bore the normal signs of combat. No punctures from heavy machine guns, impacts from anti-tanks rounds or the twisted, blackened metal that was evidence of an internal explosion.

"What the hell happened?" Zewlinski muttered.

"It doesn't matter. Look for survivors," Yuri said. The men carefully approached the wrecks.

Orel checked out the closest one. "Jesus," he said, backing away.

Yuri rushed up and looked into the torn open body of the vehicle. The seats and floor were black with blood. But that wasn't shocking. Yuri had seen more than enough blood in Afghanistan. What did shock him were the bodies. The driver's legs and lower torso were still in his seat. There was no evidence of the rest of him, just wet loops of intestine and a cloud of flies. In the rear, lying on the benches used by the passenger, was a bloody mass, a soldier who looked like he had been crushed, head shattered, rib cage split open, arms and legs sticking out of the mound of gore. Yuri had seen lots of bodies in destroyed vehicles, but nothing like this.

"Comrade," Zewlinski yelled. His section had leap frogged forward, closing on the cave opening.

Yuri joined him. The ground in front of the cave was slick with blood. A few rifles were scattered on the ground. Near the entrance, staring at them, was a head, mouth, helmet still strapped on.

"Sir, we need to get out of here," Zewlinski said.

"Stay calm, Sergeant," Yuri replied, but he didn't disagree. He was about to order a withdrawal when a wave of fetid air rushed out of the cave. It was nauseating, heavy with rot and the sweet, metallic scent of

blood. All of the men felt sick; one of the soldiers standing next to Yuri doubled over and vomited. What followed was worse. A deep growl that made the soldier's skull feel like they were going to explode.

Yuri stumbled a few steps, until he could lean against the side of a tipped over BTR.

"Oh my fucking Christ!"

It was Zewlinski. He was looking into the cave, trying to fight his roiling stomach and pounding head. He saw a pair of red orbs first, like animal eyes caught in a spotlight at night.

The Nephilim emerged from the cave.

It towered over the men, a giant, twisted human, 5 meters tall. Its skin was jet black and cracked. A thick, dark liquid oozed out, hissing and smoking where it spattered the ground. Mangled stumps of wings grew from the broad back and the feet ended in gnarled talons. Its eyes were red as fresh blood and glowed with a terrible light.

Its mouth dropped open, revealing rows of jagged teeth. A groan emerged from the gaping maw, something that ripped at the minds of the Russian soldiers.

It grabbed Zewlinski first. Six long fingers with four joints wrapped around his body, squeezing, crushing bone and bursting organs. Then it pulled him apart. A long, black tongue snaked from the mouth, licking blood and viscera from its hands.

The men started firing. The rounds bit into the black skin, but other than causing more of the viscous liquid to shower the ground, they seemed to have no effect. The Nephilim lashed out, smashing another soldier against the side of the canyon.

"Retreat!" Yuri screamed, while emptying the magazine of his rifle into the towering creature.

A second Nephilim left the cave. Others were behind it, roused from their sleep in the depths of the earth.

One of Yuri's men dropped his RPG as he ran for the canyon opening. Yuri scooped it up, turned and fired. The high explosive rocket hit the closest Nephilim, blowing open its chest. Yuri felt a moment of triumph as it fell backwards, in a smoking heap. The leading Nephilim fell on it, tearing chunks of flesh from the corpse and devouring them. Others pushed past it, intent on the fleeing humans.

Yuri kept running, chased by the screams of his men. He rounded the sharp corner of the canyon. The entrance was close. A few more meters and he would be out of the murky darkness. Although his legs burned and his chest ached, he sensed – he knew – that if he could get out of the canyon he'd be safe.

'I just need to signal Petrov', he thought, and then have the air force bomb this whole place into dust.

He was brought up short by steel-strong fingers that clamped down on his head and torso. He didn't even have time to scream, before the Nephilim tore him in half.

2004. The third year of the US invasion of Afghanistan.

"Colonel, we have a patrol out in sector five. They were running security between here and Malekar, but they missed their last comms check."

The Colonel frowned. "Equipment failure?"

"Maybe, sir."

The Colonel was quiet for a moment, then nodded to himself. "I'm not taking any chances. Get the reaction squad on choppers and wheels up in 5. We need to bring our people home."

About the Author:

Jeffrey Durkin is a writer living in Arlington, Virginia. He has published short stories in the science fiction and horror genres. He published his first novel, The Age of the Jackal, in 2015. His second novel – book one of The Curia Chronicles – will be published by Collective Ink in 2024. He is currently working on another series, Coven. Jeff also co-hosts a podcast, Script Slayers, in which he reviews and rewrites movies. You can find Script Slayers on Apple and Spotify.

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Snow | K.A. Johnson

Sophie took a step forward. The boots on her feet, which were too tight, crunched through the snow. The steam from her cup of coffee curled up in the cold air. She looked at all the snow-covered nothingness. A chill snuck through the threadbare coat she had on.

"Goddamn it, Mother!" Sophie shouted into the quiet.

Sophie turned back around and opened the door to the house. A blast of heat from the wood stove hit her as she entered. Sophie went to the couch and sat down, kicking her boots off.

Sophie had arrived at her mother's house two weeks ago to clean up her affairs. She lived in the south and hadn't visited in years and had been amazed to discover what a hoarder her mother had become. Goddamn Danny, her brother, who only lived a few hours away, couldn't find the time to come and clean out their mother's house, so Sophie had to fly up.

Danny had argued about making the identification, as it usurped too much of his precious time, and flat out refused to clean out the house. So now she was here, stuck due to a snowstorm, unable to go anywhere.

Why was mother still living so far from everyone, Sophie thought.

How could Danny never have checked on her, seen her getting worse, and gotten her into a care home?

Had I lived closer, this never would have happened, Sophie thought. Mom would have gotten the help she needed and would still be with us.

"Goddamn it, Danny!" Sophie shouted into the quiet.

The snowstorm didn't really matter; she had to sort through years of her mother's hoarding that had taken over every room. The snow just made her feel so isolated. Their parent's cute house on the lake was so fun growing up. Christmases back then had been snow-filled joys overflowing with the warmth of a loving family home. But now, with both of them passed on, the house just felt cold and isolated. All that warmth had gone.

Sophie went back to the box she was looking through. Why her mom had kept all this stuff was baffling. And more baffling was why her mom had thought they all belonged in one box since Sophie could find no common thread between all the contents.

A crash upstairs startled Sophie.

Just a box on one of my mom's precariously stacked piles, Sophie thought.

Sophie listened to the dead silence. Except for the crackling of the wood in the fireplace, there was no other sound.

Sophie had brought a Bluetooth speaker with plans of listening to Spotify while cleaning out the house, not figuring on getting absolutely no reception. And her mother's television still had rabbit ears, the pre-digital ones.

What the hell did mom do out here other than pile unrelated things in boxes? Sophie thought.

Sophie put the box down.

I'll have to get a dumpster brought out here once it's plowed outside, Sophie thought. Is there even someone to plow? Good God, I know nothing about how mom was these last few years. If there isn't a plow guy, am I stuck out here until the snow melts? There's no way the little electric thing the rental agency called a car will go through this much snow. I can't do this.

Sophie was working on some boxes in the upstairs hall. It was daunting since the boxes covered the walls, from floor to ceiling. Like all the other boxes she'd gone through, this box held what Sophie had come to term manic mixed, which meant nothing in the box made sense together. She'd started marking the boxes she'd gone through which contained nothing of value with a big magic marker X, so when she had the dumpster delivered, she could quickly bring out what she had already sifted through. She set the box down and went to pick up the next one from the stack. When she was turning, she caught a glimpse of her mom at the end of the hallway looking at her. Sophie blinked, and her mom was gone.

"Mom!" Sophie shouted.

She heard no response. Sophie rushed down the hallway and looked around the corner, but her mother was nowhere to be seen. Sophie sighed.

It couldn't have been mom, Sophie thought.

Danny identified the body. The police had found the body during a wellness check. They said she had fallen down the stairs and died before reaching the bottom. Broken neck, Danny had told her so matter of factly like he was telling her what he had for breakfast.

How long had she been there? Sophie had wanted to know. Danny wouldn't tell her. He would say not long. It weighed on Sophie, her mother lying dead at the bottom of a staircase—no one checking on her. Just laying there for God knows how long.

Sophie was pouring over a collection of old photographs that she found. The photos made her depressed. Image after image of people and places that were clearly important to her mother – why else would she have kept the photos? Then again, Sophie had found a box filled with gallon milk jug caps – so who knows. But Sophie didn't know who anyone was, nor where any of the places were.

So much of her mother's life she knew absolutely nothing about. None of the pictures had names, dates, or locations. To make it all worse, the photos appeared to be in random order as the clothing and vehicles in the images varied by decades, sometimes from one photo to the next.

Sophie didn't even know what to do about the photos. Should she toss them since they meant nothing to her? Should she keep them because they meant something to her mother? If she kept them, would she be starting down the road of hoarding that had so affected her mother?

Sophie was convinced that hoarding was genetic. She knew that Danny's place was a hoarder's paradise. After seeing her mom's house, she was worried more than ever about whether she was already displaying hidden tendencies.

Sophie tossed the thought aside; more boxes in the house were marked for disposal than possibly keeping, and there weren't any marked as definitely keep yet.

Sophie woke up and saw her mother sitting in the rocking chair in the corner. Her mom looked at her and stood up. Before Sophie could find her voice, her mom walked out of the room.

Goddamn it, Danny, Sophie thought. You couldn't even identify Mom right?

Sophie got out of bed and searched the second floor for her mother. She couldn't find her anywhere.

She couldn't have gone downstairs. I would have heard the bad stair squeak.

Sophie headed down the stairs regardless and quickly found her mother in a chair in the living room. The fireplace was crackling away.

"Did you start that, Mom?" Sophie asked.

Her mom just sat in the chair, looking at her feet.

"Are you okay, Mom? I've been here a week. Where have you been hiding?"

Sophie's mom just continued staring at her feet.

Sophie went to sit on the couch.

"Why did you ignore me?" Sophie's mom croaked.

"I didn't ignore you, Mom."

"You never come to see me."

"Mom, I live in the south now. I can't just drive over for a visit."

"You came up for your father's funeral but didn't even stay to see how I was doing."

"I had to get back to work. You had Danny here to help you."

"Danny is always too busy to help, you know that. You knew that when you left me here alone."

"Mom, you could have said something."

"I shouldn't have to say something. You're my daughter."

"Why does everything always fall on me, Mom? Danny never helps you and never gets yelled at."

"I raised you to be better, Sophie."

"But. Mom."

"You left me here alone."

"Mom, I didn't mean to. I'm here now."

"You left me here alone."

Sophie's mom looked up from her feet. Her face was decaying.

"To die!" Sophie's mom shouted.

Sophie woke up in her mom's bed, covered in sweat. She blinked and looked around.

"Mom?" Sophie shouted.

Just the quiet of the house returned.

Sophie was having a cup of her mother's herbal tea in the living room. She couldn't shake the nightmare from

her head. Nor could she shake the feeling that her mother was still in the house. She knew the thoughts were completely irrational. There was no way, no matter how half-assed, Danny could have incorrectly identified their mother. And there was no way another dead woman would have been found in her house. Sophie desperately wanted to escape the situation, even just for a night. But the weather outside hadn't improved. No plow truck had shown up yet. And another storm appeared to be arriving. There was falling snow again, and a wind seemed to be whipping up.

Sophie was dealing with another mound of paper. Mound? Mountain? Maybe mountain was a more appropriate word. She had learned it was a good thing that direct bill pay had been set up. There were years worth of electric bills — unopened. They were mixed in with oil change coupons, political pamphlets, life insurance ads, and other mail that had been sent. Sophie found it sad that she couldn't see any personal correspondence. She hoped her mother had separated that from the rest of the mail and had it elsewhere. There were certainly more paper mountains to go through — and Sophie had been putting most of them off due to a lack of place to put the garbage at the time. With everything her mother had kept in great abundance, Sophie discovered trash bags were apparently of no interest. Or if they were, she hadn't found where her mother had piled them yet.

Sophie looked through the front door window and saw her mother outside, her mother's nightshirt blowing in the wind and snow.

"Mom!" Sophie shouted. "Get inside! You are going to catch a cold out there dressed like that!"

Sophie threw her mom's boots on and grabbed the threadbare coat. She opened the door and looked out. She could barely see her mom through the blowing snow.

"Mom!" Sophie shouted. "Slow down."

Her mother had already made it halfway to the lake. Sophie saw her look back and then resume her walk to the lake. Sophie rushed toward her mom. Her boot caught something below the surface of the snow. She instinctively put her hands out as she fell forward. When she hit the snow, an icy sting bit into her gloveless hands.

Sophie spit some snow from her mouth as she regained an upright position. She saw her mother at the edge of the dock.

"No, Mom!" Sophie shouted, getting back to her feet. "Stop!"

Sophie rushed toward the dock. The falling snow seemed to get thicker and thicker as she felt the wind whip at her chapped face. She saw her mom halfway down the dock, maybe further. It was hard to tell with the thick snow covering the dock and the lake.

Sophie saw her mother stop and look back at her before continuing further out. Sophie could see the pylons of the dock. She'd made it. She saw her mom was way out at this point.

How long is this dock? Sophie thought. It looks so much longer than it should.

Sophie shook her head and went running toward her mother.

"Mom! Mom!" Sophie shouted.

Sophie had almost reached her mom when she heard a loud cracking noise as her boot made contact with the dock. She felt her foot go through the wood and was instantaneously hit by a sharp, cold sting. She felt her body fall as the pinpricks of cold pain enveloped her. She saw her mother standing next to her as her head went underwater.

Sophie tried to swim up, her strength quickly ebbing away as her fingers hit a solid layer. She tried to find the edge, but everything her hand touched was solid. Her lungs were on fire, and her urge to find the way out dissipated.

About the Author:

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

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End of the Line | Lennox Rex

The dream first came to her about the same time Michael fell ill. It arrived only sporadically, but never unannounced. Just as she could feel herself tilting back into unconsciousness, faint yet insistent strains of piano music would worm in through her ear canals, leaving her to think *how pretty* just as she tipped all the way over into nothing.

She would wake, easing back into consciousness one observation at a time. Her ears would perk up first, as they once again picked up that phantom piano. The melody would be haunting—bleak yet exquisite in its yearning melancholy. Like a soothingly hopeless nostalgia for something beyond the boundaries of human existence.

The gentle pull of fingers combing through her hair would elicit a kind of warmth that was so far removed from her usual day to day as to be a completely foreign sensation. Along with it came a sense of utter security and comfort. *Is this what it was like to be in the womb,* she would muse drowsily.

That would be the point at which, every time, she would open her eyes and smile up into the face of the person giving her such peace; and that would be exactly when she'd scream herself fully awake.

It always took her a moment to shake off the image of the face that had greeted her adoring gaze. That grotesque display of mangled skin revealing ripped red muscle and, in some places, cracked bone. She'd force herself to forget how the thinned, stringy hair fell over the creature's shoulder, nearly touching her own sleek strands. If only that hair could've obscured the shock of that empty, endless pit of an eye socket. She always let out a helpless whimper as she recalled how the intact eye peered down at her and how the dry, cracked lips moved in a quick, sweet smile before they moved again, exposing yellowed, brittle teeth and an obscenely parched pink tongue as they all worked together to form sounds that made up the words of a calming lullaby. Her skin would always crawl with dread as she refused to accept how safe she had felt in those arms and how much genuine love she could read in that clear amber eye.

She soon came to cringe in fear at the sound of unaccompanied piano.

At his final hour, Michael Brennan might've been alone. An only child who never did see the appeal of parenthood, made widower by yet another only child, and the last one standing of his friend group. His last breath could've been unbearably lonely, indeed, but there she was. He couldn't remember inviting her, nor could he remember hearing her come into his apartment, but she stood at his window all the same, gazing out at the gathering dusk. Her plain, pale ivory shift dress was only a few shades off from her smooth complexion and made her charcoal hair seem all the darker as it fell down her back in slight waves. She sensed his wakefulness and turned away from the window to come stand at his bedside. She seemed unnaturally tall as she looked down at him, somber and attentive, but it didn't spark any fear in him.

If anything, it struck him that she felt familiar. An instinct scratching at the back of his mind told him that he knew exactly who she was, and that she was no-one to fear, whether he could place her or not. In any matter, he was simply glad to not be alone. He forced his tired facial muscles upwards, into a weak smile, and with a wince of pain, unfurled the fist with which he'd been clutching the bedsheets. Body too exhausted to maneuver a whole limb, Michael only turned his hand palm-up and widened his eyes pleadingly.

She perched on the edge of the bed and took his hand in hers with a heartbroken curl to her lips. She squeezed carefully and spoke in a dreamlike whisper. "Does it hurt?"

"Yes," he rasped. His heart gave a feeble flutter at her glistening eyes. The gathering moisture made the icy blue of her irises appear even paler still, and never before had he seen so bereft a gaze. He understood that all that grief was solely for him, and it felt nice to be cared for again.

As if reading his mind, she pulled together the effort to offer him a full-fledged smile. It lasted only a moment before she spoke, keeping her tone soft and compassionate. "Are you afraid, Michael?"

He watched her curiously, vaguely noting how much he was starting to relax and how even his pain was slowly receding. He blinked, somewhat startled to find his eyes watery, and cleared his throat. His dry voice creaked like settling floorboards. "Not with you here." Growing weary, he closed his eyes. A flush of

memories suddenly overwhelmed him: the sweet love and comfort of his mother's lullables, the glorious sound of his husband's absentminded humming as he cooked. *Exactly what I need*, he thought. He didn't bother opening his eyes to look at his visitor as he made his request. "Sing me to sleep?"

She blinked away the tears that had welled up in the inner corners of her eyes and took in a deep breath. She released it slowly and squared her shoulders against the sorrow that wanted to drop down and grind her into the floor. She gave his hand one last gentle squeeze and moved to stroke what snowy hair was left atop his head. She gathered up all her sadness with one more deep breath and channeled it into her song. Somehow, she failed to note the familiarity of the tune.

When she returned to her own lodgings, after bearing witness to Michael's transition to the world beyond life, she startled back with a harsh gasp upon reaching her bed. She instinctively gripped her throat, as if that could keep her panic at bay. A monstrous figure sat daintily on the edge of her bed, watching her expectantly. They had folded back her quilt and fluffed her pillow, and now they merely sat up tall and straight, smiling patiently.

She swallowed down her unease and took a few tentative steps forward, taking in the same exact face she had been seeing in her dreams, and moving her gaze down to catalog the black satin tunic that blessedly covered up most of what she could easily tell was a mutilated frame of bone, muscles, and skin that somehow held itself together.

She cleared her throat and stammered, uncertain. "D-death? Is it you?"

Death chuckled warmly. "Who else could I be, Dear?"

She came to sit beside them finally, no longer feeling afraid. "I've been dreaming of you lately," she whispered, suddenly shy. "Why are you here?"

They placed a hand on her cheek, as if giving her a motherly kiss. The skin was leathery, and the bone chilled her skin where it touched. Death grinned, the gruesome sight somehow giving off an aura of tenderness. "At the end of the line even the banshee earns her rest." Death pulled their hand away and patted the bed authoritatively before standing up, to give her a chance to get comfortable.

Feeling an inexplicable sense of relief and reward, she got under the covers. She turned her face into the pillow as Death tucked her in. Her nostrils flared to take in the calming scent of vanilla and fresh churned butter – olfactory remnants of a bustling kitchen from a life as long ago and forgotten as the banshee's original name. It coaxed her lips into a tender smile as she glanced back to meet Death's serene gaze for just a moment.

They merely hummed a while, as they stroked the banshee's hair, strands sometimes catching on chipped bone. By the time they began to sing their ethereal lullaby, her face had already relaxed into stillness and her chest just barely moved with the lessening effort of ever weakening breaths.

Having foretold, witnessed, and mourned generations upon generations of death, the Brennan Banshee met her own end with a comfortable warmth that eased through her like a slow, smooth sleep.

About the Author:

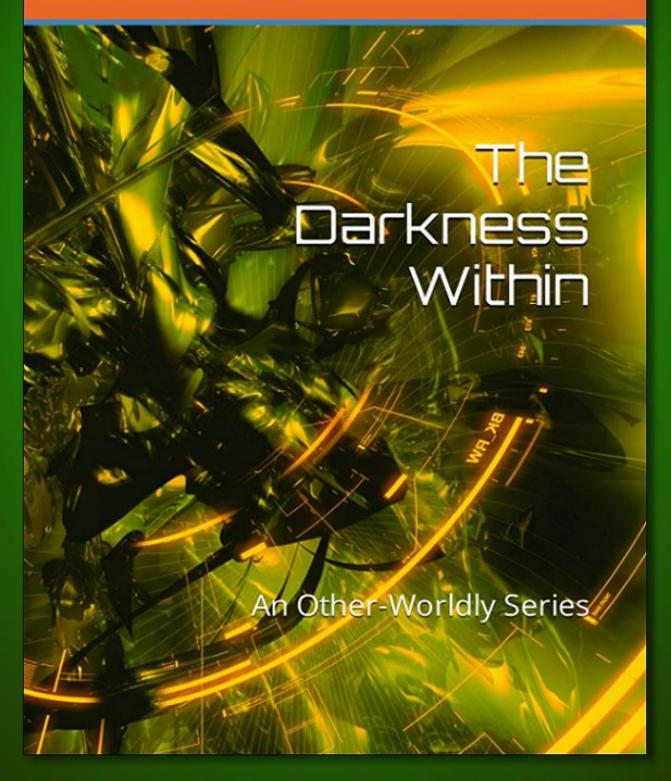
An Oregonian raised in Southern California, Lennox Rex has always been enamored with storytelling. His work appears in The Sirens Call Zine, HorrorScope Volume 3, Doors of Darkness, and Trans Rites. To him, life is best enjoyed with music, body mods, and plenty of coffee and sweets. He lives with his husband, their three children, possibly too many pets, and nowhere near enough books.

Instagram: @lennox.rex.writer

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Sentient | Naching T. Kassa

"Jack, come here!"

I looked up from the petri dish and hurried over to my colleague's workstation. Harris glanced up at me, his eyes wide beneath his shaggy, brown hair, a smile on his face.

"Look at this!"

I glanced down at the mold sample he had been studying and shook my head. "Very funny, Harris."

"What?"

"What did you use? A sugar solution?"

"I didn't do this."

I grinned. "Oh really? You didn't write my name with sugar and grow the mold...what the..."

Before my eyes, the mold within the dish shifted. What had been my name but a second ago, became another. The name 'Cindy'.

"It's been doing this for the last five minutes," Harris said in a hushed voice.

I stared at the mold as it once again changed to my name. My heart thudded in my chest.

"That is really odd."

"Odd? It's downright weird," Harris said. "Look at this."

Using a swab, he picked up a small section of mold and smeared it into a clean dish. A few seconds later, the mold grew thick and green. It formed the letter 'J'.

I took a step back and shook my head. "It's sentient."

"Yes," Harris cried. "Jack, do you know what this means?"

"We were right," I said.

Harris nodded. "We were right. And we've beaten the machines! We've created honest-to-God organic intelligence!" He pointed a finger at me. "You know what I'm going to call it? I'm going to call it Charlotte."

"Charlotte?"

"After the book by E.B. White. Charlotte's Web. It fits, doesn't it?"

I didn't answer. My stomach churned as the green horror continued to spell my name.

"This is a moment for celebration!" Harris continued.

"Champagne?" I suggested.

"Only the best."

"They have some at Sung's, around the corner."

Harris grinned. "Be right back."

He hurried from the room.

I stared down at the two petri dishes. The two had synchronized, and I watched as my name and that of 'Cindy' vanished and reappeared over and over.

I glanced at the clock. If Harris had gone to the mom-and-pop around the corner, it would take him twenty minutes or more to get back.

I picked up both dishes and returned to my workstation where the Bunsen Burner waited. I held the first dish over the flame.

"Can you believe I forgot my wallet?" Harris said as he entered the room. When he saw me, he halted, his eyes wide. "What the hell are you doing?"

I turned the dish, hoping I could burn the mold up before he reached me, but he caught my wrist and wrested it from my hand before shoving me away.

"Why, Jack!" he cried. "Don't you understand what we have here? It's alive. Aware. Why would you want to destroy this?"

The message in the petri dish had changed. The mold spelled a new word.

Harris' eyes widened.

I picked up the second petri dish and smashed him over the head.

When I pulled my hand away, I realized a shard of glass had lodged in his eye. He fell to the floor like a stone.

I took the first dish from Harris' hand. The word 'Murder' had taken the place of 'Jack' and 'Cindy'.

I glanced toward the corner of the room, the corner nearest the door. The corner I had scrubbed and bleached the night before. The corner where Cindy had died.

A green shadow covered the floor and the wall. It had taken the shape of a woman.

The petri dish fell from my hand and shattered on the floor. I snatched up the Bunsen Burner and hurled it across the room.

It did not burn with the flames.

But I did.

About the Author:

Naching T. Kassa is a wife, mother, horror writer and Talent Relations Manager at Crystal Lake Publishing. She is a proud member of the Horror Writers Association, Mystery Writers of America and The Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association. She's also a 2022 HWA Diversity Grant recipient.

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Cold, Cold Heart | Louie Sullivan

Monday, January 27

I meet a lot of women in my line of work, and generally do my best to remain professional. After all, they're our guests, and it's important that we make their time here as comfortable as possible. In my time here, I like to think that I've done a good job of providing a polite and welcoming atmosphere for everyone I've had the pleasure of interacting with, but I also make sure to maintain appropriate boundaries so that things do not get out of hand. (I learned that the hard way when I first started here; apparently my actions were deemed 'creepy' and it nearly got me fired. That's what you get for trying to be kind and courteous these days, I guess!) This girl who came in today, though, she's giving me a real challenge. I don't want to overstate it, but I think this may be love at first sight.

She's unlike any other woman I've ever seen, nothing short of an absolutely ethereal beauty. Like a storybook princess made real, with long dark hair and piercing blue eyes that I could get lost in forever. I don't think it's outlandish to imagine a 'happily ever after' of our own one day, the two of us riding contentedly into the sunset after sharing true love's kiss...

But I'm getting ahead of myself. I don't even know her name yet. And besides, like I said, I work here and she's one of our guests. It would hardly be appropriate. Unless there were a way around that, of course. But I can't force it. Time will tell, I guess.

Thursday, January 30

Jane has been here a few days now, and things have been rocky at best. She's a bit shy, but we've been getting along rather well so far — I go in and talk to her for so long I lose track of time. She's such an attentive listener! I've even found myself accidentally staying well past my shift just lost in conversation with her. It has been lovely.

Until today, that is. It was another of our long chats, and I thought things were headed in a more intimate direction. I hadn't intended to tell her so soon, but I revealed my feelings for her, outpouring my love and asking her if she felt the same for me. She sat there stone-faced. Silent. Cold. Seated beside her and blinded by my adoration, I took things further (and made them only worse.) I leaned in close, locked eyes with my love, and pressed my lips to hers. She barely reciprocated, her mouth still and stiff against mine. After a moment, I pulled away.

Her piercing blue eyes now seemed like icicles stabbing a hole through my heart. And still she said not a word, her frigid demeanor telling me everything I needed to know. Message received, Jane — though I care deeply about you nevertheless, we're done. (Cold bitch. I'm probably better off without her anyway.)

Monday, February 3

I've made a terrible mistake. I don't know what happened last night — I must have drank more than I'd expected to — and not only did I oversleep for work, but when I awoke, I quickly discovered that I was not alone in my bed. By some miracle, Jane was there with me. I can only imagine that I must have gone to see her, must have worked things out. Perhaps she finally saw it my way, had a change of heart like they always do in the movies. She looked so perfect lying there, her eyes peacefully shut as she rested beside me. Thankfully I was able to get up without waking her, because I need some time to myself to try and figure this out.

Obviously, I'm elated that she's here... but this could mean serious trouble. I know I typically call the people I meet at work my guests, but technically they might be closer to *patients* — and that might make whatever happened last night not quite legal. Not to mention that I don't want to put her in a difficult position. What if we were both drunk? I can't ignore those marks on her neck, the ones that looked like rope — did I...? No, no. We *had* to have talked. Parts of it are coming back. I remember discussing things with her, explaining that I know I'd moved fast but that's what true love *is*, right? When you've met your soulmate, you can just feel it. I remember her smile as I said that, the cracks beginning to chip away at her glacial demeanor. We kissed passionately, and we came back here. The rest is still a blur.

