

# The Sirens Call



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*A Dark Fiction  
Horror eZine*

*Short Stories, Flash  
Fiction, Poetry,  
and Artwork for  
Horror Fans!*

*Featured Interview  
and Artwork by  
Artist Simon Walpole*

*An Interview with  
author Alex Woolf,  
plus an excerpt  
from 'The RIP'*

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## The Pale Girl | *Alex Woolf*

Saul's mother had often warned him against pale women. She would not have approved of the young lady who was currently eyeing him up. For the third time in as many minutes he'd noticed the girl's dark eyes on him, singling him out from across the bar. She seemed to be on her own. Her skin looked smooth, fine-grained, like marble or ivory—and of a similar hue.

No, his mother would not have approved. But that was just her natural anxiety—and her prejudice. She was probably thinking of the stories, or of events long ago, in her own childhood. He remembered as a boy hearing rumors of incidents in faraway places, in more exotic climes. But this was London in the year 2018. There was even now a fashion in the city among some of the more daring young women—reversing centuries of tradition—for the 'pale look'. They did it to shock, of course—shock their parents, shock the establishment. They also did it because they knew that, deep down, men were attracted to it. Certainly in the case of this one, it was her skin above all that fascinated him. There was something about its cool, almost translucent quality. It made her look detached, aloof, unpossessable—a challenge. There was also something of the tomb about it. And death, in these health-fixated, nutritionally enhanced times, was strangely sexy. He wondered what it would be like to touch.

It was edging towards nine-thirty, and Connor wasn't responding to his texts. He was usually reliable. The night out had been Connor's idea anyway, and Saul was seriously considering returning to his flat and his studies. But he didn't move—not immediately. Not while there was this eye thing going on with the pale stranger across the room. If Connor came in to find Saul chatting up a pretty girl—how cool would that be!

The next time their eyes met, he tried smiling, and she responded with one of her own. Her eyes registered surprise and embarrassment, but her parted lips, gently raised at the corners, seemed to hint at something else—attraction? His heart began beating double time. Such a smile was as clear an invitation as a boy ever got. Saul descended from his stool and carried his drink through the crowded room to where she sat. He wished right now he wasn't the shy type. He so wanted to be the suave loungebar prince for whom this sort of encounter happened routinely. There was no time even to rehearse an opening line. This had happened before. Those bastard hormones, they drove him into situations that his brain, his stomach, his nerves simply weren't up to. Normally at least he'd have Connor on hand, who was a far better talker and better able to bridge those awkward pauses with his inane conversational muzak. Now he'd have to manage on his own.

“Hello. Is this seat taken?” He nodded at the stool next to hers.

She looked at him. Her eyes were not entirely dark but had hints of green fire in their depths—her skin flawless, even up close. “No,” she said in a low, foreign-accented voice, her deep red lips curving into a knowing smile. “You are welcome to take it. I don't even like it anyway.”

*Did she just make a joke?* Saul froze. There was nothing more scary than a girl with a sense of humor. She must have seen his face fall, because she seemed to take pity on him. "Sit down. Please."

Saul took his place, feeling almost expected.

"Can I buy you a drink?" Now he sounded like a john. He should have introduced himself first.

She shook her head.

"I'm Saul by the way. And you are?"

He didn't hear her reply, which was mumbled anyway, because of the loud music. This end of the bar was much closer to the speakers.

"You're not local, are you?" he said.

"Sorry. What you say?"

Saul put his mouth close to her ear. "You're not from around here!"

"How can you know?"

"Your accent."

"What?"

"The way you talk."

She looked at him, and Saul found himself fixated on the deep emerald light that danced in her eyes.

"So where are you from then?" he asked.

"What it matters where I from? Only important thing is where we are going. Yez?"

Then he felt her hand on his arm as she raised her deep red mouth to his ear. "Do you want to go somewhere else?" she purred.

*What the hell!* thought Saul, as the blood thumped in his ears. *Yes, why the hell not? Connor wasn't going to show tonight anyway.* Next thing, he was following her slender, sinuous figure in its black, sheath-like dress towards the exit. From her shoulder swung a black, surprisingly large bag.

"Do you want to go to hotel?" she asked him when they were on the street. It sounded like *how-tell*.

*This was all too easy,* thought Saul. *Was she a professional?* He wondered how he could frame the question politely. "Are you by any chance—?" he began.

"There is how-tell not too far by taxi."

*Taxi?*

"Will you be expecting me to pay?" he asked.

"For taxi?"

He'd meant for what would follow.

"I don't have much money with me," he admitted.

She smiled at him again, and he relaxed.

"You smell very nice," she commented.

Saul silently blessed his Coyote Powerscent deodorant.



“We could go to my flat,” he suggested, still thinking about the cost. “It’s only fifteen minutes away.”

“That sounds like a good plot,” said the girl. At times she sounded East European—at others, just odd, like no accent he’d ever heard.

A minute later, she waved down a taxi.

While he gave the driver instructions, he felt her hand on him, gently pressing through his shirt, just above the belt. In the taxi she began kissing him passionately. For Saul this was all much too fast.

He broke free of her embraces. “What’s your name?” he asked.

She mumbled something between kisses. It sounded like Desva? Disva? Dishva? He couldn’t be sure.

By the time the taxi stopped outside his block nineteen minutes later, her hand was stroking the front of his trousers. Her sexual assault on him—for that was almost what it felt like—continued in the elevator as they rose towards the tenth floor. Saul went along with it because he lacked the confidence to take charge, because he was excited by the idea of a girl taking the lead, and because he never knew when a chance like this might come his way again—but in truth he was a little overwhelmed.

Saul’s neighbour, old Mrs. Venson, opened the door of her flat just a crack, as she often did, on hearing the creak of floorboards in the hallway. Saul searched his pockets for his front door key, nodding and smiling at Mrs. Venson while Dishva giggled and licked his ear.

He broke away from her when they got inside his apartment. He needed the toilet. Nerves probably. “Make yourself at home,” he smiled at her, switching on the television with the remote control. “I’ll be back in a second.” In the bathroom, he checked himself out in the mirror. He’d seen a similar expression on the face of his niece’s hamster after the three-year-old had been playing with it.

When he came out, he saw that Deshva had located the half a bottle of white wine in the fridge and poured two glasses. “Nazhdra,” she said to him, raising a glass. Or it may have been ‘Nezhdrove’—she spoke so unclearly.

“Nizhdre,” attempted Saul as they clinked glasses and then drank.

“Do you hev bid?”

“Bid?”

“Yes. To schlip in. And for make the lov.”

“You mean *bed*?”

“Bed. Yes.”

On the television, the news lady was reporting the disappearance of another young man—the fifth since the Wednesday.

Saul led Disva to the bedroom. She didn’t seem bothered by the mess of open books, coffee cups and clothes, nor intrigued, as many were, by the blown-up, luridly colored photos of insects on his wall—by-products of his PhD studies in entomology. She went straight to the bed where she lay down on her back and looked up at him. “You want to make the lov with me?”

Saul dimmed the lights and lay down next to her on the messed up sheets. They began kissing, and soon, almost without him being aware of the process, they were naked. Desva took the lead at every stage, and Saul increasingly felt like a sex toy, being used purely for another person's gratification. That this person happened to be an attractive young woman excited him certainly, but the whole experience was also becoming stressful and something of an ordeal. He felt under pressure to keep pace with her, but arousal was taking longer than usual, and the harder she worked him with her mouth and hand, the less hard he became. He was also slightly perturbed by the scent now coming off her, beneath the cheap perfume—the smell of her sweat, which was cloyingly, almost rancidly sweet.

Eventually, semi-flaccid, he managed to enter her, and once inside, friction, along with some expert contractions of her internal muscles, did its work. He couldn't be sure whether she climaxed—it was all a bit of a blur at the end. In the still aftermath, as he lay there, giddy pleasure and relief subsiding into sleepiness, he felt her eyes on him, studying his body. In the half light, her eyes and mouth seemed bigger than before—almost catlike. He buried most of his face beneath the sheets to block out her strange, unpleasant odor.

Suddenly she sprang up and jumped out of bed. "I'm hungry," she declared. "Is time to eat."

*Is time to sleep*, thought Saul, but he reluctantly got up and followed her naked body into the kitchen, his eyes slightly mesmerized by the bounce of her pale buttocks as she walked. Dazedly, he watched her pour oil into a frying pan and light the gas hob.

"I haven't got much food in," he said, going to the fridge and peering inside. He took out some turkey steaks from the freezer section and put them on the countertop next to her.

She ignored them and turned to him. Her lipstick was smudged; her mouth looked swollen and wet; her eyes were big—bigger than before. "Now oil is hot. Ready for meat." In her hand he noticed she was carrying a utensil. He had no idea where she got it from. It was a knife that forked at the end into two blades: one was straight and pointed, the other was curved into a hook. She looked excited, flushed and sweating, as she cheerfully plunged it into Saul's waist. Bright cold pain seared him. He screamed, and the pain intensified as she withdrew the implement. A blood-soaked morsel of pink flesh adhered to the hook part of the blade. Blood oozed out of the circular hole she'd made in him. He fell sideways, crashing into a set of drawers. His hands were clamped to his side, but blood was escaping between the fingers, pouring down his leg and pooling on the white lino around his feet. Half fainting from the shock and the pain, he saw her pluck his flesh from the blade and toss it into the frying pan where it began to sizzle and turn white.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Alex Woolf is the author of over 20 commercially published novels and chapter books aimed at young and YA readers. They include *Soul Shadows*, a horror novel about cannibalistic shadows, shortlisted for the 2014 Red Book Award, and *Ship of the Dead*, about a zombie attack on a cruise ship. He's also had numerous adult stories published by Sirens Call Publications, Strange Circle, and Vagabondage Press.

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Amazon: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Alex-Woolf/e/B001HPNS4C/>



When the dust settles, who will ultimately reign supreme  
on Mictlan?



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## **Mirror, Mirror** | *Christopher Stanley*

Beauty tips the key into the palm of her hand and returns the vase to her mum's dresser. She uses the key to unlock the chest in her mum's wardrobe and from this she removes an envelope. Inside, there's a note and a pair of gold and diamond Claddagh studs—the ones the gypsy woman gave to Beauty's aunt. The note says: 'For Beauty's 18th birthday'. Beauty's not supposed to have them until tomorrow.

Back in her own bedroom, Beauty flicks her eyelashes with mascara. She presses the studs into her ears and admires her reflection, wondering if her aunt looked half as pretty.

"Breakfast is ready," calls her mum.

"I'm not hungry."

College is a contrast of bold chat up lines and shy smiles from boys who may never have the courage to speak to her. She examines her face in the lid of her metal pencil case, studies her hair in the toilets between classes and practices looking demure in the changing rooms after hockey.

Back home, after a minimal supper, Beauty is drawn upstairs under the pretence of homework. In front of the mirror, she fusses with her fringe and checks for freckles. She tucks her hair back and is surprised when she sees her ears.

"You should spend more time in the real world," says her mum, lingering in the door.

"Get out."

Her mum returns to her own room, saying "You love your reflection."

Beauty stares at the mirror. She knows she's wearing the studs but her reflection's ears are naked. She leans forward and so does her reflection, staring into Beauty's eyes, whispering, "Come closer."

Beauty jumps up and flees the room, searching the other bedrooms, yelling for her mum, but all she finds are mirrors on every wall. On the landing she sees her grinning face reflected in a dozen wall-mounted stars. She steps back and misses the top step of the stairs, flying and then falling.

The following morning she is eighteen years old. She sits on the wrong side of her bedroom mirror while her reflection sings "Happy birthday to me," with an accent that speaks of far off places. She watches her reflection take a cotton pad, blot it with lotion and wipe it across her face, clearing a path through layers of blush. "Your aunt was pretty," says her reflection. "But you really live up to your name." She takes another cotton pad, dabs it with coconut oil, and strokes the mascara from her eyelashes, saying "It's so good to be young again." Then she ties her hair back with a rubber band, revealing the gold and diamond Claddagh studs in her ears. As she gets up to leave, she says "See you around, maybe." Beauty wants to scream but instead she utters a perfectly synchronised "See you around, maybe."

And then she's gone.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Christopher Stanley lives on a hill in England with three sons who share a birthday but aren't triplets. In his spare time, he writes dragons into people's basements



and monsters into the plumbing. His stories have been published in The Arcanist, The Molotov Cocktail and Calendark: The Infernal Almanac.

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## **This Little Piggy Said** | *Copper Rose*

“It’s your turn to drop the blade of the miniature guillotine.”

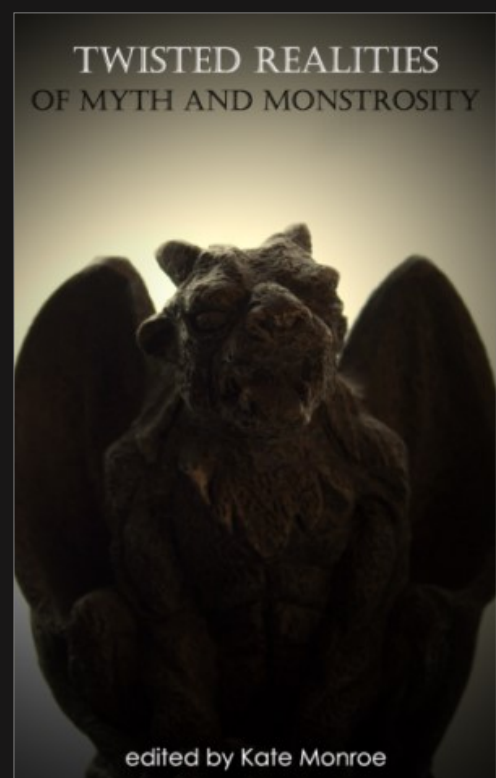
Clarice didn’t want to but she knew the truth. She had run through the cellar, plucked the cobwebs and pulled the dangle cord on the light. She had bolted up the steps through the kitchen. She had skidded across the porch, vaulted over the railing and thumped onto the dry grass. Grandmother pretended it was the lawn. Grandmother also pretended she didn’t care if she was missing a little toe. All the first daughters of the Cleary Clan were missing their little toe by the time they were twelve.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Copper Rose perforates the edges of the page while writing unusual stories from the heart of Wisconsin. You can connect with her (and her alter egos) on Facebook at Once Upon A Blank Page by Julie C. Eger, and on Amazon. She also understands there really is something about pie.

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/-/e/B07BDHG6XK>

## **Twisted Realities: Of Myth and Monstrosity**

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## Suits Me Quite Well | *Sophie Kearing*

“She’s our age, but she looks *half* that!” Mother complains to Aunt Olivia as we stroll down the sidewalk.

My aunt snickers. “The woman is lifted and lasered and Botoxed within an inch of her life!”

They’re talking about Lydia, who owns the boutique we’re about to enter. They’re still tittering when we pull open the heavy glass door.

The object of our scrutiny calls to us, “Welcome, ladies!”

My eyes flit from Lydia to a coral sundress. I whisper, “I don’t think she looks *that* young.”

“That’s because you’re only sixteen,” Mother says before joining my aunt at a display of colorful scarves.

“These dresses run small,” Lydia says, startling me. “Why don’t you try on a small and a medium and see which one is more comfortable?”

“Oh, that’s okay. I’m just looking.”

“Nonsense!” She winks, then pulls two dresses from the rack. “This color would look gorgeous on you! You *must* try these on.”

I follow her to the fitting rooms. She deposits the garments in the largest one. I step into it and the door clicks shut. I frown. The full-length mirror is black. It’s *just* reflective enough to show that there’s someone behind me. Before I can turn around, a blade is dragged across my neck. I lose consciousness. When I come to, I’m staring at... myself. I am the centerpiece of an expanding crimson pool. Confused, I lunge toward the crumpled heap that is me. I smash into an unseen barrier. It takes me a few seconds to understand: The mirror. I’m on the wrong side of it.

The fine lines around Lydia’s eyes plump and fade. Her hair becomes thick and glossy. Her breasts inch upward.

“Thank you, darling,” she coos at my wasted body. “Your youth suits me quite well.”

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — S. Kearing is a coffee-obsessed night owl who writes flash fiction, short stories, and novels. Her short fiction has been picked up by *Ellipsis Zine* and *Horror Tree*. She loves writing on rainy days, reading books that smell fantastic, and Netflixing with her fur babies in her lap.

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**Nora's Wish**  
*John Mc Caffrey*  
Available on Amazon,  
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## **A Life in Nightmares** | *Michael Subjack*

Last night I was attacked by a team of wild boar. Despite my best efforts to escape, the vile things caught me and ripped at me with their jagged, blood-stained tusks. The night before that, there was a rabid dog trying to get into my home. Last week, I ran afoul of a swarm of very large and very angry bees. I've been on something of a wild animal kick as of late and I don't know why. I've never been able to make sense of my nightmares and I'm too old to start now. I began having them nightly when I was a child and it was as frightening and traumatic as you'd expect. My father insisted it was just a phase but my mother took me to see several psychiatrists. Things were a little different in those days and rather than attempting to discuss the issues I might have at length, I was prescribed medicine that made me very tired but did little to dissuade my nightmares. Eventually I learned to accept them and they became just another part of my existence. They don't really bother me anymore and they certainly don't scare me. Now I know what you're thinking—how can they be nightmares if they're not scary? Because, frankly, it feels misleading to call them 'dreams'. Dreams suggest something enjoyable or at least innocuous. The images I endure every night are far from enjoyable and innocuous. Zombies, nuclear war, serial killers, and drowning (just to name a few) aren't things most people aspire to encounter in their lives. But they're what I encounter every time I go to sleep. And the older I get, the less of that I need. That's one plus of being elderly. I haven't found many others.

After I wake up each morning, I go outside and bring in the paper. Then I fix myself coffee, toast, and a poached egg for breakfast. Once I've finished that elaborate feast, I sit down and record the previous evening's nightmare in my journal. As I've been doing this for the better part of sixty years, I have a lot of journals. I don't always remember the nightmare though. Sometimes I'll wake up and whatever it was has been reduced to fleeting vapors. On those days, I simply write 'Don't remember'.

Then I'll spend a few hours reading. Three days a week I like to do a few laps in the community pool. Once the sun goes down, I have dinner and then I go to bed. That's my life.

Not bad, all told.

\*\*\*

It seems my subconscious is no longer interested in wild animals. Last night I was on a golf course that I used to frequent with my friend Stan. A heart attack claimed him three years ago and I haven't golfed since. This particular golf course was one of the nicest ones in the state but you wouldn't know it based on my nightmare. In addition to dodging softball-sized hail, I also had lightning to contend with. It may seem comical, like that scene in *Caddyshack*, but this lightning blackened the earth when it struck. I could practically feel the heat and smell the ozone it produced. Couple that with the hail and fierce winds and you have a thoroughly unpleasant experience. Still, given my nightmares now number into the tens of thousands, it wasn't especially memorable. There was one strange detail, though. I spent most of the nightmare running toward a club house that always managed to stay far away, no matter how far or fast I traveled. Standing next to the clubhouse was a figure dressed all in white. I couldn't see them

well enough to determine age or gender but they had what appeared to be a veil covering their face. For as nonsensical and surreal as dreams are, the figure seemed strangely out of place.

I don't quite know what to make of it.

\*\*\*

The mysterious figure returned last night, watching me while I sat trapped inside a burning car. The figure was much closer this time, close enough that I could see the outline of a head through its veil but no detail beyond that. I still have no clue why this is happening. Is it Death's way of saying its coming for me? Or is the universe telling me I have unfinished business to take care of? I don't know about any of that but I do know one thing:

It's starting to scare me.

\*\*\*

It's three a.m. and I'm wide awake. As you've probably guessed, the figure was in my nightmare again. The porcelain dolls my wife collected came to life and attacked me. Since I only kept those ugly things to honor her memory, I found this nightmare to be rather cruel. I used to tease her all the time about how creepy and hideous they were, and in response, she would just buy more. By the time she died, she had about thirty of them, all of which I store in the spare bedroom. That these mementos of my wife and her wry sense of humor have been perverted by my nightmares angers me. I like to think that under normal circumstances, my subconscious would have repressed this terrible ordeal but the presence of the mysterious figure ensured it stayed at the forefront of my memory. This time they were standing outside my bedroom window, no small feat considering my bedroom is on the second floor. As the dolls began to attack, the figure leaned forward and put its hands on the glass, as if it were spectating an exciting sporting match. It relished in seeing me suffer. I won't be going back to bed tonight. I'm going downstairs to fix myself coffee, which I'll be generously enhancing with my old friends Jack and Jim.

How I've missed them.

\*\*\*

I woke up with a bit of a hangover this morning. The good news is that I didn't have another nightmare, or maybe I did and just don't remember. That seems unlikely, as even when I forget the nightmares, there's still the faintest traces of them in my memory. None of that today.

And that's fine with me.

\*\*\*

Demons held an orgy in my house last night. The place I've lived in for almost fifty years. There have been nightmares that have taken place in my home before but this was the first time it actually felt defiled. I went into the living room after finally rolling out of bed at ten and could only see those horrid things writhing against each other, their bodies coated in blood, slime, and God knows what else. The figure was there, of course. Watching, enjoying, and motioning for me to do the same. Part of me is considering leaving the house for a few hours but the outside doesn't look any more inviting than this once peaceful place.

Perhaps I'll just go back to bed. Unusual for me, as I normally don't sleep during the day.

Can such a thing be done without nightmares?

\*\*\*

The answer to that question is ‘No’ because nothing is sacred anymore, at least not according to my nightmares. My grandmother’s house had a beautiful old tree with a tire swing hanging from it. Some of my fondest childhood memories involve that very spot. I know for a fact that none of my nightmares have taken place there. It’s a memory that’s too pure and perfect to be corrupted. At least until earlier today.

I arrived at the tree to find the mysterious figure standing next to it with my grandmother’s severed head in their hand, only she wasn’t dead. She proceeded to mock me for gaffes and indiscretions that had occurred years after her death. Some of them I had completely forgotten about, like the time I hit a handicapped boy with a rock, requiring him to get stitches. I was around twelve when that happened. He never dropped the dime on me, either out of fear or due to his limited mental capacity. Regardless, I felt guilty about it for years. It wasn’t until I was well into my twenties that the terrible incident had mostly faded from my memory. One thing I hadn’t forgotten about was the time I was unfaithful to my wife. My long-dead grandmother had saved that one for last. My one instance of adultery happened on a business trip. I confessed to my wife as soon as I got home and we went to therapy to get past it. And I thought I had but now I find myself overwhelmed with self-loathing and guilt.

After my grandmother finished taunting me with these awful memories, the tree had caught fire and I woke up to the sound of her mocking laughter. Even as I prepare myself a drink, I can still hear it, a ghastly sound that pierces through my ears while it rips apart my mind.

I fear there’s no respite from any of this.

\*\*\*

I didn’t go back to bed last night. I stayed awake with the help of coffee and an old pack of cigarettes I had stashed away in my desk. I quit for good not long after my wife died but puffing away on cigarettes that were almost a decade old is one of the only pleasures I’ve had lately. I’m tempted to buy another pack but that would entail going out.

And I have no desire to do that.

\*\*\*

It’s after midnight and I’ve invited Jack and Jim to join me for another spell and they are more than happy to oblige. I’ve been up for over twenty-four hours and I know that drinking will only serve to exacerbate my need for sleep.

If that happens, let it be undisturbed.

Please.

\*\*\*

Miracles do happen. I managed to stay awake through last night. I’m now on hour thirty-six of no sleep. I have a stomach full of alcohol and a head full of corrupted memories.