Wednesday, February 5

I may have spoken too soon. Maybe I just don't understand love? Or women? Or ice queen bitches who like to play games with the men who would do anything for them! I thought she would like it here, thought she'd be happy to stay with me for a few days while we get to know each other better. But it's just been more and more of the same — nothing. She won't say a word to me, the sex is dull and passionless (she just fucking *lays* there!) and I'm running out of ideas of what to do to make her love me. I've had it up to here with these mixed signals from her: if I can't win her back, it's over for real.

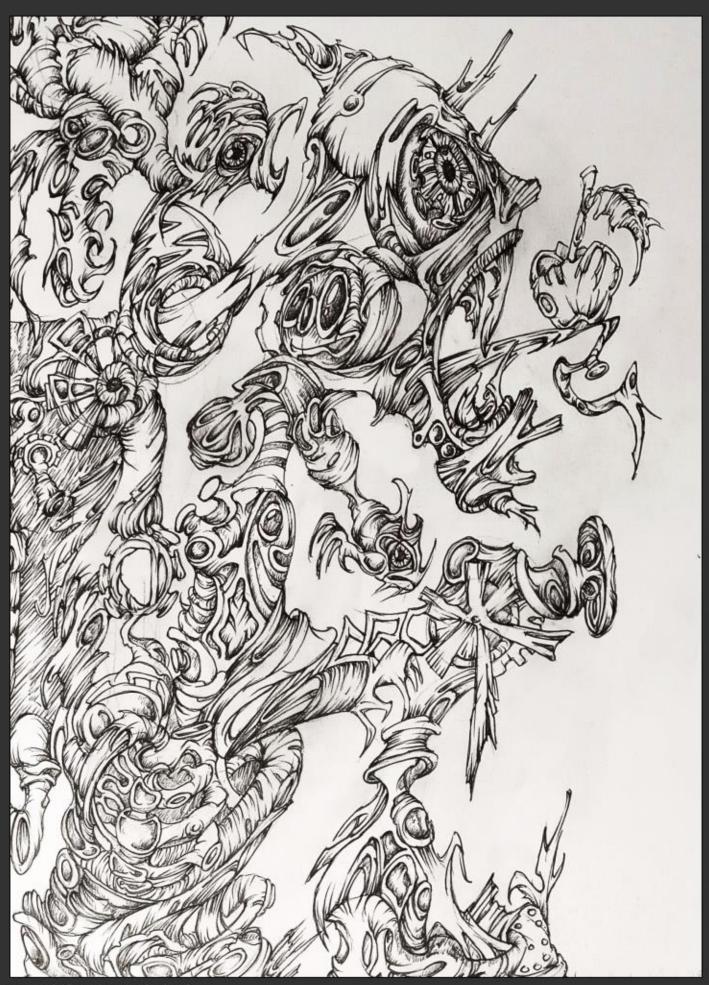
And on top of it all, work's been harassing me because I haven't been in at all this week. They've been calling me. Over and over and over. I never pick up, but I've heard the voicemails. They noticed Jane's missing too (and of course they know I've got something to do with it, not like I was subtle — a man in love never is.) But I need to do something, and fast, or they're going to send the police. They won't understand that we're just going through a rough patch, that she wants to be here with me. I know from experience: cops don't believe in true love.

Friday, February 7

I've made up my mind. It's a week until Valentine's Day, and just enough time for one last grand romantic gesture to prove to Jane how much I care about her (and get us the hell away from prying eyes, a blissful two-forone solution.) It'll be just like in those rom-coms we've been watching together, something phenomenal to sweep her off her feet. I've already set the plan in motion: I'm quitting my job at the morgue, packing up the car tonight, and driving me and Jane to Vegas. It should take a few days, but I'll propose on the way, and we'll get married when we get there. A romantic surprise, a happily ever after for me and my princess! Love is alive and well, no matter what the doubters and haters say, and we'll prove it to them. She can take my last name — hers (Doe) is pretty, but Jane West sounds much nicer anyway, and then we'll match. Forever, 'til death do us part.

About the Author:

Louie Sullivan has only dated living women, as far as he knows (perhaps one or two undead, at worst.) He is a graduate of Fordham University and Saint Peter's University, reads about a hundred books a year, and goes to the movies as often as humanly possible. You can also find his work in anthology *Doors of Darkness* by TerrorCore Publishing, and in issues 62 and 63 of The Sirens Call.



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The December House | Derek Austin Johnson

They left for the Christmas Stroll without inviting Kendra. It was typical: every December her brother Gerald and his wife Christie flew to Texas to visit but left her behind. It didn't matter if they went to breakfast from their hotel or stopped for happy hour while sightseeing; they embarked on their trek without so much as an offer to include her.

By way of apology, Gerald called assuring her they would have dinner at the house, the steel guitars of Merle Haggard's "If We Make It Through December" twanging in the background. The story of her life: Gerald experienced the world and Kendra stayed home.

It still saddened her. She loved the Christmas Stroll: red and green lights chasing each other up the town square's streetlamps, vendors offering chestnuts in paper bags, the coffee shop serving hot chocolate in Styrofoam cups, carolers singing next to nativity scenes decorating the courthouse lawn. When she was nine years old, her mother squeezed her hand as lights chased each other overhead. Kendra thought it magical. Even after the car accident that killed her mother a year later, the Stroll never lost its allure.

She'd thought Dad's death last year would change things. Gerald had flown in the week before Christmas, his stated intent to begin the long overdue discussion about the house. Barely two days into their vacation, Gerald and Christie contacted their friends and headed to San Antonio. Kendra pictured them in the crowded car speeding down I-35, perhaps stopping somewhere in Gerald's search for the perfect margarita. Kendra wondered if Gerald might die happily if he found that holy grail.

A pang of regret gnawed at her. When Dad got sick, Gerald tasked Kendra with caretaking, forcing her to give up her small apartment in Austin and tethering her to The House. It didn't stop Gerald from complaining about Kendra's compensation, first with Dad, then with the lawyers handling the estate. He'd spent the first part of Fall advising her not to give away anything to charity until she could look through it, then recommending that she disconnect the landline to save money. "It should be easy to hold down the fort until Christie and I make our Christmas sojourn," Gerald said over FaceTime one evening. "If we make it through December, we can take stock of what the house needs."

And that's what Kendra was doing. Holding down the fort and taking stock.

As Christmas lights blinked on the front porch and danced around the tree in the living room, she wandered the two-story Victorian home where she and Gerald grew up, adjusting stockings hanging from the mantle, each containing gift cards to restaurants and bookstores Gerald and Christie could use in their successful lives back in Connecticut. On the stereo, Bing Crosby dreamed of a white Christmas. Outside the Texas climate was anything but, the warm air in the house matching the eighty-degree reading on the thermostat. Near the top of the tree, the brown stain spread on the wallpaper; the air conditioner's overflow pan had leaked. Earlier this year she spoke with a nice man about repairing the air conditioner but didn't make an appointment. She reminded herself to call him.

In the kitchen she checked on dinner, the turkey the perfect shade of brown, the onions topping the green bean casserole so crisp her mouth watered at the thought of the first bite. She hoped Gerald and Christie weren't late, suddenly worried dinner would cool before they arrived. Most likely they would be drunk but still raid the wine cellar to uncork another bottle, the pinot grigio plied until they couldn't taste the food. If they waited until tomorrow, the casserole would be nothing more than a blob, each bite of turkey as dry as jerky.

The stereo clicked as it changed disks. Kate Bush sang about how Christmas would be magical again.

To hell with it, she thought as she turned the oven off. She would go to the Christmas Stroll without them. She would visit the bar next to the candy shop and order cider or vodka, down a cocktail so high proof the alcohol nipped her nostrils. Maybe meet a dashing stranger and invite him to dinner as well, like in that Waitresses song.

The old stairs creaked when she went upstairs for her jacket despite the balmy weather. As she shrugged into her windbreaker and took her phone from on top of the dresser, she made a note to make her bed and wash the clothes spilling from her laundry hamper. Maybe after the holidays, when Gerald had gone back to his self-centered hamlet.

She stopped at the door to her parents' bedroom. She'd kept the door closed since Dad's death. But now it was wide open, the darkness beyond almost complete. A chill brushed her face, as if she had opened a refrigerator. This didn't surprise her; though her parents' room was upstairs, it often trapped cool air when she ran the air conditioner. Obviously, the difference in temperature from the warm, humid evening caused the door to shift in its jamb.

Reaching into the darkness, she felt for the light switch and drew her hand away when she couldn't find it. That's right. It had been so long since she entered the room, she forgot her parents had never installed an overhead light, though when Dad fell ill she contacted an electrician for an quote. In a gentle voice, he provided her with a breakdown of what an installation would entail, but she had no idea if they'd spoken afterwards. Had she called again? Had he followed-up with her? It was impossible to say.

She squeezed her cold fingers into a fist—how low was the thermostat set, she wondered—and turned on the phone's flashlight.

She gasped, her breath visible in the suddenly cool air, and dropped her phone, the edge of the plastic case thunking on the wooden landing.

Something was in the bedroom.

Kendra tried to put together the pieces of what she had seen: something white and flowing, thin arms stretching to the floor.

The phone lay face down at her feet, the light white and bright. Slowly Kendra knelt and picked up the phone, cursing as she ran a finger over the cracked screen. She shone the light in the room again, letting it rest in the place where she saw the apparition.

A puff of breath as she sighed.

It looked like the powder-blue suit hanging from the hangar on the closet door, also open from the cool air. Beneath the suit coat, a silk shirt caught the soft lamplight, shadows beneath the collar's points and the knotted red tie with navy blue dots. She laughed at herself and shone the light on the lamp sitting on the end table, then went into the bedroom and turned it on.

Next to the lamp was a photograph, a cheesy Olan Mills church portrait. Dad and Mom smiled at her, Dad's hand resting on Gerald's shoulder, Mom's folded arms just above Kendra's blond bangs. Kendra couldn't remember when the photo was taken, but she and Gerald must have been six and seven. That was when Mom bought her the blue-and-white dress in the picture. She remembered how it crinkled as she dressed in it for Sunday school at the Methodist church down the street.

The air conditioner coughed to life. Behind her, the closet door squeaked. The picture frame was warm in her cold hand. Kendra turned just in time to see Dad's suit move, the wooden hangar swinging against the door with a muffled thump. Darkness seemed to dampen the sound of nails scrabbling on the floor. The rats were back. When she was little, Dad had refused to let her play downstairs in the den's large closet because of the rats. She used to imagine them swarming over the cloth torsos Mom used when designing dresses, the yards of fabric, and whatever arcane leather-bound books her father stored.

Studying the photo again caused Kendra to shudder. Now Mom's face was pinched into a smile, her eyes nearly shut as her nose wrinkled and the corners of her mouth curved upward like a clown's. Dad's eyes were wide, the pupils dilated so they devoured the corneas like black holes in space. His lips peeled away from his gums in a rictus grin, the teeth even and white. There seemed to be too many to fit into his mouth.

It was the same look as when Kendra found him the morning of his death.

A look burned into Kendra's memory.

Her phone buzzed. A text message. Shards of glass pricked her finger as she opened the message from Gerald advising her he and Christie had met friends in the bar and would be late getting back. 'Maybe we can have dinner for breakfast in the morning,' it read, a smiley face serving as punctuation. She barked out a bitter laugh. Gerald was so predictable.

Kendra let the phone go to sleep and shoved it in her pocket. She was warm. And then the fingers of her other hand ached, and she realized the silver frame was glowing. It was so hot it burned her palm. Yelping, she set the photograph back on the nightstand. Suddenly she wondered if the sudden heat might cause the nightstand to catch on fire. But the picture wobbled and toppled over face-up, the frame no longer glowing but glinting from the lamplight. She nudged the picture. It was cool.

With a clunk the air conditioner turned off and was followed by a sound like someone clearing a throat.

The gas heater was starting.

That wasn't right. The gas shouldn't start, especially because it was so warm outside. *It's Dad's bedroom*, she thought. It's so cold in here that the thermostat is confused.

She bent to turn off the lamp, watching the picture. Dad no longer had a hand on Gerald's shoulder, but instead held both of her shoulders. Next to her, Mom's face scrunched and swirled, no features discernible.

The last thing she saw as she backed out of the bedroom before she shut the door and stepped toward the staircase was his suit, now worn and rumpled, the white silk shirt yellowed from age. Below, Don Henley's raspy voice begged her to come home for Christmas.

The doorknob rattled, and then something slammed against the door.

Kendra ran down the stairs. She tripped on the last step and fell, her nose smacking with a crunch. Her phone slid away from her, the screen now shattered and glowing with a bright green light.

As she wiped at the blood dribbling down her chin, The Beach Boys harmonized about Little Saint Nick.

Rising, she pulled a Kleenex from the box resting on the table next to the front door. It was thin and shredded in her hand. She pulled out several more, all tearing as they slid from the box, before finally getting one she could use. *Stupid*, she thought as she blew her nose, the lights from the Christmas tree darkening her blood to black. It was just like her to scare herself after deciding to leave the house. Especially at a time of year when people were celebrating. But how much did she have to celebrate now that Dad was gone? She blew her nose again, and then sniffed.

There was a pungent odor of months-old garbage mixed with the stinging pine scent of the Christmas tree in the living room. When Kendra entered the room, she noticed fallen needles surrounding the stand as lights transformed the dry branches to the skeletal ribcage of a dead alien creature. On top shone the bright star, which deepened the dark water stain on the wallpaper into spreading fingers against the brown needles.

She sniffed again. The garbage smell was coming from the kitchen.

Slowly she walked through the dining room, where she had set three places. Her mother's China showed a house on a hill, nearly identical to The House. It was why Mom had bought it when she and Gerald were little. But the Christmas lights made the little etched houses look weathered, the front porches sagging, the windows broken.

The kitchen was cold enough to fog the windows. It was impossible. Not even last year's sudden snowstorm had made the house so chilly. She'd heard once that cold weather dampened smell, but the kitchen reeked so badly she gagged. Eyes watering, she searched for the possible source, but saw nothing. She'd taken the trash and garbage out after cooking dinner. Hadn't she?

She opened the oven.

Illuminated by the oven light, the turkey in the aluminum tray was rotten and covered in writhing maggots. Next to it sat the green bean casserole, the cream of mushroom soup lumpy and curdled, the onions thickly furred with mold.

A cough caused her to jump. Not the start of the heater, a sound she was used to, but something human.

At first, she saw nothing. Just counters, the sink, plates and silverware upright in a dish drainer. Napkins waved in the holder on the kitchen table, as if in greeting. And then the napkins weren't waving but were being ruffled by pointed black nails tipping pale fingers at the end of a white hand, its back roped with thick blue veins that rose upward to an emaciated arm. The hand rose and covered a mouth with a wide rictus grin beneath black holes where eyes should be.

The teeth were even and white.

It made a sound as another hand reached for her cheek.

Kendra slapped at it, but there was no mistaking the sense of touch. Fingers with sharp nails, colder than the air surrounding her.

Just like Dad's.

No, she thought, and ran.

The apparition stood in place, but its arms elongated as they grabbed at her, wrapped her in its chilly air, wanting her to stay within this old house.

And she realized suddenly that she would never get away.

Gerald got out, he found a life away from home, but only because The House allowed him.

She forced herself from this thing's grip and collapsed on the floor, crawling away from its grasping hands, past the Christmas tree, its lights incredibly bright now, the fallen needles embedding themselves in her palms and stabbing beneath her fingernails.

She rose to her knees and opened the door.

But she knew it was as far as she would go.

As a children's choir sang that Christmas time was here, the freezing hands pulled her back inside and slammed the door.

About the Author:

Derek Austin Johnson has lived most of his life in the Lone Star State. His work has appeared in The Horror Zine's Book of Werewolf Stories, Camp Slasher Lake Vol. I, Generation X-ed, and Anterior Skies Volume I. He lives in Central Texas.



A traumatic event in an empty train car steers a once-hopeful journey into a path of chaos filled with deceit, murder, grave robbing, and dormant secrets.



Coming February 13th!

Through the Veil | Alyssa Waugh

Kat examined the old cardboard box, her eyes scanning the odd arrangement of letters. The lid was dusty and the edges worn, the flaws all the more visible in the strong autumn sunlight of the yard sale. The knotted rope in her stomach, which had pulled her toward the box in the first place, tightened.

"You can have it for a quarter," the old woman behind the table said.

Kat, startled, looked up at the woman, and then followed her eyes to her wrist, where her clear, glitter change purse was hanging, the 75 cents her mom had given her visible.

The woman's voice was pleasant, but the fake kind of pleasant like teachers used when the principal came in to watch them teach. Kat didn't want the weird game, and couldn't imagine why anyone would, if they felt the same cold feeling she did as she held it. She put the box down. Why had she come over to it in the first place?

"I don't think so," she told the woman, wanting to be polite. "I can only get one thing, and I haven't looked at everything yet."

"You know what? You seem like a nice little girl. Just take it."

Kat felt someone grab her wrist with the change purse on it, and breathed a sigh of relief when she looked up and saw her mom. She knew she would have been too anxious to keep saying no to the seller, and would have ended up taking the game just to go along and avoid any unpleasantness.

"Come on, Kit Kat, time to go." Mom *sounded* pleasant too, but she glared at the old woman, and the old woman glared back. The face reminded her of one of the boys she knew from summer camp—the face a sore loser makes after they were sure they were about to win, and then didn't.

Kat was so focused on the interaction between the seller and her mom, she didn't even notice Lindsey, the mean girl from her class, watching the whole thing and laughing to a group of kids about what a 'scaredy Kat' she had been. She'd hear all about it, and the nickname she hated, the next day at school.

"What was that, Mom?" Kat asked when they had walked a bit down the road. It was a beautiful fall day, sunny and warm, with a piercing blue sky that contrasted perfectly against the fiery leaves which either clung desperately to tree branches or crunched beneath their boots as they walked. The air smelled of backyard campfires and the promise of snow, as autumn began slipping away to the dead of winter.

"A Ouija board." Her mother answered. "A really old one. It's a divination tool used to communicate with the dead. Remember what I taught you about tools?"

"Yes. They can be used for good or for evil. It depends on the user."

"Mhm. And while there's nothing wrong with a Ouija board inherently, you should *never* buy one used. Do you understand?"

Kat nodded, "Yes. But why not?"

"We'll for one thing," her mom began, "I got a bad feeling from that woman. Did you feel it too?"

"Yes," Kat admitted. It felt dark and cold. Made me anxious."

"Good. Always trust your intuition. It's your spirit guides protecting you."

"Like Grandma?"

"Mhm," her mom said, and kissed her on the top of her head. Then she pulled a handful of crystals from the pocket of her cardigan. "You know how when I buy these, I always cleanse them with sacred smoke before using them?" Kat nodded. "Well, that would never work with a Ouija board. The energies are too strong. And you don't know who, or how many people, have used it before...what their intentions were." She stopped walking, took Kat by the hand, looked her in the eye and said: "You can't always control what comes through a door after you open it. It could be *very* dangerous. It could be deadly."

Later that day, after they had gotten home, Kat's mom gave her a jar of special black salt made from the ashes in her cauldron, and told her to carry it with her always, and to use it for protection against negative energy and evil spirits. It was this sort of thing that always made the girls at school make fun of her. Kat hated that. But she loved her mother, and she *knew* that magic was real and that it worked. She had seen it. She had

seen her mother grow a blossoming rose bush from a seed in just a day and attract money when they needed it using nothing more than a bowl of rice and cinnamon and a green candle. She could brew teas that cured anything from a canker sore to pneumonia, and draw sigils that boosted Kat's confidence and bravery. It didn't matter if anyone else believed it. But that didn't mean she went bragging about it openly either. People thought it was...weird. They didn't understand it. And, as her mother always taught her, people feared what they couldn't understand. And sometimes, to alleviate that fear, they tried to control it—a feeling that had led to the murders of countless women back in the days of the witch hunts.

It was an ancient art that had been passed down from Kat's grandmother, whose portrait stood tall on the ancestor altar in their house. Kat did not share with the kids at school that sometimes she and her mother still communicated with her grandmother, especially this time of year, as the earth itself prepared to lay dormant beneath the ice, waiting to be reborn again in spring—when the veil between worlds of the living and dead thinned. She didn't share that the energies and spirits of the dead continued on, and that this ancestral energy is what some thought of as the presence of gods and goddesses. That spirits could help guide you, and even answer your prayers.

That weekend Kat was invited to a sleepover at Lindsey's house. She didn't really want to go, but it was the polite thing to do, and she knew she'd be bullied either way, so she might as well face it and get it over with.

By the time Lindsey had gathered the other girls in her room, ambience set with glowing candles, Kat knew some theatrical presentation was at hand, but she still let out an audible gasp when, with a wicked smile, Lindsey pulled the yard sale Ouija board from under her bed.

The knot in Kat's stomach reformed, and she went cold. She could see unease on the other girls' faces as well, and was only half listening as Lindsey regaled them with the tale of watching how scared Kat had been of it at the yard sale.

The cold, dark feeling inside Kat only grew as the girls began asking questions. "Who are you?" "Are you dead?" What is your name?" Trying to make contact with someone...something. The girls jumped and squealed as the lens scraped across the board, spelling out a name: L-A-M-I-A.

"Danger," the feeling whispered inside Kat.

She had studied religions with her mother after school, different cultures, their mythologies, and learned that some legends held truths. She racked her brain trying to come up with where she had read the familiar name. Finally, she thought she had it, but she didn't want to be right. She thought she remembered reading that Lamia was a demon. A devourer of children.

She felt a phantom tug on her wrist, protective, warm, as if her mom were there taking her hand. That couldn't be Lamia.

She remembered her mother explaining that communing with the dead isn't inherently evil, and that a Ouija board was simply a tool, a device to make that happen. It was only dangerous in the hands of the naive, like her mean-spirited classmates. So, perhaps, someone else had come through the veil the girls had opened. Someone who felt familiar. Like family.

"Grandmother?" Kat whispered, seemingly to no one.

The invisible hand moved hers toward the jar of black salt in her hoodie pocket. She had just begun uncorking it when the room went deadly silent. Just for a beat. Then the air was filled with ear-piercing screams.

A black, shadowy figure was rising up from the Ouija board like smoke from a fire, taking the shape of a distorted human with an elongated jaw, jagged teeth, and claws for fingers, burnt and black. It was Lamia. It was *death*.

The other girls ran screaming, stumbling from the room, but Lindsey, who had been using the board, seemed chained to it. Lindsey's parents had appeared in the doorway of her bedroom, watching in horror, along with Kat, as their daughter rose from the floor, grabbing a candle from her nightstand as she did, and touching the flame to her own sleeve.

"No!" They screamed together, and rushed toward their daughter. The evil spirit faced them, roared, grew to twice its size, and knocked them back out of the door.

Kat's hands were shaking so badly she could barely control where the salt fell, but she managed to enclose herself in a small circle, just as the jar emptied.

Lindsey didn't scream, only hovered there in a trance while her arm burned and the flames slunk closer to her heart. The demon sucked in the flames and ashes as if drinking her, consuming her essence. Lindsey didn't appear to be in pain, and Kat couldn't tell if she was afraid, or unconscious, but just in case, she raised her finger and drew a bravery sigil in the air over Lindsey.

The demon jerked to look at Kat, as if noticing her for the first time, irritated. It was as if she angered it by depriving it of Lindsey's fear. Kat's head felt hot, as if she might pass out.

Lamia went back to her meal, taking on more form now, the head and torso of a woman, the tail and fangs of a snake. Lindsey was looking paler, weaker, like she was being used up to make Lamia more powerful.

The flames were covering more of Lindsey's body, and Kat couldn't stand it. Although Lindsey had never been anything but cruel to her, this was beyond cruelty, and something no one deserved. She wanted to stop it but didn't know how. Her mother had never covered this.

However...her mom had told her that she herself didn't always know what to do. Not even grownups had all the answers all the time. But everyone had power within them. All you needed to do was reach down and use it. Kat gathered up her confidence and recited a protection spell she made up on the spot, all on her own.

"Beloved Goddess of love and light, Please be with me on this night. I ask your help, this girl to save, Send this demon back to its grave."

Lamia turned to Kat. Inched closer. Kat's stomach lurched with the stench of burnt flesh hovering in the room. Her heart raced, but she stared the demon down.

Lamia's hold on Lindsey was wavering, and Lindsey's arm was even beginning to heal. The demon screeched in anger, causing Kat to flinch and nearly jump out of the circle. She grounded herself and steadied her breathing. It was time to fully embrace who she was. Who she was proud to be—would remain proud to be—when the girls at school inevitably teased her again. Someone powerful. Someone in a long line of strong, courageous women.

"I'm the witch," she said with all her confidence. "You're the demon. Get. The fuck. Out."

Finally, with another screech of rage, Lamia turned, unable to cross the circle of salt around Kat, and drifted back, as though being pulled, into the board.

About the Author:

Alyssa Waugh's stories have been published in *Beyond Science Fiction Literary Magazine* and on Crystal Lake Publishing's Patreon page. Waugh is the editor of *I Am Strength: True Stories of Everyday Superwomen, Drowning Back to Life,* and the author of *Hell's Laughter and Other Spooky Tales*. Her flash fiction story, "Hell's Laughter," won first place in Inkitt.com's Running Scared horror writing competition.

Amazon Author Page: Alyssa Waugh Facebook: Alyssa Waugh



She's a Cruel Mistress | JD Clapp

The old mariner shivered in the cold afternoon air. He snugged his wool cap down over his ears and took a swig from his jug of rum. He pulled up his line, cut a fresh chunk of sardine, pinned it on a sharp hook, and threw the weighted bait over the gunwale of his rusted steam tug. Four feet below, he noticed flotsam floating toward sea. *The tide has swung. I pray my dismal luck changes with it*, he thought.

That evening, having caught nothing and out of rum, he rowed his leaky dory toward the mouth of the jetty to visit the Boatswain Tavern. Cruising easily on the ebb current, he tried to recall a yarn worthy of telling later at the tavern.

The old man sat at his usual table near the fireplace and waved over the tavern keeper's wife.

"Fish chowder and Ale!" he demanded, a twinkle in his bloodshot eyes.

"Ya'r a rude old salt—I see ya'r still a tugger who can't catch his own supper," she answered, giving him a wink.

While he ate and drank, he listened to the other old salts spin yarns of their adventures on the merciless sea. The crab boat captain, told of catching a fanged sea serpent in his pot, rolling back a sleeve to show two deep holes where the serpent had bitten him. When he finished, everyone cried "Aye! Aye!" Then the next man took the floor.

Thinking his tales not tall enough, he cursed spending his seafaring days piloting a lowly steam tug in safe harbors.

The next day the old mariner fished and drank again. As the tide swung, his line came taut. His arthritic hands cramped and burned as he fought the fish. He sighed in relief when he tied off his fish. As a massive flounder swam in slow circles next to his rusted hull, he hung over the rail to gaff it, but being drunk, he fell in. Panic crashed through his rum-addled mind like pounding surf. Cold water tore his breath from him. In shock, his drunken mind conjured a beautiful mermaid. He knew what he must do. Lusting after his own tale to tell at the Boatswain Tavern more than the temptress herself, he swam after the fine—finned buxom beauty.

Soon he became exhausted, and the ebb tide carried him toward the sea. He thrashed on the surface. Unable to stay afloat, he went under, swallowed sea water, then broke the surface again, coughing and spitting. Nearing death, he heard the sultry cries of a siren ring out from above. Shimmering below him in the depth just before blackness, the beautiful mermaid's hair undulated, her arms beckoned him to follow. Before his last breath of dank salt air, he cried out, "she is a cruel mistress!"

Relieving his bladder of ale on the jetty, the crab boat captain saw the old mariner amidst the flotsam heading to sea. "The old mariner has drowned and is heading to a watery grave!" the crab boat captain cried. The drunken and salty lot ran out from the tavern to see for themselves. They raised their cups high as the corpse floated by and cried, "Hold fast!"

Outside the mouth of the jetty, a shark found the old man's corpse and fed. Tiny bits of fleshy leftovers torn from the old mariner drew sardines. The sardines soon drew seagulls, then mackerel; the mackerel eventually drew a school of giant squid. Soon the water thrashed and churned. Above sea birds screeched, circled, and dove. High above, the lighthouse keeper watched the old mariner's body being eaten through his scope.