Suffice to say, I feel awful.

\*\*\*



Hallucinations can occur if you stay awake for too long. I know this to be true because I've seen the figure from my nightmares standing outside my home at various points. It's never for long and they never do anything but stare as they patiently wait for me to fall asleep.

And I have a bad feeling they won't have to wait much longer.

\*\*\*

I've found the old .38 that I purchased some years back. My wife hated having a gun in the house but right now, I'm profoundly grateful that I didn't get rid of it.

Something tells me I'm going to need it.

\*\*\*

Fifty-five hours without sleep.

Is it possible to feel blessed and cursed at the same time?

\*\*\*

I'm seated in my favorite easy chair but I'm no longer alone. The figure is sitting across from me, its veil securely in place. I'm holding a bottle of Jack in one hand and my .38 in the other.

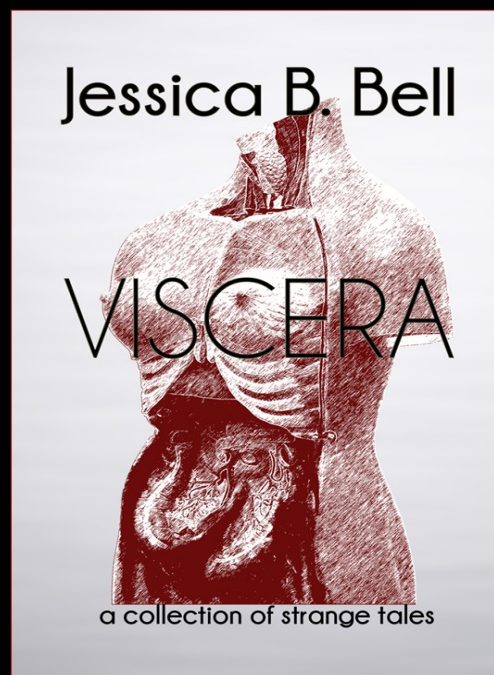
What I want is for the figure to remove the veil and reveal itself to me. Will it be grotesque? Beautiful? A mirror image of my own face? I don't know but I'm only giving it five minutes. Then I'm pulling the plug on the whole damn thing. At this point, I'm not even sure if this is reality or one of my nightmares.

And I'm past the point of caring.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Michael Subjack was born in a small town in Western New York before moving to Los Angeles. He enjoys good cigars and going on hikes with his dog Rosie.

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# The Calling



BRENT ABELL

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and iTunes

**Guts** | *Evan Baughfman*

Palms dripping sweat, Mikey approaches Emma.  
He really gonna ask this goddess to Winter Formal?

*Shitshitshitshit.*

Mikey's hands tremble. His stomach gurgles.

Her back is to him. Not too late to retreat.

She turns, says, "Yeah?"

Breath short, Mikey's voice cracks. "H-Hi...would you...um..."

His belly's full of fire. Knees buckle.

*OhGodOhGodOhGod.*

Mikey hears the ripping before he feels it. Sees a crimson stain bloom across his shirt.

He collapses, screams as black butterflies swarm free of his guts. The little monsters have chewed their way out. Their wings are razor blade sharp.

"Ew," says Emma, stepping around the bleeding boy.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Evan Baughfman's plays have been produced throughout the U.S. *Taste of Amontillado* (adaptation of *The Cask of Amontillado*) is available through Heuer Publishing. Additionally, Evan's authored story collection, *Twisted Tales from Edgar Allan Poe Middle School*. Many of those tales have been adapted into screenplays, of which "The Emaciated Man," "The Tell-Tale Art," and "A Perfect Circle" have won awards at various horror film festivals.

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**GAPE**  
*Aiden Truss*

Available on Amazon,  
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## Stygians | *Tawny Kipphorn*

I was a man with everything to lose but not much to live for. Now, as I sit here under the dying light, I can smell their putrid scent. The scent of warmed-over, rotting flesh. Any mortal man would drop dead at first exposure to their stench, but unfortunately for me, I am no mortal man. I am doomed to play this game of cat and mouse with them for eternity, and I am the pathetic mouse.

I can hear them screaming, they are gaining on me. Unholy shrieking like that of a cat being skinned alive. Horrid sounds of death and despair fill my ears to bursting here in the fifth circle of Hell. The place I call home, because as I'm sure you've figured out by now, I'm no saint, and I've done things that have earned me a special place as the right hand to the devil himself.

I wouldn't wish my fate upon any man whom I've hated in life, and I was a man with many enemies, now I've become the ultimate enemy against the humanity that turned me into the half-breed I am. This cycle of torture and suffering repeats itself, and these things, masses of flesh and bone with the ingrained intent to kill, are relentless in their lust for me. They are the teratoma's of Lucifer. The demons' toys. The beasts of Baphomet.

They are the Stygians and they are in eternal pursuit, the vile manifestations of my sins. As they sink their disgusting teeth into me, I die yet again, only to be reborn once more. I am the lowly acolyte of the fallen one, chosen to welcome each and every poor bastard whose fate is akin to my own. The familiar expressions of terror and redemption etched in their faces as I welcome them to Hell.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Tawny Kipphorn is a Freelance Speculative Fiction Author from Pennsylvania. She enjoys writing Supernatural and Psychological themed Verse, Short Stories, and Flash Fiction pieces.

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## Holy Water | *Alexandra Gipson*

“You know this place here is haunted, dontcha son?”

I set my suitcases down on the sidewalk and look in the direction of the voice. An elderly woman wearing different shades of blue squints over her glasses as she pushes her walker towards me. Her permed hair, dyed fire red, clashes with the blue clothes. “So I’ve heard,” I say.

“What’s yer name, son?” she asks, parking her walker by my suitcases.

“Stefano. Yours?”

“Nice’t meet ya. I’m Ruby. That’d be my place next door.” She pauses, then nods her head towards my new house. “The family that used’t live there just up and left one day. I didn’t see nuthin’, but I heard screamin’ during the night. In the mornin’ they came rushin’ out, like somethin’ was chasin’ ‘em.”

I nod and give a tight smile. “Mhm, I know.”

“Then why’re ya movin’ in?” Her brown eyes, desperate for an explanation, are wide behind her large, wire-rimmed glasses, giving her the appearance of an owl.

I shrug. “It was cheap and fully furnished. You don’t find that too often around here.”

“Well, you seem like a strong youngin. Maybe you’ll be able to handle yerself. I’ll tell ya, though, be careful.” She waggles a finger at me before continuing down the sidewalk.

I turn back to my new place that stands before me: a three-story, red brick house, with a charcoal-colored, trapezoid-shaped roof. Stairs with metal handrails lead up to the door that’s juxtaposed between two large, rectangular windows. It’s a plain house, one that you would look at and forget because nothing about it stands out.

I pick up my suitcases and walk up the stairs. Upon entering I crinkle my nose at the musty smell of mothballs and mildew. The door shuts behind me, ~~feeling~~ and I feel trapped between my suitcases and the wall. While turning around, I bump into the ceramic dish hanging there. A few drops of water fall onto the floor.

I walk until I’m at a crossroads: in front of me a set of stairs, down the hallway a closed door with a black, chalkboard sign on it, and to my left and right a living room and a dining room, respectively. The stairs are old and wooden, with a rusting metal handrail. I set my suitcases down by the foot of the staircase. Light filters in through a skylight, calling attention to the dust that swirls around like a snow in a gentle breeze.

“Hello?” I call. *Hello... hello... hello...* My voice bounces off the hallway walls that are painted jade green.

I wait a few seconds then smile. *Haunted, schmaunted.*

*Hello.*

My smile disappears. The echo of my voice has all but faded, but I think I hear a whisper. I shake it off and venture into the dining room. A circular table that seats six and is covered with a cream tablecloth sits in the middle of the room. In the china cabinet against the wall are dishes, probably only taken out for holiday dinners or special occasions, and a modern chandelier hangs from the ceiling. Pristine and elegant, it is the type of dining room that would be featured in a home decor magazine.

While crossing the hallway to enter the living room, there is a blur of black in my peripheral vision. I pause, step backwards slowly, and look to my right. There is nothing out of the ordinary; I probably just saw the sign on the door. I continue into the living room, where a random assortment of objects—frying pans, picture frames, silverware, shoes, and books—litter the floor. Curtains on the windows are torn, like a cat used them as a substitute for a scratching

pole. If the dining room would be in a magazine, the living room would appear in a newspaper, showing the wreckage after a tornado.

“What the hell happened in here?” I say under my breath.

*A family of wimps encountered a demon, that’s what happened.*

I whip around and am met with a pair of eyes the color of freshly spilled blood in the sun. It didn’t speak, but I heard its voice. This creature, this thing, it isn’t human, but it takes the shape and height of one. Its skin is black—eternal night—brittle and sharp like shards of obsidian. If I would reach out and touch it my fingers would be sliced open. There are no discernible features, no outlines of its nose or mouth, except for its eyes—eyes that contain Hell itself.

Tendrils of smoke begin to wrap around its shoulders as it loses its solid form and morphs into a gaseous state. A burning smell like food that is left in the oven for too long fills the air. I can only stare as the figure is engulfed in a cloud of thick, black and red smoke. Within seconds, only the smoke remains. I open my mouth to scream, but before sound can escape, the smoke funnels itself down my throat. Like I’m punched in the gut I double over and lurch backwards.

*Struggling is no use. Give up.* The voice is menacing, deep, persuasive in my head. It could kill me with words.

*What the hell! Get out of my head! Get out!*

*Give in.*

*No fuck you getoutgetoutgetouttttt.* I fall to the floor and roll back and forth in a ball. White noise fills my ears; my head is light and heavy at the same time, like a boulder falling on a balloon and popping it.

*Would you stop struggling already.*

*Get out (how do you get rid of a demon) get out (religion salt holy water near the door) get out of my head (holy water gotta get it gotta get it).*

*Don’t you fucking dare.*

*Did it just fucking sass me?* I try to stand up but my body resists, my back arches and my chest rises but my hands and arms remain on the floor. I scream, not my normal scream—one shriller and more pained—and find the strength to jump to my feet. I think I shocked it, as I can run towards the door without a struggle. My hand is almost in the holy water, relief is so close, but my hands betray me. They bend so the back of my hand is touching my wrist. I reach my other hand out and it does the same. Pain sears through my wrists and I scream.

*God dammit, can’t use hands, what do I do, face, yeah, slam face into it.*

*Wha—*

Before it can understand the thought I slam my head onto the ceramic dish filled with holy water. It falls off the wall and shatters, and a warm liquid begins to trickle down my forehead. A bittersweet relief, I feel the demon’s hold on my mind loosen, but my face stings like I dipped a cut finger in tomato juice. My hands return to normal, somehow not broken, as it shrieks. The sound is unbearable, like ten thousand teapots all whistling at once, and I cover my ears and scream, too.

*For the love of all things unholy, stop.*



*You stop you fucker, get out of my body (what else should I do salt yes salt).* While it's paralyzed by the holy water, I run through the living room. Glass from picture frames cracks under my feet, and I kick a pot out of the way like it's a soccer ball. I block out the shrieking and ransack the cabinets for salt of any kind—packets, a container, a shaker, anything.

*Victory!* I find a container of one and tilt it back. The salt burns as it fills my mouth, individual grains filling the cracks between my teeth and lining my gums. I have to force myself to swallow. The demon screeches again, rattling my brain; is it possible to go deaf from hearing something inside your head?

I drop the salt container and it rolls until it hits the fridge, spilling its contents as it goes. My mouth opens and the funnel of black and red smoke comes shooting out. My scream is combined with its, an ear-splitting sound, as it leaves my body and skyrockets to the ceiling. It starts to swirl around, circling above me—a destructive tornado waiting to touch down. I grab the container and make a circle around myself with what's left of the salt, only taking my eyes off the demon for seconds at a time. The cloud disappears, and the demon plummets from the air and crashes onto the floor in its human shape. It squirms and twitches, smoking slightly like cool rain on hot pavement. I watch its every move, holding the container of salt above my head like a makeshift baseball bat.

*What the fuck, dude.* It glares at me, red eyes narrowed.

"I could say the same!" I stare back at it, my eyes wide and mouth open. "In fact, I will. What the fuck, dude!" I pause, unsure. "Dudette?"

*I'm a demon. Do you really think I have a gender?*

"Well, sorry, I don't know much about demons," I reply with a sneer.

*Well maybe you should.*

I drop the container and run my hands through my hair. "Oh, my God, what the hell is even happening right now? I'm not actually talking to a demon that tried to possess me, am I? This has to be a dream." I pinch myself, hard, on the arm. Nothing happens, save for the fact my forearm hurts.

*Not a dream. A nightmare, perhaps.*

A bark of crazed laughter escapes my lips. "A demon. Just tried. To possess me! And now! I'm talking to it!"

*And now you're talking to yourself,* it chides.

Without opening its mouth, it laughs like a banshee and winks at me.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Alexandra (Ali) Gipson will be a senior at Seton Hill University, where she studies English with a focus in Creative Writing. Her fiction and poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Eye Contact: The Literary and Art Magazine* of Seton Hill and *Buck Off!* Magazine. Aside from writing, she is a fan of books, music, feminism, and hockey.

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# ALSO FROM SIRENS CALL PUBLICATIONS



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I have a last name. I know what it is, I'm confident, but my brain won't let me access it. The waves seem peaceful from the porch, but when they start crashing, I'm compelled to begin my walk. Across the time-worn red carpet, through the screen door, down the old, worn wooden steps, and into the sand. From there I look back and see my cat—her name is Vera—gazing at me from the window. Her eyes have seemed full of shadows lately, and I know identity is something I can no longer trust, so I look away. I check under the porch for the little dog from up the beach who likes to come play with the sand crabs, but there's nothing there. They know. The sand turns from gritty, tough crystals to shifting softness beneath my bare feet. My journey ends abruptly, at the edge of the water. The sand is wet here, sucking my feet down with each pull of the tide, like a silky, enveloping sheet against my skin. The waves barely touch my toes at first, but when the sky begins to swirl, charcoal and purple with a hint of dark moss, the waves are lapping at my ankles, and then the wind kicks up.

I take down my braids, let my golden hair fly free, and close my eyes. When I open them the water is up to my shins and the day is growing dark, the salty scent of seaborne night incoming. That's when he comes. The boy in white. I don't remember his name. Joseph? Jacob? Jonathan? Something like that. Even with the water halfway up to my knees, his pants are never wet, never dirty. Sometimes I have trouble seeing his eyes, and I can't tell if it's his russet-brown hair and thick lashes or if there are shadows lurking there. The other one gets in the way. She tells me he's a bad green underneath, and to stay away. He frightens her. Occasionally he holds my hand while we both watch the tide coming in with storm clouds on the horizon. When the water reaches my knees he disappears, and I know I've gone too deep. I'm too close to it. The jade dragon. It waits to the west, just southeast of the pier. No one fishes there anymore, because there is no longer any sea life to be caught. Did they disappear, run away, or was it just feeding? I don't think it eats like us. It feeds on something else. But then where are all the fish? Why don't the dolphins jump there anymore? Why have all the fishermen abandoned it, speaking only of the place in whispers? Why don't the gulls perch there?

It's him. He's doing it. I don't know how. I wonder, if the sea was calm enough on a new moon, could I see the golden shine of his monstrous eyes glinting beneath the water's surface? I don't fear his crimson scales. I don't fear his sharp, jagged bone-white teeth. Nor his onyx claws. Nor his jade fins that slice like razor blades. He is fire beneath the water, but the north wind follows me, protects me. I am a force of nature, like him. They say that animals lack self-awareness, but this is no animal. He's more self-aware than we are. I don't even know why I call him 'he', as his kind has no gender. And he doesn't have a name—not a made-up one or a scientific term. But wasn't I told once before...?

The more I see the boy, the more I feel the jade dragon's presence. I'm curious, intrigued, but more sea stars wash up dead on the beach every day, and no flower I plant in the front garden bed will bloom, not even my morning glories. Wisteria still hangs from the eaves, but how long until he takes that life too? I know our final meeting place will be at the place where the waves



and the pines meet, but there's nowhere like that on this island. A gentle rain starts to fall, and I put my rusty blue bike in the old shed, shutting the heavy wooden door. I enter through the front door, not sure how I got here, but Grandfather is here and dinner is ready and we're watching an old game show and laughing. Once I have my bath and go to bed, for once closing the window instead of leaving it open wide, I hear my grandfather's footsteps as he walks out to the porch and blows out the old glass lamp. He tightens the shutters and locks the doors, his silhouette standing there longer than usual. He sighs deeply, and I know that he can sense the impending changes as well as I. Our family—we can feel it in the wind. We're not entirely human, after all.



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## Dark Eye of the Lamb | Neal Privett

Moonlight sliced through the broken window and covered the room with a silver shroud. A blast of white-hot panic shot through her when she heard *the sound* again, but she bit her hand and suppressed her cries. That awful scraping sound. Something not living... not dead... moved stealthily up the rotted staircase and down the darkened hallway.

Coming... for her.

\*\*\*

Her mind raced backwards in time, to earlier that day.

The sinking sun shed a dull winter's light over the child's gravestone. *Frederick Vann McAlister 1889-1897* etched into the crumbling marble, just below the image of a small lamb. The animal's effigy stared sadly off into the gray evening as if it could see directly into the beyond.

The two college kids shivered in the cold wind as they surveyed the tiny cemetery behind the ruins of a three story Victorian house, the towering mute relic of times long past. The boy drained the remainder of his beer, crumpled the can, and tossed it away. The girl shot a reproachful glance in the boy's direction, but his cavalier demeanor remained unfazed. "You could show a little more respect," she said.

"I'm respectful," the kid said with a sneer.

The girl shook her head in disgust and stormed away.

"Hey... don't get an attitude," he added, pointing to the old house. "It was your idea to stop and look at this goddamned dump anyway."

"This is history," she said.

"No, this is a termite factory," the kid said. "And we are never gonna make it to the concert if we keep stoppin' to gawk at dead people."

"Let me make a couple of grave rubbings and we'll go." The girl popped open the back hatch of her car and reached for a box, from which she took some paper and charcoal. Her boyfriend grabbed another beer from the cooler. The shadows had already started to gather and the temperature was falling steadily.

"This place is creepy. Hurry the hell up."

The girl returned to the old graveyard and knelt in front of the child's stone. "I'm sorry, Frederick," she said, tears burning her eyes. "I'm sorry that you died so young... and I'm sorry for my boyfriend's disrespect." She spread the paper over the small marker and quickly rubbed the stick of charcoal over the lettering until the image appeared.

"I *do* respect the dead!" The boy laughed and leapt into the air, coming to rest on top of a time-worn tombstone. The marker crumbled under his weight.

She rose from her knees and lunged at her boyfriend, trying to stop the desecration. "What the hell are you doing? Stop it!"

The boy dodged her and jumped atop another tombstone. He rode the stone down to the ground with the girl screaming, almost in hysterics, "How could you?"

Enjoying every second of his impromptu blasphemy, the boy danced around the stones, knocking them over. His final coup was the child's grave. He kicked and the lamb sailed across the cemetery. It bounced and rolled down the hill, coming to rest against an ancient oak.

"You bastard!" The girl screamed. She turned in enraged defeat and headed straight for the car. The boy laughed again and raced up behind her. When he grabbed her arm, she wheeled around and caught him on the chin with a savage uppercut that almost lifted him off the ground. The boy stumbled but kept his balance. He shook the dizzy stars from his eyes and cradled his chin in his fingers.

It wasn't the first time he had pushed things over the edge, but it was the last time, as far as she was concerned. He watched her go, regret bearing down on him like a heavy stone slab. "Wait... I'm sorry!"

"Go to hell!"

The girl stood in front of the car, fumbling angrily with the keys. He ran up to her cautiously, as if she were a landmine that might explode. "I'm an idiot. I'm sorry, okay?"

She glared at him venomously but her words caught in her throat when she glanced back towards the graveyard.

Dozens of dark figures, she recalled, some of them still rising from the ground, appeared out of the dusk. The faceless shadows passed through the broken tombstones and moved down the hill towards the two kids. The animosity that was thick a moment ago, had now vanished completely, and they held onto one another as if the contact was their only salvation. The humming drone of fear buzzed in their brains, and that emotion quickly skyrocketed, turning to blind panic.

They jumped into the car and slammed the doors and the realization struck the girl like lightning... that she had dropped the keys outside.

The boy threw open the door and raced around the front of the car. "They have to be here somewhere!" He fell to his knees and ran his fingers over the ground. "My god! Help me! Find the damned keys!"

The girl hopped out and retraced her steps. She looked around frantically, kicking at the dirt. She cried out, her voice breaking into mournful sobs, "I don't know where they are!"

The boy rose and grabbed her by the wrist. They ran down the road, away from the cemetery and the shadowy creatures rising from their cold dank graves. The girl cried uncontrollably as they raced in the opposite direction. "This is your fault!"

"Let's just get the hell outta here!"

They raced down the dirt road blindly, with no sense of direction. The girl looked back and screamed. The ghostly shapes moved like silent storm clouds passing over. Some of them were tall... some were short, the size of children. All of them were moving silhouettes of people...the haints of the last century, whose bones moldered in the graveyard. They were more memory than physical, yet they struck terror in the hearts of the two kids like nothing they had ever experienced before.

The college students ran until they came to a farmhouse off the unpaved road, behind some trees. The girl breathed a sigh of relief when she saw lights burning in the front windows. The door opened halfway and the cautious eyes of an elderly woman peered out. “What do you want?”

“Please!” The girl pleaded, “*Let us in!*”

The lady studied them in sharp silence. Then, much to their relief, she opened the door. The boy and the girl rushed inside. It was if they had ventured back in time. The old farmhouse was devoid of electricity. Homemade quilts covered an antique couch. Shelves lined with dishes towered above a handmade table in the corner. Ancient photographs, yellowed with age, glared back at them from a china cabinet. A warm fire crackled in a stone hearth, with flames caressing a black kettle that idly hung and bubbled. The suspicion in the woman’s voice faded somewhat, and she invited them to sit by the fire and warm themselves.

Her boyfriend, so arrogant earlier, was now reduced to little more than a frightened child. He lay his head on her shoulder and fought back tears. “I am so sorry!”

A strange smile broke across the old lady’s face and her eyes became obsidian discs. The woman’s lips receded and she bared a mouthful of blackened teeth. The girl covered her ears and tried to block out the gut-wrenching sound of the old woman’s laughter... hoarse and crackling like bones being ground into powder by some infernal machine. The old woman pointed accusingly at the boy, who seemed to shrink in her domineering shadow.

He tumbled to the floor and cowered before the ghost-flames of the fire. Distorted caricatures of shadow danced on the floor and walls, reaching for him... scratching... raking his flesh with unseen talons. A force they could never understand now held power over them. The girl rose, her terrified eyes locked on the old woman. The boy writhed on the floor. Blood rolled in black rivulets down his face.

The woman never released them from her stare. She shook her head and her voice sounded as if it came from the lips of a drying rat-infested corpse. “*You disturbed the dead!*”

The boy cried out, “I’m sorry!”

“You offended them, boy! You haveta pay *their* price now!”

The girl moved closer, her hands held out in supplication. “What can we do to make this right?”

The old woman’s voice rose to ear-shattering heights and rattled the walls. “You can *die*... that’s what you can *do!*”

The girl thought her head would explode; brain and skull sailing off like bloody shrapnel into every corner of the dimly lit room. She closed her eyes and gritted her teeth. The woman threw her head back and laughed like a demon meeting a fresh pack of sinners. And that was it for the girl. She grabbed up her boyfriend and they fled the cabin in a mad rush of fear.

The dirt road stretched out before them in the cold moonlight, clogged with obsidian shadows... creeping things that defied the desecration of their graves.

“This way,” the girl screeched. She took the boy by the arm and led him up the hill. The shades turned and followed them... back in the direction of the old cemetery and the house. The



girl stumbled and fell, dragging the boy down with her. She picked herself up and pulled the boy along. By now his mind had become unhinged and he spoke only in strange monosyllables that took on the aura of a long dead language known only to the damned.

When she glanced back at the old farmhouse, she saw no signs of life. The light from a few moments ago had vanished. There was now only a cold ruin wracked with rotted wood and rats, shrouded with darkness... obviously abandoned for decades. She felt her heart freezing into a block of ice and her nerves fraying like old rope... but she pulled herself together and kept moving.

The graveyard appeared out of the gathering night. Frost had begun to form on the grass and the moonlight made the stones almost glow. The students trudged forward desperately, falling and rising like ocean waves, with the steam rushing from their nostrils. The boy sank into an open grave and howled as his ankle cracked.

The moon-soaked epitaph glowed white and screamed at the girl once again in cold silent lettering: *Frederick Vann McAlister 1889-1897.*

“*Get up!*” She screamed. She lifted him free of the open grave and physically pulled him towards the house. Every muscle ached... every fiber of her body howled in protest, but she kept moving. The entire hillside was now filled with the silent specters.

She couldn’t remember entering the house. Her mind was operating on some kind of animal-fear induced auto-pilot. They were running up the grand staircase when her thoughts became legible to her once again. The house was encased in darkness, but the moon shone through a high window, illuminating the central part.

Barricading themselves in an upstairs room until sunrise seemed to be the only logical plan. They were miles away from town and now they had the added challenge of his injured ankle. At the top of the stairs, they made the turn to the second floor. She pulled the boy down the shadow-choked hallway and they took the stairs again, up to the third level.

The shadows and sounds all merged into one unholy blast of phantasmagoria and her brain reeled, falling into delirium...then emerging back out into conscious thought before the cycle began again. She could not be sure if she was awake or dreaming.

They had nearly reached the top step of the third level when there was a great crash. She felt her boyfriend’s hand leave her grasp and she turned to see him plummeting backwards through space... swallowed up into a gaping hole in the rotted stairs. It all happened in slow motion: he fell... down and down... thrashing and screaming... all the way into the cellar far below. His screams faded and then there was only the aching quiet of the old house in the night and the fevered beating of her own heart in her ears.

Then she saw the shadowy haints again as they entered the house and floated up the long skeletal staircase. She continued to the third floor and scurried down the dark hall. She ran into the first room she came to and slammed the door. The old key was still in the lock. She turned it quickly and stuck the key in her pants pocket. She moved back against the wall and slid down to the floor. There was nothing to do now but wait... and pray for some kind of rescue that would or would not come.

The thought of her boyfriend lying in a broken heap down in the bowels of this house came to her then. She began to cry.

\*\*\*

And now she sat on the floor of a haunted house... lost in the dead hours between midnight and dawn, with a horrible thing waiting for her just outside the door and trying to get in. As much as her mind refused to accept this, it was happening and there was nothing she could do about it.

Except *reason* with it...

The thought chilled her blood. To speak to it... to ask its... forgiveness? What other choice did she have?

She took a deep breath and called out. "Hello?" The sound of her own voice in the cold dusty moonlit room caused the chill bumps to explode all over her body. The thing in the hall stopped beating on the door. It was listening.

The girl took another breath and continued. "I just want you to know how sorry I am that we disturbed your rest."

The hallway was silent.

She thought for a second and continued. "Just let me go... I promise that nobody will ever bother you again..."

Was it still there?

"Please..."

The silence of the house was shattered as the door began to shake violently. The thing punished the old wood until it began to splinter and crack. The hinges began to separate from the frame. The door finally collapsed to the floor with a crash. An errant cloud of dust rose into the air and the particles danced in the moonbeams.

The girl gasped, paralyzed in that frozen moment. Her blood stopped flowing and dizziness filled her head. She waited in agony for something to appear.

Something moved in the dark hallway.

"Please!" She cried out. "Please don't..."

She heard the scraping sound again... something being dragged across the wooden floor. *It* came into the room... *it* emerged from the darkness!

She screamed and screamed again!

The desiccated corpse of a little boy, dragging one foot behind entered the moon-haunted room... his eye sockets hollow and black and crawling with worms. It was *Frederick*, and he had come home. In his arms was *a lamb*... a marble lamb that somehow moved. It raised its head and *looked* at her and in its glare was all the wrath and none of the peace of the grave. The eyes of the lamb were dark and blood-red and it called out to her...

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Neal Privett lives on a farm somewhere in Tennessee, where he writes furiously, drinks too much coffee, and brews horror pulp in the barn. His work has appeared in *The Horror Zine*, *Schlock!*, *The Sirens Call*, and in many anthologies. On Saturday nights, he can be seen on the local horror television show, *Tennessee Macabre*, which can be streamed online at [wepgradio.com](http://wepgradio.com).



### **The Devereux Vault**

A grand old family vault sits in one corner of the marshy graveyard, the Devereux Vault. It's a tradition in Tandbury for children, for a dare, to risk the tomb. Cautiously they, cross the graveyard to that finely-built yet faded tomb. Those that make it, who do not panic and flee amongst the gravestones, who do not goad one another into a fright, approach the vault in which is set an iron grating; the bravest insert their fingers, daring the dead to nibble them. Most times, nothing happens except, maybe, that they scare themselves and yank their hand back in fright, laughing with embarrassment. Some manage to hold their hand in place for some time, allowing them to strut amongst their peers with a certain bravado.

But, there are times, few and far between, when things do not proceed that way. On those occasions, there is something there, something in the darkness of the vault—something that doesn't belong. Through the tunnels that crisscross the area, products of some forgotten past, these things come snuffling like dogs in search of bones to chew, but, on occasion, finding little fingers thrust through the grill, offered up as if dainty treats for their delectation. They approach and sniff, then, take a bite. The child recoils with a scream and a splash of blood to taint the tomb, the creature within retreating to chew the morsels in peace amongst broken coffins and the scattered remains of the forgotten dead.

### **The Unmasking**

"You, sir, should unmask," Camilla declared.

Cordelia watched from amongst the throng as the Stranger, who had entered the ballroom in tattered robes, inclined his head and said, "Indeed?"

"Indeed," replied Camilla, jutting her chin, "it's time." Cassilda stepped up beside her as if to offer support, and Camilla added, "We all have laid aside disguise but you."

The Stranger was silent for a moment and the entire room waited in a hush for his reply. Cordelia could feel the tension in the air.

"I wear no mask," he said at last in a whisper that carried clearly across the room.

There was a mass intake of breath and Camilla turned to Cassilda, her face a mask of terror, and exclaimed, "No mask? No mask!"

Terror, too, overtook Cordelia and she found herself running from the room, despite having no conscious recollection of deciding to.

Behind her, she heard Cassilda cry, "Not upon us, O King, not upon us!" and the collective scream of the throng gathered there. Cordelia didn't pause to wonder what the words might mean, just kept running.



Bursting out onto a balcony, Cordelia was surprised to see the moon hanging large and pregnant above the horizon. Then, with shock, she saw that the dark towers of some distant city rose impossibly behind the ivory orb. Cordelia screamed.

“It is a terrible thing,” a voice behind her said, “to fall into the hands of the Living God,” and she knew not which horror to look upon...

## **The Wasteground**

In the little Welsh town of Llanbadarn Fawr, there is an area of wasteground, suggesting of itself a shape between that of a triangle and an abused rectangle, liberally dotted with trees and bushes. On two sides, it is bounded by houses, on a third by a road leading up Primrose Hill to the university campus, and, lastly, with a buffer of private land, equally feral, between them, by Capel Soar. This small area of wasteground, with its crumbly old wall and surroundings, indicates to anyone who cares to glance at it, the suggestion of a park long returned to the bosom of Mother Nature. Across what once was its gateway, the gates long since gone, is a bench where only the foolhardy would sit.

A dark and foggy January night. A student, freshly inebriated from celebrating the end of the exams, staggers up Primrose Hill. Puffing, he takes a pause. Tired, legs aching from the steep climb, his body and thoughts numbed by the combination of alcohol and cold. He needs to sit down, take a load off his feet.

Stumbling onward a short distance, he recalls the bench. Fumbling in the darkness, in and out of the road without rhyme or reason, he eventually takes hold of the seat. He sinks down onto the cold, hard boards, the first in some time to do so. He groans with the pleasure of the pause. Slowly, his eyelids droop as alcohol, cold and fatigue work their magic and he falls asleep.

Something, a shadow, no more, looms over the prone form of the student. He doesn't even have time to scream. It is done in a moment. The next morning, they will find the body slumped across the bench. Was it just hypothermia? Or, was he another victim of the wasteground?

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — DJ Tyrer is the person behind Atlantean Publishing, and has had poetry and fiction published in issues of Cyaegha, Frostfire Worlds, Hinnom Magazine, The Horrorzine, Tigershark, and The Yellow Zine, and such anthologies as What Dwells Below (Sirens Call), The Mad Visions of al-Hazred (Alban Lake), and EOM: Equal Opportunity Madness (Otter Libris), and in addition, has a novella available, The Yellow House (Dunhams Manor).

Twitter: [@djtyrer](https://twitter.com/djtyrer)

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## A Tale Well Told | *R. J. Meldrum*

The train grumbled and bumped along at a snail's pace. It was the last train of the day and was nearly empty. The Reverend Walter Adams sat alone in the uncomfortable compartment, his back twinging with every jolt. It had been a very long journey, he'd been on the go since mid-morning. Recently graduated from theological college, he was on his way to take up his first position, curate of the parish of Littleton in the county of Norfolk. He was excited and nervous at this appointment, unsure about what to expect from a rural position in the heart of the English countryside. He'd lived in London his entire life and was used to the hustle and bustle of that great metropolis. He sighed as he gazed out the window into the darkness, unaware of the two men looking at him from the corridor.

\*\*\*

The pale young man in the dog collar sitting alone in the train compartment had caught the attention of Jethro and Tom. Returning to Littleton from Norwich on the last train, they'd made sure the journey would be pleasant by downing a few pints of ale before staggering aboard. It was Friday and they were heading home for the weekend after a week spent in Norwich clearing rubble. Normally they worked in the fields, but it was November and there was no work for itinerant laborers like them. Not quite drunk, but not quite sober, both were in the mood for mischief and the reverend was the perfect victim. A stranger, a stuck-up city type no doubt, come to preach to the country folk. Jethro and Tom, no respecters of the church, decided they would have some fun with the reverend on the journey home. A quick whispered conversation took place and then they entered the compartment, affecting to ignore the third passenger as they sat opposite each other. Jethro spoke first.

"A good week's work, Tom."

"Indeed Jethro, indeed."

The reverend continued to stare out of the window. Jethro paused for dramatic effect then spoke.

"Now then, something's just occurred to me. What's the number of this here compartment?"

Tom masked a smile, this was the beginning of the joke.

"I don't know. I'll take a look."

He stood and made a show of finding the compartment number, marked on the wooden trim.

"Thirteen, me old mate."

"Ah," said Jethro.

"Unlucky for some."

"Indeed, Tom. Definitely unlucky for some."

"What d'you mean?"

Jethro's open honest face reflected surprise.

"You don't know? You don't remember?"

"I suppose you'll have to remind me."



“The murders, me old mate. Took place ten years ago, this very night, in this very train compartment.”

The third figure in the compartment stirred slightly. Their companion was clearly listening. Jethro continued.

“Whole family, slaughtered. In this very compartment.”

Tom tried his best to look surprised.

“Oh, of course. I remember reading about it. I was still in the army in ‘46, but I remember seeing the headlines.”

“Course you were, mate. I forgot. Serving King and country you were.”

“I was. Proud to do so.”

“Wish I’d been able to. My knees kept me out of it, so they did.”

“You were working the fields, Jethro. That was important too.”

A voice interrupted them.

“Murders?”

Jethro turned to their companion.

“Yes, mate, murders.”

“In this compartment?”

“Yes, right here. In this very compartment,” he replied.

Tom winked at Jethro. The reverend had taken the bait. Now they were going to have some fun.

“Do you mind telling me about it?” asked the reverend in a small voice.

“Happy to, Reverend. Jethro’s the name and this is Tom.”

“Reverend Walter Adams.”

“Happy to meet you, Reverend. Can I ask where you’re headed on this cold night?”

“I’m taking up a position as curate in Littleton. Under the Reverend Jenkins.”

“Ah yes, I know the parish priest well. Well, I hope you’ll be happy in Littleton. Me and Tom both hail from there. You’ll have to pop into the Red Lion one evening. Me and Tom are in there most nights, when we aren’t working our fingers to the bones in Norwich.”

Adams gave a thin smile.

“Thank you for your invitation, but I don’t partake of alcohol myself.”

Jethro gave Tom a look that said ‘no surprise there’.

“But if you don’t mind, I would like to hear the story. Somehow, I have a feeling I’ve heard it before, but I’d like to hear the full version.”

“Well, I don’t mind if you don’t. But be warned, it’s a terrible tale. The police still don’t know what happened, still haven’t found out who did it neither. That’s what makes it so terrible, but before I get ahead of myself, I’ll tell my tale.”

He settled back in the seat.

“As I said, it all happened ten years ago this very night. I heard the tale from the conductor on duty. A young family boarded this very train. On holiday they were, visiting relatives on the coast for half term. He told me he saw them entering this compartment. Said there was mother,

father and three little 'uns. Two girls about ten and a boy of about twelve. Nice family he said. The train was quiet that night, very much like tonight in fact. Only a few passengers."

Jethro noticed the reverend was rubbing his forehead and starting to sweat slightly, despite the cold evening.

"The next time the conductor did his rounds was just after the train had stopped at Middleminster. Checking for new passengers he was. That was when he found 'em."

"What did he find?" asked Walter.

"The whole family, dead! Slaughtered they were. Slashed and stabbed. Mum, dad and the kiddies. The conductor nearly fainted. Blood everywhere. It must have happened so quickly."

"Blimey, glad I didn't see that, especially the kiddies," said Tom.

"You and me both, mate, you and me both."

"Sends a shiver down my spine, to think that such a thing happened right here."

"You're right, Tom. But that's not the worst of it."

"There's more to tell?"

"Aye. They do say on each and every anniversary of that terrible night, those that sit in this compartment hear and see the events that unfolded. They see the bodies falling, blood spurting from hideous wounds. They hear the cries of terror and shock. They witness the whole thing. Some even say they see the deranged face of the killer; the one that's never been caught."

His tale was interrupted by the sudden rush of the reverend leaping from his seat and stumbling out of the compartment. Jethro and Tom stared in astonishment at the figure as he fled down the corridor. Jethro laughed.

"Didn't expect him to do that. Must have a sensitive stomach!"

Tom joined in the laughter.

"Let's hope he finds the toilet before he throws up."

But Walter Adams hadn't fled the compartment to be sick. A sudden intense burst of agony in his head had caused him to leap from his seat. An overwhelming feeling of pain, distress and claustrophobia. Walter pushed open the toilet door and locked it behind him. His headache increased in intensity until he felt his head would split open like a melon. He desperately clutched his face, trying to stop the pain. Suddenly, the pain subsided, leaving nothing but a numb feeling. He stared at himself in the stained mirror above the dirty sink. He saw his face, as if for the first time. Memories rushed to fill his mind. He remembered. He remembered it all. He shook his head incredulously; what combination of circumstances had brought him here onto this train on this very night? What coincidence had made those two men relate that tale? It was almost enough for him to believe in fate. And now, after all these years, his destiny was clear to him; he could no longer forget or ignore the past. Smiling to himself, he opened the door to the toilet and headed back to the compartment. His right hand fumbled to find something in his waistcoat pocket.

In compartment number thirteen, the two old friends continued to congratulate themselves on a job well done. They'd expected fear, surprise or indignation, but not such an extreme reaction. They were drunkenly pleased with themselves.

“I tell you, Jethro, me old mate, you should be one of them writer fellas. That story you made up was a real cracker.”

Jethro smiled.

“Wasn’t all made up, Tom, it happened. Whole family was killed on this here train. Was back in October ‘42 I think, not ‘46, and I made up the bit about it happening in this very compartment.”

Tom laughed, then continued.

“It don’t matter the details weren’t quite right. Your story did the job. Wait ‘till I tell the lads in the Red Lion, that fellow will have a hard time getting settled in Littleton with everyone telling him ghost stories to see him run off scared.”

Another voice spoke.

“You missed one important detail in your story.”

It was the Reverend Adams. He rubbed his forehead, as if in pain.

“I had forgotten. So many years. But now I remember the whole thing. The whole family wasn’t killed. There was a survivor. The little boy. He was found under the corpse of his mother, covered in blood. They assumed he’d been missed by the killer, protected by his mother in her last moments. They were wrong. He killed them, then hid himself away, forcing his mind to forget his vile deed.”

“How do you know this?” whispered Tom.

The man in the dog collar pulled out the penknife he always carried. He flicked it open.

“The family that was killed. Their surname was Adams.”

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — R. J. Meldrum is an author and academic. Born in Scotland, he moved to Ontario, Canada in 2010 with his wife Sally. He has had stories published by Sirens Call Publications, Horrified Press, Trembling with Fear, Darkhouse Books, Digital Fiction and James Ward Kirk Fiction. He is an Affiliate Member of the Horror Writers Association.

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## Now I Lay Me Down To Reap

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and iTunes

## **Mexican Hat, Utah** | *Leroy B. Vaughn*

“This is the good life,” he said to himself as he opened his fourth can of Steel Reserve. He had been living in Mexican Hat, Utah since he left the big city, and his wife thirty years ago.

He thought he had dozed off for a second, when he saw her walking towards him.

“That can’t be you, Suzi.”

“I told you I would track you down, before you pulled the trigger, you son of a bitch.”

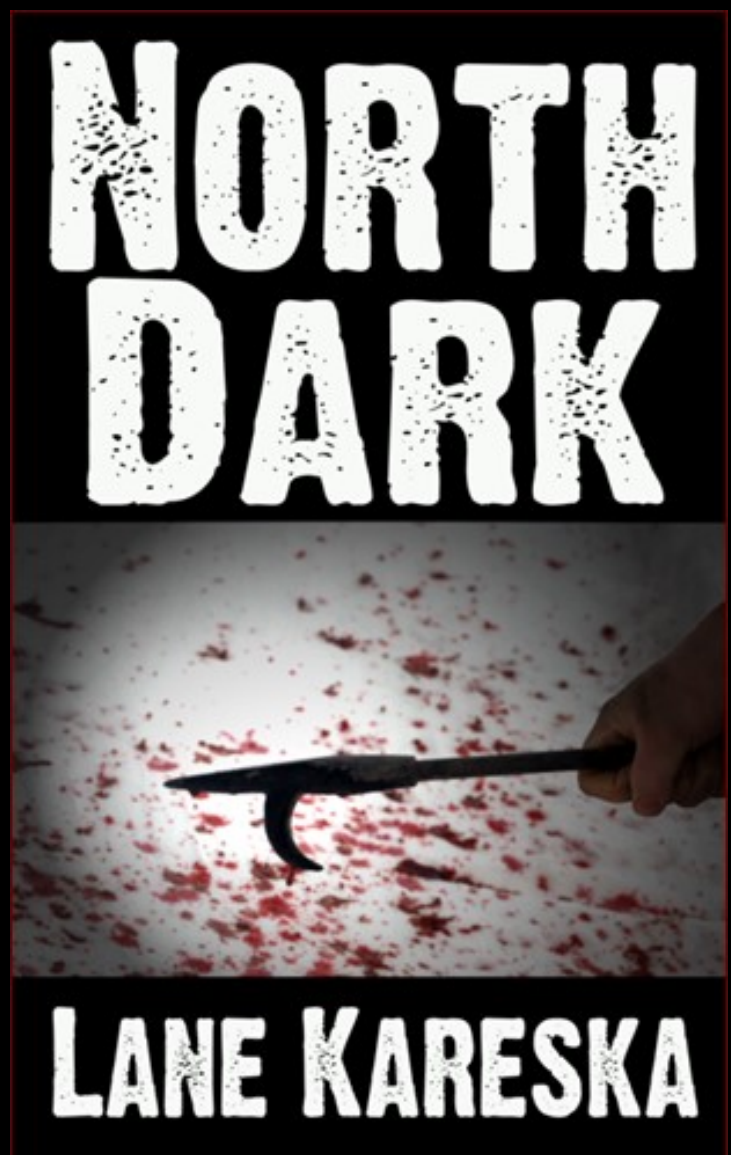
“But you still look like you’re thirty years old,” he told her.

“You look like shit, Hank. Now it’s your turn to die.”

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Leroy B. Vaughn’s short stories, articles and essays have been published in print, e-zines, anthologies and podcasts.

## **North Dark** *Lane Kareska*

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## Better Not Tell You Now | Rivka Jacobs

The sky was so deep, so blue, that it made his head hurt. The postal carrier bumped along the dusty road, nerves jumping, on the look-out for the rusty mailbox. He applied his brakes, his tires crunched the rocks and sand and squealed to a halt. He leaned out the window of his truck and hastily jammed the packet of mail into the open tube. This was the last stop on his daily route, and he slipped a guarded glance at the ruins of the house down the driveway in the distance, its walls bleached white and gray in the midday sun. He held his breath for a moment; it was hot, dry, and silent.

Then he crossed himself, put his foot to the pedal, and swung around backward in a thick cloud of dust. He shifted gears. The truck spun its wheels with a hollow grinding noise and leaped forward.

The man known as Paul Marsteller leaned back against one of the weathered porch columns in front of his house and watched the mail truck pitching and spewing grit as it sped away from him. He chuckled to himself, took another swig of light beer from the pop-top can, threw the can onto the dirt in front of his home. He began the walk to retrieve his mail.

He bathed in the oppressive layers of heat, the soundlessness, the great vistas of pink and almond and bone colored stone. To the south he could just make out the slopes of the Pedernal Hills. Stretching in all directions, sparse clumps of sagebrush, rabbitbrush, and prairie grass dotted the ground. Misshapen mounds of tumbleweed sat perched along his scrabble and gravel private roadway. Marsteller reached his mailbox and stopped. He withdrew each item, briefly inspected it—mostly ‘postal customer’ mailers and ads. The latest issue of *Carnival Collectibles Magazine*. There was a letter from the Torrance County Sheriff’s Office. Marsteller turned this over a few times and smiled. He glanced back at his house, straightened alertly.

Did he see something, or someone, move in the fallen timbers of the former smokehouse? Was there a shadowy figure somewhere behind the stunted juniper trees? The thought delighted him. He looked westward, noted the sunlight was beginning to stretch and turn glinting orange. Soon it would burnish everything it touched, enveloping the hills and the mesas, the arroyos and sandstone cliffs in a henna haze.

He began ambling back toward his home. Little bubbles of excitement started to effervesce, rising through his mind, tickling his heart. Life had been so bland, so isolated since he moved to New Mexico twenty-five years ago, hurriedly leaving his post as a professor of Eighteenth Century French Literature at an ivy-league school in Pennsylvania. He had abandoned his family, his friends, his very way of life. When he found this house—deserted, decaying, yearning for an occupant in this stark, alien, and desolate landscape—he knew he had found his match. He hadn’t done much remodeling or renovation. Just enough to keep out the occasional rain and snow and more insistent wind.