That night, the lighthouse keeper went to the Boatswain Tavern to share his grave tale.

To honor the dead, the barkeep opened a bottle of his best rum, took a pull, and passed it around. In turn, each old salt removed his cap, then took a solemn slug. The lighthouse keeper got the last sweet swig. He raised the bottle high and cried out, "To the sea! She is a fickle mistress!"

"Aye! Aye!" the old salts cried back. "Aye! Aye!"

About the Author:

JD Clapp is based in San Diego, CA. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in Wrong Turn Literary, Café Lit, The Milk House, Fleas on the Dog, The Whisky Blot, among several others. His story, *One Last Drop*, was a finalist in the 2023 Hemingway Shorts Literary Journal, Short Story Competition.

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Snow crunches under the old man's boots as he carries the bundle over his back. Three logs, each one over a foot in diameter and just as long as he is tall. There were closer trees in the forest, but this one was calling to him. His pace is slow but steady. He's got work to do, something special to build.

The clouds roll. The sun falls. By ten o'clock, the eldest, Audrey, sends one of the thirteen to bring him a sandwich. Little Sharon shivers across the snow, carefully as to not drop the plate. The wooden door creaks open. "Papa," she calls. The old man is sitting on a bucket in the corner, wood shavings piled around his feet. Amber light from an oil lamp flickers, casting shadows that deepen and distort the wrinkles on his sweating face. "I brought you a sandwich, Papa. Turkey and jam."

His head snaps up, suddenly aware of his daughter's presence. "Sweetheart!" A smile cuts across his face. "Come, I'm almost finished." Sharon reaches up, barely getting the plate onto the workbench before being scooped up into the air. The old man sits back down on the bucket with Sharon in his lap. "Look, see, the last piece."

Sharon looks at the block of wood. And then at his hand. "You're bleeding!"

He laughs. "Now, now, look, almost finished. Last one." He points to the rest of the block-letters neatly stacked in three piles on the floor.

"Oh," she says, more concerned with his hands than the wooden alphabet. "What's it for?"

"It's for tonight!"

"What's tonight?"

He smiles at the girl. "Oh, honey," he says, brushing a ringlet of hair from her forehead. She looks just like her. "Alright, but don't tell the others just yet. Promise?" He offers a giant pinky finger.

"Cross my heart and hope to die," she replies, hooking her pinky around his.

"Tonight... tonight we're gonna talk to Mama."

Why a Woodworker with a Horror Twist?

I've always wanted to be a woodworker. And I think that stems from watching my grandpa. Some of my earliest and fondest memories are of spending time with my poppy in his woodshed. I'll never forget the war stories he told there, or the one about a ghost who saved the missing child. Like my poppy, I've struggled with mental illness my whole life, and also like Poppy, working with my hands, creating something new with Earth's old is incredibly soothing to my soul. Sometimes the world is too much and I just need to sit in a corner and build my own.

I don't know how or when my love for horror began, but it's influenced just about everything I do, especially my art. We all have a little darkness inside of us. Instead of trying to bury it, I channel mine through art. I think that's what horror is all about. Cheers to all the weirdos out there, creating dark shit for the rest of us weirdos to feed on. If you like my world, you can find me on Instagram @hellcatwoodcraft

About the Artist:

Racel Sopoco AKA Mai Kil is a horror writer and artist living in Ontario, Canada.

Instagram: @hellcatwoodcraft













Idle Chatter | David Whippman

It started with a conversation after a meal. You know those rather contrived discussions that often follow a dinner party in the suburbs. There were five of us round the table: George and Helen, the hosts (who had done us proud with beef wellington followed by peach melba); Jane, my better half; yours truly, and Ackroyd.

Don't think for a moment that Ackroyd was any kind of gooseberry. He's a handsome sod, and he knows it, and I've no doubt he could have brought a female companion if he wished. But he rather likes to be the lone wolf at such gatherings. I guess it's for the same reason that he prefers to be called by his surname. It's his persona, the maverick, slightly the outsider. You've met the type: clever—he knows that, as well—and he loves to play devil's advocate. I'd suspect him of being an online troll, except that he likes to look his victims in the face when he riles them.

It was Ackroyd who got the ball rolling. "I've been giving serious thought as to whether vampires might actually exist."

"Serious thought about vampires? A contradiction in terms!" said George.

"I agree," Ackroyd replied, "if you're thinking of the 1960s horror film rubber bat on strings and plastic fangs type of thing. But that's not what I had in mind."

"Give us the benefit of your wisdom, do," said Jane. My wife is always a bit hostile towards Ackroyd. A lot of women are, I guess because they both dislike and fancy him. Mind you, I trust Jane totally. She is a genuine, good person.

"Well," he said, "let's admit that first of all, if such beings existed, you wouldn't look for them in the Carpathian Mountains or some such place. They would be found in an urban environment. More food, and better concealment. The same is true of plenty of species – rats, seagulls and so forth.

"Then," he continued, "where precisely would we look for them? I think we might well find them – don't take this personally, Jane – in the caring professions."

I should mention that Jane is a counsellor and therapist in the local health authority, and a damned good one at that. Of course, she *did* take it personally.

"Don't you think my clients might notice if I started biting their necks?" Ackroyd was undeterred.

"Oh, it's nothing as crude as that. What if these things fed on emotion, not blood? Fear, grief, misery."

"That's hardly a groundbreaking idea," I chipped in. "I mean, there's actually a German word for getting off on the misery of others. Shandyfraud or something."

"Schadenfreude," Helen corrected. "But he's right, Ackroyd. I mean this is more Jane's field than mine, but any art therapist knows that a client drawing a vampire indicates an emotionally draining, one way relationship. Nothing new about it."

"True," said Ackroyd, "but I'm visualising someone, or something, that gains real physical sustenance from negative feelings. Thriving with it, languishing if it is withheld. It's possible.

Some dogs will lose the will to live without affection from humans. But these things would need to imbibe the bad feelings I was talking about.

"And isn't our modern age – the zeitgeist – tailor-made for such beings? I mean, go back a few decades and it was all about keeping one's emotions to oneself. Stiff upper lip, real men don't cry, etc. But now? It's all about letting your feelings out, working through things. Everyone is so precious. If you hear somebody fart, you need counselling! Everyone is baring their soul. All that misery on display! These creatures must be thriving like rats on a corporation rubbish tip! Hence what I said earlier about Jane's line of work."

He was in full flow now. "And isn't it a bit suspicious that people seem to need all this 'expert help' for such a long time? Look at Hollywood, plenty of actors are in therapy for decades!

Maybe the professionals have a vested interest in keeping them unhappy?"

"Well, that can be explained in financial terms," Helen said. "The more they come back, the more they pay. Cash cows. It's unethical perhaps, but not sinister."

"That's one motive," Ackroyd agreed. "But maybe they're also a source of nourishment. Cash cows and dairy cows as well."

"Hang on," I said. "You call these people beings, creatures, and whatever. Are you saying they're not actually human?"

"I'm not sure," he answered. "Maybe they're a different branch of humanity. An offshoot. Or maybe, yes, they're an entirely different species. Of course, they would *look* like us, but that means little. There are some insects that look exactly like twigs or leaves – but are an utterly different form of life."

The gathering broke up soon afterwards, perhaps because George and Helen could see how upset Jane was. When we got home, she went straight to bed. I watched TV for a bit, then joined her. "You shouldn't let Ackroyd get to you," I told her, slipping an arm round her shoulder. "You know what a wind-up artist he is."

She snuggled into me. "I know, but he's so bloody glib. And he hasn't a clue. I could tell him things, if it weren't for client confidentiality.

"When you train, they tell you not to get involved. But it's so hard sometimes. Maybe I shouldn't even tell you this, but I've had this woman on my books for a month or so. She's in an abusive relationship. When her partner isn't knocking her about, he's playing mind games with her. She's heartbroken and bewildered. Last week she broke down in the middle of a session. The misery was just *radiating* from her! I couldn't do this, of course, it would have been unprofessional, but I just wanted to put my arms round her, to take all that feeling."

"That's understandable," I told her. "You're human, and you wanted to comfort another human." She hesitated, then kissed me on the cheek. "You're so sweet. Yes, of course that's *exactly* what I meant." Oddly, as I was drifting off to sleep, I could have sworn I heard her giggle. Imagination, of course.

About the Author:

Dave Whippman, who lives in the north of England, is retired after a career in healthcare. He writes poetry, stories and articles. His favorite fantasy writers are Jack Vance, Neil Gaiman and Ray Bradbury. Aside from writing, his main interests are music, chess and visual art.

Facebook: <u>Dave Whippman</u>

The Monster Hunter's Lament | B. T. Petro

Since we could walk, we were trained to protect those skilled in magic. We can attack or defend with or without a weapon and with our own bit of magic. We know the weaknesses of all manner of monsters, and how to exploit them.

A powerful sorceress created a portal that opens to a new world. She showed the empress a vista of jewel-colored trees under a lavender sky. "It is an opportunity for expansion, riches, and glory," she said.

We do not agree. We sensed that there are powerful monsters there, waiting.

That is why we killed the sorceress.

About the Author:

B. T. Petro is retired and living in Ohio. He has published 50+ stories in sci-fi, fantasy, and horror genres. The stories generally have a touch of the macabre or a bit of whimsy. His best friend when he was growing up was an invisible robot, who still visits from time to time.

Tracks | Andy Martin

"Hey. Hey, come here," Bobby yelled from out on the ice.

Greg was a few yards closer to shore, holding his phone up, trying to get a photo of the stars. It never worked, but he wanted to try, even if he didn't have Holly to send them too anymore.

"I'm busy."

"You gotta see this."

"Give me a minute," Greg said and walked out into the ice.

"What you got?"

Bobby was crouched in the snow. He was grinning.

"What?"

His hand was down in the snow, fingers spread out to their widest width. "Look here."

Greg crouched, pulled his phone from his coat.

"No, don't. See it in the moonlight first," Bobby grinned.

"What the hell?"

"Just do it."

Greg grumbled, took a step forward and crouched as Bobby stood and took a step back.

"Holy shit."

It was a track. Canine, bigger than Greg's hand from the tips of the claws to the back of the pad.

"Jesus. Someone got a Great Dane out here?"

"Yeah, there's a guy that's got three or four, he always walks 'em way the hell out here."

Greg looked around them. There were lots of woods between them and the Tacoma. Plenty of places for whatever made this track to hide.

"Coyote?"

Bobby shook his head.

"Bullshit," Greg said. "I read an article on it; eastern coyotes are bigger than western coyotes because genetically they're part wolf."

"That track is all wolf."

Greg looked back at the woods, tried to spot the Tacoma back there in the trees. Instead, he could almost see the wolf, huge and gray, step out into the ice snarling to block their path. Of course, that was impossible, there hadn't been a wolf in Massachusetts since the 1700s.

"Then we need to get the fuck outta here."

Bobby wasn't listening, he was following the wolf's tracks across the lake. He was picking up speed, breaking through the snow heedless of how thick the ice beneath was or wasn't.

Greg looked at the first track again and turned, started walking back and forth across the snow-

"Bobby! Yo!"

Bobby stopped; he was twenty yards away. "What?"

"You screwing with me here?"

"Huh?"

"Come here."

Bobby took off, stomping through the snow, his beer sloshing around.

"Look."

In the moonlight Greg and Bobby could see where their tracks meandered out of the woods and onto the lake, and then to where they'd stomped circles around the wolf print. But—

"That ain't either of us," Greg said.

—there was a third track. Bobby shoved passed Greg, put his boot in the snow next to the track.

"God damn. God damn man, look," Bobby said, practically hopping up and down in the snow.

"You're messing with me. You got me good but you're..."

"I am not, look!" Bobby said. He put his boot in the snow next to the track. His boot was a good size or two larger than the other print. "And besides, I'm not gonna walk around out here barefoot."

The barefoot tracks came out of the woods near where they'd parked the truck. They went onto the lake and then, well, then they became the wolf tracks. Or were covered by them.

Greg turned back toward the trees. They were positively looming. Hell, Greg thought, they might be closer than they'd been before.

"This is impossible. We gotta go."

Bobby stood up. "How do we know it's impossible? Because you've never seen one?"

"Me? No one has. Christ, I'm going to need another beer."

Bobby was crouching, walking slow, following the barefoot tracks that they'd missed on their way out there, walking beside them to where they merged with the wolf tracks.

"This is real man. You get that?"

"It looks real. I'll give you that. But this stuff doesn't happen."

"Why not?"

"Cause its bullshit. Stories."

"Someone just walked barefoot across the lake until their tracks disappeared with a wolf's?"

"Most likely explanation and all that. Maybe the tracks are old. Hell, maybe they went through the ice and the coyote or wolf or whatever just came out and had a sniff."

Bobby jumped up and down. Then again. "The ice is a foot thick. You're not going through that."

Greg took a step, then another. It might be his imagination, or the snow starting to melt, but the barefoot tracks seemed to lengthen, the toes and the heels getting a little blurry as they hit the spot where they disappeared and the wolf prints began.

Was Bobby right?

"Look, maybe...this barefoot person left their stuff back on shore. Maybe they left a note if they're a suicide or something."

"So, let's walk the tracks back and see what there is to see," Bobby said.

Greg looked out across the frozen lake, followed the line of the wolf prints as they arced out around a little tree covered finger of land that stuck out into the lake. He wondered if somewhere on the other side of that finger, screened from view by the trees, somebody was lying dead, barefoot, and frozen on the ice.

He could hear Bobby taking a swallow from his beer. He turned, followed the barefoot tracks back to the pines from whence they came. The trees looked way too dark.

"Or we go back to the truck, get the hell outta here and forget we ever saw this," Greg said.

"You can do that?" Bobby said, taking a step forward, a little cowboy swagger to the way he stomped through the snow. Greg knew him well enough to know that swagger was his sciatica acting up.

"Your back hurting?"

Bobby shrugged. "Look, one time, my brother and I were visiting our Grandparents in Arizona. We could see this mountain behind their development. Didn't look far at all and we were 12 and 10, didn't know shit about perspective and distance, so one morning we took our Grandparents' bikes and a can of Coke a piece and rode straight into the desert looking after it. We rode straight at it for two hours and didn't get any closer."

Greg took a sip of his beer.

"But we found something weird. We found these two big stacks of palm fronds cut up and laid down like they were covering something. It looked real creepy, so we turned around and biked back. That night, I should be exhausted, but I'm lying on that fold out couch next to Tommy and I can't sleep because I keep seeing those stacked palm fronds. So, the next morning, I talk Tommy into riding back because what if there's someone under there and no one knows they're there but us?"

Greg nodded. The wind rose slightly and the pines sighed. He had maybe an inch of his coat unzipped under his beard. He stuck his chin out and zipped up that last inch.

"Well ain't this illuminating. So, you know how every time we're in the woods and find some old carpet or plywood and you insist we flip it over, you've been doing that your whole life?" Greg asked.

"Near enough."

"Illuminating but still confusing," Greg said. "So, what was under there?"

Bobby grinned, the gleam in his eyes matching the stars and moonlight reflecting off the snow.

"Sand and lizards. Not a damn thing else, but at least we knew."

"You son of a bitch."

"I'm just saying, I gotta know what's back there."

"Why not run the wolf tracks down instead?"

"Because the people tracks are closer to the truck and the beer," Bobby said and punched Greg's shoulder and then they were both loping along, giving the barefoot tracks a wide berth as they went. The tracks ran parallel to the finger and Greg felt the wind die down a little as they got the pines between them and the full breadth of the lake.

"I'll bet you anything the guy was naked," Greg said. "He could have bolted right out onto the lake; except he kept parallel to the trees...I'll bet he was cold."

Bobby nodded, "You just figuring that out?"

Greg gave him the finger and then they slowed to a stop. The tracks led to a spot along the shoreline where the pine boughs arched, made a bit of a cave. Or a doorway.

They said nothing, just stared at the little cave in the pines and listened to the wind out on the lake.

"Damn if that doesn't look ominous," Greg said.

Bobby nodded. He crouched a bit, handed Greg his beer, and pulled his cellphone out with his other hand.

"Wait here," Bobby said.

"Hey, you sure about that?" Greg said.

"Of course," Bobby said.

He went toward the pine cave, holding his phone in its bulky case out like a torch. Despite the case Greg knew Bobby's screen was cracked all to hell.

Bobby turned. "Don't go anywhere."

"I won't," Greg said and took a pull on his beer. It was the last one. He tipped the spit out and dropped it in his coat pocket.

Bobby disappeared into the pine cave, his phone light throwing light and shadows all over the place.

Greg shook Bobby's beer. Had to be almost half left. He took a pull.

"Son of a bitch! Shit shit!" Bobby yelped and Greg jumped in the snow, took one, two, three running steps and then stopped, turning as Bobby burst out of the pines, a clear plastic bag in one hand. "Look!"

"I don't think I want to," Greg said.

Bobby skidded to a stop and dropped to his knees in the snow, put his phone in his mouth. "Can you believe this?"

Greg leaned in. "Jesus."

Bobby had his head in the bag, was shaking it, careful not to touch anything, "Look at this stuff. Jacket, ski pants, thermals, boots, water bottle, Aleve, power bars, holy shit."

"There an ID in there?"

Bobby let the bottom of the bag hit the snow, then was grabbing at the clothes and shaking them through the bag. He looked up at Greg. "Feels like it. Phone too."

"God damn. You think he got naked and went through the ice?"

"Where? It's frozen solid."

"Not over by the beaver dam it isn't. There's that little creek there."

Bobby shook his head.

"Come on man, it can't be. That's some weird coincidence. Hell, what if he's dead somewhere and that wolf or whatever was just dogging him and stomped all over his tracks."

"We already went over all this. You're reaching bud."

"And you're talking about werewolves."

"So, what if I am?" Bobby said. "People have believed in them for thousands of years."

"And kids believe in Santa Claus."

"And every Sunday people all over the world line up to worship a man that came back from the dead," Bobby said.

"Exactly. Doesn't make it so, does it?" Greg said.

"You like your astronomy?" Bobby said.

"Sure."

"You know how they found Neptune?"

Greg groaned. "Come on."

"Years before any telescope could see Neptune, people could see the effect it had on the orbits of other planets. Like the tracks it left."

"Exactly how many beers did you have to get this grandiose?" Greg said.

Bobby ignored him, started to head for the little pine tree cave. "I gotta put this back."

"Wouldn't want this guy getting cold once he comes back, stops being a werewolf."

"Exactly."

"Jesus man, can you hear yourself?"

Behind them the pines shifted, blew from left to right instead of right to left and for the first time since they'd gotten parallel to the trees Greg felt the wind.

"Oh shit."

"What?" Bobby said.

"The wind changed."

"Front's coming in."

"And blowing our scent in the direction of those," Greg said and pointed at the wolf tracks as they turned around the little point.

Bobby smiled.

"I thought werewolves didn't exist?"

"I'm just covering all my bases-"

A howl erupted from somewhere down the lake, so sudden and violent Greg thought he saw the edges of the stars above them go fuzzy.

"Run!" Bobby said, dropped the bag and then they were both running across the lake, sliding in the snow, whoever had better footing grabbing the one who slipped and then they were simply holding onto each other's forearms like scarred kids as they beat it across the lake. Greg was sure, totally certain, despite it being the wrong direction that the wolf would emerge from the pines between them and the Tacoma.

Bobby looked left, toward the howl.

"SHIT!"

"What?"

"Don't look man, just run!"

Greg didn't need to turn, he could hear it, could hear the thing panting, could hear its paws breaking the snow as it bolted across the snow to cut them off, these two drunken idiots that knew its impossible secret.

"Duck!" and then they were scrambling up the bank, Greg waiting for one of the gnarled roots to reach up and grab him, spill him back onto the ice so that thing could rip his throat out. They separated at the Tacoma, Greg bolting for shotgun, Bobby with his keys already out, and as Greg got the door open, he was sure he'd smell the thing a millisecond before he felt its teeth and claws. He was in the seat and slammed the door hard enough to rock the truck.

"Damn it, don't slam door," Bobby shouted as he turned the key.

There was nothing from the engine.

"You kidding me right now?" Greg said, rooting around under the seat for a weapon but all that useful shit like shovels and axes and breaker bars were in the truck's bed. His fingers found an ice scraper, dropped it, then grabbed it again.

"Come on, come on, come on-"

The Tacoma roared to life like it was embarrassed it had ever hesitated. Bobby slapped the high beams on and turned in his seat and jammed the truck in reverse.

Greg screamed because he saw it in the headlights. It was for no more than a heartbeat but the thing was as real as Bobby beside him, black as midnight and covered in hair and standing on two bent dog legs. He caught Bobby's head turning to look, "Don't you turn around, just keep driving!"

Bobby listened this time, swung the truck wide in reverse and then smashed it into drive. Then they were banging down the logging road they'd always taken back here but never would again, the pines clawing at the Tacoma as they went. Both of them were laughing, cheering, because even if there *were* werewolves and a million other things they'd never guessed at in this world, there wasn't a werewolf alive that could outrun this truck and Bobby's lead foot because God looks out for drunks and idiots and these two were a little of both.

About the Author:

Andy Martin I s an archaeologist, musician, archaeologist, and cat dad, who lives in South Philly with his partner. He writes horror fiction about the woods and the ocean and bands in trouble and his work has been featured by DandT Publishing, Midnight Tales, Monstrous Tales, A Sirens Tale, and more.

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A Dog Is for Life | Kelly Barker

Unlike the commercial meat grinders, the manual one Hailey found in her local charity shop snagged on bone. While she was unclogging it, the landline rang. If it was who she thought it was, she had rehearsed her lines and tone of voice enough to feel confident in answering it.

The independent rescue dog shelter she owned was at full capacity. And even if it wasn't, money was always short. Her income came from whenever someone stopped by to adopt one of her dogs. Each dog went for three hundred pounds; enough to feed the dogs in her care for a month, but not enough to pay for their medication if they needed it. Which they often did need when they came in. For whatever reason, when an owner couldn't train their puppy, they used cruelty as a punishment. Often locked outside, wind, rain and shine, out of sight, out of mind, until the owner could no longer bear to hear their barking or whines for attention.

All day, Hailey's thoughts had returned to the Labrador she put to sleep yesterday evening. A perfectly healthy dog, but because of his age, no one wanted him. Her lack of funds meant she had to make these tough choices. In order to save one dog, one had to die.

The memory of the Lab being excited to see her when she retrieved him was a memory she would bury deep within the black mass, taking over her mind and heart.

She used to sedate the dogs before administering the lethal dose of death. But again, her funds meant she no longer could. The dog had flinched when she injected him, making her choke on her tears. While she wept for the Labrador, she heard someone ring the bell at the front desk. Over and over. The person was impatient, and Hailey knew, after all these years, that this person was here to drop off a dog, rather than adopt one.

However, she wouldn't let the Labrador die alone. While she stroked the Lab's ears, the person continued to ring the bell, then they called out.

"Is anyone here?" The woman's tone was shrill.

When the Lab's bladder gave out—a sign the angel of death had been and gone—Hailey kissed his temple, then left to confront the woman.

The woman's heels tapped the tiled floor when she turned. She shifted her designer bag on her shoulder before using her foot to slide a small cat carrier towards her. "May I leave it here? I have a meeting to get to."

Seeing the dog wedged against the bars of the door, Hailey rushed over to the cat carrier and opened it immediately. A Pomeranian rolled out, looking shell-shocked rather than pleased to be released.

"She's a little monster. Someone might have the patience to put up with her, or you could just put her down. Whatever you think is best," the woman said.

Hailey continued to take animal welfare courses. The latest one mentioned how you should always say, 'thank you,' when people gave up their dogs, to not make them feel bad about what they were doing, to prevent dogs being abandoned in the streets or tied to lampposts. But in cases like this, how could anyone say that?

"I have some forms for you to fill out—"

"I don't have time. Like I said, I have a meeting." The woman's nose crunched up in disgust.

"If you don't, I can't legally take her in. Not to mention, I'm at full capacity. I will have to see if there's another dog shelter willing to take her in—and they won't without paperwork, either." Hailey's tone was sharper than intended, but it felt good to have some authority over this woman.

She sighed before looking Hailey up and down. "Fine."

Hailey walked behind her desk, opened a large glass jar of dog treats, then scattered a few over the floor to occupy the Pomeranian. The woman cleared her throat, wanting her to get on with it. So Hailey took out some more treats and did it again. Then she took her time finding the forms that were right in front of her.

"First two questions: what is her name and age?"

"Porsche. Six months old."

"You named your dog Porsche?" Hailey shook her head. Now she knew for certain what type of owner she was dealing with. "And why have you brought her in today?"

"She's just a bad dog. The bloody thing kept peeing all over the kitchen floor and it chewed a pair of my Louis Vuittons."

The next question on the form was a clever one. Depending on how people answered it, it would prove either way if they subjected their dog to abuse. "What training method did you use? And did you play with your dog?"

The woman looked perplexed. "What does it matter?"

"It matters a great deal. For example, if you smacked or shouted at your dog for peeing on the floor, then they are more likely to do it again. Did you know that? And it would mean that your dog was mistreated. Information the new owners would need to know."

"A dog should know not to pee on the floor."

"I'm going to put down smacking and shouting as the training method. Agreed? And did you play with your dog—teach them any games? If not, that's why she chewed your... What brand of shoes did you say they were?" Not that she cared. Whatever they were, Hailey bet the cost of them would have kept her rescue centre going for the next few months.

"Louis Vuitton. And no, I didn't play with it. I don't have the time to throw a bloody ball around."

"Then why did you get a dog?"

"Is that question even in the form?" She looked around, curling her lip up. "If I went to another place like this, I'm sure they wouldn't ask me these ridiculous questions."

"A place like this is called a rescue shelter, and all the forms are the same wherever you go. So why did you get a dog if you didn't have time to train or play with her?"

Before she answered, she craned her neck, trying to read the forms. "Well, I don't know. A friend of mine takes her dog to restaurants, nail bars, away on holidays, wherever she goes. That dog is well-behaved."

"Good owners tend to have well-behaved dogs unless they have a rescue dog with psychological problems. It would seem to me that your friend loves her dog very much."

The woman's demeanour said whatever. Then she raised her brow. "My next dog will be well-behaved because I'm getting it from the same breeder my friend got hers from. Something I should have done in the first place."

Hailey noted how her blood ran cold before it boiled. She looked down at her clenched fist, unable to feel her nails pressing into her palm. "It has nothing to do with where the dog is bred. Please, don't get another dog. I'm full, and I know the other shelters are full too. An elderly dog will have to be put down just to make room for her—something I will have to do—and it will happen again if you get another dog."

"That's not my problem," the woman said.

"Not your problem! No, it isn't, is it? People like you just expect others to clean up after you."

"I've answered enough of your questions." She kicked the dog carrier. "You can keep this."

"Keep it, or dispose of it for you?" Hailey walked around the desk.

"I'm leaving, and if I were you, I'd expect a bad review from me."

If the situation wasn't so tragic, it would be laughable if she truly thought she could leave a bad review, as if Hailey ran a five-star hotel.

When the woman turned towards the door, desperation overrode Hailey's rage. "Please, do not get another dog. All you're doing is adding to the problem and all the rescue shelters are struggling to keep the roofs over their heads as it is."

The woman said nothing as she reached for the handle—she didn't even look back to say goodbye to the Pomeranian.

Hailey still couldn't feel her hands, and now she couldn't feel her feet on the floor. Her body moved towards her desk of its own accord. She frowned when her arms reached over and picked up the jar filled with dog treats. Confusion sparked anxiety. The latter set fire to her adrenaline.

"Wait!" Her voice was hers, and yet it wasn't at all.

When the woman turned, Haileys arms smashed the jar over her temple.

Glass, dog treats and the woman fell to the floor.

Before Hailey could analyse what she'd done, her instinct to protect kicked in and she scooped up the Pomeranian. A cut paw was something she didn't have the treatment for, and the dog had clearly been through enough as it was. Initially, Porcshe protested. No doubt from being roughly handled. But when Hailey cradled her to her chest and cooed at her, she calmed down.

After she put the dog down in her office, she heard the woman murmur from her reception. Now that her outof-body experience had ended, Hailey had to deal with the aftermath. Whatever happened next, the woman could not leave her rescue shelter. It's true that you only received a slap on the wrist for assault these days—that's if it even went to court—but she couldn't take the risk. If she went to prison, even for a week, the dogs in her care would be destroyed.

The woman was on her knees now, holding a hand to her head. Blood poured from between her fingers while she steadied herself to stand up.

Hailey was still on the fence about what to do next. She glanced at the dog carrier, and although she would love nothing more than to give her a taste of her own cruelty by locking her up, it would be counterproductive—another mouth to feed. However, the alternative was out of the question. She hadn't killed anyone before.

Her head tilted to the side. Well, that wasn't entirely true, was it? How many dogs had she killed? Hundreds, she suspected. Innocent souls had died because of people like the woman before her bought puppies in the same way they purchased the latest bag or a pair of Louis-fucking-Vuittons. Dogs didn't know the difference between their toys and a pair of shoes—that's if they were given toys. They didn't know they had to go to the toilet outside so soon after being separated from their mother and siblings. It wasn't their fault that they moulted, or that they whined because they were ignored, hungry or abused. It wasn't their fault, and yet they were condemned to death. They died, simply, because they didn't do what the owner wanted them to do.

And now Hailey was a dog lover who killed dogs. A role forced on her because people kept buying puppies, making her feel like a monster, a killer.

She was a killer; she decided.

Hailey bent forward to retrieve a shard of glass, locked her door, then grabbed a fist full of the woman's hair while she was still on her knees.

"What do you think you're doing? I will sue you for this. I will shut you down and see you on the streets."

Hailey waved the shard of glass in her face. "And how will you do that if you're dead?"

The woman's eyes widened before she thrashed her head from side to side, trying to free herself from Hailey's grip. "No. Please, don't do this. I'll take the dog back. Yes, yes. I'll take the dog back and we can forget this ever happened."

"No, it's too late for that."

"But, but, you're not a killer. You wouldn't."

"Actually, because of people like you, I am." Hailey frowned. "But this feels... different."

"What do you mean?" She raised her hands up in surrender and steadied her tone. "You mean, because you've had to put dogs down. That's what you said, isn't it? That you had to put dogs down when there's no room for others. And that's why it feels different, because I'm a person; not a dog. You've never killed a person before, have you? That's why it feels different."

"You're right, I haven't killed a person before, but that's not it. It feels different because I feel nothing about doing it." Hailey ran the shard of glass across her jugular before the woman could say another word.

After dislodging the bone and taking the phone call, Hailey went back to mincing the woman in the meat grinder. It had been the police, asking her if she had seen the woman in question. She said she had and that her shelter was full, so she had sent her to another one.

Whether she'd got away with it was yet to be determined, but at least it bought her some time. And after the dogs had eaten their fill, she'd be that little closer to being in the clear. Until the next time.

About the Author:

Kelly Barker was born in Oxford and now lives in Witney with her husband and dog, Lana. She has been a barber for over twenty years, and loves her job. However, reading and writing is her passion—a passion handed down to her by her great grandmother, Isobel O'Leary.

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Underneath the Arches | Jim Mountfield

David stood with the dead thing in his hand, remembering what he'd been told – how it was supposed to reflect its owner's mood.

But it wasn't just that. His whole surroundings seemed to reflect his feelings of defeat and despair. Darkness enclosed him, heavy, choking, putrid. Wintry rain beat down yards away. He felt the clammy ground through the leather of his shoes.

And when a voice addressed him, one that seemed to rasp out of a shrivelled throat, it seemed a manifestation of his despair too.

Three months earlier, an arts festival had taken place in the city. David had wandered the streets with no sense of where he was heading, happy merely to enjoy the atmosphere.

He ended up on the main thoroughfare, much of which was closed to traffic. Its road and pavements were thronged with festival-goers and performers, the former eddying around the latter where they sang, danced, mimed, juggled, swallowed flames, and wrung music out of exotic instruments. The air reverberated with laugher and chatter. Sunlight poured down from a flawless blue sky.

He came to some railings fronting an old church, whose grounds nestled in a corner where the main thoroughfare was joined by a subsidiary street. The festival had commandeered the church in three ways. The building was in use as a venue, several shows being staged inside it each day. A temporary café with tables and chairs under an awning had been set up by the wall on the far side of the church-doors. Beyond that, a flight of steps led down into the churchyard where a crafts market was in progress.

David entered the church's premises, inspected the posters on a board beside the doors, and from a little box office bought a ticket for a play due to start there at three o'clock. The play was based on a Franz Kafka story called *The Burrow*, which seemed doubly significant for him. He was considering making Kafka the subject of his graduation dissertation when he began his last academic year after the summer. Also, his fiancé Barbara was currently studying in Kafka's home city Prague.

He checked the time. It was two-fifteen, so to kill the intervening three-quarters of an hour he first had a tea in the makeshift café, then visited the market at the bottom of the steps. Barbara's birthday was next month and the market gave him an opportunity to find her a gift.

The strip of ground between the steps and the first rows of headstones had vanished under a multicoloured canopy of stall-roofs. The brightness of the roofs was in contrast to the lichened headstones and the grey stonework of the walls surrounding the churchyard – one wall descending from the elevated site of the church, one holding back the earth below the subsidiary street, the other two separating it from the greenery of an adjacent city-centre park.

David joined the shoppers moving in slow, shuffling lines along the narrow alleyways that broke up the canopy. He passed stalls selling slabs of wood with angular faces carved on them, and framed medieval maps of the British Isles, Europe and what was then thought to be the world, and harlequin, jester and clown-marionettes suspended on pegs, hanging amid their strings like parachutists tangled in tree-branches. But he didn't see anything Barbara might be interested in.

He reached the end of the first alleyway and entered one running perpendicular to it. By now he felt faintly uneasy about this market being on consecrated ground. He saw how the furthest-away stalls actually stood among the nearest headstones and commemorative obelisks and statues. Citizens of the city during the 18th and 19th century lay mouldering in their coffins just yards from the shoppers' feet, if not quite under them.

Then David noticed the arches.

The alleyway he'd entered had market stalls on one side of it only. On its other side was the wall running below the subsidiary street. Unlike the main thoroughfare, the street hadn't been given over to the festival, and so a rumble of traffic came from behind a line of railings at the top. Level with the churchyard, the

wall's base was punctured by a series of archways whose interiors burrowed into the earth under the street. These had been converted into miniature boutiques.

No doubt their interiors were usually dark, grimy and malodorous, but today electric lights were rigged inside them to dispel their gloom, incense sticks lit to mask their smell, strips of linoleum laid to cover their earthen floors, and sheets of cloth hung to hide their dirty roofs, sides and backwalls. He made his way along them, peering in at the wares they displayed. He went by an archway of landscape paintings, an archway of dolls, and an archway of clocks. Jewellery was on sale in the fourth one. Remembering Barbara's fondness for jewellery, he freed himself from the crowd and stepped inside.

This was surely the most pristine of the subterranean boutiques. Swathes of dazzling white cloth were fastened over its vertical and curving surfaces. Pinned to the cloth, like an albino vine, was a lattice of white wires and white fairy lights. Spanning the floor was a square of creamy carpet. Even the air seemed pale, thanks to several candle-flames dancing on pillars of vanilla-scented wax.

Somehow, the whiteness muffling the place's surfaces, edges and corners disrupted David's sense of scale. The cavities within the archways weren't wide or deep, but in here he had no feeling of being cramped or confined.

He shook off that odd sensation and focussed on the jewellery, laid across more white cloth on shelves and tabletops – earrings, bracelets, lockets, pendants, necklaces, rings, broaches, tiepins, collar bars, and cufflinks. Most of these consisted of semiprecious stones like turquoise, amethyst, opal, and aquamarine set in intricately-fashioned pieces of metal. A locket with a diamond-shaped case caught his attention. Its lid was prised back to reveal a round, scarlet-pink stone, which intrigued him because he wasn't sure what it was. A ruby? No, it didn't have the dark, bloody hue he associated with rubies. He lifted the locket's chain so that its case and stone hung level with his eye. He wondered if the stone was becoming brighter. A tiny flame seemed to have ignited inside it...

A voice nearby said, "Pretty, isn't it? Shall I wrap it for you?"

The speaker was a slim woman in a long, sleeveless dress as immaculately white as the fabric covering her boutique's interior. At the same time, because of the glossy black tresses spilling down the sides of her face and onto her shoulders, she introduced a quantity of darkness into that white alcove. Her face, framed by the tresses, had a bland, doll-like prettiness. But her eyes were shrewd.

"Why," he asked, "are you sure I intend to buy it?"

Her voice was mocking, though sweetened by a measure of good-humour. "You've stood admiring it for so long. I don't think you could not buy it now. But don't worry. It'll make a perfect gift. I'm sure she'll appreciate it. In fact, she'll love you for getting it."

Stood so long? How much time, David wondered, had he spent looking at the red-jewelled locket? She laughed at his bewilderment. "I mean, it's obvious. What other explanation could there be for your preoccupation? Your distant smile? You're in love!"

He couldn't think of a reply and a moment later she'd subtly removed the locket from his fingers and turned to a tabletop where there were sheets of wrapping paper and a spool of ribbon. She hadn't confirmed that he wanted to buy it. She hadn't waited for him to ask what it cost. She'd simply decided he wanted it.

But she'd decided correctly. For some reason David did want that locket, badly.

As the strange woman began to wrap the locket, she commented, "You'll have noticed its brightness. It's said of this particular stone that it reflects its owner's emotions. Which figures. You being so much in love, you've animated it!"

Fleetingly, however, David wondered. He was convinced of his own love for Barbara. But... Could he absolutely swear that she loved him too?

And just before the woman closed the locket, and concealed it beneath a fold of paper, the gleam of the stone seemed to fade a little... Discombobulated, David turned away. A yard from him, he noticed something about the white cloth hanging down a wall. A blemish had appeared amid its whiteness, though only a black fleck that looked no more significant than an ink-dot on a giant sheet of paper. Still, it was as if the

surrounding earth had marshalled its cold, mouldering darkness at that spot, and from there it would begin to penetrate and reclaim the archway.

Everything had changed three months later.

David sat in the room he rented on the topmost floor of a south-side tenement building, eyes fixed on a laptop screen where a Word document was open. The document's one and only page was bare save for a few sentences. Reading them again, the sentences seemed to him as wild and incoherent as the narrator of the story they were trying to explain – the animal through whose point-of-view Kafka had written *The Burrow*, becoming increasingly panicked and paranoid while it scrabbled in the dark depths of its hole.

Finally, he pulled out a drawer at the side of the desk, removed an envelope, and from that removed a letter. It was short, plain and unworthy of the thousand readings he'd given it since its arrival in late August. However, for the thousand-and-first time, he took in Barbara's message. She informed him bluntly that: she didn't love him; she didn't want to see him again; she wished to remain in Prague; she wouldn't be coming back.

After staring at the letter for a long time, he noticed the sound of rainwater above him, striking and oozing down the slopes of the roof and window-cornice, then being channelled into the guttering and disappearing into the downspout. The wind was audible too, tripping across the city's roof-ridges and chimneystacks. He got up, lifted a curtain from the window, and inspected the scene beyond. Black clouds had crowded out the moon and stars in the night-sky. Above the opposite pavement, through the slashes of rain, the streetlights gazed back at him like rheumy yellow eyes.

He returned to the desk, opened the drawer below the one that'd held Barbara's letter, and removed the locket he'd purchased in the arches that August. Her letter had come before he'd had a chance to send it to Prague. He opened the case and examined its contents in the beam cast from his desk-lamp. The red stone that'd glowed so radiantly had lost its lustre and colour. It'd died. Now it was a grey pebble, cold and lifeless.

An inexplicable impulse drove him to pull his heaviest coat out of the wardrobe, put the locket in one of its pockets, and leave the flat. Still trying to get his arms into the coat-sleeves, he hurried down the spiralling stairwell to the ground-floor hallway and let himself out into the tempestuous evening.

It took a half-hour of brisk walking to reach the main thoroughfare. He had the coat's hood up around his head, the rain beating on it so loudly he hardly heard the traffic's growling engines and smacking tyres on the roads beside him. The hood limited his vision too and he got only glimpses of the street-facades he was passing – discarded cans, bags and Styrofoam food-trays strewn along the bottoms of their walls, spraypainted obscenities straggling across metal shop-shutters, occasional beggars crouching in doorways under rank woollen blankets.

He followed the thoroughfare to the entrance of the church-grounds. Dark, deserted, pummelled by rain, there was almost nothing about the place to suggest its role as a theatre, café, and marketplace three months earlier. Only the notice board remained beside the church-doors, though a few rags of paper were all that were left of its posters.

He passed the doors, crossed the area where the café had been, and started down the steps at the back. The steps were treacherously slimy and the darkness became thicker as he descended, so his entry into the churchyard was slow and groping. He reached the bottom and waited until his eyes were more accustomed to the blackness. When the yard was slightly clearer – no longer black, but a sooty grey where he could at least discern things' outlines – he trudged across the muddy ground.

He arrived at the wall below the subsidiary street. The arches gaped along the stonework like black mouths. As he walked past them, he recalled the wares sold in each archway. Paintings on sale in this one, dolls stocked in the next, then clocks, and then... He stopped by that fourth black mouth, reached into his pocket, and made sure the locket was still there.

David stepped inside.

The rain no longer drummed on his hood, but the shelter offered by the cavity was no consolation for the blackness around him. It wasn't just an absence of light. It seemed oppressively heavy, like an extension of

the soil packed against the archway's sides. Almost surprised he could move his arms in that blackness, he took the locket from his coat and fumbled it open. The stone inside remained dead. Nothing emanated from it, no glow to give that subterranean space even a smidgeon of light.

Suddenly, a voice spoke behind him.

"This must be bad news," it said from the opening. "You're not satisfied with your purchase."

He turned. In the opening's half-circle of grey stood a human figure, a female one. She was a black silhouette against the greyness, but as he stared at her he began to observe certain details about her outline.

She stepped closer and he noticed how the putrid air in the cavity was becoming more putrid. "I'm afraid," she continued, "we don't offer refunds."

Those details... He saw how her thick tresses had diminished and withered so that now only a few random barbs of hair protruded from her head. The sides of her face looked eroded – her cranium a stark ridge, her cheekbones like corners, her jaw hinged and mandible-like, her neck resembling a ridged stem. She held up her spindly arms. Their sleeves must have been badly torn because long shreds of cloth dangled below them. But then he wondered if the tatters hanging from her were really ones of cloth.

Arms outstretched, she came close enough to embrace him and her face, though still invisible in the darkness, was only inches from his. The stench became worse, and he struggled to breathe as it clogged his nostrils and throat.

"But," she purred, "I can make amends in... other ways."

About the Author:

Jim Mountfield grew up in Northern Ireland and Scotland and has since lived and worked in Europe, Africa and Asia. He currently lives in Singapore. His work has appeared in Aphelion, Blood Moon Rising, Death Head' Grin, Flashes in the Dark, Hellfire Crossroads, Horla, Horrified Magazine, The Horror Zine, Hungur, Schlock! Webzine, Shotgun Honey, The Sirens Call, the Stygian Lepus and Witch House.

Author Website: Blood and Porridge

Betty and Her Parents | JB Corso

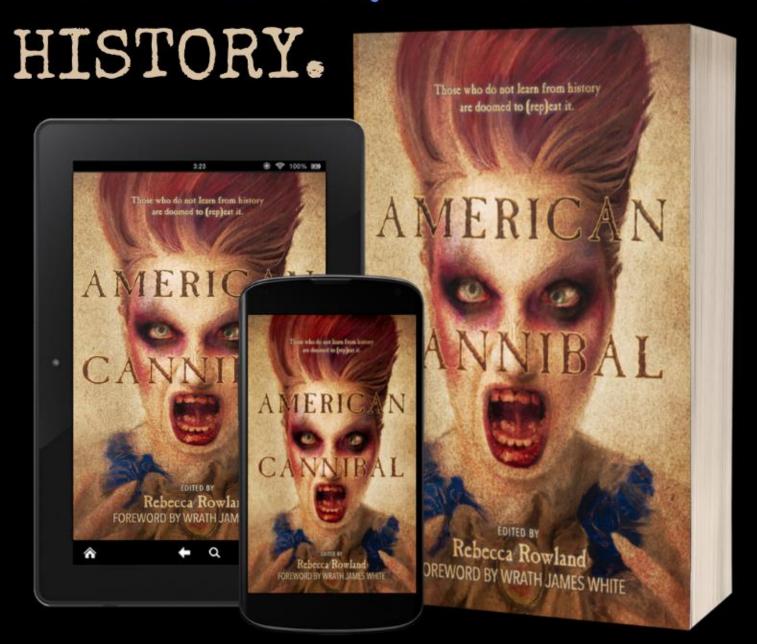
Betty limps down the street. Fire-infested homes light up her neighborhood. She screams. No one listens. Abandoned dogs bark at everything moving. The dead have risen. All of them. Including her recently exhumed parents. Jim. Gretchen. Maggots cling to their faces. Burrowing. Dirty grime clothes their naked skin. They moan. "Be-tty." She screams again. Her hips ache. They're getting closer. Their raspy voices torment her from behind. Betty looks over her shoulder. "We-e l-ove y-ou." Their fingertips extend for her. Her lungs burn. They close in. "Joi-n us." Betty reaches a local police station. Both doors hold steady. Locked.

About the Author:

JB Corso is a healthcare professional working to better the lives of vulnerable people. They enjoy spending time with their supportive wife, writing daily, and finding joy in the world. Their author's motto is "Developing stories into masterpieces." They have been published in both fiction and professional outlets.

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A Heavy Day | Chris McAuley

John stood at the window and allowed the sun to gently caress his face. He leaned forward and pressed his forehead against the cool glass. Sighing, he closed his eyes and allowed himself to remember.

A torrent of memories from childhood washed over him. From the moments when she had bandaged his knee after Tom Wright had pushed him off the swing. To the carefree times when he opened his colouring book on the living room floor as she knitted and watched TV.

His dad had left them long ago, before any real memories with him could be made. Mum never spoke about him much but every so often John would catch her opening the drawer beside her bed and take out the picture of her wedding day.

Throughout his life he had only had his mum. It was difficult for him to get close to other people.

He opened his eyes and looked over the city. The distant windows of the skyscrapers glinted with the sunlight. A million memories continued to tug at his mind. He tried to force them away, a part of him knowing that he had to let go. There was so much to do and prepare. He needed to call the funeral director or something like that. He wasn't sure what to do but that seemed like a good start.

With that course of action decided upon, John removed his head from the glass and turned around to face the body on the bed.

It looked like his mum but something was missing. The force which had animated her. The warmth which exuded through her smile, the gentle reassurance which was behind every hug. It was gone. It wasn't coming back.

With this realization John sobbed. A deep gasp which bubbled from somewhere deep inside. As the tears streamed from his eyes he cried aloud. The weight of this grief, it was too much to bear.

Through the torrent of childhood memories, the moments of the past ten minutes replayed in his mind.

"John love, it's alright. This is just part of life. I know you will be scared, Son but I will always be with you. All those treasured days of the past, you carry them with you. I'm so proud of the man you have become."

She had reached for his hand in the final few moments and as he took it, she smiled. A final brilliant ray of sunlight.

John let out one final sigh before reaching for the phone.

As he struggled to tell the funeral company what had happened, he swore that he could feel his mum's arms around him hugging him gently one last time.

About the Author:

Chris McAuley writes prose novels, magazine short stories, video and tabletop games, and audio dramas. Best known for creating the StokerVerse he has also worked on The Terminator, Doctor Who and most recently the Star Trek franchises.

Author Website: Dark Universes
Author Website: StokerVerse



At One with Mere Ashes | K.A. Schultz

I cannot feel but rather sense the energies of the flames, their erratic dance, as candles are placed around me on the bier and one by one slowly, ceremoniously lit.

The room in which I have been laid to temporary rest is vast. And draughty. It was never a warm space, no matter how fiercely the fires in the massive hearth might gambol and whip about the charred grate, the rusted andirons. Tonight, it is verily a season's sweeping breeze which wafts and winds, up around and over my body, stirs the fabric, flicks at the tiny tongues of light. Borne on the soft exhalations of a decaying army, its silenced commands, and cries of terror from ages long, long past (hastily buried and best forgotten), the cold air that sifts up from the catacombs far below us all and suffuses the space, seeks me out and beckons to my living counterparts, *Join us*.

I cannot see what it is directly under me but can more or less discern the tufted velvet pallet upon which my body has been laid. Despite the bandages in which I am swathed, each little hill, with horsehair stuffed and a button stitched into place to anchor it, renders the *suggestion* of a sensation over the entirety of my body. It is as if I am being held aloft, but by no means comfortably cradled. No restful sojourn is this.

Serendipitous, that I had lain there, on the floor of my cottage bedroom, undiscovered for nigh two full turns of the sun before my sisters had come to call, when they had at long last finally found me. Their unintended negligence – for I had been failing and was in need of their ministrations – would now serve me well, for my eyes had been frozen open, left agape with the shock of my fall. By the time the women had arrived, my eyeballs had been exposed long enough to the dry air to now be impossible to close. Funny, the youngest one among them had tried repeatedly to ease my lids down, draw the curtains, so to speak. But my gaze, quite affixed into the voids, had been firmly set. I like having them open. All the better to see.

Later, as my sisters had anointed my limbs and wrapped them in what felt to me like miles and miles of coarse black bandages, I had listened with some concern to the chatter amongst a few of them, who had wanted to place cold, gold coins over my eyes, in a token gesture taken straight from the playbooks of the mundane. But no, majority had prevailed, and my sisters decided to leave my eyes as they were.

In this moment, I am looking, you could say, at a thousand hand-painted stars and moons, which dot the arched ceiling over our heads. The fretwork of stone that supports the expanse is intentionally rough-hewn, evoking the bark of a tree. It is reminiscent of the ancient oaks under which I and my kind would welcome our solstices, our equinoxes, beckon forth the sun, bid adieu the moon. This tree of carved stone shields our ceremonial chambers from the daylit upper reaches, where the everyman treads. Barely illuminated by the candles, the space fades quickly into deep shadow, appears quite endless, as if the floor could perhaps eventually merge with the shallows of the Underworld. It is a place of mystical confluence, a membership to which I have belonged for as long as I can remember.

I can hear my sisters' singing. Their words are muffled, and the melody is distant. It is as if I were afloat underwater, with them standing above and nearby, as if at some pier's end. They are sending their invocations into the reaches below, to me where I lie submerged, and farther down still, beyond what is here, now. We have always reached to the deepest deep, be it heaven *or* hell, be they opposing destinations or one and the same. And I know every word they are singing. I did, after all, compose some of the verses myself. I sing along in my heart, asking, willing my spirit to heed the prayer, and to, please, take wing, take final flight.

We sing to my afterlife awakening; we sing to incite my post-mortem spirit to sever itself from the sinewy and aged vessel to which it had been assigned in life. We sing to ask of Mother Earth and her shadowed siblings that they lift the truer me up, off and out of what had been in life the woman, the witch, the temporally housed human being.

I, more than ever before aware of the fluidly conscious entity I am now becoming, understand that I am about to take leave of my erstwhile self, and to commence on an everlasting journey that will intersect, perhaps even link, the myriad plains of our beauteous nook in the universe. I am on the cusp of manifesting something magnificent, beyond anything I could ever have imagined in life, let alone called forth, in any of my sisters who had preceded me in death.

And, from these other dimensions not yet revealed to me, I will come back.

I am about to become She Who they will call forth.

It will be for me to heed the call of spells cast at midnight, to emerge from magical portals or through vapors teeming from the mouths of steaming cauldrons. I will rise up and out of fissures where reality leaves off, where histories and imagination mix, where facts and hallucinations merge and become a riotous one, where the intoxicating and primordial soup of immeasurable potential hold the power to transport – or consume – every participant who invites me into their presence, is willing to behold the new and oh, so ancient Me.

I can hardly wait. It is the culmination of a lifetime of devotion to the craft, the closest thing to immortality I could hope to achieve.

Wait!

I think. . . yes. I do believe. . .

It is happening!

Gossamer filaments loosen. They pull long, thinning out like strands of spun sugar, or the strands of a spider's web when caught by the purposeful claws of a cutting November breeze. . .

I am pulling free, undoing the knitting. . .

My field of vision regenerates, broadens incrementally, sliver by sliver. New eyes, new sight.

I see luminous fingertips pulling free from languid sleeves. They draw back, ease out, as if extracting themselves from the gloves of a reclining mannequin. The smallest of lit forms, like fireflies, whisper-small appendages begin to extend beyond what were the wizened knuckles and fingers of an old hag's work-weary hands. Reaching furtively, they stretch longer, longer, wavering like the candleflames close by...

I feel an urge to contract my core. I start to try and lift my head. . .

But wait. . .

What's this?

A disturbance in the distance!

It is a harsh breaking sound, that of a fracturing. It disrupts the soothing veil of the requiem, whose melodies my sisters and I had created together to conjure a sentient exit from the hollowed housing in which the emerging Me as of this moment still resides.

My spirit recoils. The luminous fingertips vaporize and are gone.

No, no!

Only moments ago, as the crescendo of the song was building, the faintest sense of separation was beginning to manifest itself! I know what I felt! We were so close – I was, I am so close! The frustration is almost erotically charged; my entire being hovers painfully on the brink of something so new, so wonderful, so, so. . .

And now this?

What in bloody Hades is happening?

Their singing has stopped. An abrupt and pregnant silence fills the space, suffocates even me.

I can smell my sisters' fear. It is a stench, freshly perceived.

Recollection, recognition leave a bitter tang in my mouth.

Their terror grows. They stand motionless in a coagulated cloud of confusion, anger, and despair, cornered like pups, nowhere to go. There was only ever that one, narrow door that led into this underground chamber. . .

Sisters! We have come this far! Rally! Fight! I am with you!

Out of my periphery, I can sense they are coming to, shaking off that first, cold grip of fear. They are readying themselves for the assault. A few of my sisters have run to the door, thrown the bolt. They now lean with the full weight of their bodies against it, a paltry, stop-gap deterrent, their own lives placed at vast, immediate risk. But that is what we do for each other, have always done for each other.

I hear the tools from the hearth being lifted off their hooks. My sisters will wield these as weapons. Primitive, yes, but plied with the vehemence of a protective Fury, simple, forged fireside implements can become objects of keen destructive potential. . .

My sisters whisper but a few words – most can read each other's minds. Hissed commands fly from the far corners of the room, from behind support columns, from behind the altar. Breaths held, still as statues, they are ready for the onslaught. I can almost hear what they are thinking, as they listen, listen...

We have been thusly hunted, so horrifically persecuted for so terribly long. If we jump to conclusions, we have earned that right. If we leap to violent resolution, we are merely giving back.

It has to be them, or some similar attack party from the next village. Again.

Boots sound on the stone pavers of the stairs, come to a stop. Shouts echo, indiscernible commands. I hear metal scraping, the *shing* of blades unsheathing. And then, with a bang like a thunderclap, the door bursts open. The locks, the bolt, my sisters' determined postures are rendered futile in an explosive, split second.

They have come for us. Again.

My spirit winces, shrinks back into the hull that is my emptied breast. It cowers, beholden by way of long-held memories, dragged down by fears I fought against my entire life.

The screams of my sisters – old, dear friends, novices I barely knew – are blood curdling. Their voices are instantly infested with a garbling as one by one they choke on their own blood.

And I? I cannot make a sound. I lie here like an idiot effigy. I, who for decades led these women in thought, intent, and in deed, do not move. I am the very reason why they are here now, and under attack. And I cannot do a thing to help them.

I should have known. News of my passing had spread unusually quickly, for gossip grows legs viciously fast and long. I realize, I have utterly and completely betrayed my sisters. I may as well have led the mob to this room as their Delilah.

I can only lie here and idly witness the attack as it plays out around me. The candles are immediately knocked to the ground. Some flames sputter and drown in their own wax. But some flames — I can very nearly smell the scorching fibers — grab at the draped fabric of my bier and set it afire. There is a rushing sound as the flames stretch insidious fingers, claw at the benches, the altar, the hems of my sisters' robes. Old, loamencrusted velvet is rank as it incinerates. Thick smoke fills the room. Everyone who as yet draws breath is coughing, gasping, seeking air.

Not I.