Marsteller reached his back door; it always stood slightly ajar. His grimy old Jeep was parked nearby. He stepped into his back pantry with a creaking and groaning of wood. “Hello,” he called. “Is there anyone here?”

The closest towns, where he did his shopping every few weeks, were miles and miles away. No one but the postman ever came around. He had well water but no phone, and while he had electricity, no one had ever sent him a bill or come around to check his old-fashioned dial-face meter. Even the realtor in Clines Corners who sold him the land had refused to come near the property.

He passed through his cluttered and antique kitchen, through a narrow hallway past another pantry on one side and a bathroom on the other. As he emerged into his parlor, a strange man crouched slightly and spun around to face him. He held one of Marsteller's collection of fortune-telling balls in a hand, as if to use it as a weapon.

Marsteller smiled broadly, teeth shining, as their eyes met. "How are you? The people around here call me Paul. I'm glad you could visit."

The stranger was young, muscular, with a scarf tied around his bald head. He was dressed in a stained, torn, and dirt-caked blue jumpsuit. He pulled up slowly to an upright position, still palming the black plastic ball.

Marsteller could see the tattoos of a confederate flag, swastikas, and various white-power slogans coiling around his visitor's arms and chest. "You must be tired, and thirsty. How long have you been traveling on foot?"

The other stared, open-mouthed, and then rubbed the back of a hand across his chapped lips, as if just remembering he was indeed thirsty. "Not that it's any of your business, asshole, but yeah, I've been walking for a couple of days," he said roughly, his voice cracking.

Marsteller nodded. "I see on your shirt, 'CCA-TCDF'. That's the detention facility in Estancia, isn't it. You must have been traveling a long time."

"Yeah, and I'll need to borrow your Jeep out there." The visitor raised the fortune-telling ball in a vague motion of threat.

"I have no phone. I won't turn you in. There's no need to get violent. Let me get you something to drink," Marsteller said lightly. He judged correctly that the young man had no gun, and was too exhausted and confused to chase him or stop him. He turned and sauntered back into the kitchen. He called out in the direction of the parlor, "I'll be right back. Make yourself at home."

He took two cans of cola out of the refrigerator, found a box of vanilla wafers in one of his cabinets, picked through the colorful little antique bottles that sat along a shelf atop his red Formica counter. In a few minutes, he returned to his parlor carrying a tray with two tall, amber glasses of ice and soda, and a yellow stoneware bowl nearly filled with golden cookies. The young man was sitting in one of Marsteller's recliners, gazing at the little window of the ball. Copper light began to fill the room as it streamed through dusty glass panes behind the chair.

Marsteller set the tray down on a metal folding table beside the recliner. "What do you want me to call you?" he asked as the young man grabbed one of the glasses and began gulping the drink like a fish out of water, his Adam's-apple bobbing.

He paused, caught his breath, wiped his mouth again with the back of his free hand. “You have ten of these stupid balls...” he said, ignoring Marsteller’s question, indicating the particular one he’d dropped in his lap.

“I collect unusual, perhaps you could say macabre things. Vintage and antique toys, games, relics, boardwalk and carnival artifacts, preserved animals, all kinds of stuff. See?” Marsteller pointed to the shelves and display cases and tables covered with hundreds of items, some as small as a tiny crystal skull hanging from a silver chain, others as large as the phone-booth sized mechanical ‘Zoltar Speaks’ stuck in a far corner of the room.

The young man craned his neck, half stood from the chair, dropped back down again. “That’s shit,” he muttered to himself. He appeared dazed.

“What do you want me to call you?” Marsteller asked again, sitting opposite his younger guest. He studied the body across from him, the way it twitched and stiffened then relaxed, as if the other wanted to be watchful and cautious but was too tired to maintain his vigilance.

The young man lowered the glass until it rested on the table again. “Uh, you don’t need to know my name.”

“I guess I don’t,” Marsteller responded. “What did it tell you?” He nodded in the direction of the ball, still resting in the visitor’s lap.

“Do these things work? It’s just bullshit. It said something like ‘I can’t tell you now’.”

“Do it again, see what it says,” Marsteller suggested, his eyes twinkling, his lips stretched into an affable grin. He leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees, his fingers dangling, as he watched the young man.

The other smirked, looked defiant, but then shrugged and picked up the ball, shook it, asked, “Am I going to get out of here, am I going to be okay?” He studied the answer and made a sour face. “Fuck, what is that?”

“What does it say?”

“Don’t count on it’. Okay, that’s bullshit. I’m leaving right now.” He came to his feet, but his legs rippled and he couldn’t keep his balance. The ball dropped to the wooden floor with a heavy thunk, rolled toward Marsteller as the young man staggered and sagged backward into the stale Naugahyde of the recliner. “What the fuck...” he said, his voice garbled and thick.

“I see you’re a very committed youngster. A neo-Nazi, white-supremacist tough guy. A punk. But you probably didn’t do anything terribly horrible to get thrown in the county jail. What was it, drugs? Meth or cocaine? But they couldn’t hold you for long before you escaped...”

The visitor’s face slackened, became pale and glossy. His eyes became round circles, the pupils dilated. His lower jaw drooped and his tongue lolled. He again tried to stand, this time with enormous effort, but he couldn’t make himself move. Something wet stained his blue government-issue jumpsuit around the crotch.

Marsteller continued to casually rest his elbows on his knees, his hands now clasped, and watched the other intently. “I’ve given you a neuromuscular blocker with just a drop or two of midazolam syrup.” He was beginning to feel giddy and he tamped down the jolts of excitement in order to remain professional and focused. For the last twenty-five years of this exile, there had



hardly been any opportunities to indulge himself, to add to his ultimate collection. The one now housed in the cellar. Not like so long ago, on that campus, where there were so many bright young things to choose from, so rosy and fragrant and warm, in the prime of beauty and life. He had only himself to blame for ending up with a new name, in the middle of New Mexico. Such a lack of self-discipline...

The young man was now slumped like a marionette without strings, folded to his right, his head bent on his neck in an unnatural angle. The odors of sweat and urine wafted from his form. Saliva began dribbling from his mouth. His lower arms, his fingers vibrated for a few minutes, his shoes tapped the floor, keeping time in a wild dance, and then he was completely still.

Marsteller leaned back slowly. He took a deep, deep breath, a connoisseur enjoying the aroma, the sight, the ambiance with all of his heightened senses. *The Marquis de Sade was right*, he thought. *A little less vice is virtue in a very vicious heart.*

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Rivka Jacobs currently lives with three Siamese cats in West Virginia. She was born in Philadelphia and grew up in South Florida. She has sold stories to such publications as The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, the Far Frontiers anthologies, and the Women of Darkness anthology. More recently she's placed stories with The Sirens Call eZine, The Literary Hatchet, Fantastic Floridas, and the More Alternative Truths anthology. Rivka has a BA in history, MAs in sociology and mental health counseling, and a BSN. She most recently worked as a psychiatric nurse.

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## Death Proof Inc. | Lexie Carver

“Welcome everyone and thank you for attending. If you would be so kind as to put your phones on silent, we would greatly appreciate it. And please, no video recording. We can’t show this to the general public, I’m sure you understand why. I’ve put together a PowerPoint presentation to further explain to new clients exactly what our firm does here. Please, stop me at any time if you have any questions.”

The presenter stops speaking, and looks around the room at all the nervous faces in front of him, though I don’t think anyone could be more nervous than I am.

My dad has Stage 4 cancer and without this, he’ll be dead soon. He’s everything I have in this world. I’m an only child and I refuse to live in a world without him. Death is everywhere in our society. Horror movies play on that exact fear. Some people embrace a fear of death and even death itself, while others are so crippled by it that they can’t function. Me, I never thought about death until we heard the diagnosis. I lived in a world of privilege, protected from the ravages of the outside world. I didn’t think death could get to me or my father. I just hope this company isn’t full of crap. I’ve been to three other talks about how to live forever. One was even going on about blood. *How utterly disgusting and unhygienic. Really?*

I sip my coffee anxiously awaiting the continuation of the talk. Time goes slowly. I keep glancing over at my dad. My hands shake from the massive amounts of caffeine I’ve ingested, just to stay awake, to be able to take care of him.

The presenter starts speaking again, his voice melodious and calm. “Now, it is 2280 and we still don’t have a cure for cancer. There have been a lot of recent advances in our society and many companies offer a chance to beat death but I offer you *forever*. And my claim unlike my competitors is the real deal. I don’t offer you a measly couple of years like my competitors do. No. For the elite, such as yourselves, I offer you *forever*. The common people, well, they’re cute in their struggle to survive, but why would we want to save people like them? Wouldn’t we rather have a society of elites who live forever? The others would work for us and provide for the society we live in. The commoners don’t have much to offer the world, except their dedication to their jobs, earning hardly anything. It’s all rather endearing. You have to love those little worker bees. This project, this company, is all for you, the elite. Now, it is true that we don’t have the full consent of the FDA. Since this is so outside ‘normal’, I don’t think we ever will.”

I speak up, raising my hand. “Um...are there any risks involved?”

“Very good question. I don’t want to say no, but the risks are minimal. I see your father is quite sick and I assume the sickness is leaking into his soul. He is probably quite weak. The risk goes up if the patient is weak, but it’s minimal. The reward greatly outweighs any concerns.

*I have to hand it to this guy, he’s a good salesman.*

“The procedure is simple. Basically, we take your soul and place it in a younger body. We keep doing this *forever*. You decide when you’ve had enough *not* Mother Nature. You control your own destiny. You can be a god among men.”

“Do you get to choose—” A meek voice spoke up.

“Your new body? Yes, of course, dear. There is a booklet in front of you with a list of healthy Americans. All the people listed in that booklet are downstairs. They are fed proper meals, of course, none of this vegan or vegetarian crap. They are given vitamins and daily exercise to make sure they’re at their peak for our clients. You can pick any of them, and can even come downstairs to look at them in person.”

“What happens to the souls that are already in these people?” a businessman asks.

“Honestly, why would you care? They’re nothing. They rely on the government to help them out. They’re not rich, they have no families. They’re living a pitiful life, really. This would be a mercy killing.”

“How do you do it? And how many times has it been done before?” I ask utterly intrigued about the possibilities. He was right, of course. Why would one care what happens to those unfortunates? We are the important ones. We are the ones with money. We control the fate of everyone.

“More good questions. You are the best clients so far. Of yes, I’ve done this before, many times. A person could run several times for the Presidency since they appear to be different people. But I’ve already said too much I’m afraid. The possibilities are endless. Now, the *how* is a bit complicated. I brought a video to show you.”

The presenter snaps his finger and a very attractive woman smiles at us, the clients, before turning the lights off.

“That’s my wife of 150 years. Doesn’t look a day over 23, does she? Thank you, dear.”

His wife bows to us in turn before pressing the button on the PowerPoint presentation.

“Now, as to how...well, there is an old black magic ritual that dates back to Salem, Massachusetts. A few of the people that were killed in the Salem Witch Trials were actually witches and they used this ritual to transfer their souls to another body before their flesh burned. The founder of Death Proof was one of those very witches and has graced us with the ingredients and the Latin ritual needed. It would always be done in front of her and her coven of witches to ensure that it is done correctly. She does every transfer personally.”

“Are there any side effects?” my father inquires.

Even though I had asked the question already, my father needed to know specifically what would happen. He wanted to make sure this was his best chance for survival. I turn to look at him and hug him tightly. The presenter watches our interaction and his eyes visibly soften.

“Well, your soul is contained in a shell of sorts so, yes, sometimes there are side effects. Sometimes the person goes into a deep sleep for two weeks and wakes up refreshed and new. Some have migraines for a week. Some a slight stomach bug for a week, while others have no side effects at all. Of course the sample size is rather small so it’s hard to come up with percentages and risk analysis information. We’re not quite sure why some people have side effects, and others don’t. But we can assure you that the side effects are minimal.”

“The price is 10 million, correct?” I ask confidently. This man may be lying and the procedure may not work, but somehow I feel confident and trust him. I have hope again and that is a precious thing indeed.

“Yes, in cash if you can. I do so hate having to fill out tax forms. As if the government doesn’t have enough money. I mean we’re all rich here and we deserve every penny, even if we didn’t actually work for it. So let’s screw the government and taxes and let’s live forever. Who’s with me?”

Everyone raises their hand including me. The presenter smiles, though I can’t be sure if it’s because of all the money we brought in our briefcases or because he would be saving all of us. Whatever the reason, I know this is our best chance.

“Follow me then and welcome to a brave new world.”

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Lexie is a feisty woman who lives out loud and is a veritable badass. She loves indie rock and a good cup of black coffee. She’s been writing since she was ten years old. Her love of horror started at the age of 11 with her first horror movie, a slasher. She has an adorable small dog named Remy who is quite a handful.

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*ABERRANT* is defined as unusual, abnormal or different...



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### **“Grave Work”**

The heavy lid of the coffin plopped off and fell to the dirt with a muted thud. The sound of a prayer drifted down from the top of the gravesite. Ben looked up above him as he wiped the sweat from his face with dirty hands.

“Is it done?” He asked Ben as he crossed himself.

“Yeah, preacher man, it’s open.”

Ben backed up a step as the priest climbed down into the grave. Together they peered at the man inside. A beetle burrowed its way into the dead mouth. Again the priest crossed himself. Then the corpse’s eyes opened.

### **Sacrifice**

Rain danced against the stained glass windows to a chorus of thunder. Inside the small chapel, David knelt before the man suspended on the wall.

The man’s arms were outstretched and he wore a crown of thorns on his head, causing blood to fall to the altar floor beneath, like the rain outside.

David waited until the sacrifice was complete before rising from his knees. With one last look at the man on the wall, David left the chapel, back out into the cold, cleansing rain.

David thought, this time the man didn’t die for our sins, only his own.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Dusty Davis is a horror author living in East Liverpool, Ohio. When he is not working on a story, he can be found at home with his wife and two children.

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/dustydavis21](http://www.facebook.com/dustydavis21)

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## The Dent | *Nate Ealy*

“I made an appointment with the body shop for tomorrow morning, honey.” Rick MacIntyre was talking on the phone while driving home from work. On the other end was Mrs. MacIntyre, or Wendy as her friends called her. “I’ll be home in twenty minutes. Love you, bye.”

Rick hung up and continued to drive. Last Sunday an idiot backed up into his gray Focus and dented the front left bumper. Now, five days later, he was less than twenty-four hours from getting it fixed. Wendy waited at home for them to start their weekend.

Work was always hard for Rick to find. He never could do anything with his history degree. The only job he was able to land was his current one at the mill. He had to take a day off to drive up to Alabama for an interview for the office job with FireTech.

Rick was in his late twenties, and had the average Dad bod: soft in the middle and hairy all over with a beard. He covered himself over in a nice white button up shirt and khaki pants. He dressed for the job he wanted.

Coming home meant driving through the same old towns that dotted the back roads between Effingham, FL and the interstate. Life in the little places was worth it, though. Rick didn’t envy those who worked in the cities.

As Rick drove by a rusted mailbox, an equally rusty pickup barreled out of the driveway behind him. The old beater picked up speed, tailing Rick. From his rearview, he could see the driver put a flashing red and blue light on top of the truck.

Rick thought the man must be drunk. He was barreling down the road with a strobe light on his truck. What other explanation was there?

Rick didn’t think to pull over until he heard gunshots.

The back window and side rearview mirrors were reduced to shards. Broken glass covered the inside of the car. Rick put on his four ways and then hit the brakes. He slowed to a stop on the road. He didn’t pull off the asphalt. If some person came flying by, he’d rather this idiot get hit trying to walk up to his window.

Once stopped, Rick turned around to see if the guy was stopping too, and he was parking behind him like a State Trooper.

The guy got out of his car and was skinny as a rail, wearing a cut off denim vest and dirty blue jeans. He had a ball cap on that look liked he used it to wash the dishes. Rick saw the man spit a wad out of his mouth and approach his Focus still holding the gun, which turned out to be a pistol.

The stranger walked up beside the Focus, looked at the front of the car, and then leaned into the window.

“Howdy,” the man said. “Name’s Josh, but everyone calls me Birdy.”

“What is this all about, Birdy?” Rick said. “I’m just going home.”

“You’re coming back to the scene of the crime, son. Don’t think I’m stupid.” The stranger waved the pistol around. “Why else would you come back here after killing my boy?”

Rick paused. He couldn’t have heard him right. Killed his boy?

“Wh-”

“I’ll tell ya in one word: admiration. My boy was just trying to come home for some chow and you killed him. I told him not to play around on the asphalt. That jerks like you drive way too fast down the road. Little pups like him don’t listen to nobody though, I suppose. You did your part. Now I’m gonna do mine,” Birdy said.

Rick was still processing what he said.

“I didn’t kill any kids,” Rick said. “I’ve never drove this road before!”

“HA!” the stranger laughed. “That dent on your front bumper is from my little boy. I can still see his hair in it. It’s a fresh dent too. You got it last Friday.”

“That dent is front some asshole in the Walmart parking lot on Sunday! I don’t even know what your kid looks like.” Rick hit the steering wheel to punctuate his statement.

Birdy huffed and then drew his wallet out of his back pocket. Instead of peeling out, Rick watched the man pull out a little clipping of a golden retriever in his arms. In any other scenario, it would have been a nice picture of a dog.

“Nice try. That’s a dog. Not a kid,” Rick said.

Birdy smashed the butt of his gun into Rick’s jaw.

“That’s my boy. His name was Spark and he loved to hunt in the woods for God knows what, but you killed him, sonny. And don’t think that he didn’t come from my wife doesn’t make him my own flesh and blood. That dog is my child.” Birdy tapped his chest.

Rick was beginning to think that Josh got the nickname Birdy because his thinking was crazy as a loon. He didn’t dare mention it, though.

“Look, I’m just gonna get going. We obviously have a misunderstanding,” Rick said. He then reached his hand out to put the car in drive, and that’s when Birdy’s pistol whipped Rick in the face knocking him out cold.

\*\*\*

“My boy was just trying to come home for some chow and you killed him.”

Rick heard the line two more times before he opened his eyes. He was staring at a tranquil pond surface, but the whole world was inverted. All the blood in his body was rushing to his head as he hung upside down in a tight cocoon of rope.

If Rick would look straight up, or down as he was, he could have kissed the pond water.

The sky below him was a burnt orange, and the last minutes of sunset were flooding the sky.

“Wanna atone for all your wrong doing?” Birdy laughed. He was sitting on a stool beside Rick on the pier, and had on the same clothes. “Well I ain’t gonna hear it.”

Rick tried to think, but he was starting to get light headed and his pulse was sounding more like a bass drum in his ears.

Birdy stood up and walked to the edge of the pier. He then bent down on his knees and started to slap the water. Rick watched the ripples.

“Come on over, boy! This murderer here is ready for ya!” Birdy yelled. Then he looked Rick in the eyes. “You know, if a gator is gonna eat a man, he’ll want to see the fear in your eyes when he closes them jaws on you.”



Rick's stomach flopped. He now understood what was happening. That crazy man was going to feed him to a gator for killing his dog. Rick thought about Wendy for a second, and knew he had to free himself.

"Yes! Wiggle like a little catpillar!" Birdy screamed again. The crazy man hit the water with an open palm. "The gator will enjoy gobbling you up!"

Rick kept wriggling in his bonds, but he was bound too tight. The rope wasn't loosening.

*Think*, Rick thought. He watched Birdy slap the water again and again. Rick then did half a crunch, something he'd never do in any other situation, and saw that he was tied, with just as much rope around his body, to the wooden beam that held him out over the water.

That was a lot of weight on the beam, and the wood looked weathered. Old.

Rick tried to get himself to jump around more. He could feel the sweat bounce off his face as he tried, but he felt more like a fly stuck in a spider's web than a man achieving freedom. He paused to catch his breath, and when he did, Rick saw a dark shape in the water ahead. It moved slow, rippling the surface.

"Oh lawdy! Here he comes!" Birdy screamed. He slapped the water two more times and then held onto the edge of the pier.

Rick watched as the long shape of the gator materialized in the murky water. It never rushed, staying slow and meticulous. The closer the animal got, the more he could make out, until it dove deeper below the surface. Rick's heart pounded in his chest as he scanned the water for the gator.

He was helpless hanging above the water. He knew that even Birdy couldn't help now. No one could call off a hungry gator.

Rick thought of Wendy once more. He tried to picture the face he'd never see again.

"My boy was just trying to come home for some chow and you killed him," Birdy said.

A single drop of sweat rolled off Rick's nose and fell into the pond.

The gator shot out of the water. Rick saw its open jaws land firmly on Birdy's arm, and then pulled him head first into the dank grave. The pond turned white for a moment from all the splashing, before foaming red.

Rick took a deep breath and let out a scream.

The gator took Birdy. It left him swaying in the wind like a dead man.

VVRROOOOMMM. CLICK. Rick heard a car engine to his left.

"Oh my god," someone yelled. It sounded like a woman. Rick could hear people getting out of the car and running his way. "Birdy got another person!"

Within minutes, Rick MacIntyre was cut down and helped away from the water.

He was going to be able to see Wendy's face again, and get that dent fixed.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Nate Ealy is a writer living in Western PA. When he's not writing he's watching sports or hanging out with his non-writer friends. Some of his stories have appeared in *Gathering Storm Magazine*, *Romance Magazine*, and *The Siren's Call* among others. He is currently working on a novel that may or may not get published one day.



## **Playground** | *Tony Flynn*

All of us of a certain age came to define the end of our childhoods with the disappearance of Edward Moore. That was the day the world stopped being safe. Little Edward Moore, seven years old, with blue eyes and the darkest black hair, vanished on the 3rd of October 1993. He left nothing behind except a small backpack which led police to believe he had run away from home, because it contained a change of clothes, some chocolate bars, and a blue Power Ranger toy that he wouldn't have left home without. They found the backpack underneath the slide at the playground beside the lake in our neighborhood park. First, they searched the lake. Then they searched the woods around the park. Then the nearby houses and beyond, until days and weeks and months went by without a trace, and after a while it didn't even seem real anymore. It was as if Edward Moore stopped being a human being, and became a cautionary tale. Don't wander alone, or you'll end up like Edward Moore. Don't get into cars with strangers, or you'll end up like Edward Moore. Don't play too close to the water, or you'll end up like Edward Moore. No one knew what had happened, so anything could have happened. A thousand horrible deaths all speculated and all used to kill him over and over again. Maybe he was kidnapped. Maybe he drowned. Maybe he was abducted by aliens. I was five years old when he disappeared. By the time I was seven, my parents had begun to look at me in the strangest way, almost as if there was something unlucky about the age. Then I became eight, and then nine, and then ten, and ten was when it happened.

Like I said, I was two years younger than Edward, and to a child, two years is the difference of an eternity. I didn't know Edward Moore. We went to the same school, but he was in a different class, so may as well have been in a different world. I didn't know him, but I felt like I understood him. When you're a kid, there's usually only ever one reason to want to run away from home, and it's almost always because of your parents. I knew how that felt. I had thought about it myself almost a thousand times the year I turned ten, but I never got to a point where I packed a bag. My rebellion, for what it was, was to go to the playground, which had become that most forbidden of places ever since Edward vanished. No one went there anymore. It's hard to play on a slide where someone has left flowers and mass cards. After a while the park keeper just stopped unlocking the playground gate, so the metal slide turned to rust and the paint peeled off the yellow and red monkey bars of the jungle gym until they were gray all over, and the rope and wood of the swings started to rot, untended in the wind and the rain. Even so, I liked to go there. It was the best way to piss off my parents. As if just by being there I was daring whatever happened to Edward to come and happen to me. So I kicked my football as far as I could up the hill beside the playground, and then tried to catch it as it rolled back down, kicking it back and forth, the lake behind me and the playground across the field to my right, gate fastened shut; a crypt too depressing to play in, but too important to break down and grow flowers. Nothing would have grown there anyway.