Screams dissipate, and then more horrifically, silence follows. I can tell, the chamber is awash in a toxic fog. Acrid, putrid, it singes the lungs of the few who are yet alive, who still fight – ever more failingly – for their own lives. The predators who dared journey out to the ruins to breach our secret quarters with full intent to eradicate us, are now likewise ensnared. They, we, are all trapped.

Before the last of the attackers succumbs, he grabs at the necklace around my neck. Silly fool, greedy to the last. My dear, lost sisters, wholly dead and unrevivable corpses, litter the floor around me. Neither he, nor they, will have any use for those gemstones. The rubies fall loose to the floor. Some bounce and scatter; some stick where they fall, like bugs in crimson amber, for the pools of blood have thickened in the intense heat. The rubies might as well be gravel.

Perhaps, someday, this site will be discovered, perhaps it will be excavated. Perhaps, someday, these bejeweled remnants will delight their finder, and be fabricated into something wearable, for the slender throat of an ignorant, willow-necked other, where they will hang, and sparkle benignly. It is almost nostalgic to imagine it. . .

But they are right now merely talisman of the bloodshed of this night. One faceted droplet for each fallen member of our coven, a coven which has been effectively eradicated. For now.

And I? I will soon join the newly deceased. There is nowhere left to go. I must resign myself to dying the ordinary death of an ordinary human. I am fading. Annihilation unbound, they won. This time.

The force of the necklace being ripped from my neck nearly pulled me off the bier. My head, arms and torso hang inverted; my splayed arms brace my body like the spindling legs of a painter's easel. My lower half still spans the upholstered bed, unceremoniously, hideously awkward. To think, minutes ago, I was on the cusp of an ethereal shift, about to waken, fully sentient from the mummified remains upon this bed. My elegant corpse. . .

But now, as I lie ungracefully askew, and with my inverted view across the floor, I see there are no options. There is no way out. I have met with a truly dead end. Riotously lit, a fiery dervish of oranges, blues, yellows and black, flails about the ceremonial chamber, which has become nothing more than a subterranean crematorium.

One young woman, the last initiate welcomed into our fold, crawls towards me, calls my name with what is left of her voice, as if there was something I could yet do for her, for us.

The constellation bedecked timber of the ceiling coffers bursts into flames. The ceiling collapses from the heat, burying the young woman whose outstretched hand almost touches mine.

My silken sheathing betrays me, becomes a kindling cocoon. It curls at the edges, sparkling momentarily, and then all of a sudden, I too burst into flames. As I am by the elements consumed, the last things I see are feathering whisps of light seeping from the bandages at my wrists. They are the dregs of a spirit making a one last but futile attempt to disengage itself from the burning remains of an old woman who will not let go.

Soon, I am nothing more than at one with mere ashes. Before my mourning can even begin, it's over.

Santa Domnia | K.A. Schultz

There was once a writer whose gifts for the lyrically imaginative fell unfailingly flat in the face of his egosuffused, ambitious attempts. Beset with envy, he resolved to aspire to different heights — indeed, to their inversions — by way of a more morosely inspirational sort of Muse. He determined, he would call forth and conjure into his presence none other than the Queen Mother of all Christmas Spirits, La Santa Domnia.

All the candles in the house – every candelabra and chandelier, every brass chamberstick and glass votive – he changed out to black. Doorways and staircase banisters he festooned with black beribboned garland. The stately spruce in his parlour he trimmed with *Vanitas* invoking artifacts, decorations reeking of mortality, decay, and degeneration. Even the crèche displayed upon the library mantle evoked more a cold crypt than a warm, sheltering stable. It's possible, he may have felt a whisper of conscience when he painted the minuscule, red slash marks across the infant doll's porcelain neck, but to summon *Her* up would require blasphemous sincerity of effort. Nothing less than a deep-darkest, hell-firing welcome was required to usher *Her* in.

This moribund fellow did fervently believe that what he could summon from somewhere far below and then bear unholy witness to would place him right up there, right among the best of all his other, literarily bound ilk. With luck, it might catapult him past the greats, past the upstarts, and straight – straight! – to the top. He'd show them all, by golly!

Santa Domnia, Santa Domnia!

The writer sat in his study, night after interminable, solitary, and silent night. There, in his chair, he would read from his grimoire, reciting the stanzas over and over until his voice grew hoarse and the room before him would begin to swim...

At long, long last, after countless sleepless nights of endless invocations and sing-song incantations, it so happened, the clock on the mantle *did* slow down and, *tick*, *tick*...*tick*...*tick*...fall still, and the fire in the hearth did chokingly dwindle, sputter, and suddenly die...

The man stopped. He held his breath to better listen through a quelling silence that roared deep inside his ears, past his dizzied and befuddled sensibilities.

Has She...

Has She materialized?

The man listened.

Yes, it has to be...

His Spirit approached!

Yes. There they were, thick and heavy steps sounding in the entry below – plodding, plodding, steadfastly advancing. He heard the rhythmic shush of weighted fabric asway; he heard the rustling sounds of dry leaves and debris as they were swept up and along in the newcomer's wake. And then, he heard the sound of metal

scraping the floor, striking upon the stairs, a-clanging and a-thudding, one tread at a time. Up, up, closer, and closer...

She approached with the lumbering stealth of one freshly resurrected.

When She at long last appeared at the door, the man sank to the floor, abjectly awestricken, utterly overwhelmed. Glory – such a beauteous horror was She! The apparition embodied it all: Ignorance and Want, misguided intent, all virtue gone vice, acts of spiteful, cold vengeance; violence and bloodlust, all murderous ambition, all hate-filled desire...

This was Mankind's underbelly, exquisitely flayed, sublimely incarnate.

Santa Domnia, fair maiden, thorned ringlet, brow crested! Your forehead and scalp pierced; your curls thickly matted. Garnet rivulets flow 'pon a dainty lace collar, so painstakingly knotted, so thoroughly spattered!

Santa Domnia, fair maiden, candle crowned! Dripping, molten, hardening fast; ensconcing, encasing your pallid countenance. Streams flowing unfettered with blood imbued wax!

Santa Domnia, sweet maiden, fair princess! Snow-white was your dress, but with holly impaled, wet blooms herald the gash from that stake in your breast! Your heaving, your breathing, belabored and pained, your moth-eaten bodice most thoroughly stained!

Santa Domnia, fair maiden, wings spread! Not in flight but in fight, hardened feathers, sharp tines! One hundred small daggers – they clink, cut the air, kill off the last dregs of the peace in my lair!

Santa Domnia, your fragmented teeth mix with crumbs of black coal, your small mouth cruelly stuffed, until it is full. Your leering smile bares gums, not of a soft rose, but grey-shaded, the flesh curling off from the bone!

Santa Domnia – no, no!

Santa, stay where you are! Let me worship you here from my spot on the floor!

No, no, Santa Domnia – do not take my hands!

No, this I sought not – I plead, I implore!

No, please, not the spikes! No, not my left hand!

I beg you, dear Santa, leave my right hand alone!

No, no, blessed Santa!

You were not called forth to crucify me –

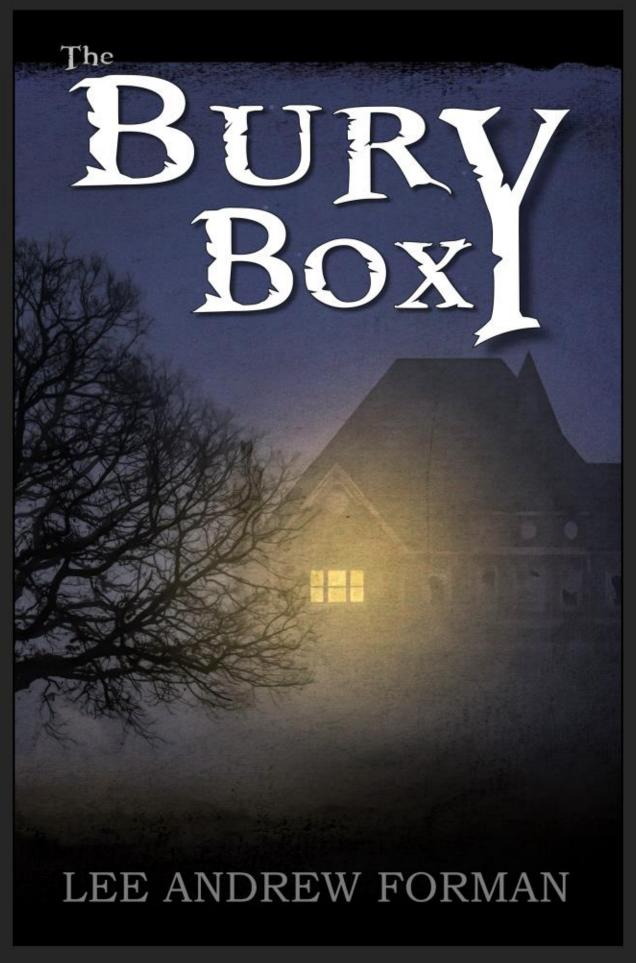
I foolishly thought you had simply come home!

About the Author:

Author Illustrator K.A. Schultz writes with pictures and draws with words. Art historian and freedom of expression advocate, Kimann is a fan of all things darkly romantic, as evidenced by her black cats, her house in the woods, and the macabre pop surrealist art she loves to collect. Kimann has published two horror/sci-fi short story collections NEITHERIUM and GÖTHIQUE, and JACOB, a Jacob Marley denouement.

Author Website: Butterfly Broth Instagram: @kaschultz writer





Available on Amazon

The Faces of Hell | E.J. Bramble

The world up here is chaos. Cars crashed, buildings destroyed. Alarms, fires, bodies, glass, knives, gunshots. Demons. I stumble through as if I am the ghost that they all once were. It doesn't bother me. What is a little more of everything? And I am so happy to see this. Euphoric and joyous and merry.

It is Hell, the radio had said. Spawned back to earth. We will all die. But if there is no Hell to go to, then where will we go? Would we even leave at all? Should I murder, just so that I may roam the streets forever? What would it take?

I am terrified that I may be sent kicking and screaming to heaven. Have I done enough, in this life, to save me? To keep me here, beside you. Will I find you before I am slashed into pieces or burned alive in a heap of screaming faceless bodies and dragged to the other realm?

A child cries, a few feet to the right, and my head turns quickly towards them. They must be real, right? A child so tender and small could not be spawned from Hell? I crouch behind a car and I stare at them. Surely that could get me a space. What could be worse?

I clench my fists, but I cannot, I cannot. I have done enough in my time. Was it not a sin when I laid with you? Have I not earned my space beside you?

I move on, stalked by screams. I cannot tell whether it is the child who wails or the child who kills, and I do not know which one I hope for most.

The walking keeps on for days, just like this. There can be no more living left, I am sure. The demons kill each other mercilessly and endlessly and pointlessly, and they let me walk through them peacefully. I wonder if I am already dead, too. Whether Hell is not knowing. Not knowing you have died, or not knowing what you most desire to.

I look for you in all of the faces. The torn and the bloody and the furious and the distraught. You must be here. You must.

You had held me in your arms all those years ago. You had kissed me on the cheeks and you had said that you would walk through Hell for me. If you had lied about that, Heaven would not have taken you, for such a lie would have killed me.

No.

I will walk through the death and the destruction, and I will find you. I know I will. I will find you and I will save you and I will take care of you. My darling, you must be cold. Hell was so hot, before the ice. Will you shiver under my fingers? I will wrap a blanket around you, and I will hold you before a fire, and I will kiss your burnt feet.

I will find you. I will.

I will walk through Hell for you.

About the Author:

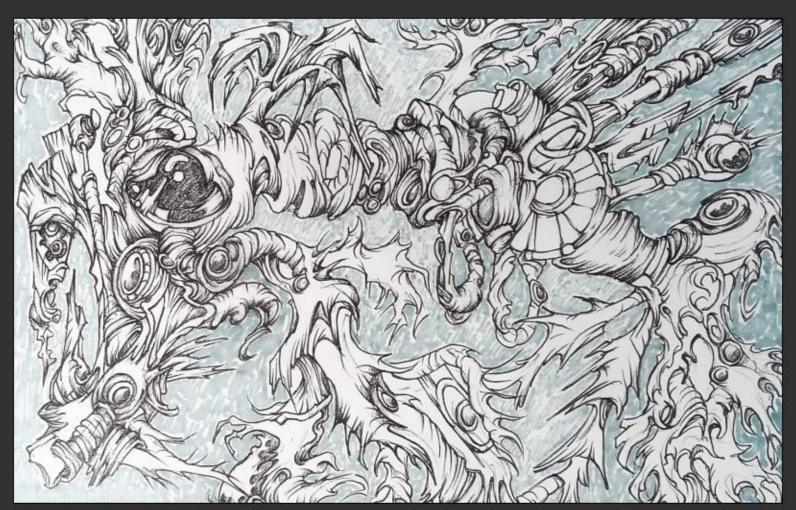
E.J. Bramble enjoys writing weird things. She lives in England and likes being by the sea.

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Melon Head | Nadia Corin

I don't know why they pick on me, or call me names; what's wrong with having stripes on your head? They have swirls, who cares? It's what's inside that matters. They laugh and point, giggle and snort – they have no idea what it feels like to be treated this way. But I've made a new friend that understands me. He's different from his own kind, too. He doesn't mind what I look like, doesn't snicker or leer. We understand one another.

They don't laugh any more, now that they've met my new friend. Because no matter his or my outside, the venom coursing through him works instantly, and he doesn't like the way they treat me.



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The Family Heirloom | Carole Tyrrell

Julia looked up at the self-storage facility as she crossed the car park and entered the building. Come on Julia, you can do this, it'll only take an hour. She straightened her shoulders and carried on through, nodded to the receptionist and then waited for the lift.

When it arrived she stood aside as a young couple came out and then she got in. Julia had to admit that the place had always spooked her, and she avoided visiting it unless it was strictly necessary. *This is definitely the last time,* she thought and gave herself a mental shake as she got out of the lift at the fifth floor.

The double unit, large enough to take the contents of a house, that she and her younger sister Elaine, rented was at the back of the building. After Mum had gone into a care home for what became the final six months of her life, it had seemed an ideal solution to put all her belongings there until they decided what to do with them. Neither Julia or her younger sister, Elaine, had had the space and so they had rented the double unit. Julia soon began to dread visiting 'Safe 2 Store' whenever Mum had wanted something from it or had insisted that it was there when it clearly was not. Sometimes these trips could be once or twice a week and Julia loathed them.

It's like being in an episode of the X Files and the CCTV cameras aren't working as usual, Julia thought, pursing her lips, as she walked along the long. empty, windowless corridor lined with locked metal doors. What was behind them? Once a padlock had suddenly unlocked and fallen to the ground as she had passed by making her quicken her step. On her return journey it had lain there, the chain attached to it coiled like a snake, with the door to the unit slightly ajar. It had been weeks before she had had the courage to return.

The silence of the place always unnerved her and, as she approached their unit, she had the urge to turn, run back to the lift and leave the building. There was a tightness in her chest as her claustrophobia began to take hold and the corridor to the double unit seemed to elongate as she walked. *Just an hour tops. Once I find it, then the rest of it can all go to a charity shop*, Julia thought as she finally reached the door of the unit and, reaching into her bag, she took out her keyring, found the key to the padlock, inserted it and unlocked it. As she wrenched open the metal door, she paused and sniffed. 'What is that smell?' she said out loud before remembering. It was Mum's favourite perfume, 'Moon of Paradise' and today would have been her birthday.

"I miss having all of my bits round me." Mum had often said as she slowly began to slide into dementia which was when she had begun talking about a diamond necklace. "It's for you Julia as you're the eldest." But it hadn't been mentioned in the will. She was going to find it and it would be hers and hers alone. Elaine was coming for the weekend as she wanted a last look through Mum's belongings and Julia was determined to find the diamond necklace first. She had been putting it off and Elaine's visit had spurred her on to find it. *They'll be here tomorrow. This is my only chance.*

Julia peered in. The once neatly packed boxes and bags were now thrown about inside the unit as, on previous visits, Julia had quickly searched for items, found them, and then escaped as quickly as she could. The door had always been a bit fiddly but she had always caught it before it could shut completely on her when she was inside. Once she had woken up from a nightmare in which she was shut into the unit and couldn't get out, surrounded by old clothes, papers, photos, furniture and musty smells. Julia entered the double unit and stood, looking around.

She had never remembered seeing Mum wearing a diamond necklace or ever seeing one in the family home. But Mum had always been full of surprises. It's mine. It's my present from Mum. I'll be using a family heirloom to get rid of another heirloom! Julia thought. The heirloom was the family nose. Roman and large, Julia felt that it dominated her face and attracted the wrong sort of attention. She had had enough of people saying 'Oh you could be sisters, you look so alike' whenever she and Mum had been together. She wanted it gone so that the resemblance no longer existed. Julia tightened her lips in resolve. Rory, her husband, always said that he had never noticed her nose being particularly large and that she was always beautiful in his eyes. But Julia didn't believe him and now she could do something about it.

The smell of perfume was stronger and she shivered at the unit's chilliness. "Must have knocked over a bottle of the stuff or the stopper's fallen off a bottle. Get on with it." She told herself and, pulling the door of the unit behind her and switching on the light, she got to work. Pulling down boxes from the teetering piles, she began taking their lids off and tipping their contents on the floor to join with those from earlier visits. Then she paused, goosebumps beginning to rise on her skin. It was definitely becoming colder in the unit and for a moment she had the urge to turn and run. But, mentally giving herself a shake, and glad that she was wearing comfortable clothes to forage through the boxes and bags, she squatted down and began to rummage through a black bin bag. "Old birthday cards, old Christmas cards, what on earth did she keep them for?" Julia muttered as she threw them down onto a pile of woollens.

"Because it's always nice to be remembered." said a familiar voice in her ear and she stopped momentarily and looked around. But she was alone.

"Now I'm imagining things. Where is it?" Julia muttered and then tried to duck as an unsteady pile of boxes suddenly fell on her. The surprise made her fall backwards against the metal wall of the double unit with a thump and she sat back again, surveying the chaos of framed photos, postcards, books, handbags, jackets, coats and other items that lay before her. She could see a tall object covered in bubble wrap standing against the opposite wall which had been behind the pile of boxes. It was her mother's cheval mirror of which she had been very proud and had always stood in her bedroom on its freestanding frame. "Get on with it." she admonished herself again but, as she got to her feet, she suddenly felt something cold on the back of her neck. She turned but there was nothing there. The goosebumps were now beginning to resemble stigmata and she hugged herself to keep warm. "Where is it?" she shouted as the pile of discarded boxes and belongings thrown into a corner by the door grew.

A sudden rustle of plastic made Julia look up as her breath started to come out in tiny clouds. The plastic bubble wrap that had been wound around the tall cheval mirror and its frame had fallen to the ground and she was now facing her own reflection under the harsh overhead light. It wasn't flattering. Julia was red faced, her hair sticking to her face, dust covered her clothes and the smell of perfume was beginning to give her a headache. But, as she stared, she saw a darkness appear in it beside her, swirling as a shape slowly began to appear in it, at first indistinct, formless before taking on a human shape. As its features become more apparent, Julia gave a little scream as she recognised who it was. Then a hand clamped onto her shoulder and Julia started. Slowly she turned to see Mum standing beside her, grinning at her, wearing her summer dress and cardi as their reflections looked back at them.

Julia stepped back, her hands to her mouth, before turning towards the metal door of the unit as it shut with an audible clang. Julia almost threw herself towards it over the huge pile of discarded items that she had casually thrown in front of it. She immediately began to pound and push on it. "Oh no!" she shouted as she tried to push it open, "Help! Let me out!"

But it wouldn't budge and quickly she reached for her phone in her back pocket. As her fingers encountered only denim she realised the awful truth. She had left it in the car.

There was movement behind her, slow and furtive, shuffling purposefully towards her.

"Julia." said Mum as a cold hand seized her wrist and pulled her up with a firm grip. Tears pricked Julia's eyes. "No, no!" but the hand was insistent.

"Julia." said Mum. "Come here I've got something to show you."

"No, I won't look at you! You don't exist, you're dead!" shouted Julia. And then she caught a glimpse of something sparkling, dangling from a half open box.

"It's for you Julia. All for you."

Julia stood up and reached out to the box and its glittering contents. Eagerly she picked up the necklace and held it in her hands. *At last!* she thought. But when she looked more closely, even she could see that it was paste, and only a piece of costume jewelry. "You tricked me!"

"How else did you think I was ever going to get either of you two to keep visiting me in that dull place? It felt as though I was already dead." said Mum triumphantly. The cold hand seized her wrist tightly again. Slowly Julia allowed herself to be pulled back towards the mirror until she stood facing it. Mum stood beside

her and then she started to dissolve, to fade, to absorb herself into Julia who felt unable to move. They stood together, inside each other like wooden dolls, reflected in its surface. "We'll always look just like sisters." Mum said firmly, finally letting her go, and Julia sank to her knees, tears rolling down her cheeks. *I'll never get rid of it. I'll always look like her.* Somewhere she could hear someone laughing.

Julia looked at her watch and remembered that Rory was away at a conference. He wouldn't be back until Monday morning and she hadn't told him that she was coming to the unit. *It's a bank holiday!* Julia remembered with a shock before realising "Elaine's coming tomorrow! She'll know where I am!"

"Until someone comes and finds you, it's just me and you." said Mum with grim satisfaction. "No gallivanting off or going home. I've got you all to myself again. And I've got so much to tell you."

The walls began to close in as Julia fainted and fell to the floor, her head hitting the only clear space on the concrete floor with a thud.

In Julia's car, her phone switched on as it lay in the glove compartment.

Hi Julia, it's Elaine. Sorry we're going to have to cancel the weekend, one of the kids is sick so we're grounded. But I've been thinking, you do whatever you want with Mum's things. It's time to let go and I have what I wanted. Speak soon. Bye. The phone switched off again.

About the Author:

Carole Tyrrell lives in Rochester, Kent, UK which is reputed to be one of the most haunted places in Britain. Sadly, no ghosts have appeared to her but she lives in hope. A keen photographer, she likes exploring cemeteries and writing supernatural stories. She has been published in The Silent Companion, Ghosts & Scholars, The Sirens Call, Supernatural Tales and several anthologies.

Facebook: Carole Tyrrell
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Single Red Rose | DJ Tyrer

Online romance: love through emojis.

Eventually, agree to meet. Quiet pub. She's waiting.

Greet her, hand her a single red rose. Ask what she wants, order it, sit down.

Chat. Flirt. First date nerves, despite the prelude.

Time to leave. Exit into chill night air.

"Can I walk with you?"

"Sure."

Leave her at corner, watch her walk to a gate, go through.

A week without calls, texts... Return, retrace steps. Beyond the gate? A graveyard. Upon a tomb: a phone and a faded rose. Her name engraved upon the stone.

Ghost or troll? Perhaps better to believe the latter.

About the Author:

DJ Tyrer dwells in Southend-on-Sea, on the misty northern shore of the Thames Estuary. DJ 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, Occult Detective Magazine, and Tigershark.

Author Website: DJ Tyrer
Twitter: @DJTyrer

Dead Things | Dawn Colclasure

Tony excitedly packed up his gear, smiling as he got closer to getting ready. It was the first time his best friend, Branson, had invited him along on a hunting trip. At 17, he'd already been out on his first hunt – his father made sure of that – but he'd never gone hunting with anyone else. Now he'd be out hunting with one of his buddies and not only was it a nice break from hunting with an adult, but a chance to get in some 'hunting time' with one of his friends. He didn't have many who liked to hunt, so it was a good chance to see how that goes.

When he finished packing up all his gear, he grabbed everything off of his bed and carried it out to the truck. His father stood at the opened bed of the truck, smiling at him. "Ready to head out?"

Tony smiled. "All set." He loaded his things into the bed of the truck then joined his father at the front. They climbed into their seats and buckled their seatbelts. Tony hummed as his father started the truck then turned on the radio as they headed out to Branson's house.

Branson greeted them at his front porch, excitedly waving. Tony and his father waved before Tony climbed out of the truck. He ran around to the back to gather his things then carried them around the truck. "See you on Sunday!" he called in farewell to his father as he drove the truck away.

Tony grinned as he neared Branson's porch. "Thanks for inviting me."

Branson shrugged. "Sure. It'll be nice to have someone else along for a change." He eyed the rifle slung across his friend's chest. "You brought a gun?"

Tony winced at the reference. Nobody called a rifle a gun. But he decided to let that slide. "Sure. We're going hunting, aren't we?"

Branson shook his head. "We won't need any guns." Branson stepped down the two front porch steps and took Tony's rifle. Tony watched him as his friend turned and carried the rifle into his house. Tony shrugged then followed his friend into the house. Branson was probably putting the rifle into a gun safe.

The first thing Tony noticed upon entering Branson's house for the first time was the smell. He wrinkled his nose, hoping his friend didn't see. Thankfully, Branson wasn't in the room.

Tony walked around, trying to find somewhere to get away from the putrid odor, but it was everywhere in the house. There seemed to be no getting away from it. He coughed, holding the tip of his nose as he tried to keep down the nausea he felt. The smell was horrible. It smelled like something had died and left to rot in the house. How could Branson even live here?

"When are we heading out?" he asked, checking out his friend's Spartan living arrangements.

"Right now," Branson replied, as he entered the room. Tony noticed he didn't have his rifle – or any firearms, for that matter. They were supposed to be going hunting, but what weapons would they use to hunt with?

"Where did you put my rifle?" he asked.

"Someplace safe," Branson answered.

Tony looked his friend over. He only wore jeans and a T-shirt, along with his tennis shoes. "Are we going to change first? I brought extra camo stuff, if you need it."

Branson shook his head. "Don't need it. Don't worry; you're good."

Tony watched his friend walk out through the back door and hurried to follow along. "No guns and no camo," he said, catching up to where Branson stood at the storage unit in the backyard. "What are we even hunting?"

Branson turned to smile at him. "You'll see."

Tony watched as Branson opened the storage unit, walked inside, then emerged carrying an ax and two large black trash bags.

"What are we hunting?" Tony asked him again.

Branson grinned. "Food." Then he headed back towards the house. "Come on."

Tony shook his head in confusion before he followed. This was going to be an interesting hunting trip.

They wandered through the woods near Branson's home. While Tony appreciated that there were good hunting grounds near his friend's house, he couldn't stop wondering why they were making so much noise as they tramped through the leaves, over fallen tree limbs and across rocky areas. All that noise would scare away the prey.

After what seemed like hours of wandering through the woods, Tony caught sight of a man sitting on a large rock up ahead. And Branson seemed relaxed as he walked right up to him.

Tony hung back, watching.

"Hey, Dad," Branson casually greeted the stranger.

The man smiled at him. "What's up, Bran?" Then he nodded in Tony's direction. "You brought a friend." Branson turned to point at him. "That's Tony. He's helping me today."

Tony nodded at the man as he held up a hand in greeting. "Hey."

Branson looked at the stranger again. "Is it ready?"

Branson's dad nodded. "All set." He waved off in the distance. "Caught 'em doing bad things to a little girl." He shook his head. "We're better off without 'em."

Branson nodded. "Thanks. She likes it when they have bad blood in them."

Tony looked at his friend in confusion but remained silent as he followed behind Branson as he set off from where Poncho sat. This time, their trek through the woods was much shorter, as they soon came upon two bodies of men lying on the ground.

"Jesus Christ!" Tony gasped, looking at the two men who appeared to be very dead. There were bruises on their necks and one of them had an arm twisted at a strange, unnatural angle.

He looked in horror at his friend, who only stood there looking down at the bodies with a grin. "Nice!" "Nice?" he repeated with alarm. He indicated the bodies with his left hand. "You call two dead guys nice?"

Branson shot him a serious look. "They're evil. You heard what Poncho said. They were doing something to a little girl. Something bad." He nodded at the bodies. "He put a stop to it."

The look of horror on Tony's face deepened as he pointed behind them. "You mean to tell me that your dad killed 'em?"

"Yep," Branson replied. "And now Mama will finally have something to eat again." He looked at Tony. "She likes dead things."

Before Tony could say another word, terror shot through him as he watched Branson drop the trash bags and swing the ax through the air to cut off one of the bodies' arms.

"What are you doing?" he cried in disbelief. "We can't cut them up!"

Branson shot him a look of disgust. "Don't be such a wuss." As he proceeded to chop at the body again, he added, "You're gonna do that one."