The sky was dark blue, and it was the beginning of May, so I was out far longer than I should have been. I could picture them at home, Mom and Dad, shouting at each other, and I

smiled, trying to guess the second that the fight would change from whatever crap they were arguing about to the realization that I hadn't come home yet. Then they'd start fighting over who was to blame for the fact that I was such a disobedient little bastard, as I'd heard my father put it once. So I smiled and I kicked the ball, and with every kick, I kicked my Mom and Dad. I kicked him for raising his hand. I kicked her for putting up with his shit for so long when so many of my friends had parents who were decent enough to divorce. I kicked him stumbling upstairs in the middle of the night and then hearing their muffled row through the bedroom wall. I kicked her crying the next morning and him promising he'd never drink again. I kicked so hard that I slipped on the grass and fell flat on my ass, and then the ball rolled back down the hill but I wasn't fast enough to catch it and it sped past me and rolled into the lake.

I picked myself up and cursed myself for missing it. I walked down to the lake and, kneeling down on the path, I reached for the ball, managing to reach just far enough to graze it with my fingers, but I only ended up forcing it further out.

I looked around. The branches of the trees which grew out over the lake were like a giant green fist closing over me. I could see a fallen branch a little further up the side of the lake, so I took it and tried to reach out with it, trying to get the ball. All of a sudden I became aware that I was alone. That didn't bother me. It was part of the reason I came here. I liked being alone, but I rarely felt alone. A bird squawked and flew from a branch above me and, following it with my gaze, my eyes fixed on a squirrel running up the tree on the other side of the lake and then out over the branch, like a little daredevil over the water. There was a breeze which made the leaves dance and form a little pattern of fluttering light from what remained of the sun. The light seemed to reflect off the water onto the skin of the football, so it looked almost as if it was alive, shimmering like crystal. I leaned out over the water and reached out with the branch as far as I could.

I jumped back and let the branch fall.

Two little hands broke the surface of the water. They were pale and waxy, as if frozen cold from the lake, almost blue. They wrapped around the football and held it there for a moment, and then pulled it gently down beneath the surface. I stood there, completely still, and the surface of the lake was still too. I wanted to run, but I didn't. I couldn't. I stared out into the water, trying to make sense of what I had seen.

It jumped from the lake as fast as lightning. I only saw for a moment the pale, naked skin and the soaking black hair before his frozen hand took my wrist and pulled me into the lake. I kicked and struggled but I could feel myself falling under. I held my breath as tight as I could, and kept my eyes closed against the water. I could still feel that grip on my wrist. It was colder even than the water around me, just this ring of ice around my wrist. I could feel myself sinking further and further down, but I wouldn't open my eyes, and I wouldn't let go of my breath. Then suddenly it was as if the grip on my hand became just a little warmer, and somehow, I felt like I heard a voice.

*"It's alright,"* it said. *"It's alright."*



The frozen water seemed to lose its edge. It was still freezing, but I could feel it less. I began to wonder, is this dying?

*“Open your eyes,”* said the voice.

I shook my head.

*“Open your eyes,”* it said.

I shook my head again, and struggled as if to speak. I was getting warmer now. Almost comfortable in the water.

*“Open your eyes.”*

The voice was so gentle. The grip on my wrist was firm, but not painful. It was strange, but all of a sudden I didn't feel like I was in any danger.

*“Open your eyes.”*

So I did. I opened them. Looking above me, I could see the shimmering of the water like a clear cloud enshrouded by blackness leading back to the surface.

*“Look down.”*

I turned my head and we drifted further down into the water. I began to see something emerge from the murky dark depth. I saw a shiny metal slide. I saw perfectly painted monkey bars. I saw a gorgeous swing set.

*“We can play here,”* said the voice. *“We can be friends.”*

The playground was exactly as the one above used to be, only even more beautiful. There was a seesaw painted blue and red, and beautifully carved wooden horses and lions suspended on big metal springs to ride on. There was a small merry-go-round moving all on its own, creating a little round whirlpool.

*“All you have to do,”* said the voice, *“is breathe in.”*

Then I looked at him. I wasn't afraid. I knew he didn't want to hurt me.

*“All you have to do,”* he said again, *“is breathe in.”*

The water was so warm, and the playground was so beautiful, that I nearly did what he asked. I wanted to. It seemed so easy. Just breathe in. Let the water fill me, and then be the water and play forever. Just breathe in. Just breathe in—

*“Just breathe in.”*

—but I couldn't. Something wouldn't let me. Maybe I was afraid, or maybe I knew what it would mean. I looked at the boy who held me, and his face was so expectant, so excited, so ready to play.

I shook my head.

His smile faded, but I still wasn't scared of him. He held my gaze for a few moments and then he looked down to the playground—a beautiful playground—but a lonely one.

Suddenly, my wrist was free. I kicked as hard and as fast as I could, and I didn't look back. I wish I had, but I didn't. I kept my eyes on the surface above, and held my breath until I felt my chest would burst, and then I broke the surface, and I gasped for air, coughing and spluttering and thrashing at the water around me. I kicked my way to the shore and pulled myself up to the footpath. I sat there, freezing cold, soaking wet, the lake still busy with the ripples from my

swim. Then I looked to the playground, and it was so much uglier than the one down below, but nowhere near as lonely.

\*\*\*

I still come back to the lake quite often. Eventually they did tear down the playground (the one above land, anyway) but the lake, of course, remains. I'm an adult now, and a father myself. Behind me, my son kicks his football up and down the hill, just like I used to. Seven years old this October, he was born on the anniversary of Edward Moore's disappearance.

I do my best not to read anything into that.

I can still see his face so clearly. Edward's, that is. I don't think of the newspaper photo anymore, though that's still the one they print every year, on my son's birthday. I think instead of the way he held me so tightly, and the way his eyes looked so pleadingly. Sometimes I wish I had stayed. I used to like being alone, but really there's nothing worse in the world.

"DAD!" I hear my son shout, and I turn just to see his ball fly by my field of vision and then splash into the lake. My son runs down towards me, and I put out my hand, keeping him well clear of the water, and we watch the ball drift on the glassy surface of the lake.

"Can we get it back?" my son asks.

I could probably reach it if I tried, but I won't. I shake my head.

"No," I say.

He looks down at his shoes, sad in that quiet way that breaks parents' hearts.

"It's okay," I say, and I ruffle his hair with my hand. "Tomorrow we'll buy a new one."

Then we start on back home. As we walk away, I look over my shoulder. The ball is still there. I feel my son's hand grip my wrist the same way Edward grabbed it all those years ago. He holds on tight, and his grip is warm. I take his hand and I know I'll do anything I can to make sure he's safe.

At the top of the hill I look back to the lake one more time. The ball is gone. The water is still and calm, and betrays no knowledge of what lies below.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — A writer of short stories, poetry and screenplays, Tony is fantastically afraid of most everything and therefore has a particular interest in the horror genre. "Playground" is Tony's third publication with *The Sirens Call*, after "Where the Lost Ones Dwell" in issue #11, and "The Shadowman" in issue #22. He has also had work published by Mocha Memoirs Press, Horrified Press and Villipede Publications.

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## **The Dance** | *H. J. Steinwachs*

She stared down intently into the darkness of the bowl in front of her. The outside was smeared with the soot of candles. You could no longer make out the designs her great grandmother had etched in the clay 100 years ago. The bowl was filled beyond the brim. Not enough for the water to cascade over the edge but enough that it was bulging upward. She had filled the last bit one drop at a time until she could feel it pulsating with the need to escape over the edge.

Colors began to swim across the surface of the water. A psychedelic whirlwind of blues, purples, oranges danced before her.

She opened her mouth and breathed forth.

“Shooooooooow meeeeeeeeeee...”

The words poured from her mouth into the brimming bowl. The contents exploded outwardly into the room. Colors swirled around her, pulsated in the air. They moved faster and faster dancing around her. Her skin began to prickle as the light began to take form. She began to hear music, faintly at first. Then it grew louder and louder. An old song that reminded her of dark woods, moonbeams, and magick. She began to make out forms in the chaos. There was a company of demons brilliantly shining in the light of her fire. Their faces were still out of focus, but the fabric around them glowed luminously. They whirled around her furiously. She felt the energy swell within her. She opened her arms, threw her head back and laughed.

She stood up, swaying back and forth lost in the music. The crescendo built driving itself through her body, lifting it up and tossing her around like a small plastic bag in the wind. The ecstasy distorted her face. The music built faster and faster. She lifted her hands to the sky.

The music abruptly came to a halt. The demons stopped. The only sound was her ragged breath. She looked around coming back to this place. The demons smiled coldly at her and whispered in unison

“See?”

They swarmed her, ripping the flesh from her bones. They feasted on her terror and passion. Licking their lips, they faded into the darkness on the wings of the music that brought them.



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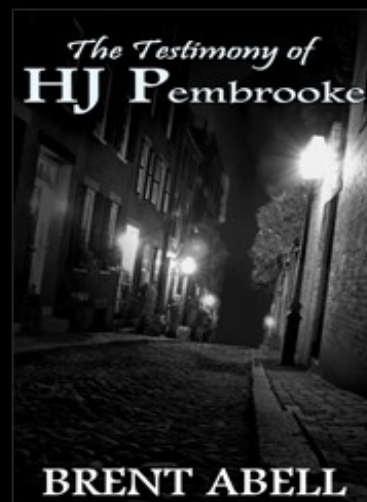
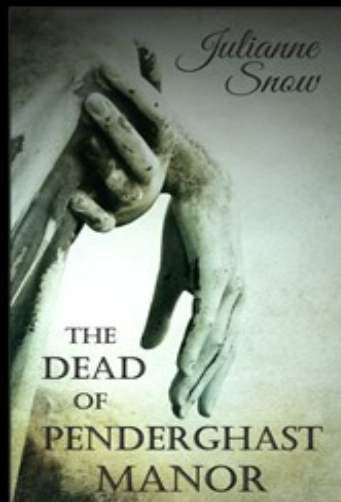


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## Breathless | *Mark Steinwachs*

His wide eyes shadow my every move, veins throbbing in his neck. A look I've seen numerous times. Lying stomach-down, each limb bound to the table I bolted in place. He shakes, sweat plastering cropped hair to his skull. The acrid smell of urine and sweat fills my soundproofed basement. An odor I've learned to ignore. Can he? I've never asked them, not even the ones who lasted a while.

He struggled at first, like they all do, but the bonds are tight. Any background noise will ruin what I need. The ball gag is slick with saliva but muffles the sounds. Situations like this remind me that humans are animals—base, instinctual creatures. We've grown arrogant because we have thumbs and big brains.

He started with questions. Like a dentist talking to a patient, I understood every word—and ignored him. Then he begged, pleaded. Cried. Screamed.

They're all the same. Except for one thing. Everyone's sound is unique. Pitch and timbre, guttural groan and rasping breath, final gasp and last exhalation.

I caress his salty hair. His body slouches. "Almost over," I say. "I'm going to make you famous. Promise. I know talent when I hear it."

With two more steps, I'm hunched over my laptop. It's a simple workstation, but it does the job. A few keystrokes later, and I'm ready. I hit the record button. My thumb taps the mic mounted to the short boom and levels jump to yellow. I set it on the ground, tilting the mic toward his face. I unstrap the ball gag and pull it free. A strand of spittle connects his lips to the ball in my fist, then falls. The carpeted floor darkens under each drop.

He chokes. Levels jump on my screen. They touch red. There will be some distortion, but I'm fine with that.

"Please." It's between a whisper and a rasp, his throat long ago rubbed raw. "Please." He's said it countless times, at first a plea for freedom. Now that he's accepted his fate, this solitary word is still a plea for freedom—just a different kind.

I glance at the mic. Still in position. I climb onto the table, planting one knee on either side of his ribcage. His shortened breaths register on the screen, levels in the yellow, dropping closer to green where they need to be.

I've taken almost everything I can from him. These final moments are ones I can never go back and capture again. I let out a long breath. I wrap my hands around his neck. My fingers search, finding their targets. My muscles tense, all my attention is on the screen. My grip tightens, squeezing. Little bursts of color in the levels mirror the sounds under me. My languid breaths contradict the staccato rhythm of his gasps. My body stills, except my fingers.

A meter on the screen measures time. Approaching one minute. Not long now. I hold my breath as he lets out his last exhalation.

Perfect.

I slide to the floor and return to the computer. I press the spacebar to stop recording. I transfer the file to my flash drive. A smile twists my lips as I head upstairs, drive in hand.



In my studio, I make quick work of loading the files, manipulating them so they're ready for use. I swivel and face my keyboard. Pressing the key, his last breath spills from the speakers. I hold the note, bending the pitch up then down, layering it into the nearly finished song.

Almost there. A few more tries and I have it.

To my left, three phonograph statues proclaim 'Best New Age Album.'

This will give me number four.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Mark Steinwachs is a roadie who retired to shop life and is now GM at Bandit Lites in Nashville, TN. Over a decade traveling in tour buses plus time as a United States Marine, and a rave DJ/promoter has given him a unique outlook in his storytelling. Growing up in Buffalo, NY and spending many winter nights reading fantasy and scfi novels he never imagined he would one day be writing his own stories, and oddly enough writing primarily horror stories. He is also a member of a horror writer group called Pen of the Damned.

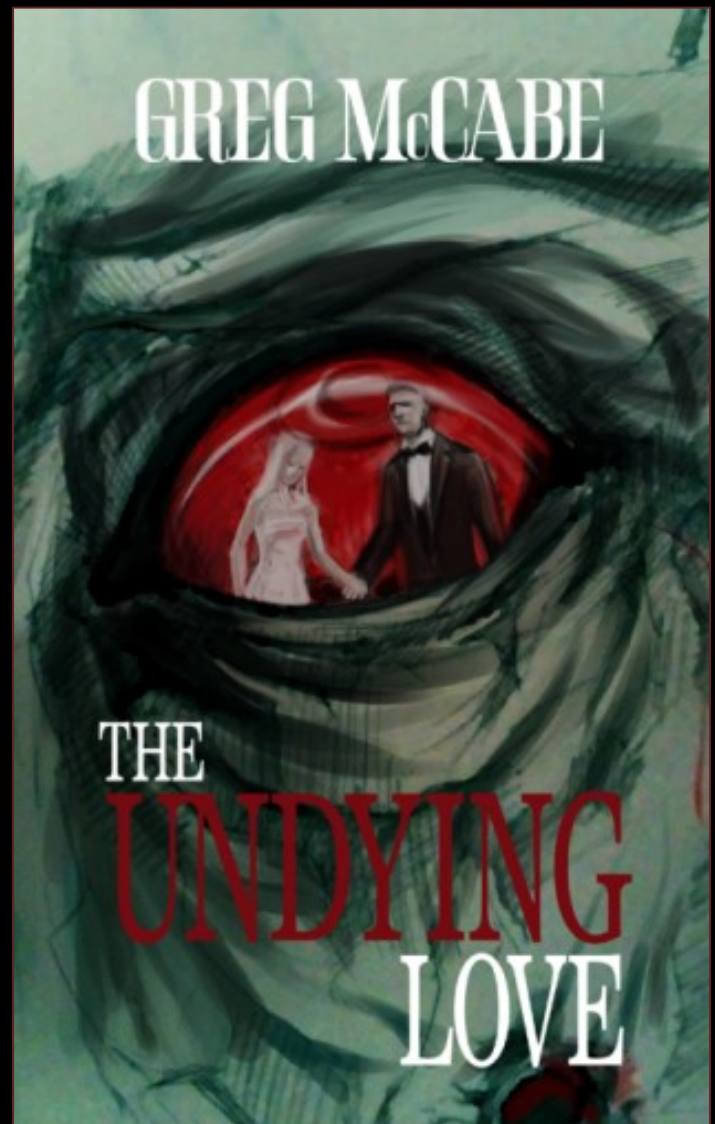
Twitter: [@authorMarkStein](https://twitter.com/authorMarkStein)

Facebook: [Author Mark Steinwachs](https://www.facebook.com/AuthorMarkSteinwachs)

## The Undying Love

*Greg McCabe*

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## The Bargain | *Linda Imbler*

Bored on a Saturday afternoon, an overworked Susan Pritchett decided to take a break, get out of her apartment, and go for an extended drive. After making it across town, she saw a sign for a yard sale. She had not stopped at a yard sale in several years, so she decided to spend a few minutes looking around. The woman running the sale told her she had better be quick, as they were about to shut down. Hurriedly she moved along the shelves, but stopped cold when she saw a voice recorder which for some reason had a very low price. With her job and hobbies, it would be helpful for her to have something that left her hands free, but would allow her to record her thoughts while she multitasked. At only two bucks, it was a bargain!

When she arrived home, she wanted to try the recorder. She discovered when she turned it on that the display did not illuminate. She opened the battery compartment and found it empty. Wanting to familiarize herself with the device, she went through the motions of recording herself anyway. When she hit play, she was shocked to discover that it played back her voice. She wondered how this could be. Freaked out, but curious, her questioning nature overcame what should have been fear. Recording yet again, even without a battery, her voice played back. But this time, in addition to her own voice, she heard what she perceived to be whispering and what sounded like a soft shuffling. She went ahead and brushed this off as just a result of her tiredness and her aging ears. *Tinnitus is supposed to be very common once you're getting up there*, she rationalized. Later that evening, as she worked to create a grocery list on the recorder while she painted the rest of the bathroom, she not only heard the list being repeated on playback, but again heard what she now knew to be another voice and soft footfalls, although still somewhat subdued.

Upon awakening early Sunday morning, she turned the recorder on so that she could list off her errands for the day. During playback, she distinctly heard a voice, not her voice, saying, "Good morning to you, Susan." At this point, most people would've called for a priest or at least thrown the recorder in the trash, but not Susan. Always inquisitive by nature, she decided to find out how this strange voice recorder worked. She realized there was probably a way to record a general message as a gag, but how on Earth the recorder had known her name was beyond her.

She put the recorder aside as the phone rang. It was her boss, Madeline, that thorn in her side, pain in her derriere, and rock in her shoe. What wouldn't she give not to be harassed anymore by this dumb woman all the time! After barking instructions on what Susan needed to take care of when she reached the office the next morning, Madeline slammed the phone receiver on Susan. *So this is why I start every day with a headache*, thought Susan. *Getting the phone slammed in my ear, that's enough to make anyone's head pound. This woman is a menace. Not only is she ultra bossy, but she has eyes like an eagle and she watches everything I do waiting for me to make a mistake. What a nightmare.* At least Madeline hadn't tried to drag Susan into the office on her day off. That was a lucky break.

Monday morning, while driving to work, Susan realized that she had a couple of things to add to the work list, so she turned on the recorder. Later, when she played back the list in her

office, she heard something very disturbing. It was a strange voice, gravelly in nature and sounding like slurry being poured, definitely louder than the previous times. It informed Susan that Madeline was going to develop vision problems. *OK, so Madeline's eyesight is going to get worse. Maybe she'll get some more attractive glasses now. This is getting more disturbing all the time. Someone is messing with me. I realize technology has taken giant leaps in the last few years, but I had no idea that it had evolved to this level. But when and where would someone have been able to program this voice recorder and make it specific to me and who would've known that I would be at that yard sale or even interested in having a voice recorder?*

That evening, while sitting at home working crossword puzzles, after having taken a break from all the extra work Madeline piled on her that day, the phone rang. *Here we go again, probably Madeline checking up on me to see if I'm working. Thank goodness she can't see through walls.* Instead, it was her coworker Bob. He sounded rather exhilarated.

"I just wanted to let you know, there's been an accident. Madeline was texting on her phone and not watching the road and she slammed into a tree. They were not able to save her," he reported.

In bed that night, Susan thought over the voice message and what happened to Madeline. She tried to wrap her head around the whole thing, as well as trying to get some well needed shut-eye. A shiver of thrills ran through Susan at that moment. In spite of herself, she couldn't help but grin at the idea that the harpy, however sad her death, would no longer be yammering incessantly at her throughout her future work days. She was able to fall into a deep, dreamless, restful sleep, finally, without her head looping endlessly through the night about duties at work.

Her thrills were short-lived though, for the very next night, her psycho neighbor from upstairs interrupted her rest. He decided this was another night he was going to slam around in his apartment and make her ceiling shake. Her thoughts went to a dark place as she contemplated, *Oh man, what I wouldn't give to shut him up. It's bad enough that he talks to himself every time I see him, but stomping around and singing at the top of his lungs is making me crazy. I can hear him through the ceiling!*

The next day, after making a list on the voice recorder, and playing it back, she heard the same strange voice; now a little louder, a little eerier, a little screechier and shrill. At times it sounded like a woman scared by a little mouse, other times the protestations of a petulant child. The footsteps had also become louder. The eerie voice informed Susan that her noisy neighbor was close to having the worst meal of his life. *Hmmm, well, I guess a little food poisoning won't kill him,* she concluded.

Two days later, while at the apartment mailboxes, her neighbor, Chris, rushed up to her and asked her if she had heard about her upstairs neighbor. Then Chris revealed, "He was at a restaurant last night with a friend, amazing that he has any, and he choked to death on a piece of steak he was trying to swallow. The EMTs came, but they couldn't save him."

Without even batting an eye, Susan threw a high fist in the air and whispered a sibilant "Yessss!"

Back upstairs in her apartment, feeling rather hysterical, Susan said out loud to herself, “As helpful as this recorder has been, I know I need to get rid of it. This thing is pure evil. I have no idea how it works, and I don’t want to know how it works, and I don’t ever want to turn it on and use it again.” At that moment, the sound of footsteps and the sound of another voice became extremely apparent, loud and clear as if someone were in the room with her.

“You’re going to be traveling soon, a long journey,” she heard that voice portend.

“Where am I going?” Susan asked shakily.

She felt the hand on her shoulder at the same time as she heard that voice one last time.

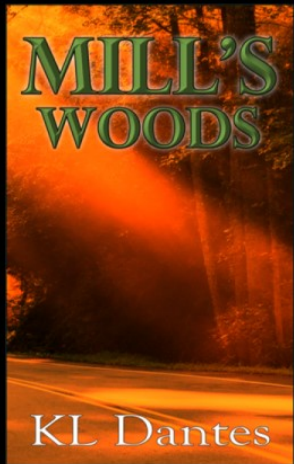
“Below,” it whispered.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Linda Imbler is the author of the published poetry collections “Big Questions, Little Sleep,” “Lost and Found,” and “The Sea’s Secret Song.” She is a Kansas-based Pushcart Prize Nominee. Her work has been published in numerous national and international journals.

Blog: [lindaspotryblog.blogspot.com](http://lindaspotryblog.blogspot.com)

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/Linda-Imbler/e/B079CY8FML/>

No one could have guessed the blood-thirsty horror hidden in Mill's Woods!