Tony shook his head. "No. No way am I helping! I'm outta here!"

He turned to run but froze in his tracks. Branson's dad stood right behind him, towering over him by nearly two feet. He smiled at Tony and Tony shuddered at the sight of the broken yellow teeth in the murderer's mouth.

"You're here to help," he said, taking a step closer to Tony. "So ya better help." His gaze turned ice cold. "Or else!"

It took everything he had to avoid wetting his pants as he stood there, shaking. Then Tony nodded. He slowly turned and looked to where Branson was happily chopping up one of the bodies. He grabbed a trash bag, shook it open, and started gathering the discarded limbs and body parts his friend tossed aside.

After Branson finished his chore, he handed Tony the ax. Tony saw that Branson's dad still hovered close to him and swallowed the lump of fear in his throat. He swung the ax to start chopping up the other body, forcing the bile in his throat back down.

"If anybody asks what's in the bags on our way back," Branson explained as he worked. "We tell them we were hunting."

"Got it!" Tony replied, swinging the ax down.

After the job was done, the boys gathered the bags full of body parts and carried them back to Branson's house. As they walked inside, Tony shifted his weight in anticipation of heading towards the kitchen. Perhaps the body parts were stored in the refrigerator. But he noticed that Branson was walking to one of the bedroom doors and followed behind.

The smell was at its worst in the room they walked into and Tony nearly flung backwards, retching. As soon as he was able to regain control of himself and covered his nose with his hand, he looked inside the room and a new wave of disgust hit him. Discarded body parts lay about the room, along with scattered bones. Tony nearly lost control of his bladder at the sight of an adult arm lying next to a half-eaten brain.

He turned his head to look ahead of him and nearly screamed. Lying on the large bed in the room was the corpse of a woman. Tony could see she was a corpse because she looked like something right out of a horror movie. Her skin was a mixture of green and gray. Her fingers had claws for nails, there were bloody scratches on her face that peeled away her skin, and her limbs looked bony. Her stringy brown hair lay splayed beneath her head and maggots crawled in and out of her legs and arms. The skin over her stomach lay inside of her skeletal frame and her large eyeballs stared in a dead fixed gaze ahead of her.

"I brought you food, Mama," Branson said by way of greeting, as he carried his bag to the bed. "It's your favorite too. They have evil blood in them."

For the moment, Tony thought his friend had lost his senses. Then he shook with horror as a sound came out of the corpse's mouth, the jaw moving as it spoke. "About time!" it screeched in a deathly snarl. "I'm starving!"

Tony froze in disbelief as the corpse slowly sat up in bed. He watched in greater horror and disbelief as Branson, with a loving smile on his face, handed over one of the heads of the bodies he had chopped off.

The corpse took the head and started munching on the face.

"Oh my god!" Tony screeched. "She's eating that head!"

Branson looked at him and shrugged. "I told you, she likes dead things."

"She sure does," Branson's dad agreed, placing his hand on Tony's shoulder as he appeared at his side.

Tony looked at the man and an icy chill ran down his spine upon noticing that Branson's father was holding Tony's rifle with his other free hand. And pointing it in his direction.

Mr. Branson looked at him. "And we're going to make sure she keeps getting what she wants to eat. Even ifit means we have to feed her bad people who snitch on their friends."

Tony could only stare at the man's cold, hateful eyes in shock as he understood what he meant.

"Aren't we, Tony?" Mr. Branson asked.

Tony forced a weak nod. "Y-y-yes, sir."

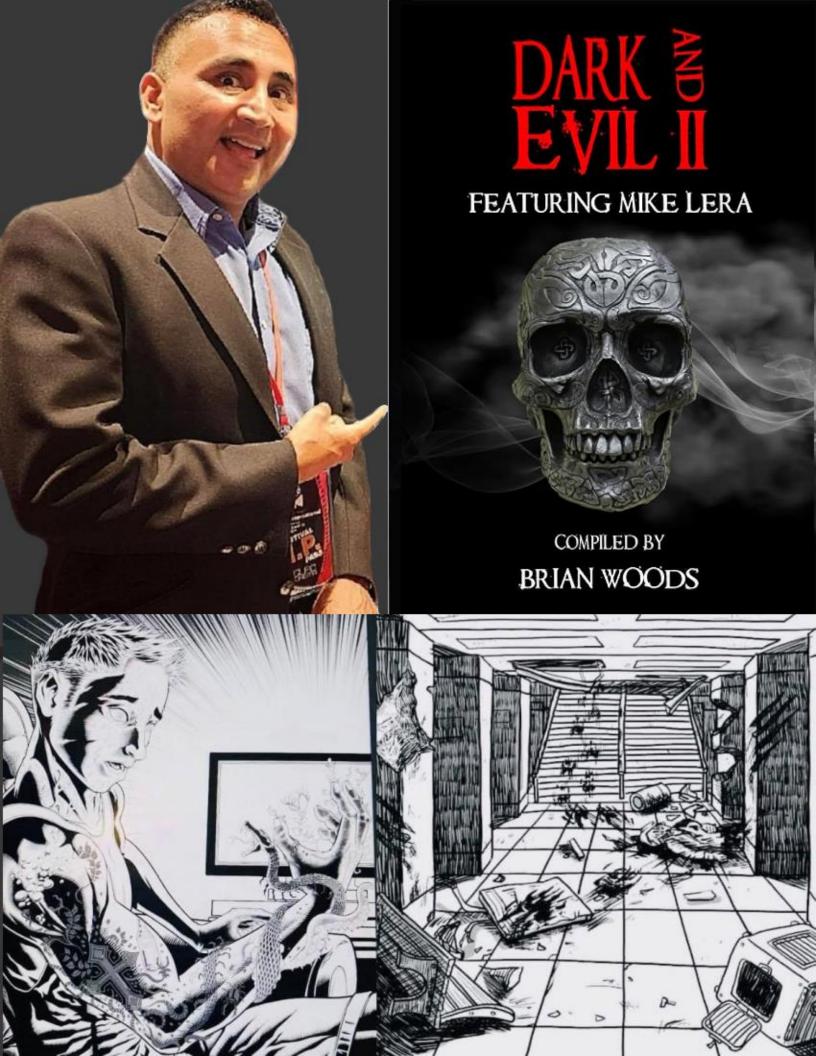
Tony looked back at the gory scene in front of him, and he could only stand stock still in horror as he watched his friend feed his dead mother a very much wanted meal.

About the Author:

Dawn Colclasure lives and writes in Oregon. She is the author of three novels. Her short stories have appeared in magazines and anthologies. She is also a book reviewer, freelance writer and newsletter publisher.

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Hell After Hell | P.S. Traum

Time flew by. The two women realized they had been chatting for hours as they surveyed the landscape, admiring its unusual beauty. Their discussion had never veered into argument. They were something like equals, despite being so different. Teacher and student... They resumed the conversation as they walked back.

"It seems the Hollow Earth theories actually date back to prehistory."

"I'd imagine caves and caverns also played a big part in the conception of Hell."

"Fossils too...imagine finding them for the first time, literal giant monsters with bones of stone."

"But why the fixation on fire?"

"Well, there were several sun gods and fire gods, they would need a fiery realm to rule?"

"Hephaestus/Vulcan was a type of fire god, a god of the forge, but that's essentially very early technology."

"You know, I think it's only the Hell of Christian mythology that's flame and fire... Infernus, the lake of fire and all that."

"Yeah, the name Hell came from Norse Hel, which was just a death goddess and her spooky realm."

"Greek Hades is cold, so is Tartarus, or Erebus? Anyway, it even has rivers."

"Yeah, but one of those is fiery."

"True... Oh, I think all the Arabic and middle east myths and all that have fire hells."

"Patterned after their harsh deserts?"

"Probably."

"Hey, Cenobite Hell was a creepy torture maze, but that's just one morbid Brit's wild sadomasochistic imagination."

"So, what's Perdition? Or Purgatory? Or Limbo? Or..."

"I don't know...all the same thing?"

"Maybe..."

"Oddly, some cultures had no Hell at all."

"True. Not all the myths were universal or accepted, diffusion or not."

"Oh! Jigoku, the eight levels of Buddhist Hell, some of those are fire pits too."

"But Naraka is a Hindu Hell full of monsters."

"Sounds pretty cool."

"So...once again, why fire?"

"Well, think about it, burning sucks! So, burning to death forever would very truly suck!"

"You know, I bet it's simpler, like, it's actually just volcanoes and magma, that's the true underground lake of fire, so we're back to caves and caverns."

"Oh, yeah, you're probably right..."

"Well...whichever Hell is down there, flaming or not, it's frozen now."

"Yes, that's bound to happen when a planet's core solidifies and the rotation stops."

"Not to mention their yellow sun going red."

"It's a bit more than an ice age this time, isn't it?"

"I'll sav.'

"But that's okay. Humans had a good run. They survived climate change, pollution, plague, war, and even a couple of giant asteroids..."

"But still...who knew demons apparently existed? So strange! Devils, demons and Hell. A real Hell... Can you imagine? I told you Earth was an odd little planet."

"Early on, I always wondered why you chose to study such a pathetic, primitive civilization...but yeah, I've come around, there's a lot of interesting variety here."

"Well? Do you think I can convince the Galactic Counsel to grant Earth protected status? It would make a really great location for tourism. And with all life extinguished, none of the noninterference mandates apply."

"The alternative is that the Counsel strips the planet of all its remaining resources and uses Earth as a hydrogen processing center... Yeah, okay, let's do it, I'll sign on. I vouch for you. This silly little species does deserve to be memorialized for the ages."

"Thank you! It was such a colorful and creative little planet... Oh well. I'll miss them..."

The bluish tentacled women boarded their silver saucer and removed their plasma-filled helmets. With a final goodbye glance, they activated the hyperdrive and vanished into the cosmos.

Flying Swine and Frozen Infernos | P.S. Traum

Patrick stepped over the frozen demons as he crossed the street, they were even on the sidewalks. He waved at the military people pitchforking the corpses into trucks. The devils were always dead by the time they broke the surface. Poor little buggers.

When Patrick arrived at Cherry's house, he was happy to see the sweaty cheerleader standing on her lawn watering a flower garden. Cherry wore a tiny pink bikini, wrapped in a loose lavender sarong.

"Hi Cherry! Wow, you're still sexy... A supermodel...you look great!"

"Oh, bleah...what do you want?"

"Remember middle school? Sixth grade. I had such a huge crush on you. Well, me and every boy and girl in school! On Valentine's Day I asked you if I could have a Valentine kiss..."

"Yeah... I think I laughed."

"And then you said, 'When pigs fly!'"

"Then you made oinking sounds."

"Well, last year, do you remember how after the school dance, your date took off early on you, and you were bummed out, so I asked you if you'd like to fool around with me for a while? Do you remember what you said?"

"Yeah, sure. 'Only in your dreams.' Right?"

"Yes! And Cherry? Oh, how I did indeed have a great dream that night! Wow. Of course, I had to change the sheets in the morning..."

"Ew!"

"So, Cherry, do you happen to remember the last week of school? You know, when you signed my yearbook?"

"Um..." The cheerleader bit her lip and glanced away.

"I said, 'It's going to be a hot summer, Cherry, why don't we go skinny dipping in your pool one of these days? And maybe we can fool around a while.' Right?"

"Ugh..."

"And you said what? Please refresh my memory."

Cherry crossed her arms over her ample chest and closed her eyes. "I said, 'Sure! Sounds great! Not right now though, how about...um...I don't know...when Hell freezes over?"

"Yes! Excellent recall, Cherry! I'm impressed. Well... I don't suppose you caught the news last night? Did you happen to catch the lead story? Something about how...oh, I don't know, how the ground opened up, and Hell froze over?"

Cherry looked Patrick over. She glanced over at the pool in her backyard, then back at the skinny smiling kid. She rolled her eyes and sighed. The slender teen wriggled out of her sarong and stripped off her bikini. She held out her hand. "Well, come on..."

Hell on Earth | P.S. Traum

They say there were no kids in Hell.

There were rules. And you had to be sinners to go to Hell. And not just regular sins, but really vile horrendous things. But now, with Hell frozen over and all the monstrous demons unleashed upon the earth, no one is safe. The gates are wide open and the human race is doomed.

Worse, the Dark Lord Lucifer is dead. The inferno iced over, and the forces of Hell were unleashed. Angels can't die. And yet, He did. And when an Archangel perishes, well...it seems Hell can freeze over.

Heaven doesn't care. Or perhaps doesn't exist. No Avenging Angels swooped down. No Messiah. No saviors. We're all alone. Some say Lucifer himself was the final Angel. The last god.

I've been running for weeks. Fortunately, humans still far outnumber demons. There are plenty of easy targets. So it's also easy to overlook one skinny little preteen girl hiding in the shadows. Especially since I'm one of the smartest girls in school. But honestly, I'm probably only alive because of luck and desperation.

But demons are devils. By definition, they're evil. Pure evil. All they know is hate and rage and terror. That's all they are. Hell personified. Children become the ultimate prize. The lucky ones die quickly. I realized immediately there are things far worse than death.

Most of the adults are still protecting the kids. But demons aren't easy to fight. They're very difficult to stop, and it might not be possible to kill them. Not permanently anyway. They have an infinite variety of shapes and sizes, every one of them terrifying beyond imagination.

Some demons are simply wanton killers, like a rabid puma or a rogue shark. Others are vicious and voracious; they enjoy eating people. Humans are like a gourmet meal to them, and some specifically hunt for infants, a rare, treasured delicacy. Demons don't like to share, and often jealously attack each other. Sometimes their mindless hostility and aggression gives us time to escape.

Then there are nightmares occurring everywhere that I refuse to describe. Unspeakable atrocities that I block out of my mind as much as I possibly can. Sadly, these same horrors have already long been very familiar to almost any woman or child who has ever been abducted, or to those whose very guardians have inflicted such terrors and betrayals. Demons aren't the only ones capable of great evil. It's somehow worse when humans do it. At least the demons clearly display their evil intent in every action, and even their very appearances.

It is only a matter of time until the demonic swarms overtake everyone. Civilization is gone. And soon we shall be as well. Humans will no longer hold dominion over the earth. Over each other.

Perhaps it is for the best.

About the Author:

P. S. Traum writes escapist speculative fiction in a wide range of styles, tones and subjects. The mercurial Traum prefers to remain invisible, so that the unique storylines and compelling characters remain interesting and interpretive, unburdened by any external distractions or preconceived perceptions. Readers deserve a fun imaginative experience that feels real, personal and entertaining, even when it might be scary, spooky, or creepy!

Amazon Author Page: P. S. Traum Facebook: P. S. Traum



Fate Is Fate | Michael D. Hilborn

It doesn't matter where I found the camera—to tell you the truth, I don't remember how I came across it. It's always been here, always been a part of me. I don't like using it, you know, I really don't, especially not after taking that first set of self-portraits. But I'm resigned to using it now—as I've come to learn, I don't have much of a choice.

Today I take a snapshot of the beggar passed out in the alley behind Butler's, that dive downtown. If you live in this part of the city, you know the guy. He's typically crouched outside the bar or the pizza parlor next door, that stupid sock puppet on his hand asking passersby for change. The first image that appears on the camera's digital display is how I find him: curled up underneath newspapers, within a hut constructed of weathered palettes, torn potato sacks, and the side of a dumpster. His hand and its puppet lie outstretched in a puddle of grey slush, the remnants of last night's warning of winter.

I take a second snapshot of the beggar. He hasn't moved, I haven't moved, we're both still in the same place, but the image on the camera shows a different man than the one I just photographed. There's no sock puppet on the guy in this second photo, but he's clearly a destitute passed out in an alley somewhere, several empty flasks cluttered about him. Using the digital display, I zoom in on the newspapers that blanket him, searching for a hint of his era—there's always a hint, it seems—and I deduce that I'm looking at someone circa the Great Depression, probably several years before the sock puppet guy was a twinkle in some other guy's eye.

The third shot of the beggar takes me back to another homeless gentleman in another alley. Again, I search for clues of his era and, yes, there it is—a torn poster from Grover Cleveland's election campaign. The fourth and fifth shots take me farther and farther back into history, as do the next dozen, and though the era and the subject change from photo to photo, the fate of this particular soul does not. Always a destitute, always a wretch, passed out in filth.

It's the same with everyone. The dealer down by the corner of Fifth and East—traded opium in old-time London. The prostitute on the corner of Seventh and North—sold herself to colonial soldiers. The abusive husband down the hall from me—beat his wife back before the Mayflower settled on our shores.

Fate, it seems, has a lock on us. We are what we always will be, in this life or the next.

Sighing, I pocket the camera, and stash a couple bills into the sock puppet's mouth. I leave the stink of the alley, and that's when she walks by, her red coat and lips slicing brilliant wounds in the city's concrete skin, her long, scarlet hair dazzling despite the overcast evening. She's so vibrant, so brilliant that I have to follow her. A few blocks down the street and she turns toward the entrance of a decrepit strip joint. I have time to snatch my camera and take a quick shot before she disappears through the doors. With an ordinary camera, I think it might have been a great pic, catching her as she briefly cranes her neck over her shoulder, her lips parted while she stares inquisitively up at the sky, probably wondering, like the rest of us, what winter will bring. But with this camera I quickly hide what I see, glance around to make certain no one else has seen it.

Back at home, my apartment soon fills with the aroma of warm toner and the whir of my printer spewing forth fresh sheets of professional-grade, glossy paper. One by one, I start attaching the portraits of the sock puppet guy to a clothesline that I have hung up. As I move down the line, I duck under another, this one strung with the lives of that serial rapist they caught in the park. I have to maneuver around at least two more lines, for dozens crisscross my place, weaving a web of lifetimes through kitchen, bed, and bath.

Her single portrait I do not print. I simply stare at it on the screen, accepting what must be done. I don't want to do it, I really don't, but fate is fate is fate.

So, the next day, I loiter around the block of the strip joint until she exits. Snap. The day after I track her to her apartment. Click. Within a week or two, I have a dozen shots; I also know her favorite spot for dinner, where she grabs a coffee after her first shift, the bar in which she and her girlfriends end the night, the diner in which they have breakfast before they separate and head home. Foolishly, she walks alone on the path by the canal, but fortunately, I never see anyone else down there—too early in the morning, I suppose. And there don't seem to be any men in her life. Just me.

Which doesn't bode well for either of us, I'm afraid. When I finally print and hang up her photographs, I make certain they parallel my own set of self-portraits because—as I have suspected ever since I took that first photo of her—her gory fates complement my own, shot for shot. I've always wondered whose mutilated body I'm portrayed standing over, whose heart I hold in my bloody hand, whether it's me dressed in my old varsity jacket and ball cap, whether I am garbed in the noir of post-war New York, or whether I'm wearing the top hat and cloak of a Victorian Englishman.

I heave a heavy breath, turn off the printer, shut down the computer and monitor, disconnect the camera, and stash it in its case. Not knowing what else to do, I walk into the kitchen, grab a knife or two, definitely the cleaver, and tuck them all in my belt. She'll be finishing up breakfast soon, then walking down by the canal. I can meet up with her there. I don't know what I'll do with her heart once I have it, I really don't, but I take out a skillet and toss it on the stove. Seems like the sensible thing to do.

I don my old varsity jacket and ball cap, and trudge into the hallway of my apartment complex. I crane my neck over my shoulder, much like she did in that first, fateful shot, and glance back into my apartment. As I close the door, I stir up an air current, and the poor portraits, pinned to their clotheslines, shudder and flutter, wave and flap, unable to break away.

About the Author:

Michael Hilborn spends his spare time (when time can be spared) delving into realms of horror, science fiction, and fantasy, either by reading stories or writing them. He also authors digital works of interactive fiction which have earned him a prestigious XYZZY award. He currently lives in Boston with his wife for whom he is eternally grateful for all the encouragement she gives.

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The Creature Grows Fat | Lance Loot

A trilling growl echoed amidst the sounds of dripping water as the creature awoke into being. Stretching its snakelike form, the creature glissaded through the brown waters of the hotel's subterranean sewer system, its body billowing like a line of ebony hills and valleys.

The creature was ravenous, as hungry as a grizzly bear arising from winter hibernation, and it required meat... raw, bloody meat to sate its voracious appetite and commence the evolution cycle. And there was so much available to consume nearby, too—just above, within the leisurely quarters of the hotel, hundreds of people milled about. As the creature swam through the grimy labyrinth of pipes and tunnels, it could smell their salty, succulent odors with its primitive olfactory senses. And it grew excited, eager to devour their meaty insides, and not ceasing until the soporific demands of the great slumber overtook.

Fortunately for the creature, the hotel was rife with sprawling, comfortable beds; after the great gorging would take place—and as the great slumber's tantalizing lethargy would begin to take effect—the creature need only locate one of these beds, coil up within the soft linens, and drift into dormancy once more. And what a glorious change of pace that would be! Rather than sleeping in frigid, dirty waters, the creature could instead retire to a warm, cozy bed! A suitable compensation for such laborious efforts. The creature felt elation at this thought—as much as its archaic, wicked consciousness was capable of anyway—and surged through the repugnant sewer streams with glee. It couldn't recall a time that it had felt so fervent for a feeding before.

A large rat—scurrying along the cylindrical wall of the sewer tunnel—detected the creature rapidly approaching by its vigorous splashing. Panicked, the rat spun and hightailed it back the way it had come from, the survival-mode sector of its brain activated. The creature was hardly interested in a morsel as measly as the

rat, but a meal was still a meal, and it amplified its advancement. The waters in its wake roiled like a cascading waterfall, and eventually, it caught up to the doomed rat. The creature's maw sprang open, the inside big enough to envelop a softball, and it chomped on the back-half of the rodent. The rat squealed in agony as its furry hide tore under the sharp, powerful jaws, and the creature propelled through the tunnel, ingesting the rat further bit by bit.

The tunnel ended at an intersection of two smaller pipes, and the creature opted for the grungier one on its right. The only thing left visible of the rat was its face, silent and dead, the red eyes and agape mouth frozen in horror. Then, that was swallowed up as well, and the creature made a satisfied, glottal noise—its vocal cords weren't fully developed yet.

The creature sniffed the air as it swam, the savory scent of the luscious humans nearing with each passing moment. Soon it would feed, and as it fed, the creature would grow and grow until it became more powerful than ever before. Nothing could stop the hunger from devouring what it desired.

Nothing.

"You almost done in there, dude?" Kyle asked through the bathroom door.

Jon was taking a shit on the toilet, the porcelain throne, relishing in his fetid alone time. And no, he did not have the fan on.

"Yeah, yeah. Just gimme a minute, okay?" Jon replied.

"You've had about sixty minutes already! Let's fuckin' go, dude!"

Then it all happened so fast. Jon didn't even get a chance to fire back with the witty rejoinder his brain had conjured up. The inky, serpent-like creature—having had swam its way through the hotel's network of plumbing—emerged from the underwater cavern of the toilet bowl, wriggled through the mush of human shit-stew, and torpedoed itself into Jon's dilated asshole.

Jon yelped—the creature traversed his rectum and invaded his body. He felt a white-hot sensation navigate his guts like a careening pinball as the thing gnawed and feasted on all organic tissue in its path.

Jon screamed—the blood spattered out both ends, cascading from his ass and fountaining from his mouth, spraying the wall like a crimson Jackson Pollock piece. The creature savored its viscera buffet as Jon's wails apexed to dying-animal sirens.

The door creaked open and Kyle peeked in.

"What the fuck is going on in—"

The grisly scene caught his tongue.

Jon was on his knees, his eyes bugging out and his vocalizing reduced to a choked, gurgling sound. Kyle let loose a blood-curdling scream.

The creature launched out of Jon's frothing mouth to Kyle's wide-open, screaming one and slinked its way down his throat. Blinding pain inflamed Kyle like hundreds of ice picks stabbing him everywhere as the creature gobbled up his innards like a carnivorous Pac-Man. Copper-tinged blood filled his mouth and his ass got sticky. He lurched out of the bathroom and into the main room. Kyle felt his midsection expand, and horrified, glanced down to see the flesh of his belly stretch beyond its limits—the creature was growing at an alarming rate.

Kyle shuffled into the hotel hallway, leaking gore and feeling like ten pounds of shit stuffed into a five-pound sack of skin.

"Somebody—HELP!" he rasped, limping down the hallway.

A nearby door flew open and a middle-aged man with a bushy gray beard and caterpillar eyebrows stepped into the hallway, just in time to see Kyle drop to the floor like a boulder, dead as a doornail. A dark pool developed under the body, staining the carpet like spilled juice.

The man hobbled over. "Christ, son! Need me to call an ambulance?"

The swollen creature erupted out of Kyle's ass with a sound like ripping duct tape. Its wormlike form slid across the floor and began climbing the man's front. Panicked, the man hotfooted it back and forth and crossed his eyes to watch the thing as it got closer.

"Holy fuckballs!" the man exclaimed, vainly swatting at its syrupy, black skin.

The creature faltered at the man's chin, lifting its visage to study his aghast face. It growled like a revved-up engine; the man screamed like a flayed-up pig. The creature shot forward and sucked the jelly of the man's right eyeball out like an oyster, oozing through the empty socket and tearing the hole larger as it went. The man blared banshee-shrieks and clawed at his face. The creature burrowed through the roof of his mouth, scrambling part of his brain like eggs in the process, and descended the man's esophagus to the meaty contents of his chest cavity. The man fell back against the wall, moaning a low note, the empty eye socket looking like a gaping gopher hole.

As the creature devoured the man's organs, it grew fatter and fatter, quickly becoming too bulky to be contained within the body. The man's flesh stretched and contorted until it couldn't any longer, and the corpse exploded like a water balloon, showering the hallway with putrid, gummy fluids.

The serpentine creature—having mutated to five times its original size—sluiced through the man's soupy remains and slithered down the hallway, leaving an oily, viscous trail in its wake. With a wet smacking sound like a belly-flop splash, two misshapen arm-like appendages mushroomed from either side of the creature's charcoal hide, causing its endless fat folds to undulate like shockwaves.

As the creature advanced, it put its new limbs to great use, knocking on any doors within reach. A door on the left whirled open and an elderly woman in a floral-print dress emerged.

"What part of 'I don't wanna hear any of your got-damn bullshit' do you not understa—"

The woman was cut off as the creature hefted her into the air like a ragdoll and crammed her small form into its eager gullet. It continued to knock on more doors as it glissaded further along. A door on the right swung open and a younger man with a mullet and a hooked nose leapt out with a gun drawn.

"You bastards think you got me? Y'all be trippin'! I'm gonna show y'all whose—"

Mullet man didn't get to finish his flex as he was hoisted and swallowed up. There was a muffled bang from inside the creature as the gun went off. The thing went on for a few more yards but then halted—its massive body began to vibrate and quiver like a jackhammer.

Then the creature belched with the force of a volcano and upchucked whatever was left of the elderly woman and the mullet man. Their moist remains had combined into one glistening conglomerate and looked like a mess of half-picked rib bones.

Approaching the end of the hallway, the creature slinked into the hotel lobby. Gluttony had ballooned its anatomy to a Volkswagen-sized slug, and its appendages had grown so long they were dragging behind like pool noodles. The clerk at the front desk had a red tie and a pencil mustache, and was so absorbed in the stacks of paperwork before him that he did not look up to assess the creature as it approached.

"Help you?" the clerk asked, still gazing upon his papers and jotting notations down.

"I'd like a room please," the creature gargled in a booming, guttural timbre.

"I am afraid we are currently all booked up," the clerk replied, still fixated on his busywork.

"NOT ANYMORE!" the creature roared.

Startled, the clerk glanced up and had just enough time to howl a soprano caterwaul as he disappeared into the creature's cavernous maw.

About the Author:

Whether creating at-home comics or opus-like stories, a lifelong love of all things eldritch and macabre brought Lance to writing. Taking inspiration from daily life and distorting it like a funhouse mirror for your reading enjoyment is what he does best. Lance lives in a centenarian haunted house in Illinois with his wife and three cats.

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Screaming Shoals | *William Couper*

You look down, expecting to find your feet, all you see is the ground forty feet below. The last thing you remember is stepping from the train and now you are here, in this forest.

The air is alive with susurrations, and sounds like disturbed moths flutter around you. You want to bat at them, but when you try to move your arms a hollow emptiness answers your demand. Proprioceptional information tells you there should be limbs and that you can move them. When you send the signals to pass your hand in front of your face, nothing appears, you feel no corresponding movement.

Movement is key. Locomotion is achieved by a thought and your relative position among the trees changes with mild input. This is good. It offers no new information, all that can be seen are trees and all that can be heard are the aggressive whispers. You want them to stop. No amount of willing puts an end to the inchoate, persistent sounds, it is frustrating.

No smell, no scent of leaf litter or of animal excretions. You think you have to be ill; the cessation of olfactory information is a well-known symptom. It must be a dream, then, driven by your body's attempts to fight off an encroaching infection. Your imagination must be inflamed, even the aborted journey to work must have been a dream.

Drifting through the trees, your attention is tugged in one direction. Avoiding the trunks is instinctive as breathing and weaving between the branches, while slow, brings a languid calm. Without the furious, distant voices it would be perfect.

If only it were possible to hear what they are saying, these ephemeral sounds that whirl around you like a disturbed spring breeze. Yet the few leaves clinging to the trees are unmoved by them, even your passing does nothing to affect the last vestiges of the summer. These brown and yellow, mottled revenants of growth cling precariously, but don't fall even as you get close enough that you must brush them.

A current has you and you can't turn against it. The notion of struggle is such a strange one, there is no reason for it. Curiosity has you in a connecting system of eddies driving you in one direction without explanation and without thought. There isn't a fight because there is nothing to fear. The journey protects you from the voices, even as they become more frantic.

Should you be in work right now? Are you sleeping through an imposed weakness? Has the time fallen away that you should have been on that train? Are your co-workers wondering where you are?

You say co-workers, but most of them work under you. Clawing your way to the position of manager now feels so long ago. The sense of purpose you felt in taking the careful steps to make sure you found yourself there is a dim shadow, almost something that happened to someone else.

Responsibilities were a secondary thought — power was the primary destination. You have hungered after power since the idea solidified when you were thirteen. It was a hindrance for a long time. You have been assaulted numerous times. You persevered and you were rewarded.

When Dawn started in the office, you couldn't resist saying something to her. Keeping it all subtle and ambiguous, you learned her limits and weaknesses. You have become skilled in building deniability. She laughed at your jokes and didn't recoil at the small touches. Probing, checking, shaping, each new word specially deployed with weighted intent.

The quality of the light has changed, a strain of violet tinges the deep browns, clinging greens, and sombre greys. The violet entwines and creeps through the crisp white daylight, writhing around rays infecting them and strangling in a new meaning into the slanting illumination.

Your attention is caught by the source of the light, and there is nothing else you can think of. It is your destination.

A march of trunks clutters together yet achieves ranks of distinct intension. A tunnel forms, walls of raw wood crowd in and skeletal branches lace over your head until the glaring grey sky is blocked out and all there is to see by is the throbbing purple light. The heartbeat cadence entrances you, demands your attention, calls out without a voice.

Hissing, incoherent warnings are all you can hear. They are like gnats, flicking in and out without ever being inaudible. A constant sibilant chatter, wordless, yet there is a clear meaning. You will not be swayed by the rabble of haranguing voices. Even if you had full control over your movements, you would defy them.

The other end of the tunnel of trees is an opening of variegated purples, a vertical cyclone twisting slowly between two huge trees. You want to be there, and it desires you, the feeling is as strong as it is undeniable. With the willed ability granted for you to move, you push with the pull.

Hissing voices become distant shrieks, burned away by the encompassing light. Spikes of luminescence skewer through your pain, burning and gouging skitters through your consciousness. Barbs tear at you and drag you on while you try to struggle against a force that is brutish and impassive. The colour is seared from the light, leaving nothing but a bleached and unforgiving beam slicing through your being.

Weight. The smell of burned petrol and crushed leaves clamour around your overwhelmed senses. Light, smashed and reflected form the road beneath you is more pain than you can handle, and you recoil, finding the muted light of different, smaller trees. You would cover your eyes, but you still have no limbs.

Your movement feels harder, but more forceful. You float but with more precision, darting where you had drifted before. Branches surround you in an embrace reserved for the closest friends or most intimate lovers.

The whispers are gone, in their place are the sounds of small animals scurrying, birds chattering, and the steady rustle of the ocean of leaves around you. A deer, moving with uncommon brazenness passes within a few feet of you without balking or rearing away. Its muskiness is intoxicating and exotic, a world away from anything you have ever known.

Cities and towns are where you have lived your whole life, moving through their bulk like a burrowing worm. Always eagerly searching out the newest sensation, another novel way to feel and always grasping for advancement.

It was never your intention to stop at the lowly managerial position, but you knew it would require patience to go further. Time had to accrue for your position and authority to cure and solidify. Dawn was a benefit to that, and your gentle moulding began to bear fruit.

She was yours within a year, and by this time you were bored with her, already you had realised there can be more than one. Her confusion and hurt irritated you and you found excuses to spend less time with her, even at work you minimised exposure. You didn't hide that you were more attracted to others.

Squeezing her out was easy. Her fragility was what caused her to make the mistake and you were able to exert more of your power. It was hilariously easy to force her to make a mistake and take her job away.

A car passes along the nearby road, when you look towards it this time there is no pain. You are drawn to it, like you were drawn to the place in the trees.

You have never been here, yet there is familiarity in the surroundings. Not certain what to do, you stay in the trees, the leaf and branch shade soothes you. There is safety here that you have never felt in all your life living in a city.

The car. You feel that draw towards the car. It has rushed out of sight, but there is a trace of it, shadows of its passing. This tether must be followed, there is nothing to think, nothing to argue over. It must be done without hesitation, and you go.

The stand of trees ends quickly, and you fear you are exposed. There is no one close by, but yet you feel, away from the shelter of vegetation and the company of quivering animals, you are seen, nakedly and mortified.

You can't allow yourself to be delayed by internal worries. The sense of purpose that fills you is heavy, almost heavy enough to slow your progress. Energy propels you with a focus you hadn't imagined yourself capable. You consume it and you generate it, a feedback loop of dizzying elation.

A group of buildings appears and at first you don't recognise them as such. They are low and strange. They coil on the landscape, brooding in whites and greys. Jagged shapes saw against the sky, ripping at the clouds and the horizon. Windows catch the sunlight and glint, passing harsh beams out into the world. You duck, using the undulations of the land to conceal yourself from the piercing glow.

Hesitation is impossible to resist this time. You feel like a fugitive. If the searchlight of the sun's reflection rests on you for too long you will be destroyed, your being scoured away, leaving nothing that could be scattered by the winds.

The chorus of whispers strikes up again, echoing across the emptiness around you. In the language of pure tone, they warn you. Their intentions are clear, their hatred is pure and sharp. Contempt for you pounds with each wordless utterance.

You should wait for nighttime. Daytime, out in the open, moving through a town is not for you. The sun doesn't welcome you; it illuminates your worst fears and saps you of the courage to fight against it.

The voices mock you.

Fearful of it but terrified of ignoring the building compulsion to go on, you brave the sword of light arcing out form the windows of the town and launch yourself towards the grinding collection of buildings. You strike coldness. Waves of iciness, resisting your approach, break against your insides leaving migrating splinters within you. The world works against you now, with varieties of pain you don't comprehend.

The rays of light slice, the whispering voices mutter their disapproval, and the walls of ice bite into you. Existence has become a toxin, poisoning you. You push on, following the trace of the car — the one thread that you can discern through sensations raining upon you, muddying your perception.

Weakness isn't enough to stop you and you make it to the streets of the town, prowling, dripping agony as you go. There are people here and you recoil from them, their skulls plastered with ugly flesh. Where there had been beauty there is now crimson slabs, layered onto ungainly bone and wrapped in layers of skin that rustles constantly, rivalling the whispering for its grotesque persistence. Worse, is the dripping and the exhaling, a cascade of fluid and gas that will cling to you and refuse to be removed.

You must concentrate on the search. The grotesque dancing things among the buildings that grind at the land are hard to ignore. The path of the car winds through the streets, it brings no relief, but you must turn yourself to the work. Only the work is important now.

When you find the car, it is as offensive as everything else you have encountered here. Where did any of these words come from? You struggle to recall the world, recall this must be a dream as a new sensation wells up. A boiling feeling within you eats through the memories. This isn't a dream; it can't be real. You smell the car's heat, the passengers' secretions smeared around the doors and windows.

Great drops lie on the street leading up to a house. Everything is smeared with grease and dirt. You are disgusted by it, yet it attracts you, draws your gaze and lets you think about nothing else.

You have avoided touching the buildings until now and you pass through the tainted door with greater ease than you pass through the air. The whispering is now a cacophony, ringing voices of hate and aversion. This volume makes them easier to ignore.

New voices talk in another room, and you find Dawn with another woman. They are talking quickly, you understand the words, but you aren't listening. Nothing can be more important than the overwhelming hunger you feel. Despite the dripping and pulsating forms, you reach out. Dawn's essence isn't the flesh, and you engulf it, shredding it with your unbridled need. Her friend screams as you devour what you had once thought fancifully intangible. The whispers fall silent in their failure.

About the Author:

William Couper is a writer from Scotland. As well as horror, he writes fantasy, and science fiction. His fiction has featured in Penumbric Speculative Fiction Magazine, Cosmic Horror Monthly, The Horror Zine, Black Sheep Magazine, and Schlock Webzine. He lives with his wife and a multitude of cats.



Red Sough of Autumn | E. W. Farnsworth

I kicked through the piles of fallen leaves, at some places knee-high under bare black choirs where sometimes an abandoned bird nest lay and on one occasion, high-up, a giant wasps' nest. Cold drizzle trickled down my back as I passed the silent asylum. On the newly mown greensward were blue streaks snaking in parallel with the walk. I made them out only with averted vision.

The free-range tentacles that had left their sinuous trails knew how to keep to themselves, but I had no fear of them as I was not their enemy. Today I discovered three ghosts, two by the frozen clock works and another by the iron asylum gate. Absorbed in their mute and somber cogitations, they seemed to have all the time in the world. How unlike the scary creatures of urban legend they were! I walked on.

Nadia certainly chose a dismal day for our monthly meeting. She was insistent and sounded desperate. I had no choice but to comply—I feared for her health and her sanity.

The young woman spent her days in her family's estate serving her three maiden great aunts, ancient crones who resented her youth and vitality. She was grateful to be employed in these difficult times, but she knew a day would come when her relatives would be gone, having left her alone with their old mansion rotting and falling apart.

The roof of her slouching edifice was layered with leaves over moss. I stepped onto the porch, which was soggy and pliant to my footfall. I heard the gurgling of rainwater in the drain pipes. I walked around the apron of the landing, but Nadia was nowhere to be seen.

I called out her name in a hoarse whisper. In my peripheral vision, I saw a dowager figure in a rocker, nodding but not rocking. I felt a frisson of apprehension as I followed the crone's vacant gaze to the front door. There a black cat arched her back and waited as I pushed the door open.

Water rushed out the entrance as the cat leapt inside and disappeared up the stairwell. I called, "Nadia, are you at home?"

My eyes adjusted to the darkness as I listened to the pattering of the rain. I smelled the odor of decay and, faintly, the scent of rotting flesh. I followed the path of the feline up the stairs. I moved tentatively not knowing what I would find. I neither heard nor sensed the presence of another human.

At the top of the stairs was a female figure that might have been Nadia, but it receded as I ascended. By the time I reached the landing, the wraith had disappeared in one of three chamber doors. I heard a cat's meow and followed the mournful sound into a sparsely furnished room in which a four-poster bed lay centered. In the bed were the remains of an old woman whose fingers were being devoured by the black cat. I had read that a cat will eat its owner's body if no other sustenance was available.

The cat was now growling as it crunched the bones. I backed away to leave no doubt I was not a competitor for the animal's meal. I exited the room and walked to the next adjacent space, which was furnished much like the first. Another deceased ancient woman lay in the gigantic bed there. There I fancied I saw the same ghostly figures who had stood on either side of the clock on my walk. The cadaver's hands had been gnawed, but the face's withered rictus smiled at me.

I backed out of that room and entered the third chamber. There I found Nadia sitting beside a woman whose hand she was holding. The girl did not turn around, but she said, "This is the last of my maiden great aunts to pass. I assume you found the other two."

"Do you want me to call an ambulance?"

"What's the use? My relatives have never had insurance, and they would have been insulted to take charity. This woman is fading rapidly, but she feels no pain."

I saw the old woman's final smile as she expired. Nadia was clearly relieved her end had come. She set her great aunt's hand aside and stood. She brushed her eyes and slowly walked towards me.

I was not sure how she wanted me to react, but I opened my arms and let the young woman fall against me. She grasped me with all her strength, and I felt her heave with sobs as she wept uncontrollably.

Gradually, Nadia recovered from her exhaustion and shock. She took my offered handkerchief and blew her nose. I said, "We should walk outside so you can collect yourself."

"Yes. I will gather my coat and hat at the bottom of the stairs. We should walk. You have been kind all these months while I have faced the end of my ordeal."

Nadia held my arm as I supported her down the stairs. At the bottom of the stairwell, she put on her weather gear, and I opened her bumbershoot as we passed through the door into the rain and mist.

"You don't have to say anything. Let's just stroll for a while."

She smiled faintly and kicked through the sough. "It's just that I have no idea what I am going to do."

"You must have some idea. We have talked on many occasions about your great aunts' passing."

"I always put off making decisions. As my relatives passed, I felt the urgency of the coming moment, but I still did nothing. Now I guess I cannot avoid the inevitable any longer."

I let her come to grips with her situation. We heard the cawing of crows. "I will help if you will let me."

"I will contact the authorities and my great aunts' lawyer. I don't want to inconvenience you in my affairs. You have leant me your ears and your sympathy on many occasions. I am most grateful you were present for my last great aunt's passing."

"Will you be all right in your house?"

"I expect I shall, thank you."

"Shall we walk to a pay phone so you can make your calls?"

"Yes, that would be convenient."

"After you have made the arrangements, I can stay with you for a while."

"Please don't do that. I would only feel self-conscious and, well, guilty."

"What will become of the black cat?" I kicked through a pile of sough.

"That cat is not ours. It ate my relatives' fingers, but it is an alley cat who lives on eating rodents. It will get along."

We made our way to the only pay phone on the street—in a shelter outside the asylum. There Nadia made her two final phone calls. When she had finished, she looked at me with determination. "Well, now that's done. And I am glad it's over."

"Shall I walk you home again?" It had begun to rain in earnest.

"No. Thank you. If you don't mind, I shall be leaving you here. I shall never forget you."

"Goodbye, then Nadia. And good luck to you!" I held out my hand for her to shake, but she ducked under my hand and hugged me tight with her free hand. I felt the cold of her cheek against mine.

The young woman then released me and turned and walked into the mist under her umbrella.

I retraced my way to North Eleventh Street with a sense of *memento mori*. On my way home, I noticed a black cat prowling in the wet autumn leaves. The rain had ceased suddenly, and the first autumn leaves swirled in the breeze.

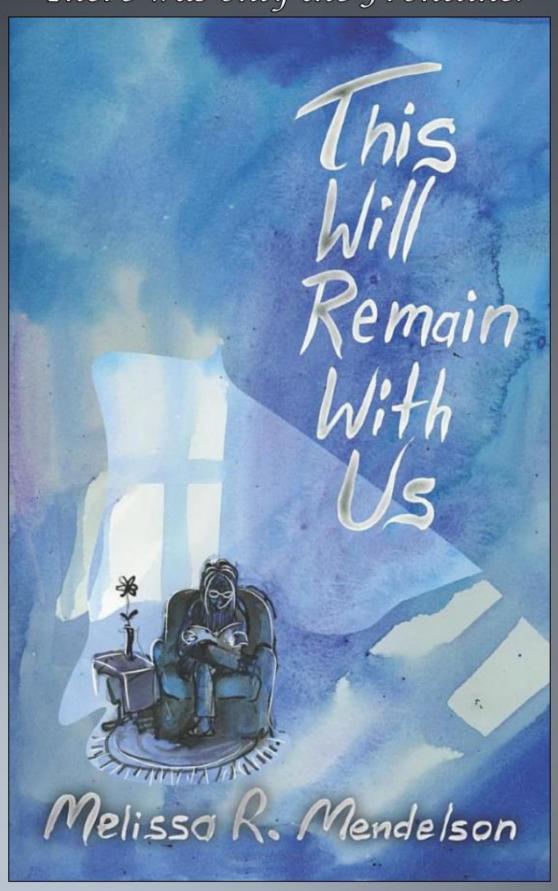
About the Author:

E. W. Farnsworth, a prolific Ohio writer, is widely published online and in print. A writer in many genres, including horror, science fiction, romance and westerns, Farnsworth has numerous collections of short stories to his credit as well as ten novels, all currently available on Amazon. His latest publications are Hrethelsaga, Volume I, 2nd Edition and "Firstborn" and Other Tales and Poems of Horror, both from AudioArcadia in the UK.

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There was no Normal waiting ahead.
There was only the Frontline.



Available on Amazon

Girl in the Yellow Dress | Leonard Henry Scott

It was close to midnight.

Maryanne was hunting beneath the black sky. Her eyes were sharp and wide, searching for any trace of movement. As she drove steadily down the road she could see every tree, building and stump as if it wasn't dark at all. To her, the nighttime world always had the look of a bleak, dreary day filled with gray skies and threatening clouds.

Route 5 was a lonely two-lane blacktop flanked by sandy dirt fields of sparse, stubby grass. Maryanne was almost half way between the sorry semblance of the last town and an unpretentious scattering of low frame houses a quarter of a mile ahead. She was hungry, but not in the normal sense because this hunger was different. It was a ravenous beast that lived inside of her and would not be denied.

Maryanne had waited too long to feed and now the hunger was taking control.

She tried as best she could to absorb herself into the gentle rivers of calming music from her favorite Pandora station (Enigma, Enya, Deep Forest). But nothing worked. As she struggled to concentrate on the road *the hunger* continued to swell up inside her. Its fingers of agony scraped through her body. The unyielding vise of its power clutched and tightened its grip on her mind. Although she tried to suppress it, Maryanne knew that *the hunger* would eventually win, inexorably squeezing away all other thoughts until it became the only one. It would be everything. And in the end, it would not just control her, it would become her.

All at once, something captured her attention, a tiny bright patch in the long distance ahead. It was yellow and at first, Maryanne thought it was some sort of light. It grew brighter and more yellow as she approached until her high beams finally reached it. And with the slightest touch of her high beams the little yellow patch exploded with radiant light. But, after staring at it intently for some moments she quickly came to realize that what she was seeing was not a light at all. Incredibly, it seemed it was just a person in some kind of bright clothing.

It was a dress, the *luminous* yellow dress of a girl walking hurriedly along, alone beside the dark road. In the bleak landscape, the radiance of that dress was so uncommonly bright that it seemed to be made of light itself. In view of its starkly unnatural appearance she concluded it must be some strange trick of the mind.

Maryanne sensed the girl in the dress was between about 17 and 22, but probably no older than 24. A hundred yards away, above the low whine of her engine she could hear the crunch of the girl's quick-paced footfalls along the gravelly roadside. There was an anxiousness in her gait and in the heavy beating of her heart. She was alone on a deserted road at midnight and she was frightened. The musky sweet, pungent scent of her was unusually intense, elevated clearly by her fear. Her warm, enticing fragrance saturated the night air. Even from this distance, Maryanne could taste the smell of her and savor the deep rich aroma of her fear.

As she slowed her approach, the walking girl threw a sharp glance over her left shoulder. And then she quickened her pace somewhat. In that instant she could clearly see the girl's large frightened eyes and *feel* the fearful chill and shivers that raced through her body in the humid night.

It would be so easy, she thought.

Maryanne would not even have to think about it. In fact, she wouldn't think about it at all. She would pull up beside the girl, stop the car and spring through the passenger window, faster, much, much faster than an angry Black Mamba on its best day. It would be automatic, like muscle memory. And she would have this walking girl in a fraction of an instant, quicker even than her thoughts could comprehend the moment. Then within seconds, Maryanne would suck and drain every ounce of fluid from her body until the hapless girl was no more than a brittle dry, empty husk no longer recognizable as a human being. And then, in keeping with her practice, she would carefully but quickly crush that brittle remnant to dust and scatter that dust away to the wind. There would be nothing at all left of her remains to interest even the hungriest of worms.

But as Maryanne slowed her automobile, she felt increasingly uncomfortable.

The closer she came to the girl on the road the more distracted she was by thoughts prompted by her yellow dress. The dress was so unnaturally brilliant that Maryanne was completely mystified. It was an inexplicably powerful accent to the gloom of the dull gray landscape. The walking girl had the appearance of someone striding along on a clear, summer afternoon wearing a yellow dress, so bright and radiant that it was almost blinding in the sunlight.

Now, no more than 20 yards away she could feel the girl's apprehension turn to panic. Her head swiveled side to side searching for some refuge from the slow approaching headlights. Maryanne could hear the intensity and the quickening hammer of her heartbeat and sensed the girl was seconds from darting away into the shadowy field to hide.

And the hunger continued to grow inside of her, overwhelming her senses more and more.

It was at this moment that Maryanne realized her perception of the yellow dress had nothing at all to do with the nameless girl on the roadside. It was a trick of the mind. The sight of the girl in the yellow dress had triggered something deeply buried in layers of time. It was the memory of her own dress, the yellow summer dress (her favorite one) that she had worn on her last day on earth as a human being. It was the dress she had died in on that summer evening when she suffered a fatal encounter with a stranger by the side of the road. It was the dress she had worn when she was resurrected and became the undead creature that she was.

She was nineteen then, possibly not one minute older than the hapless girl on the side of the road. They shared that in common. But unlike that girl, Maryanne had been nineteen for well over 100 years. And she would continue to be nineteen until the day she ceased to exist, if and when that day should ever come. The age of this unknown girl would also be frozen in time. Because after their encounter she would be dead.

The girl had not run off to hide in the shadows. Instead, she was standing perfectly still waiting to face the mysterious car that had tracked her movements. Maryanne pulled up beside her and stopped. She could see that the girl's eyes were no longer wide and wild with fear. She stood silently by the passenger door gazing back at Maryanne. Her unwavering dark eyes were steady and squinted down to narrow defiant slits. Clearly, she had chosen to stand her ground. Perhaps she had deluded herself into believing that she had been overreacting and there might not be any danger at all. Perhaps, the driver of the car was just some Good Samaritan offering her a ride. The only way she would know was to see who was in the car. And so, curious and silent, she waited. One hand clutched the strap of her handbag while the other was deep inside to hold (a gun or a knife or a nail file?) something.

Maryanne sat still in the driver's seat, her unmoving hands locked tightly onto the steering wheel. The front passenger window was open and waiting. But Maryanne did not spring through the open window and pounce upon the girl. She did not move at all.

Neither one spoke as they exchanged a silent emotionless stare. All around was dark and still. The only sound was the sound of the car. Its engine idled softly as the long moment passed.

Maryanne stared at the walking girl. But it felt as though she was staring at herself, an unsuspecting girl in a yellow dress on a roadside so many summers ago; an innocent who possessed no understanding of the incredible depths of cruelty that existed in the world. She did not (could not) realize her own fragility, or the imminent crystal reality of her danger. She (a long lost girl locked in a tin type memory) stared quietly at the beast on that night. And now, the beast stared back. And the beast was Maryanne.

Although by now, Maryanne had been all but completely devoured by *the hunger*, her body was frozen in place. Her mind was a jumble of things; sepia tone images of her long ago lost innocence, bright yellow flashes marching along like a flag. And intermingled with the rest was a soft curious face that was at this moment staring at her through the car window. It was the face of the girl on the road. In that face, where she saw herself as well, she was unable to distinguish one from the other. Maryanne sat still in her seat, her fingers unwilling to abandon the steering wheel. So many things flashed and paraded through her mind, that not even the all-compelling hunger could rise through the chaos of her thoughts.

After some moments, a small clear space emerged in her mind and with the last remaining vestige of herself she summoned one quick reflex and mashed the accelerator pedal hard to the floor. Her idling automobile suddenly bolted away into the night, leaving the girl standing alone by the roadside.

As the car quickly careened down the road with steadily increasing speed, Maryanne was overwhelmed by her spinning kaleidoscope of thoughts. She felt weary, suddenly weighted down by the heavy chain of her past deeds; of countless innocent souls that had been slaughtered to continue her existence. She was weary of being always nineteen, weary of being the insatiable monster she was, forever driven and controlled by the hunger. The thought of her constant need to (selfishly!) kill and keep killing in order to feed the hunger was all at once overwhelming and distasteful (how selfish, so, so selfish!)

She just wanted to crawl into a hole and die.

Maryanne sat at the wheel, her car quickly devouring the midnight road. She was very sad. Her mind reeled with dark thoughts; her century of horrible (selfish, cruel!) inhuman deeds. And then, out of the chaos and gloom that had taken over her mind, a clear cogent thought broke through. She would end her tormented existence. She would drive head on into an overpass pillar at 100 miles an hour and obliterate herself completely and forever in a brilliant explosion of gasoline and fire.

Yes, she thought. That is what she would do.

But she didn't.

Instead, something else happened. A switch turned on or a switch turned off. Maryanne never knew which one it was. But all at once she was feeling better, so much so that she wondered briefly why she had been so upset. The catharsis was over as the last feeble vestige of her humanity was swept aside. *The hunger* had won again (of course).

The scenery swept hypnotically past her windows and the sweet rhythms and music from the radio covered her like a warm comforting shawl. She was mesmerized by the passing road and the calming music that stroked and caressed her soul. As she raced through the black night, she could see every tree, fence and mailbox along the way as if it were daytime. She looked at the dark gray clouds up ahead and said out loud to the overcast sky, "It looks like rain."

Maryanne smiled. To her kind, the comment was a joke, because to them the night always seemed like a gray gloomy day. It always looked like rain.

Without thinking at all, she slowed her car and made a u turn. The car seemed almost to turn itself as if by magic or muscle memory. Maryanne was suddenly filled with anticipation and a deep feeling of joy as she headed back up Route 5 to find the girl.

About the Author:

Leonard Henry Scott is a Bronx born and raised graduate of American University, with an MLS from the University of Maryland. He was on the staff of the Library of Congress for many years and presently resides in National Harbor, Maryland. Scott's fiction has recently appeared in; *Mystery Tribune, Sci Phi Journal, The Chamber Magazine, Calliope* and elsewhere.

Candy Store | Gabriella Balcom

Despite the 'Closed' sign on the door, Iona discovered it was unlocked, entered, and admired the twinkling Christmas lights.

She stared wide-eyed at all the goodies, grabbed a scrumptious-looking chocolate, and crammed it into her mouth. She inhaled a mint next, then more treats.

A peppermint stick Iona's height appeared before her, and she shivered, seeing it had a face. It leaned toward her, nipped her shoulder unexpectedly, and she yelled and ran for the door.

Child-sized candies blocked her way. One-by-one, they bit chunks of flesh from her body, ignoring her shrieks. Within seconds, nothing was left of Iona.

Opening One | Gabriella Balcom

James opened his door a crack, strained his ears, but heard nothing. He tiptoed past his parents' room and into the living room.

Masses of gifts surrounded the Christmas tree, but he sulked. He'd begged to open one early, but hadn't been allowed to.

A large, heavy one clinked when James shook it. The tools he'd wanted, maybe? He examined more boxes, felt antsier and antsier, and finally opened one. Discovering cologne, he frowned. Unscrewing the lid, he gaped when gray smoke trickled out, twisting and turning like an undulating snake.

It drifted toward James, enveloped him, and he vanished.

Try Now | Gabriella Balcom

Ever-so-carefully, Corrie lifted stray hairs from Betty's back, then hid them.

Betty noticed her nearby. "Get away, freak!"

"Thief," Corrie thought. "You'll pay."

That evening, she mixed ground-up slugs, toads, Betty's hair, mildew, and goofer dust. Pricking her finger, she added blood drops.

At school the following day, Betty spotted a tiny Christmas-paper-wrapped box, opened it, and found a porcelain container labeled 'Beauty Cream' inside. She slathered the sweet-smelling mixture onto her face.

Gaping pockmarks erupted on her skin. Her nose melted, lips swelling into bulbous masses.

Hearing her loud wails, Corrie murmured, "Try stealing a boyfriend now."

The Next Phase | Gabriella Balcom

Stiffening, the rat toppled over, fluids seeping from its orifices.

"Not bad," Dr. Filan commented. "Faster than before."