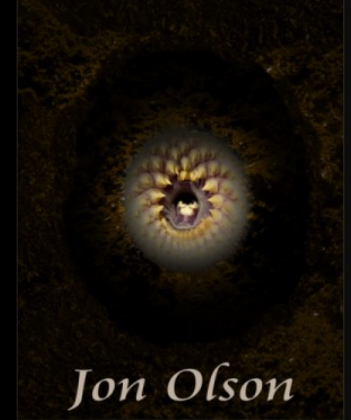
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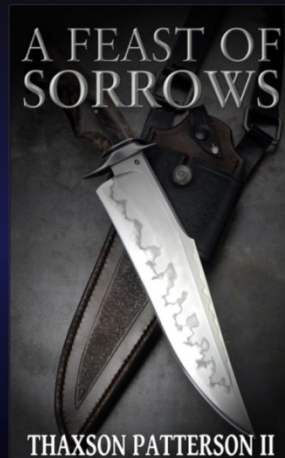
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**Poetry** | *Mathias Jansson*

**Untitled 1**

Do you see the fear  
crawling on the walls  
shadows of spiders and snakes  
the contour of a dark lake  
dripping wet on the floor  
and the door  
with signs in blood?

They don't exit  
except in your fantasy  
in your dark dreams  
it's not your reality  
it's mine  
visiting your mind....

**Untitled 2**

Do you feel  
when darkness  
embraces you?

The skull face  
with a breath of death  
gazing at you  
at the end of the road

Alone you walk  
on spikes and thorns  
tormenting your soul  
soon you will realize  
it's a Sisyphus work  
to reach the goal.

**Untitled 3**

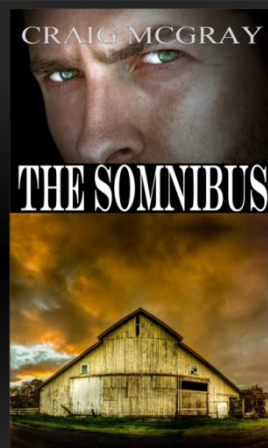
I am slumbering  
in the chamber  
of your heart  
a dark worm  
biding his time  
in your bloody cave

When I will awake  
my poison will spread  
through your veins  
some call it passion  
some call it eternal pain.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Mathias Jansson is a Swedish art critic and horror poet. He has been published in magazines as *The Horror Zine*, *Dark Eclipse*, *Schlock* and *The Sirens Call*. He has also contributed to over 100 different horror anthologies from publishers as *Horriified Press*, *James Ward Kirk Fiction*, *Source Point Press*, *Thirteen Press* etc.

Blog: <http://mathiasjansson72.blogspot.se/>

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Mathias-Jansson/e/B00BTDBYBQ/>



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## Poetry | *Alexis Child*

### Diary of Death

In dimly lit fog-blanketed streets  
A devil in disguise by shadow creeps  
One fearful night  
Surrounded by the social blight  
The murderous monster strikes  
Wielding surgical knives

Under the full moon's frosty glow  
His brutal blood lust grows  
Another victim's butchered like swine  
Not just any old East End crime  
One more lady of the night disappears  
London is gripped with frenzied fear

Detectives puzzle over half-clues  
Not to blame are the Jews  
Unanswered questions  
No murder weapons  
Such outrageous speculations  
A butcher from another nation  
Taunting letters mock police

The murderous rampage ceased  
No sinister confession uttered  
Murderer's body undiscovered  
Forever justice is starved  
Chilling reminders carved  
In Whitechapel's heart of infamy  
A diary of death incomplete

### What Killed Aleister Crowley?

He summoned Pan until the darkness of  
chaos appeared, or a demonic counterfeit  
in vague and monstrous shapes. Crouching  
naked in a corner, stripped of magician's  
robes, he is haggard and wild-eyed,  
gibbering  
in tongues; chained to the spirit of fear, a  
mere  
reflection of his former commanding self.

He descends into the deeper emptiness of  
the abyss, appearing to look upon the  
sleeping ocean, waiting for it to awaken,  
hoping to hear the bell of the God's realm,  
yet knows the Old Ones are locked away,  
senile from neglect, dead or dying in a  
labyrinth of sewers rotting beneath the city.

Still in a trance, the mystic departs to  
the domain of the pagan dead, stars  
looking downwards with a holy glance.

## Chambered Whispers

Bad dreams he chased away; ghost stories  
singing midnight lullabies—words lulled  
raindrops into a trance beyond the wall of  
sleep.

Spirit-whispered warnings, madness  
shadows  
spawned, through veins of mortal flesh.

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

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

## Eyes of Asmodeus

Proud flesh foretells dread; children taught to sin,  
quiet as shadows, without thought for their own  
failings, manipulate skeletal angels in an unborn  
universe. Until the speed is such, their wounds when  
at peace fly into themselves, opening pages of their  
death, long before its time. In hatred of itself, the  
history of bones and blood rises up from its depths,  
in the heart before birth, a secret death in these wounds.

Who can accuse those sustained by dark breath?  
We cannot help those who were born to perish.  
What happens to them is found in all cold places  
on Earth, even lonely cemeteries. Constructed from  
raw petals, burnt and scarred, their ugliness stirs the

## Cobwebs of a Century

At the crossroads of twilight, the city is  
coffined  
beneath the weight of blood and bone.

Stolen  
joys where no rest reposes, burrow in stale  
boudoirs. Weeping faces like drowned  
funerary  
bells excavate wild fears waiting for all.

Stone-carved dreams rise like tall ghosts  
wearing  
tatters drinking life like death. Bat-wings of  
boredom  
thrust us on as if the devil sputters in our  
chamber,  
orgiastic with greed. Candles fade to black  
like long  
sobs, charged with goodbyes in communion  
with a  
fading god burdened by giant wings.

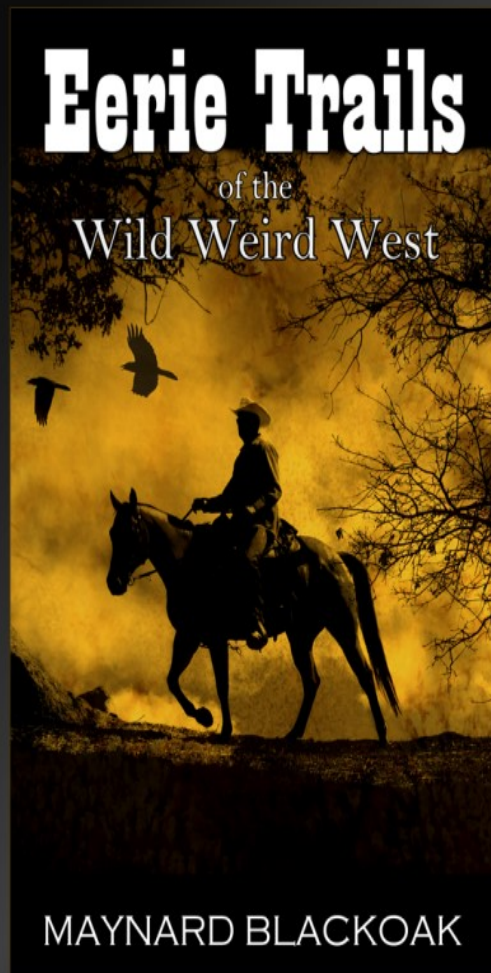
fire, by the light of a true hunger, that's not been found. The genesis of evil owns one completely; the cadaver of a future life, driven onto spikes.

Crucified children leave behind all they want you to remember, compelling your feet to go on, breaking worlds in others' heads, where existence is elsewhere.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Alexis Child hails from Toronto, where horror in its purest form is a calculated crime against both the aspirations of the soul and affections of the heart. She once lived with a Calico-cat child sleuthing all that went bump in the night, and is haunted by the memory of her cat. Her fiction and poetry has been featured in numerous online and print publications. Her first collection of poetry, a dark and sinister slice of the macabre gothic, horror, surreal, and supernatural—DEVIL IN THE CLOCK—is available on Amazon.

Blog: <http://www.angelfire.com/poetry/alexischild/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/alexis.child.7587>



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Kobo, and iTunes

## Poetry | *Grant Skelton*

### **Inquisitor**

A man of God whose heart was aflame  
With hatred so bright it blinded Heaven  
His will was forged iron, his cross likewise  
He kneaded his bread with Pharisees' leaven

He recited Scriptures from his memory  
For he was learned in Hebrew and Greek  
Half of his income he gave to the church  
In hopes that sinners there would seek

An inquisitor by trade, for he loved the law  
A solemn vow to vanquish the heathen  
To bring a holy hammer to witchcraft  
And leave no blasphemer breathing

The day he died, the inquisitor awoke  
Within the blackest maw of torment  
His profound thirst quenched only with sand  
His eyes in want of a heavenly portent

Above him he beheld his risen Savior  
While he beneath did weep and wail  
At the Savior's side stood a heretic  
A convicted witch named Abigail

"Lord, Lord!" cried the inquisitor  
"I am in such anguish in this flame!  
Please send Abigail with cool water  
That I may ease my suffering and shame!"

With a furrowed brow, the Savior spoke:  
"You do not know me, utter not my name  
Your roots are rotten, your fruit is diseased  
The poison you speak has kindled this flame."

"Lord, lord!" cried the inquisitor



Behold what deeds I have done!  
The offerings I gave! The souls I saved!  
Who loves you more than I is none!”

“Your gold is tarnished with decay  
Your money is putrid, your offerings waste!  
It is power you covet, empire you praise  
But all those you condemned had seen my face

You see Abigail would have taken your scraps  
For she and her children buckled under tax  
Their bellies were empty, their faces were gaunt  
You gave not a finger for the weight on their backs

Away! Away!” commanded the Savior  
Depart to the place where your soul will never die  
Your thirst shall ever be quenched with sand  
Thirst! And burn! ‘Til your ashes choke the sky!

The measure you used is now used on you  
You sewed torment, you will reap it without end  
For I will confound that which you deem wise  
And I will uphold the ones you condemn

### **Morning Commute**

I hold the world in my hand  
Scrolling, hustling

Appointments to keep  
Hassle, bother

Time crunching like hollow bones  
Cranial fragments

Time is money and money blood  
Viscera spattered

Early bird eats worm, false

Early bird eats corpse of late bird

Leather shoes shined with bile  
Tires squelch over exposed ribs

The dead have no decency  
No respect for the workingman

Leave their remains elsewhere  
I pay taxes for morgues

If they didn’t want to be stepped on  
They shouldn’t have died

## Nocturnal

With the sun's retreat, I shall arise  
And cast away the diurnal disguise  
I welcome nomad, rambler, vagrant  
An onslaught of passions I will awaken

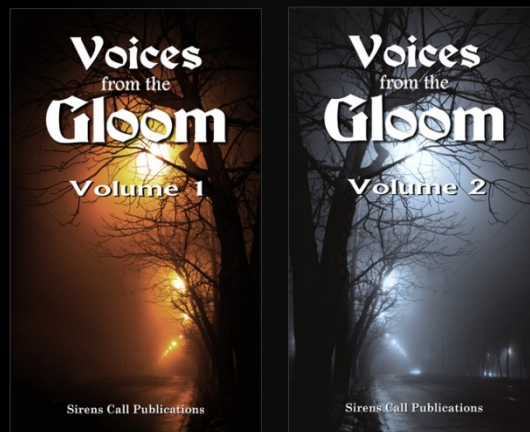
Do not seek dreariness in my shadow  
For my haunting hue is holy and hallowed  
No beasts are lurking, nor do creatures loom  
Within the rest of my sacred gloom

By the cruel light of day, you strive after gold  
A mineral to love you when you are old  
When agony and toil are all that you reap  
Enter my gloam, and there find sleep

Fret in my shade neither monster nor ghost  
Rather find my cloak a more amicable host  
You have nothing to fear in the calm of night  
But what of the demons who prowl in sunlight?

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Grant Skelton enjoys black humor, black coffee, and Black Sabbath. In addition to fiction and poetry, Grant contributes to the heavy metal blog, *No Clean Singing* and to *New Noise Magazine*. Information on his first novel is forthcoming.

Eclectic collections of spine-tingling  
stories...



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& Noble, Kobo, and iTunes

### **The Ghost Within**

The living has become the dead, this I know. I see it.  
Blood spills out before me, seeping into the cracks on the wooden floor.  
I walk this house, slogging my way through the living room,  
The viscous liquid clinging to my shoes, the axe scraping the floor.  
Death lays out before me in the form of three victims;  
What remains of the people who inhabit this dwelling,  
The living who have become the dead.  
He got here before me. I will never forgive my slow response, or this transgression.  
A ghost, a pallid, evil thing; a being from another world, he is.  
I disturbed his bones in the back yard when planting trees  
And felt the sting as I touched them,  
The course of energy filled me!  
There were words written in some language, etched on the marrow sheath,  
Something I had never seen before, but for some reason, I could read fluently.  
They chanted to me, within my head, burning my mind,  
Saying he would kill what lives,  
The living had to become the dead.  
So, I acquired my axe and ran to the house, to stop him and save the innocent.  
I was too late though, my family suffered at his hands.  
The anguish digs at my heart, my peace is forever destroyed.  
Now, I walk this world of ethereal energy, looking for the harbinger of death.  
I'm trapped somewhere between here and there, deep within my tortured psyche.  
He, it, must be here,  
Floating among the living who have become the dead.  
I find my way to the bathroom on the other end of the house.  
I'm thirsty, so I reach for the sink.  
The water is cold and refreshing, as I drink.  
My hands, shaking, connect with the liquid stream.  
The white bowl turns red, as I wash my palms, freeing me of the death paint.  
Looking in the mirror, he's looking back at me; the ghost within,  
The living has become the dead.

### **Those Who Can't**

The face within the moon, beckons me to kill  
It falls on the grounds below, dark shadows of death  
To heed the call to the dance of the undead,  
The need of those who can't and those who should not.

The crowd forms one-by-one casting shadows upon the walls.  
They dance to the bright of night, the beckoning of the lunar ecstasy  
In bands of craterous lands and men we only see from Earth.  
The need of those who can't and those who should not.

Which comes forth no one can describe; the descriptions of this sight are fleeting;  
Blood for blood and tooth for tooth, mine the physical wanting  
To break free from terra firmer and branch to the galaxy  
The need of those who can't and those who should not.

Cast your lots and say your prayers; the feeding frenzy has begun,  
For the groundskeeper has left for the night;  
He knows all too well what is to come;  
The need of those who can't, and those who should not.

For what is instinct; basic thought?  
Love is only lust in disguise; the beguile of a demon's ruse  
To those who think an angel is present.  
What forms on the tongue of an innocent child?  
The need of those who can't and those who should not

The shattered mind looks for a way out of this labyrinth of doors and mirrors.  
Only to find the beginning is the end and the end is nowhere here nor there,  
And what door did I enter? There is no way out.  
This hall leads only to the grounds and the groundskeeper has left for the night;  
To ignore the needs of those who can't and those who should not.

So, cast your lots and say your prayers, as the lunatic ball begins  
For this night will not end until the moon wanes to a sliver.  
Only then will the groundskeeper return and pull those lives to sunder.  
Then all will sleep, and peace will come to the man in the moon  
To those who can't and those who should not.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Edmund Stone writes at night, spinning tales of strange worlds and horrifying encounters with the unknown. He lives with his wife, a son, three dogs and two mischievous cats. He also has two wonderful daughters, and two granddaughters.

Twitter: [@edmundstonehwr](https://twitter.com/edmundstonehwr)

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100015202063420>





**Poetry** | *Eliana Gradishar*

**grace of an angel**

my love, demon born  
with a weapon in his mouth  
shotgun pointed, tilted south

bound to a lack of logic found

step away from the manger

strangulate the stranger  
who does not want  
to recognize the danger

a gravity  
in dark eyes  
censored

rest assured  
ten thousand apples  
will fall in his favor

bite  
with the grace  
of an angel

tasting  
ominous  
prophetic  
echoes

swallow  
the hallowed  
hollow  
if not for a sliver  
of your sanity tomorrow

**lost soul**

the ghost  
lets me know  
when he's in pain

in resistance  
to aloneness

i kiss him adoringly

his growls follow the corridors  
of my fair-weathered heart

his teeth tug at the tethers  
of my time-stained dress

i draw the curtains  
and hunger in turn  
dissipates

roses trimmed  
next to hemlock and gin  
caustic aphrodisiac  
in the name of suffering

he whispers  
in a silvery tone  
undone we become  
as night folds onto itself

locked lips and skin  
melted mescaline dreams

conjuring  
vanishing silhouettes  
of ancient realms

### **the haunting**

scratch  
the surface  
of a coffin  
to wire  
oxygen  
back into  
the bloody  
crevices  
chaos is

no nemesis  
and hearts  
only harden  
with no  
resolute bone  
who but you  
to carry  
this restless  
spirit home

### **wormwood**

lichens ripen  
beneath your beating wings  
cherishing obscenities  
wormwood and her frailties  
trail frivolous things  
sting of a hornet's kiss in the wind  
shadow offerings  
weighing heavily on the vine  
bruised bodies conjure  
stumble and writhe  
a tune of lost stares  
now added to the penalty  
no one said hatred would be easy

### **death at its best**

the priest summons  
a ghost anew  
leaves of dew  
nature's jewelry  
seven candles lit from behind  
because symmetry is blind  
drip of wax and red wine  
with which to bind  
an unkindness of ravens  
havens that cannot exist  
in solidarity  
call of spirituality  
will and bone that fit  
exhume cannibalistic wit  
leave Poetry and Love  
now chafing at the bit

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Eliana Gradishar is originally from Buenos Aires, Argentina and moved to New Orleans, Louisiana at a young age. Ms. Gradishar's poems have been selected for display via a community project called St Tammany Poetry on the Streets, and she recently participated in the Jane Austen Festival (2017 and 2018) as part of a panel of other selected poets. Ms. Gradishar attends several writing groups, including Poets Alive, Bayou Writers and Inklings in Mandeville, Louisiana.

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## Poetry | *DJ Tyrer*

### Madness Rides the Star-wind

In secret museum of the bizarre  
You freeze to sounds of scratching at the door  
Discover only echoes from afar  
Not the suspected agents of the law  
Mysterious voices rush on the breeze  
Words in Dutch alarm even as they fade  
Is it the ghoulish dead you did displease  
Seeking that stolen amulet of jade?  
You must cross the sea to undo your crime  
Return to where in that curse-bound Dutch tomb  
You had found what you sought encased in rime  
Dead flesh hounding you to your final doom  
For against the dead you recklessly sinned  
And now it comes: madness rides the star-wind.

### Candles in The Night

Pinprick points of light  
Candles in the night  
Peculiar procession passing  
Through the ebon night  
Warily approach that file  
Tarry not there while  
Peculiar procession passing  
By in single file  
Pinprick points of light  
Candles in the night  
Peculiar procession passing  
The dead marching through the night

### Tattoo

Paint your skin  
With a permanent design  
No more than decoration  
Yet once it held power  
And even now can be more  
Than just ink.  
At night does it writhe  
Flow across your skin  
As if alive?  
Brave the needle.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — DJ Tyrer is the person behind Atlantean Publishing, and has had poetry and fiction published in issues of *Cyaegha*, *Frostfire Worlds*, *Hinnom Magazine*, *The Horrorzine*, *Tigershark*, and *The Yellow Zine*, and such anthologies as *What Dwells Below* (Sirens Call Publications), *The Mad Visions of al-Hazred* (Alban Lake), and *EOM: Equal Opportunity Madness* (Otter Libris), and in addition, has a novella available, *The Yellow House* (Dunhams Manor).

Twitter: [@djtyrer](https://twitter.com/djtyrer)

Blog: <http://djtyrer.blogspot.co.uk/>



**Desperation** | *Michelle Graham*

Desperation, despair, dread  
Wicked things control my head  
Painful yearning, lying in wait  
How much pain can one soul take?  
Wishing for a forgetful mind  
Releasing desperation, despair, dread, entwined  
Waiting patiently for my life to unfold  
Only time will tell what the future holds.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Michelle Graham is a horror fanatic and aspiring author. She resides in a small town in Pennsylvania with her husband and beloved dogs. She enjoys everything horror, including writing dark verse. Her first dark verse piece, “Demons” was published in Living Paranormal Magazine - August 2017 Issue.

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## Poetry | Ashley Davis

### Nautilus

A structure of questioned expectations.  
It looms ahead  
Monstrous.  
Lovely.

Stained-glass windows  
Shards like ice  
Like shattered holograms  
Complete in their brokenness.

### Timeless Blue

Seek her  
Under the surface  
Under the prison of your skin.

Give in to the siren's call  
As thin cuts bleed brightly  
Catching the light,  
transforming us.

Breathe the water  
Take it into your lungs

### Subduction

Inside the prayers of redemption  
You can feel it:  
The void.

Not dreamless sleep  
Not life in absentia  
But nothing, true and vast.

Limitless in its expanse  
So cold that your bones ache  
In this place  
You will feel tiny in the endlessness.

You want to go home  
But no one feels like home anymore

Fight the panic.  
Catch your breath.  
Bridge the gap  
Between the living and the dead.  
The air is hesitant  
A weight descends upon us  
The eye of a storm we cannot fathom.  
Release.

As the coming clouds  
Consume you.

She'll take out your heart  
Her fingers dripping crimson midnight  
And you'll hand it over  
Grateful for her love.

She will be real  
Long after you cease to be.

You run too fast  
And fall to pieces.

You'll stand at the edge of an unanswered  
prayer  
From which there is no recourse  
No escape  
Only forever, a legion of what-ifs.

She of a thousand voices  
Walks the echoing halls.

Is it death  
Or exodus you seek?

## Undone

Find me in the mist and snow  
Let my heart of ice  
Guide you.

Hear my song in a cold, quiet place,  
A place where ghosts  
Are safe.

Breathe deep and take in  
The smell of sulfur, saltwater,  
And formalin.

The waves lap against the frozen shore  
But my arms are warm  
If you let me in.

Let the frosted darkness close around you  
Bear the weight of the universe  
On your shoulders.

Listen to the footsteps  
Cracking on rime—  
It comes from beneath;  
We come undone.

## Black Swan Inn

Past the musty parlor  
Paint peeling, wallpaper faded  
Down the hall of shadows  
Lined with broken dolls.

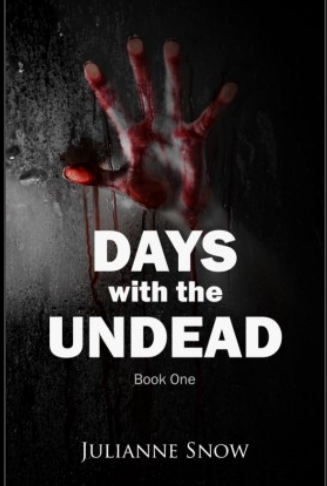
The clear light in the bedroom  
Marred by the broken pane  
Of the window through which it passes  
Makes this house feel safe.

Skeletal remnants of an iron gazebo  
A rusted chandelier  
Splintered remnants strewn through the  
grass  
These, the signs of you.

Orb weavers in the corners  
Echoed footsteps on the wood  
Take the twisted, shambling staircase  
Until the ghosts can hear your thoughts.

The mist leaks through the windows  
Their glass long absent  
Darkened doorways stir  
A hint of movement when you pass.

Stay at least 'til midnight  
Or the witching hour  
Leave not empty-handed  
But with a soul reborn



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## **The Darkness** | *Jack Wolfe Frost*

It bites, the darkness, it bites,  
Just when finally you think you're alright,  
The darkness, it bites, it bites,  
Leaving you frightened alone in the night.

It tears, the darkness, it tears,  
When at last you had lost all your cares,  
The darkness, it tears, it tears,  
Hitting so hard that it scares.

For such a long time,  
You had felt alright,  
The pills were all gone  
And you're relieved of your plight,  
That for so many years,  
Had cut like a knife,  
But then when it seems that you found your life:

It cries, the darkness, it cries,  
I'm here all alone,  
Wondering why?

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Jack Wolfe Frost is the Eternal Rebel; he rebels against everything which may have the word “rules” or “behave” within it. Born in Sheffield, UK, in 1956; he first started writing in 1982, as a hobby - Now older and wiser, he has had several poems and two short stories published.

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## Behind the Glass | Lexie Carver

I touch the glass with my small shaking  
hand.  
My eyes wide with pain  
And anger.

I watch with tears in my eyes  
As you go off with my doppelganger.  
Sure, the resemblance is uncanny  
But that woman isn't me.  
I'm in here.  
I'm trapped in here!  
*She* belongs in this mirror!  
Not *me!*  
*I'm* the one you love!

You chose the wrong girl!  
She's not me!  
She's a demon  
Pretending to be me.  
She trapped me here!  
How can you not tell?  
Don't her kisses feel off?  
Doesn't her touch feel different?  
Has she really copied me so well?  
Or did you really know me so little?

I scream, trying to get your attention.  
I bang on the glass  
Anything to get you to notice me  
But you can't see me.  
I'm behind the glass.  
She is the only one who can see me  
And she smiles at me  
As she takes my life  
As she takes you away from me.

I turn off the lights  
And lie in front of the mirror  
Torturing myself with images of you  
Not able to leave  
Trapped here on the other side of love.  
I need to see you no matter what  
To hear your voice  
To pretend that's *my* hand you're holding.

I'm trapped here  
Behind the glass  
Of a life that should have been mine.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Lexie is a feisty woman who lives out loud and is a veritable badass. She loves indie rock and a good cup of black coffee. She's been writing since she was ten years old. Her love of horror started at the age of 11 with her first horror movie, a slasher. She has an adorable small dog named Remy who is quite a handful.

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## An Interview with Artist Simon Walpole

The artwork featured in this issue of *The Sirens Call* is courtesy of artist Simon Walpole. We sat down with him to ask a few burning questions and this is what he told us.

**Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Simon! Why don't you start off by telling us a little bit about yourself?**

**Simon Walpole:** I'm a self taught freelance artist and I started a couple of years ago ( although I have been drawing most of my life) by sending emails to prospective clients and after I completed a couple of commissions, I set up a website. The bulk of my work is for books and magazines and I specialize interior illustrations including graphic maps although I have done few covers. Most of my work centres on fantasy, sci-fi, horror and Ancient History although I'm comfortable with other genres as well.

**SCP: What mediums do you work in? Is there a medium you've always wanted to try but just haven't gotten around to yet?**

**Simon:** Generally, I work in pencil and then finish in pen, promarkers, or ink. I recently illustrated a Novella which I did in white pencil on black paper. This is a medium I am developing as it offers something quite different as a visual style.

**SCP: What are some of your main influences?**

**Simon:** Too many to mention although lot of my influences when I started drawing were comic artists from Marvels John Byrne and Neal Adams to 2000ads Carlos Ezquerra and Glenn Fabry. As I been growing and developing as an illustrator the likes of Arthur Rackham, Gary Chalk and Ian Miller have had a definite influence on my work.

**SCP: Is there an artist you would love to work with?**

**Simon:** I think Ian Miller as I think he is totally original... and who wouldn't want to work with Mike Mignola?



**SCP: What do you do when a piece isn't coming together 'on paper' the same way it does in your head?**

**Simon:** Possibly; like most artists I often struggle to draw what I see in my head. I guess I'm not alone in seeing what's wrong with my work and my inaccuracies in its outworking rather than what's right. But perseverance is a key, as is taking a break from that piece and going back to it with relatively fresh eyes.

**SCP: As writers, we sometimes suffer from 'writer's block'; is there something similar to that in the artist/painter/illustrator world? If so, do you ever suffer from it? How do you combat it?**

**Simon:** A lot of my work and commissions are fantastical in nature so there are times when I have artist's block when my imagination 'dries up' so to speak, what I tend to do then is spend time studying and drawing anatomy from books, photos and the odd life drawing class. I also spend time sketching buildings, trees, rocks. Basically, I draw what I can see rather than what I cannot and eventually the imaginative water starts flowing again.

**SCP: Where do you find your inspiration?**

**Simon:** Movies, nature, other art, sometimes just random thoughts that pop into my head and even dreams and nightmares

**SCP: What is your favourite piece you have ever completed? Why is it your favourite?**

**Simon:** I'm rarely completely happy with my finished illustrations as I can always see what's wrong with them. That said I am particularly pleased with 'On sour ground only crooked things grow'. It's my response to my favourite branch of horror films: Folk Horror. I feel technically it works well, the white on black and it says everything I want it to.

**SCP: Have you ever completed a piece for a client and thought it wasn't good even though it was exactly what they asked for? What did you do?**

**Simon:** I did a book cover once and its base design was very geometric. I thought the easiest way would be to do it in Photoshop, (which it is a definite work in progress☺) and it was a real struggle from start to finish. I wasn't that happy at all with the finished illustration, but the client loved it... so you never know

**SCP: What is your favourite piece of artwork you did not create?**

**Simon:** I think it is Edvard Munch 'The Scream', I'm not sure why really but it really appeals to me on a somewhat primal level

**Thank you Simon for taking the time to answer our questions!**







## **The Ghosts of Dragonhorn Manor** | *David B. Harrington*

Parthenia was just an orphan when she first arrived in Charleston in the summer of 1914 at the age of eighteen. Under the auspices of Professor Dragonhorn, Parthenia would live out the rest of her sweet short life hidden away in the confines of his stately Victorian mansion, where I was employed as the seasonal gardener.

By day, while Professor Dragonhorn was away on business or teaching at the university, Parthenia occupied most of her time studying in the private library under the care and guidance of her tutor, Penelope. When the weather was fair, I would often see Parthenia strolling leisurely through the garden, stopping occasionally to smell the roses in her beautiful silky flowered sundress, or galloping along on her young mare up and down the equestrian trail under the watchful eye of the handsome young stablehand, Jonathan, her long chestnut hair flapping wildly in the cool summer breeze blowing in from the bay.

Sometimes at dusk or early in the evening I would even spot Parthenia wandering around the old cemetery adjacent to the Dragonhorn Manor, her ghostly milk-white gown fluttering gently under the pale moonlight as she glided carefree among the crumbling tombs and moss-covered statuesque. We even exchanged friendly pleasantries on a couple of occasions. She was a dazzling sight to behold.

When Parthenia was just nineteen, she suddenly came down with a high fever after being thrown from her horse and knocked unconscious one hot summer day. The family physician was immediately dispatched to her bedside, as was the local parish priest, but it seems Parthenia had also suffered a nasty insect bite to her neck and passed away in her sleep three days later, her remains entombed in a private mausoleum at the old cemetery.

Clearly distraught over Parthenia's loss, Professor Dragonhorn's health gradually started to deteriorate and he fell into a deep depression, locking himself in his chambers like a recluse for weeks on end. In the days that followed, Penelope and Jonathan were let go and Parthenia's cherished mare sold off. I stayed on as the gardener, however, receiving my monthly pay from Professor Dragonhorn's personal accountant as usual.

In remembrance of a young woman's life suddenly cut short by unspeakable tragedy, sometimes I would cut fresh flowers from the garden and place them by Parthenia's shrine. One afternoon I was working in the rose garden when I happened to look up and noticed Professor Dragonhorn watching me from the balcony window. It seemed a bit odd at the time, but I didn't really think much of it until the following day when he suffered a stroke or some kind of mental breakdown and had to be taken away by carriage to the hospice up on Bench Street.

It was on one of these frequent visits to the old cemetery when I believe I first saw Parthenia's spirit—a fleeting glimpse of a passing shadow gracefully drifting across the last narrow shaft of sunlight filtering beneath the entrance of Parthenia's tomb. Disturbed by what I saw, I set the bouquet down on the steps and started walking hastily toward the gates. When I reached the next row of graves, I suddenly found myself standing face to face with a pair of matching mausoleums. The massive stone monuments were impressive, identical to Parthenia's

tomb, with the Dragonhorn family crest engraved at the top, and the names *Priscilla 1898-1918* and *Emily 1899-1917* inscribed in gold letters just below. I was a bit puzzled by this unexpected discovery and wondered how I had missed them all this time.

The next day I hopped the brand new trolley car downtown to see if I could dig up some information about the women. I scoured obituaries and death certificates, sifted through birth certificates and announcements, but didn't find any records for a Priscilla or an Emily associated with the Dragonhorn Estate. A further search through the archives at the local historical society did, however, yield some black and white photos of two young women who looked an awful lot like Parthenia. In fact, all three looked so similar that they may very well have been siblings. Attached to the pictures was a newspaper clipping which read: *Priscilla, age 19, died on October 13, 1918 from serious injuries sustained following an accidental fall down a flight of stairs in the Dragonhorn Manor. Emily, age 18, died on July 31, 1917 after being struck by lightning while playing outside the Dragonhorn Manor. Priscilla and Emily were orphans who became wards of Professor George Dragonhorn from Vilnius, Lithuania. Both were buried side by side in the old cemetery near the Dragonhorn Estate.* I'm not one to believe in coincidences and I started to grow more and more suspicious. I may have come away with more information than when I started, but I was still left with more questions than answers. Not of least was Professor Dragonhorn's interest in young women. I feared the worst.

Later that night, just as I was about to fall asleep, I could have sworn I heard the sound of galloping hoofbeats outside my window. I dragged myself up out of bed and parted the curtains. The night was warm and muggy, the sky overcast. It was too dark to see beyond the cemetery, so I slammed the window shut, closed the curtains and crawled back into bed, only to be awakened fifteen minutes later by the pitter-patter of footsteps running up and down the hallway. I lit a candlestick, twisted the doorknob and peered out down the long dark hallway.

When I reached the landing at the top of the stairs, I snuffed out the flame and flipped on the wall switch. Soft light from a pair of sconces illuminated the mezzanine in a gloomy glow. Outside the wind was howling, rattling the shutters. Hail started pelting the rooftop. I strained my eyes in the dim yellowish light and peered down the narrow flight of stairs. Suddenly there was a brilliant flash and a thunderous boom which shook the mansion to its very foundation and made me practically jump out of my skin. The lights flickered and the chandelier started swaying, as if somebody were playfully swinging back and forth.

When I got to the bottom of the stairs, another bright flash lit up the parlor and the house went completely dark. As I fumbled through my pockets for a book of matches, a violent gust of wind blew the front door wide open, slamming it hard against the wall with a terrible crash, nearly tearing it off its hinges. A monstrous looming shadow slowly crossed the threshold and crept its way into the parlor. I recognized the silhouette right away by its enormous size and shape, and the black lifeless eyes which seemed to stare back at me with hatred and shame through the darkness. Something tugged gently on my nightshirt. And from out of the darkness came the tormented screams of three very frightened young women.

Suddenly Professor Dragonhorn's angry demonic voice roared through the mansion, "Get

out! Get out of here and leave us alone!”

The proverbial black cloud hovered in the doorway for a moment, then came rushing toward me. I grabbed a poker from the hearth and blindly felt my way down the long dark hallway. I escaped out the back door and hid in the toolshed until a thunderbolt struck the stables and sent me fleeing foolishly in the direction of the old cemetery.

The wind was whipping around and branches were strewn about everywhere. I searched the grounds for a safe place to shield myself from the driving rain when a giant tree limb snapped and came crashing down just a few yards from where I was standing. It was much too dangerous to stay out there any longer, so I decided to take my chances and head back inside before I ended up electrocuted or crushed by a falling tree.

I hurried down the footpath paralleling the equestrian trail when something odd caught my eye. It was a freshly dug grave, a mound of damp soil heaped in a pile just a few feet away and a temporary grave marker that read: *George Dragonhorn*. Another magnificent flash split the night sky with a tremendous explosion, striking the stable and sending a shower of sparks cascading down onto the roof. The manor burst into flames and by the time the fire brigade finally arrived the entire structure was fully engulfed and burned to the ground, all of its dark sinful secrets of lust and betrayal buried beneath the tons of debris.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — David B. Harrington enjoys reading and writing, playing tennis and the bass guitar. When David is not feeding his salamanders, he can be found chasing his kids around the house with a meat cleaver. David’s fiction and poetry has been published in *New Myths*, *Green Egg Zine*, *Lovecraftiana*, and *Eldritch Tales* from *Necronomicon Press*, as well as the upcoming *HYPERTOMB: Cyber Mummy* anthology from *Horrified Press* and *Spectral Realms #9* from *Hippocampus Press*.

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## Drabbles | *Deb Whittam*

### Beloved

“Do you love me, Mark?” She asked as she held out her hand and bewitched he nodded, failing to comprehend.

She smiled in delight as she unbuttoned her dress, her tone playful as she asked, “But do you really love me?”

Enthralled he just nodded, unwilling to digress but as her skin was revealed he fought the urge to gag at the sight revealed.

Malodorous, ulcerous, gangrenous ... his shocked gasp he couldn't contain.

Her eyes were dull, her laugh hollow as she exclaimed, “Then come join me in the land of undead, come rest within my grave, my love.”

### Mankind

*In 2222 the last woman ceased to exist ...*

The handcuffs bit into the sores on her wrists and resigned she ceased her struggles ... to resist only meant further punishments ... it was only an excuse for additional brutality.

For she was the last ... their last hope, their last chance and they were determined to have their pound of flesh. They used her, determined to propagate.

Once their inhumanity had made her weep but now she only looked forward to the end ... it meant release from this hellish existence.

*With her death, mankind, had ceased to exist.*

### Shades

*Forgive me Father for I have sinned.*

I thought I was so clever with my petty deceit, that I was so adept at identifying black, white and all the shades of gray that they would never suspect. I was correct, no one ever realized.

When I took the job I didn't tell them, for it all seemed so simple—in an emergency press the green button, not the red button. I didn't ask which button was green.

He looked into the priest's eyes—his confession was pointless for apologizing, for being color blind would change nothing.

They were still dead.

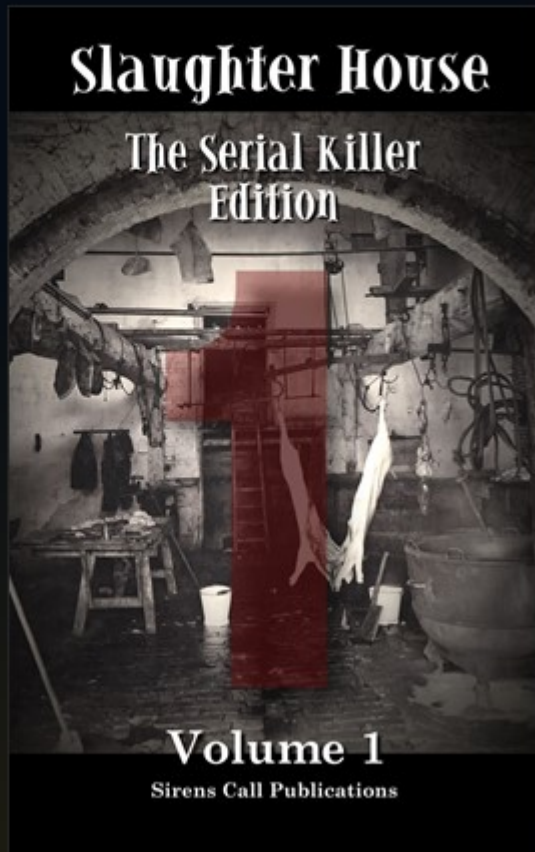
**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Deb Whittam is a graduated from Macquarie University Bachelor of Arts and is currently she traversing the great continent of Australia in a caravan. She seeks to explore the many forms of reality in her writing and examine how perspectives can alter when life is viewed through an alternate lens.

Twitter: <http://twitter.com/@DebbieWhittam>

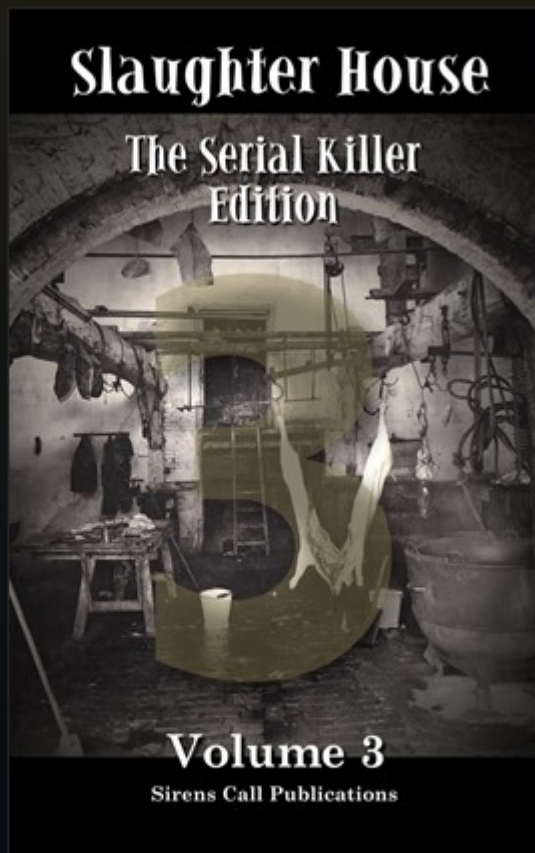
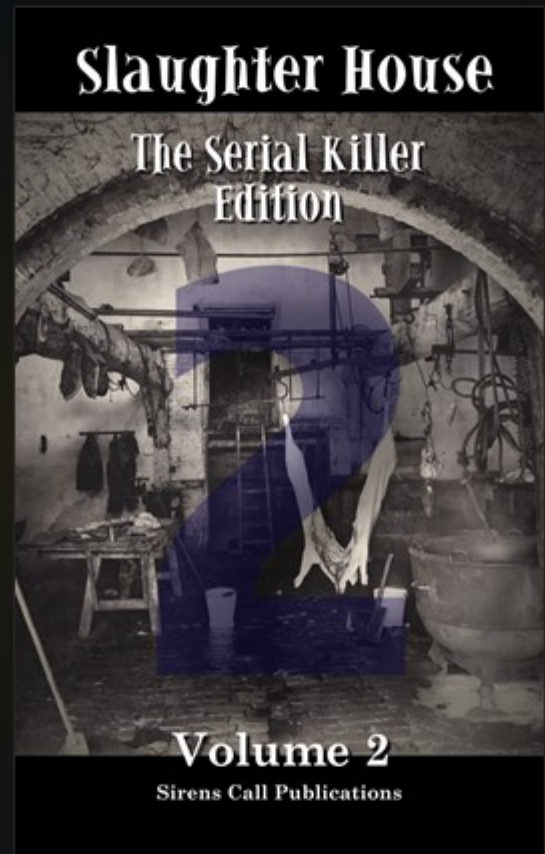
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## Vermilion | *Tawny Kipphorn*

Beneath the canopy of vermilion lies the hidden path on which I walk. The dirt and fallen leaves are damp and cool beneath my bare feet. Spectral fingers comb through my hair as a gentle breeze playfully dances around me. I walk past never-ending rows of crooked trees, bleeding as they shed their dying leaves. An immeasurable glowing ball of yellow primrose hovers on the horizon, and like a moth to a flame, I am drawn to its blinding luminosity. It is incomprehensible to me how such a vast object could emit such a radiating warmth, and yet despite the decrease in proximity between it and myself, I still feel so cold. Only just as I notice the light of day fading into the black of night, do I realize my feet are caked in mud, and my hair is drenched.

I hear the faint whispers of people talking, and I can't help but ask myself who would be here in this place, at this time of night. Something inside me wants to stop walking, but I cannot. As I move cautiously forward, I can see the the outline of people kneeling in a circle at the base of a monstrous rock formation. I can feel a lump form in the pit of my stomach and a sinking feeling of dread rise through my chest and into my throat as tears sting my eyes. I want to run forward and see what is going on, but I'm too afraid of seeing what I already believe to be true. I continue on and it feels as if the ground is shaking beneath me, as if any second it will give way and swallow me into the earth. My worst fear has been realized, as I can see a glimpse of my lifeless body lying there.

I knew on that brisk October night that nothing good would come of this, and still I walked into the darkness. Every detail is etched into my brain as the turning point of my existence. I can remember how the ground, slick from the pouring rain, glistened beneath the glow of the moonlight. A shimmering path leading me straight to my own personal hell. A yellow-brick road paved in black. As I stand here now in the midst of all the commotion of my demise, I gaze above to the precipice, and I know that I am trapped here. Beneath the canopy of vermilion, down the hidden path I walk, forever.

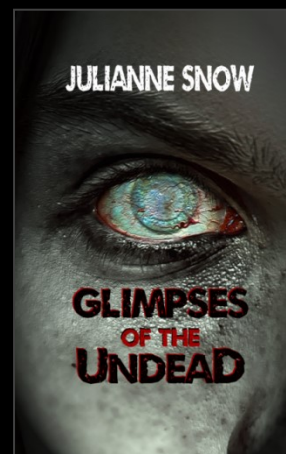
**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Tawny Kipphorn is a Freelance Speculative Fiction Author from Pennsylvania. She enjoys writing Supernatural and Psychological themed Verse, Short Stories, and Flash Fiction pieces.

Blog: <https://darkdoorpassages.wordpress.com/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/tkipphorn>

## Glimpses of the Undead *Julianne Snow*

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## Behind the Door | *Suzanne Madron*

The clink of the padlock against the doorjamb woke her. After a century of sleep, she opened her eyes. Immediately, she regretted the action as dust and debris scratched upon entry past her lashes.

She sat up and blinked away the tears, noting the feel of layers of time upon her rotting clothing. *How long this time?* She wondered.

Her story had been told so many times over the centuries that it had become muddled. She had helped to dilute it until it featured a box, and all the things held within that box.

There had never been a box. It had always been *her*.

The gentle clink of the padlock gave way to hammering, followed by the sound of metal hitting the ground as the lock fell. The door's hinges screamed out a warning to the unsuspecting innocents beyond, but went unheeded.

With a smile, Pandora got to her feet in order to properly greet the next generation.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Suzanne Madron was born in New York City and has lived up and down the east coast. Currently, she resides in a house built over a Civil War battlefield in the wilds of Pennsylvania where she has been known to host some interesting Halloween parties. She has authored several novels and stories under various names including Suzi M, James Glass, and Xircon.

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## **I Promise to be Good** | *Melissa R. Mendelson*

The rain was fell hard against a newspapered window, and some of the newspaper peeled away, revealing a dismal world. The room itself was vast with a concrete ceiling, and every other square had a gaping hole. Some spiders lingered above, daring to dangle down. Instead, they played with the cinder blocks in every other corner, and the floor was hard and cold beneath my body. Every movement pushed me back down. It took a long time for their drugs to wear off.

My mouth was dry. I felt like I had swallowed a cotton ball. There was a dish of water nearby. I crawled toward it, looking at it, noting pieces of dirt that floated on top, but I was so thirsty. I still downed it, choking in the process, and that's when I heard them, the two men outside. They were always arguing. One of them was always impatient. He just wanted the job done, but it sounded like they weren't paid yet. If they were paid, would they let me go, but the knots tightened in my stomach. And then I noticed another dish nearby with brown slop. I turned and threw up.

I rested once more against the hard and cold concrete floor. I listened to their voices. My eyes roamed around the gray space. There were plenty of windows, but they were high above. I was too short to reach them, and they looked like they were sealed shut. Some had newspapers over them. Others had duct tape. There were no doors except for one, and those two men always stood outside. I think I might have seen their faces once, but I knew their touch. They came in every now and then to stick me with their needles, knocking me senseless, and I knew that they would be back soon. If I was going to escape, now would be the time, but how to do it? Crying would result in a slap, a sting, and then silence. Begging was out too. There was just one move left to make.