Dr. Moon nodded. "If we don't dilute..."

"The reaction would be almost instantaneous."

Two days later, Filan announced, "Time for the next phase."

Moon agreed.

When wisps of gas trickled from its canister, nobody in the theater noticed. People standing collapsed, however. Those sitting slumped sideways or forward.

"Christmas Eve Tragedy," newspaper headlines screamed, blaming it on a gas leak.

A certain group of people knew better and were pleased. The first human trial had been a complete success.

About the Author:

Gabriella Balcom lives in Texas and writes fantasy, horror, romance, sci-fi, literary fiction, and more. She's had 420+ works accepted for publication, and has five books out: On the Wings of Ideas (publishing contract was won), Worth Waiting For (second place winner in an Open Contract Challenge), The Return, Free's Tale: No Home at Christmas-time, and Down with the Sickness and Other Chilling Tales.

Facebook: Gabriella Balcom





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The Demon's Perk | Hillary Lyon

Since Hell froze over, *this* crematorium is my favorite place for unwinding. Some co-workers complain it's too small, they can't stretch out, the tile walls wreck the acoustics, it's too dark until it isn't, then it's too bright. I argue I don't need much space; I like tiny, snug places. As for the tile walls—that makes it easy to clean. Hose it down and you're done. And the acoustics? Don't care. What am I going to do on my time off—sing hymns and gospel songs? And this business about the lights? Again, don't care. The sudden bright light is my doorbell: it means something delightful has arrived. Special delivery!

My front door opens, and in slides what used to be a person. Will such room service spoil me? Nah, I will always be an unholy bastard; it's my true calling. Besides, this deceased person-thing on my table is usually someone I dealt with on Earth—and by dealt with, I mean inflicted all manner of diabolical torments. Believe me, they always deserve it. Says so in the contract they signed with my boss.

But back to my little home-away-from home. Being so compact this spot really intensifies the heat. And I unabashedly admit I'm sentimental; this place reminds me of my permanent home down below. Until I finish my work here—though it looks like that's going to take literally forever—my little tile kingdom fits me just fine.

Sure, it gets noisy, briefly, and at the same time comes blinding light. But that flash and roar lets me know the relaxing part of my day is about to materialize. Like magic, piles and piles of the softest ash appear on the long table in the center of my humble abode. It's so fine, you could use it as baby powder, if your infant was an undead monster, like I was. Mother still has a baby picture of me lying on a nun-skin rug (Order of Carmelites, I believe).

I love playing with this stuff—build ash castles, create armies of round little ash-men. Then they go to war! Every one of them, and their castles, get obliterated with one blistering breath from my lizardly lips—I never get enough of war and devastation. And then I lie down on the table and make ash angels, er, demons.

Sometimes I smooth the ash with my long prehensile tale, and draw all sorts of portraits and landscapes with my needle-sharp claws. Some are goofy and crude—especially when I render politicians—render, get it? As in melting the fat off their bones?

I'm well known for being very imaginative in my line of business. But it's a different kind of creativity, more along the lines of devising original, heavy-handed tortures and mortifications of the mind and flesh. Because I'm so good producing one soul-crushing, madness-birthing horror-show after another, I was granted exclusive residency here, in my tiny, tiled home. My perfect little perk.

Believe me, I earned it.

About the Author:

With a Masters in English Lit, Hillary Lyon founded and for 20 years acted as senior editor for the independent poetry publisher, Subsynchronous Press. Her speculative fiction, science fiction, horror, and crime short stories and poems have appeared in numerous print and online publications. She's also an SFPA Rhysling Award nominated poet. When not writing, Hillary is the assistant art director for *Black Petals*.

Blog: Hillary Lyon



Sneaking into Danger | JB Corso

The glaring danger signs with their bright colors and explicit warnings weren't enough of a deterrent to quell Ronald's childhood curiosity. He interpreted their presence as an adventure. He grabbed his best friend's small hand in his. They crossed through a tight gap in the hastily installed chain fence gate. An elevated camera bubble tracked their movement to a monitor in an off-site camper office.

"Ronnie, I don't want to go in there," Holland argued as he was dragged up the cracked road. "Let me go."

"It's fine. Just stick with me. There's nothing to worry about."

"What about the signs?" Deep concern etched atop his words.

"It's probably just to keep away tourists and junkies."

They crossed up a small embankment to the top of a hill overlooking a wide prairie that infested across a forgotten back country road. A second row of posted warnings at the grassy edge declared the area as a bio-hazard threat. A series of hidden cameras focused on their progress forward.

"See, just more signs. If they wanted this place off limits, there would be dudes with guns or autocannons. This is just adult stuff that doesn't really mean anything. Maybe we'll get to see aliens or something." Holland's attention peaked. "You really think we'll see real life aliens?"

"Like Big Poppa says, you don't know," Ronnie flashed a learned salesman's smile, "until you know."

"Okay, I'm in. Just let go of my hand." Holland shook his grip free.

The two boys scampered down the broken road to its end at the unnatural grassy expanse.

"Why are the blades orange, Ronnie? I ain't never seen nothing like it."

Ronnie assessed the field with false expertise. "Could be where they take the aliens to pee."

Holland took a step closer. He stopped. A primal fear gripped his logical thoughts. "I don't know, Ronnie. I don't like the look of it."

"You're scared."

"I ain't scared, but I don't trust some orange alien pee grass, neither."

Ronnie waded through his own concerns. His bountiful ego overrode ballooning worries. "How dangerous can orange grass be?"

"Okay, hero-boy, I'll follow you," Holland said with a gulp.

Ronald led Holland forward. Terrible whispers of horrors and shame filled their ears. The overpowering scent of rotting death sifted up through their progress.

Ronald turned towards his companion. His face became pale like a river stone.

"Hol, we need to go back. Something's wrong."

He realized that the grass they wandered into were actually paper-thin, orange fingers, each topped with crusty nails.

Waves of grass wrapped around their gym shoes. Their progress stopped in a second.

"What's happening, Ronnie?"

"Run, Hol."

"I can't."

A batch of orange hands broke through the soft dirt. They extended upward on rotting arms up the short legs. Cracked fingernails dug their jeans, impaling their thighs and calves. Shrill, panicked shrieks filled the early morning air. The boys' ankles and knees snapped as they were pulled below. Their screams faded under the soil.

Uncle Lawrence | JB Corso

"I don't have any better ideas than you've had so far, Sarah." Jennie ran her fingers through her hair.

"How in the hell are we supposed to live like this?" Sarah asked herself as much as her wife. Her foot tapped the carpet.

"Let's move," Jennie quipped in flustered desperation. "Let's just pack up what we can in your SUV and head anywhere." She stared at the translucent apparition sitting on the couch, smiling at them.

"It's your uncle. You figure this out." Sarah's arms held locked across her sweatshirt. She switched her bouncing foot.

"I didn't invite him."

"When is breakfast?" Uncle Lawrence asked Sarah with an extended East-coast drawl. He sat forward on their living room couch with hands steepled between his knees. His face expressed a look of concerned curiosity.

"For the ten-thousandth fucking time, I don't know."

He turned to Jennie. "Is it time for breakfast?"

"That's it," Sarah dropped her arms. "You two can figure out when breakfast is. There's no way I'm going to be okay staying here with him around." She gazed out the window into the night.

"Baby, please don't go. I can't do this without you. The Conways are having the same issue. It's like the dead have nowhere to go. But none of these ghosts seem to have any ill intention. I mean, he just sits there asking about the same damn thing." Jennie sat forward.

"When is breakfast?" he asked, cocking his see-through head.

"I'm going to a hotel." Sarah panned over the room, searching for her purse and coat.

"Baby, they're in the hotels, too. The news reported that earlier today. Someone posted about being bothered by one at a Stay-With-Us Inn. It followed her to four rooms before she left."

"Can I have breakfast?" Uncle Lawrence asked Jennie.

"I'll camp out in my car somewhere if I need to. I've a blanket in the back."

Jennie fell to her knees. "Sarah, please. I'm as confused and frustrated as everyone, including *you*." She shuffled closer across the carpet. "I'm literally begging you, baby."

He looked at Sarah. "When is breakfast?"

Sarah closed her eyes to calm her expanding rage.

"Please," Jennie caught her beloved's hand and rubbed her wedding ring. "You promised for better or worse."

"That didn't include dealing with your dead fucking relative."

"It didn't not include that." Jennie fought back a nervous smile.

Uncle Lawrence shifted his attention to Jennie. "When is breakfast?"

Sarah broke away and stomped towards the apparition. She leaned in until their noses almost touched. "It's in the fucking morning, asshole."

He nodded with appreciation. "Thank you. I'll see you ladies then."

Uncle Lawrence stood and stepped through Sarah towards their front door, passing into the night. The couple stared at their door with stunned expressions.

"I guess we'll have to wait and see if he comes back for breakfast," Jennie said with a nervous chuckle.

Catching Teeth | JB Corso

I'm working my way upward through the empty guts of the fifty-seven floor office tower just a mile from the city center. Colonel Suihe implied that the structure is designated to become a new command hub and refugee center for our district. It's taken me several long weeks, but I've somehow managed to clear out thirty floors without being bitten. That's a damn record these days. Most of my partners weren't as lucky.

Rockrock caught teeth yesterday at the end of a sweep. Some straggler he missed. They found a large bite on his lower back when he stripped down for the end-of-shift inspection. I can't imagine the fear he went through, knowing his last hours were upon him. He received a quick hero's death in the incinerator. At least his wife and kids will get a good payout. Maybe she can buy their way into the Free Zone and escape into a new life. Here's to you, buddy.

The only way to kill the dead anymore is with fire. It seems that the afterlife has closed its doors and we must be the Grim Reapers for the walking nightmares. Our bullets and bombs stopped working after their last evolution. Who knew that corpses could evolve? The scientists said that, even when their brains become damaged these days, their nerves have developed some ability to regroup in odd ways and continue to function equally well. Burning the bodies with copious amounts of fire seems to be the most effective solution.

My illustrious job is to draw them out into the open and run past the fire teams who spray the dead with a chemical flame that burns flesh and not building materials. The concoction allows us to clean residences, offices, and other useful places without burning the structures down. A little paint and you'd never know we'd burnt some corpses to ash in that same room. Dr. Josephine McMasters won the Nobel Prize for that innovation. It literally saved civilization from living in caves out in the middle of the wilderness. We'd done that for months before getting word that she'd developed something special.

Doing my job is fine when it's one or two of those things in an open area. But, when I have to lure aggressive hordes from pitch-black warehouses or winding sewers, the job ain't so easy anymore. But, it beats being one of the burners who come home covered in corpse soot and smelling like burnt death every day. While my comrades in the darkness have night terrors of being outnumbered and eaten, the burners carry fresh memories of screaming, shrieking corpses that pop and sizzle to their crispy end.

Time to get back to it. These rooms aren't going to clear themselves. Only twenty-seven floors to go. I'm sure I'll be fine. After this building, there's only another couple dozen infested high rises. Maybe my transfer will get approved before then. I'm not hopeful.

About the Author:

JB Corso is a healthcare professional working to better the lives of vulnerable people. They enjoy spending time with their supportive wife, writing daily, and finding joy in the world. Their author's motto is "Developing stories into masterpieces." They have been published in both fiction and professional outlets.

Facebook: JB Corso

Snowflake | Lee Andrew Forman

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

About the Author:

Lee Andrew Forman is a writer, editor, and publisher from the Hudson Valley region in New York. Lee has published three books to date, *The Bury Box, Zero Perspective*, and *Fragments of a Damned Mind*, along with numerous short stories in multiple anthologies. He is a co-owner of *Sirens Call Publications*, a regular contributor to *The Lift*, and writes non-fiction pieces for various periodicals.

Instagram: @leeandrewforman
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The Stuff of Nightmares: My Relationship with Horror Media

One of my earliest memories involves me at age four in the basement of our split-level home in Ohio. Clad in Disney princess pajamas, I hide behind the couch watching *Are You Afraid of the Dark?*, only peeking out at the not-so-scary parts. In the nineties, horror for children experienced a massive boom. Shows like the aforementioned *Are You Afraid of the Dark?* and *Goosebumps* (an adaptation of the popular book series, which I'll delve into shortly) appeared in prime-time slots, and made-for-TV movies like *Don't Look Under the Bed*, *Under Wraps*, and *The Little Vampire* ushered in a fresh new crop of baby horror fans. If you were a creepy kid with a budding interest in the macabre, you had a bevy of entertainment options to choose from.

It's almost impossible to imagine the 1990s without *Fear Street* and *Goosebumps*. Although *Fear Street* was slightly before my time—and aimed at an older audience—I discovered and devoured the *Goosebumps* book series. As a kid with a vivid imagination, I was prone to nightmares—and night *terrors*. For those of you unfamiliar with night terrors, they are extremely vivid nightmares that often spill over into the person's half-awake consciousness. So, even if I could escape an awful night terror, sometimes I'd wake up and see the flash of a terrifying image from the night terror—prompting me, most times, to scream so my mom would come running.

Naturally, my love for spooky media didn't help. The more episodes of *Are You Afraid of the Dark?* I watched, and the more *Goosebumps* books (and later, TV episodes) I took in, the more prevalent my nightmares became. You'd think I'd be smart enough to stop consuming dark media at this point. You'd be wrong.

Eventually, I became desensitized to kids' horror. I stopped having nightmares. As I grew, I discovered horror movies streaming on AMC around Halloween. I was often home alone for an hour or two after school, and it was during this time I watched *A Nightmare on Elm Street, Scream*, and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* unsupervised. The nightmares returned, as did the unscratchable itch to consume and discover more terrifying content. I began renting horror movies to watch, seeking titles with an R rating, and convinced my parents I could watch them because they were "so much scarier than the PG-13 titles" that were more age appropriate.

Regarding my upbringing, my parents raised me religious—reasonably conservative, but not completely sheltered. For example, I couldn't read the Harry Potter books until I was sixteen, but as I mentioned, my parents didn't mind me reading or watching content that was above my "pay grade," so to speak. At one point, my mom tried to read semi-inappropriate books before me to get a sense of their content, but she soon realized that given how fast I devoured books, she just couldn't keep up. Thus, she left me to my own devices.

Still, I delved deeper and deeper into consuming horror media. I watched progressively more horrifying films until discovering one that truly shook me to my core—*Martyrs*, a French exploitation film. I was sleeping over at my friend Ryan's house when he suggested we put on a French horror flick I'd never heard of. To my shock, dismay, and eventual delight, *Martyrs* remains one of the most disturbing films I've ever seen. I've only watched it once. That film left an indelible impression on me. I wanted to scare people. I wanted to make them feel something when taking in my work.

Soon, I read Stephen King's *Cujo*, and I was hooked on horror fiction. I began writing darker stories, often with psychological twists, as that was the horror I liked most. In school, when I submitted a fiction writing assignment, my teachers praised the writing itself, though they didn't love the subject. Still, I kept writing. That was what I enjoyed.

In college, I continued consuming every morsel of horror media I could get my hands on. In my freshman year, the first season of *American Horror Story* premiered. I was hooked. I kept reading horror books and studying what made them scary. Armed with my new knowledge, and inspired by the resurgence of horror in popular culture (or cable TV, at least), I dove headfirst into my creative writing program, writing the darkest material I'd ever created.

In most universities in the United States, they encourage creative writing students (read: *force*) to write literary fiction. Most professors expect submissions of stories about cheating men in middle-aged crises, mothers grieving the sudden loss of children, older adults reflecting on the misdeeds of their youth, etc. While there's nothing wrong with literary fiction, genre fiction is more popular and commercially successful. Clearly, horror has always appealed to me. So, even while forced to write stories with a more literary bent, I often got notes in

workshops about my pieces being too "dark and twisted," "unnecessarily bleak," or even "over-the-top" as far as violence and sentimentality were concerned.

For some time, I let this feedback influence my writing career. I tried to make my peace with writing literary fiction. Overall, I improved as a writer, and I got more positive feedback from my professors and peers, but was I happy? Far from it. In fact, during this time, I came to dread writing. Whenever I sat in front of a blank page, instead of my usual excitement at the prospect of a project's potential, I felt trapped. I put off my homework. I stopped writing outside of my assignments. Eventually, I grew miserable.

During this time, I still found solace in horror movies, TV shows, and books. Outside of my required reading for classes, I read Stephen King, Dean Koontz, and any other horror or thriller I could find. I took mental notes about what made these books scary and yearned for a day I could incorporate my observations into my writing. With three more years of college to go, I couldn't see an end in sight.

Well, the end came. When I graduated from college, armed with a BA in English and no clue what to do next, I moved to Florida to start my first job as a digital marketing analyst. In Florida, I was utterly alone. I had no friends or family there—just my cat Mystee and my online writing community. As my job grew more toxic, and I failed to establish bonds with any locals, I became depressed and suicidal. I drank heavily. I rarely slept. I cried myself to sleep each night, only to wake at three in the morning and cry myself to sleep again. In short, I was miserable.

The only thing that got me through my lowest point was writing. Shortly before arriving in Florida, my grandfather had passed away. When I was a child, he'd instilled a love of storytelling in me. His passing made me mourn the passion and creativity of my youth, which made me decide to pursue writing again. This time, I'd finish and publish a book. This time I'd write what I wanted.

In Florida, I drafted my debut YA horror novel *Blood and Water*, about a group of teenagers surviving in the wake of a pandemic (yeah, I know). It also focused on the themes of found family and overcoming grief. That book got me through a lot of difficult times. It's nowhere near perfect, but I'll always be grateful for all it did for me and all it gave me. I self-published the book in 2015. Much to my amazement, and undoubtedly the shock of my professors, many readers enjoyed it. I'd finally expressed my love of horror to the public, and they rewarded me for being authentic to myself. It was intoxicating. I've never looked back.

As an adult, I still love consuming and creating horror content. My favorite video games are horror titles, and my reading list is primarily horror. With each book I put out, I write what scares me in hopes it might scare at least one other person too. Horror keeps me going, and so I'm still writing. I don't think I'll ever stop.

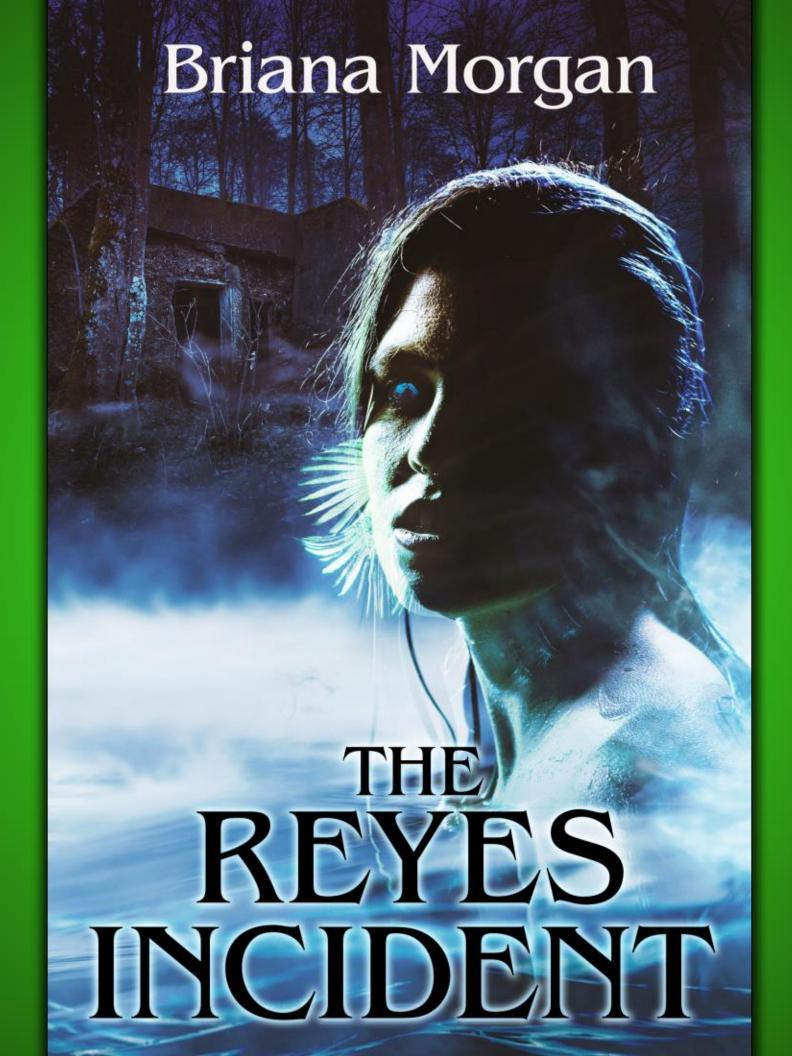
About the Author:

Briana Morgan (she/her) is an award-winning horror author and playwright. Her books include *The Reyes Incident, Mouth Full of Ashes, The Tricker-Treater and Other Stories,* and more. She's a proud member of the Horror Writers Association and the Alliance of Independent Authors. When not writing, Briana enjoys gaming, watching scary movies, and reading disturbing books.

Briana lives in Atlanta with her partner and two cats.

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DAWSONVILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT INCIDENT REPORT

CASE NO: 543

DATE: October 16, 2022

REPORTING OFFICER: N/A; Eyewitness Report

PREPARED BY: Officer Paul Wesson

<u>DETAIL OF EVENT:</u> Witness is female, Hispanic, approximately 24 years of age. Arrived at 22:36 EST on October 16, 2022. Witness appears disheveled. Possible injuries to chest, face, and mouth; possible internal bleeding. Witness declined medical help.

Witness claims to have knowledge surrounding the alleged disappearances of multiple Dawsonville residents aged 18 to approximately 25. Witness requested to speak with the first available officer. Initial statement taken at 23:15 EST by Chief Roger Alameda. Further investigation is required.

Witness escorted to the interview room at 23:00 EST. Investigation pending by Sergeant Andrea McCollum.

<u>ACTIONS TAKEN:</u> Assigned to Sergeant McCollum by Chief Alameda. Sergeant McCollum to conduct an in-depth interview.

Chapter One

Andie

"You're being reassigned," Dad said.

I'd just gotten to the station, and the last thing I expected was for my father to corner me, let alone reassign me. I looked around at my colleagues, wondering why he'd selected me out of everyone else. The case I had been working on involved petty theft. Not that I didn't think the theft was important, it just didn't captivate me. So, the reassignment piqued my interest.

My wife Joy and I had been having problems at home, too, and the theft case barely even distracted me from that.

"What about my current case?" I asked.

"I'll get to that. Come to my office."

Not having much choice, I followed him. My steaming mug of coffee bounced as we walked. Dad led me back to his office, which I could've found in the dark. You don't spend seven years at the same precinct without memorizing its interior layout. Someone had flung open the door, but I could still make out his name in golden letters on the outside: ROGER ALAMEDA, CHIEF, DAWSONVILLE POLICE DEPARTMENT. He'd been the chief for a long time, way back before I'd been born. He could've been the chief for centuries.

Dad gestured to the metal folding chair in front of his desk. "Please, Sergeant, have a seat."

I set my mug down on the edge of his desk and sat. Dad shut his office door before coming around to the other side. He sat in his big wingback chair, rocking as he contemplated whatever he wanted to say.

"Have you... have you been keeping up with missing person reports?"

I frowned. Missing persons wasn't typically my beat, and I'd only been involved in a handful of those cases through the years. As far as recent disappearances went, I didn't have a clue.

He must have known that.

"Not exactly."

"Hm." Dad stopped rocking. "What about homicide?"

I leaned forward in my seat. "I've never covered homicide. I'm not exactly qualified—"

"You're qualified if I say you are. And I say you are, Andie." Dad waved me off. "Gonna argue with me?"

"No, sir." I didn't like where this was going. Icy fingers of dread dug into my stomach. He must have had a good reason if he wanted me to handle a homicide case. Wesson was much more qualified to handle this case, as he'd worked homicide for a decade. Even Hopewell would fit better, and she only had two years of homicide experience.

With investigating murders, I was greener than the grass in front of the precinct.

"This case," said Dad, "is not one to be taken on lightly. I wouldn't reassign you if I didn't think you could handle it."

I nodded, though saying I felt less than confident would have been an understatement. My gaze drifted to the mug on his desk, still steaming, still untouched. Now, I felt too jittery to contemplate drinking coffee.

"Review the report and get back to me. If you have any doubts, conflicts of interest, or anything, I can give it to someone else, but I think you're the woman for the job. Do you trust me, Andie?"

I didn't have a choice, but yes, of course I did.

"I've looked over the case file, and this is gonna be a difficult one," Dad added. "Still, I wouldn't put you on it if I didn't think it was something you could handle, all right?"

I sighed. He had a point. Although I was his daughter, I'd also been on the force long enough to handle almost anything. I'd proven myself, several times over. Surely whatever he had for me this time wouldn't be so different.

"She's waiting for you," he said. "Might want to offer her coffee or something."

I nodded. The conversation as he saw it was over. I didn't bother asking any follow-up questions, and he didn't stop me as I got up and walked away. My dad had always been a man of few words. Working in the public sector improved his social skills some, but he still struggled with the ends of conversations.

Mostly, I hadn't inherited that trait. I hadn't been popular in high school, but I did well enough. I had friends. Now, as a police officer, I got along with most people. Even the criminals I brought in didn't hate me much. I tried to see all of them as people whose circumstances I could never fully understand. Whatever crime they committed was wrong, but that didn't mean they deserved to be treated as less of a person because of it.

We'd all done things we weren't proud of. I had no right to pass judgment on another person, just as they had no right to judge me.

Few people shared my worldview living in a small town.

Even before I spoke to Liv Reyes, I knew she'd gotten used to judgment. Although I didn't know her story, her body language told me she was ready to be discredited—arms crossed, chin lowered, eyes staring straight ahead. Defiant.

I thought back to what Dad had told me. This was a missing person case with notes of homicide. Was I well-equipped to handle anything like that, or was Dad setting me up to fail?

A muscle jerked in my jaw. I pushed the question away and got ready to do my damn job.

I found her in the first interview room sitting in a metal chair. Her dark eyes pierced a hole through me. I recognized that look—*distrust*, likely from previous encounters with the law.

I'd need to get through that to make her see me as a person. I just wanted to connect. I wanted to help. Once she understood that, I was sure we'd get along.

She stood when I walked in. I offered her my hand, and she shook it.

"Hello. I'm Sergeant Andrea McCollum."

"Olivia Reyes. Everyone calls me Liv." She sat, crossing her legs. Her clothes were clean—I recognized them as lost-and-found attire that no one had claimed—but the rest of her was not. A long, angry scratch ran across her right cheek, and blood flecked the edges of her mouth.

"Did they take your clothes?" I asked.

She nodded. "Said something about a lab."

Perfect. They were already looking for evidence.

"Do you need someone to take you to the hospital?" I asked.

"I'm not..." she trailed off, then tried again. "Most of this blood isn't mine. I want to tell you how it happened."

She winced, clutching her arm. Her face contorted in pain.

"You sure you don't need a medic?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I have fibromyalgia. It'll pass, I think."

I took the recorder out of my pocket and set it on the table between us. My finger hovered over the RECORD button.

"Do you consent to being recorded?"

"Would it matter if I didn't?"

I didn't answer. I hit RECORD. Liv shifted in her seat and cleared her throat.

"Sergeant Andrea McCollum recording an eyewitness intake interview," I said. Then, to Liv: "Please restate your name for the record, Ms. Reyes."

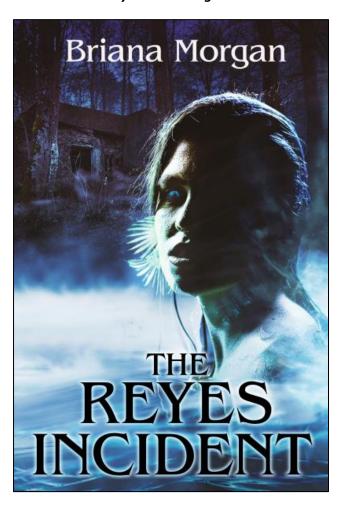
"Olivia Reyes. When can I start?"

"You can start now."

She took a deep breath. "This might be the strangest thing you've ever heard, but I have to put it out there. I'm hoping this gives you cause to send someone out for a search. I don't know where to start."

I leaned forward in my chair. "Let's go with the beginning."

The Reyes Incident
by Briana Morgan



Available on Amazon!



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