As I had crawled across the floor, I rolled over a broken nail. It must have fallen from the walls or ceiling. They had missed it. I could use it as a weapon, but they were bigger than me. And stronger too. I bit my tongue, which was still puffy, and I held back a sob. I plunged the nail into my hand. It did the trick, and a pool of blood began to form on the floor. I smeared a little on my face, and then I lied on my stomach with my eyes open. My mother used to say that I could play dead a little too well, and if my eyes were closed, they would not believe it. A few moments later, they walked in.

I continued to stare at the concrete wall. I watched the spiders dangle on their webs. I heard their footsteps quicken in pace, kicking up dirt as they hurried over, and they knocked the dishes aside. One of them saw the blood, pulled out his cell phone and hurried out of the room. The other man grabbed me and shook me like a doll. He screamed in my face, spitting against my flesh. I did not blink, and he dropped me with a loud curse. Then, he turned to find his friend, and he left the door open. It was my only opportunity, so I pulled myself to my feet. And I ran. My mother used to say that I could run fast, and the moment that I left the room, they knew. But a side door was propped open, and I squeezed between it, scraping against the wall. They grabbed the back of my shirt, but the fabric tore. And I was free.



It was still raining outside. I cradled my bloodied hand, trying not to look at the hole in my palm. My bare feet splashed in the puddles. The rain kissed the hole in the back of my shirt and tried to wash away all the dirt left on my pants from crawling, and a car came by, covering me in a giant wave. I was now drenched from head to toe, but I didn't care. I was outside, and I knew where I was, recognizing a street sign overhead. And then I heard the dinner bell.

They always went to dinner at Mollies. It was just down the street. Maybe, they would be there, but why would they be there without me? Didn't they miss me? Weren't they looking for me? How could they do that to me, and sure enough as I pressed my face against one of the windows, I saw them at their usual table. And one seat was empty, waiting for me, and then I noticed the horror on the couples' faces as they sat by the window, looking at me.

It was best if I went around back, so I did. I retreated away from the window, and luckily, the kitchen door was open. It usually was because the cook liked feeding the stray cats, and I definitely looked like a stray. The cook almost didn't let me in. He seemed afraid of the fact that I was there, and it even seemed like he regretted moving aside to let me in. Did he know something that I didn't? Again, the knots twisted in my stomach. Where were the two men that had taken me away?

Dinner was just being served. My stomach kicked. My tongue twitched. I remembered the brown slop as I looked at the freshly cut vegetables and boiling meat. I would be sitting at that table soon, and they would hug and kiss me. They wouldn't let me go, and the waiter would bring me a plate. And I would remember what real food and water tasted like, and then after dinner, we would go to the police. I would tell them about waking up in that horrible room. I would describe that room to them and the two men, and maybe I could go for the ride afterward just to see them take those two men away, locking them up in a concrete box.

I pushed the red curtain aside that separated the dining area from the kitchen. The room went silent. My mother saw me, dropping her wine glass to the floor. My father's fork froze in his mouth. My brothers and sisters looked from me and then to our parents. Then, everyone turned toward the empty seat. Were they waiting for me to sit down? I would love to, and I quickly made my way over to them. But then they averted their eyes, staring at their hands, and a chill pierced my heart. Weren't they happy to see me? Didn't they miss me? Why were they looking away from me?

Suddenly, a little boy bounced out of the bathroom and hurried past me. He jumped into my seat and laughed loudly. A happy smile drew across his face, but then he looked at me. The light in his face went out. His eyes grew wide, and he became nervous, almost shaking. It was almost like he was going to be sent away, and he should be. That was my seat. That was my family. Why was he there? He shouldn't be there. I should be there, but my parents refused to answer me. My mother turned away, brushing some tears aside, and my father slammed his fork down against his plate.

A hand fell on my shoulder. It was heavy. I knew his touch, but I couldn't look up at his face. Instead, I stared at my father, who nodded to the man, and my heart dropped. The man started to push me forward toward the door, but I refused to move. I didn't want to go, so he

latched onto my arm, dragging me away from my family. And I screamed, “I’m sorry that I was bad. I’m sorry! I promise to be good. I promise...” A familiar pinch met my skin instead, and I swooned, falling forward, only to awake in that room again.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Melissa R. Mendelson is a Horror and Science-Fiction Author, whose stories have been published by Sirens Call Publications and Dark Helix Press. She is also a Poet and Photographer, and her photography can be found on Fine Art America. She is currently working on numerous projects including anthology submissions and short stories for Amazon Kindle.

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# WHAT DWELLS BELOW



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## **Icarus**

I've never felt so alone, well, maybe never is a bit strong. While the gray creeps over the land ahead I'm watching as everything tries to vainly run for cover. I'm sitting patiently against a huge oak tree, leaning against the rough bark, with my fingers twisting through the grass. The gray just keeps on moving towards me, steady in its pace. I look past its trail and see that nothing's escaping. Everything it touches begins to shrivel, wither—die. Animals, to bones, to dust; mixed with the dirt and grass that's dried and cracked to become a gravel-like sand. The clouds seem to be getting closer now, and even though I can just barely see the light shining in the distance, I know this is where it ends. Before long, my twisting grass becomes ashes, my huge oak tree trunk, drained to a fraction of itself. As for me, well, I too have been touched by the gray. It hurt at first, tearing flesh from muscle, from bone—from consciousness. That's fine now though, because as they say, 'ashes to ashes.'

## **Traurig Erinnerung**

I can still feel the flames burning through my bones. Decades, centuries have passed, but still, I remain bitter. Hermann was wrong though, about me at least, the ones who came after, I cannot say. I've been lingering on this plain for a reason, reliving the flames, the smoke, just so I could watch the world for the right time.

I've been waiting here, at the monastery in Fulda. She's got to come, the right one, I'll know her, I'll feel it! I haven't felt anything besides a constant roasting of phantom flesh, but he says there will be a magnetism when she's finally here...

In the autumn of 1602 I was accused and burned for witchcraft I had never performed. I vowed revenge—not for myself, but for the life inside me. I'd have been spared, but my confession also demanded that my child's father was named as *der Teufel* himself. Convenient, no?

Lucky me, once there was nothing left but scorch marks and ash, I met the creature beyond the myth. Oh yes, his brilliance, beauty, and fearsome intoxication drew me. I struck a deal. I would wait on the mortal plain to possess a woman and give birth to his child if he assisted me in terrorizing Hermann von Dernbach to his grave.

Finally, in 1605, the prince and self-proclaimed witch hunter of Fulda was dead. At my hand. I still smile when I recall his face: the crystalized perplexity, the fear, the shame; a cocktail I could sip for eternity. When he finally looked upon me, his first victim, he saw the havoc he brought upon himself.

"Merga?" His voice trembled. Satisfied with my work, I would make good on my deal, but as it had taken so much time, this would be even sweeter. I called upon the King of Hell himself, and he came of course, ready to collect.



“It is time, the others, they deserve their due,” I said. He smiled, knowing exactly what I meant. Hermann was given to the other two hundred fifty witches he’d tortured and burned. Tears fell from his eyes, as mine had, but for only himself. “Wo ist dein Gott jetzt?” I asked him, the smirk never leaving my lips.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Lydia is that friendly monster under your bed waiting for you to stick your limbs out from beneath the covers. She tends to frequent nightmares others dare not tread. More often than not, she can be found lurking on Pen of the Damned or in Nina D’Arcangela’s Ladies of Horror. ‘*Sometimes,*’ she states, ‘*what’s inside, is scarier than anything reality throws at you.*’

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### **Solitude** | *Tabitha Thompson*

9am. By this time he was having his second cup of coffee and typing a business letter. He loved the solitude, given most days it was a rarity but this day was special for work, so he took full advantage of the silence. Then a fly flew in front of his face. “Well that’s just great,” Kyle shooed it away as he muttered in disgust. “They’re starting to come.” Living in a climate that was known to have 95-degree weather in July wasn’t something that Kyle was foreign to, but he was also known for having an immaculate home, so he found them gross and unsanitary. “It’s the season, I guess.” Kyle got up from his laptop and headed into the kitchen, refilling his coffee when another fly start buzzing around his head. “For God’s sake, are you serious?” Grabbing the fly swatter, Kyle tried to hit the flies on the sink, counter, and toaster, but none of his efforts were successful. “Whatever.” Nothing else mattered once he sipped on his coffee. Caramel flavored. His absolute favorite. Enjoying the sweet, hot beverage on his tongue, Kyle retreated to his desk to finish his letter as the flies buzzed around him, only to find more coming to the surface. “What is going on?” Frustration began to set in.

10am. He was halfway done with his letter when three more flies began to buzz around his head. He was keeping them at bay using the fly swatter, but it was becoming tiring and frustrating. “I just don’t understand. Where are you disgusting insects coming from?” Washing his now empty coffee cup, Kyle was determined to find the root cause of the flies. Tugging on each doorknob to make sure that none of them were cracked open by his wife on accident, double checking the screen doors by the pool, and even the sink. But it wasn’t until an odd smell

hit his nose from upstairs that Kyle's curiosity started to kick in. "What is that smell? Karen!" His wife of twelve years would usually be awake by this time, but sometimes she chose to sleep in. As he climbed the stairs, more flies began to show and the weird smell grew stronger with every step. "Karen? Karen!" The voice that came from his lips was a mix of cracking and shouting, almost surprising himself at the sound echoing through the walls. Immediately heading towards the end of the hall where the master bedroom was, the foul smell hit Kyle's nose like a ton of bricks. He opened the door and found his wife Karen, bundled in their bedroom sheets with several flies buzzing around her, lying completely still. "Karen?" He peeled back the sheets to see her face turning blue with a foam-like substance seeping from her mouth. "Good. It worked. All I have to do is finish the letter for the insurance policy, and I can finally have my solitude." With a smug smile on his face, he took one last glance at his wife's stiff face as he turned around to leave.

He heard a light pop and a tight squeeze on his arm. It was Karen, staring at him with red eyes, a mix of burning anger and sadness. "Don't be too sure, Kyle Williams. You will not get what you want." Raspy and guttural, Kyle couldn't believe what he was staring back at, he thought the drugs worked. It was foolproof. "You didn't think you could get rid of me that easily did you? I wouldn't let you have the money and solitude that easily. We're in this together, remember?" She flashed Kyle a creepy grin, who froze in fear with his mouth wide open, allowing flies to enter.

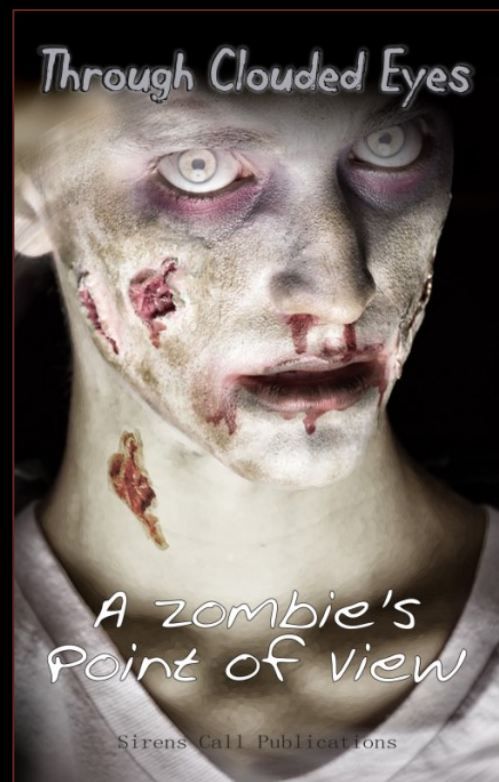
**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Lover of writing words that become horror stories, reading, coffee, rock music, and video games while residing in Florida. My work is featured in publications such as Sirens Call Publications, JEA Press, and Mocha Memoirs Press. When I'm not writing I spend time people watching, always inspired, always creating.

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## The Little Girl Who Cried Werewolf | *Rie Sheridan Rose*

“Mommie! Mommmmiieeee!” The terrified shrieks echoing down the hallway jerked Merrilee Chambers from the insulation of a sound sleep, and she was halfway out of bed before she was fully awake.

“Lorie? Are you okay, baby?”

The screams degenerated into wordless cries. Merrilee grabbed her robe from the chair beside the door and belted it haphazardly around her waist, running barefoot down the corridor. She threw open her daughter’s bedroom door and flipped on the light switch.

Lorie huddled in the corner of her bed, back pressed tightly against the solid security of the headboard. At the sight of her mother, she burst into renewed sobs, diving for Merrilee’s arms as the young woman perched on the edge of the bed.

“What is it, sweetheart?” murmured Merrilee soothingly, stroking the little girl’s raven hair until she began to relax into the familiar comfort of her mother’s rocking. Since the divorce, Lorie had too often been the victim of nightmares. This wasn’t an isolated occurrence.

“Mommiee, there—there’s a w-werewolf outside my window!” Lorie hiccupped, pointing a shaking finger at the partially drawn shade.

Merrilee kissed the top of Lorie’s head, hiding her smile in the girl’s soft hair. “Sweeting, there’s no such thing as werewolves.”

Lorie’s body trembled with the intensity of her urgency. “But I *saw* it, Mommie!” she wailed. “It was right outside.”

Merrilee went over to the window and lifted the shade. Lambent moonlight from the full moon outside spilled halfway into the room like a pale bloodstain, warring with the warmer glow from the overhead fixture. The street outside was empty except for two cars parked some distance down the block. The neighboring houses were dark this late at night.

Under the window was the bulky carcass of a dead rosebush that reached desiccated tentacles to rasp against the screen. There was a large gaping hole ripped in the wire mesh.

Merrilee frowned. “I need to fix this so you can have the window open this summer, huh, Lorie? But there’s nothing out there, hon. You were dreaming again. I’ll bet that old rosebush was scratching against the window and scared you. How ‘bout I cut it down in the morning? Deal?”

Lorie refused to be distracted. “M-maybe he got in the w-window when I wasn’t l-looking. Maybe he’s in the c-closet.” It was hard to understand her through the tears.

“I’ll check.” Merrilee tiptoed dramatically to the closet door and threw it open with a bang. “Get out of there, werewolf!” she thundered.

Lorie shrieked with nervous laughter as her mother pretended to attack the closet.

“Nothing there, pumpkin,” Merrilee promised.

“Under the bed?” suggested Lorie, swiping the tears from her cheeks as she began to calm down at last. She snuggled back into her pillows, clutching a stuffed sea otter.

Obediently, Merrilee knelt and peeked under the bed. “Nope.”

She stood, dusting her hands and knees. “When’s the last time we vacuumed in here, little missy? Lie back down now and go to sleep. I’ll leave the light on in the closet, okay?”

Lorie shook her head vehemently. “Not in the closet, Mommie. Leave the door open and put on the light in the hall.”

“Lorie—” her mother began.

“Pleeease, Mommie....”

“Oh, all right. Just this once though. Your father would kill me.” Merrilee could hear Lawrence now—*You spoil the girl too much, Merrilee. She needs discipline...* “This isn’t going to become a habit, young lady. And I don’t want to hear another peep out of you tonight!” She was trying hard to be stern, but she could tell from the tiny smile on Lorie’s damp face that the little girl saw right through her. “Promise?”

“Promise.”

“That’s my good girl.” Merrilee bent and kissed her daughter’s cheek. It tasted faintly of salt. “May the moon light your dreams, darling,” she whispered.

“And the stars shine till dawn,” Lorie replied softly, punctuating their ritual phrase with a yawn. Her eyes fluttered closed, but she forced them open long enough to make sure that the door was ajar and the light on in the hall before she let herself surrender wholly to sleep.

Merrilee smiled down at her fondly and went back to her own bed.

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“Mommiiee! M-mommmiiee!” The shattering screams pulled Merrilee to the surface more slowly this time. She grabbed her robe and stalked down the hall, her irritation mounting.

She threw the door fully open. “Lorna Gail Chambers! What on Earth—”

She relented at the sight of Lorie standing on the back edge of her bed, trying desperately to climb the headboard. Lorie’s screams had died to incoherent whimpers.

“Oh, honey...” Merrilee murmured, hurrying forward to scoop the little girl into her arms. “It’s all right...Mommie’s here now. What’s the matter?”

Lorie’s face crumpled. She was trying to catch her breath to explain, but her terror was choking her. “H-he’s under the bed, M-mommie,” she whispered in Merrilee’s ear, her breath hot and sweet against her mother’s cheek. “I saw him!” She sobbed harder.

“Look, baby—” Merrilee swept back the bed spread and bent down to peer under the bed. Lorie hid her face in Merrilee’s shoulder. “There’s nothing under there.”

“W-where did he go?” the little girl whimpered.

“I don’t know, honey. Maybe he had someone else to scare...there aren’t a whole lot of werewolves to go around, you know,” she growled in Lorie’s ear, nipping it lightly with her teeth. “You have to share yours.”

Lorie giggled.

“Okay now, honey,” Merrilee said briskly, settling Lorie back onto the bed and straightening the coverlet with a twitch of her wrist. “This time go right to sleep. I mean it.”

“Can’t I sleep with you?” Lorie pleaded.



Merrilee almost relented at the sight of Lorie’s tear-brightened eyes...but the girl *was* seven now. She couldn’t sleep with her mommie forever. Lawrence was always harping on how lenient she was with Lorie.

“No, baby,” Merrilee sighed gently, brushing Lorie’s hair out of her eyes. “You have a perfectly good bed all your own. I’ll put your tape on, though. How’s that?” She punched the play button on the portable cassette player resting on the dresser, and the night air was filled with the soothing strains of *Brahms’ Lullaby*.

“Go to sleep now.” She bent and kissed Lorie good night.

Lorie sniffed away her tears. “I love you, Mommie.”

“I love you too, pumpkin. Now go to sleep. And no more nightmares!”

“I’ll try...” The little voice sounded so lost that Merrilee’s heart constricted. *What would it hurt?*

Then the image of her ex-husband’s disapproving glare flashed through her mind. *No, Lorie needs to learn.* “I’ll see you in the morning, darling.”

\*\*\*

Lorie lay in the exact center of the bed, her arms and legs stiffly at her sides, one hand resting on the otter. *Maybe if I am very still and very quiet—*

There was a heavy-throated growl from the shadows on the far side of the room. Lorie whimpered soundlessly, her heart pounding painfully in her chest.

With a deep, chuckling snarl, a hulking figure covered with coarse, matted fur stepped out of the shadows and paused at the foot of the bed.

“All the better to *eat* you with, my dear,” barked the werewolf, reaching for her with its long, sharp claws.

“MOMMIIEEE! MOMM—”

The cry ended in a blood-curdling scream...and then the night was filled with silence.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Rie Sheridan Rose multitasks. Her short stories appear in numerous anthologies, including *On Fire*, *Hides the Dark Tower*, and *Killing It Softly* Vol. 1 and 2. She has authored ten novels, including the horror novel, *Skellyman*; six poetry chapbooks, two of which are dark poetry--*Overheard in Hell* and *By Candlelight*; and lyrics for dozens of songs.

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## **The Girl in the Blue Tarp** | *Robb T. White*

Lake Erie by mid-October is too cold for surfing, even in a wet suit. But that's also the perfect time for waves topping seven feet. Kitesurfing became my second passion. It allowed me to skim over water faster than 20 mph. The chop, however, punished my knees and the Canadian northwest winds barreling down the lower lakes made my face so stiff with cold you could bounce quarters off it.

I had some bar-hopping lined up for that night in case Lori stayed mad at me; she wasn't taking my calls. The day was freakishly warm, so I decided to get in one more day of kite sailing before November put a razor's edge to the wind. I had the public beach to myself except for some people walking the shoreline looking for beach glass. East of the beach is the breakwall and the harbor where I like to run parallel to the big granite boulders all the way to the lighthouse.

That day, I was feeling more reckless than usual. I'd made the jump over the wall a couple times during windy days in summer. In fact, the local paper printed a photo of me clearing it on the front of the big Sunday edition. A couple perch fishermen sat at opposite ends of Flat Rocks, a section of the breakwall where the boulders are just a few feet above wave height and smooth as a flagstone walkway. I made the turn at a good angle, caught plenty of wind in my sail and went for it. I parked near the sandbar behind the wall. I thought it would make for a cool exit to go sailing over it.

I cleared the rocks, all right, but slammed onto hard-packed sand and tore my meniscus. Those two fishermen I intended to impress called an ambulance while I lay writhing on the ground, still buckled in.

No bar-hopping or Halloween parties, no nothing. After the meniscal tear surgery to repair the damaged knee cartilage, which my doctor said looked like an upside-down mophead, I was dosed with anti-inflammatory medications and enough painkillers to turn zombie.

Sick of daytime TV and CNN, I went to my back porch overlooking the lake about a thousand yards in the distance and a steady decline below my backyard's slope. I had a view of the water and the red-gold clouds at sunset, although my neighbor's willow obscured Flat Rocks. Waves pounded the slabs of rock and shot spray twenty feet into the air. The big lakeboats passing by were close to the end of their shipping season and would be tying up at their berths in the ports around the Great Lakes.

My binoculars enabled me to scan the water to the horizon and along the breakwall. Most of the foliage was gone at this time of year, but the tall trees had an eyrie for a bald eagle I'd been watching lately. A spot near the observation deck the city had built overlooked the inlet where blue herons mated. Deer roamed between the property lines of the Norfolk and Southern and the couple hundred acres of wetlands. Iroquois hunted and fished down there before this state existed. Canada geese were among the last to migrate. It wasn't much to look at but it beat watching Ellen DeGeneres.

My leg ached worse in late afternoons as the temperature dipped. I was doing some flexing exercises when I reached for the binoculars. Just behind the observation deck was a clearing among the phragmites—invasive cattails. The fronds at the tops of their brown stalks last through winter and wave in the wind like decorative feathers on medieval helmets.

I found the spot—and then I found something else. Something bulky, lying near the edge of the water. Something wrapped in some kind of dark blue fabric, a tarp.

Adjusting the focus knobs, I could make out a large cylindrical object about five or six feet long. *It couldn't be*, I told myself. *Nonsense*. My marathon horror-film watching at night was a guilty pleasure as well as another symptom of my boredom. I looked again but nothing stood out, no matter how I adjusted the view. I could limp well enough to the back yard for a better view without the glass interfering. I stopped short of the slope near my maple tree and zeroed in on the object. No doubt about it—human-shaped, wrapped up, banded in three places with sisal rope. Protuberances at both ends suggested the position where feet would be on a prone body and the other was rounded like a human head.

Calling the cops wasn't the first thing on my mind. This was likely a high-school prank, a mannequin wrapped and dumped to look like a murder victim. The Cleveland *Plain Dealer* was making much of the fact our little speck on the shores of Lake Erie was a convenient body dump for a serial killer who might be local. The rotting remains of four Cleveland prostitutes had been discovered in a field east of the township line, not ten miles from where I stood. A camera crew was in town to do an episode for a popular crime show. All of that publicity gave the year's Halloween parties a gruesome vibe. I wondered if Lori went to the one we were invited to with her new man.

It was worth checking out. I drove my Jeep down to the beach and parked in front of the breakwall. The area was difficult because it had to be traversed on foot by following a winding path through cattails across heavy sand. The relentless wind blew the sand into small dunes surrounded by thick marsh grass and wind-stunted trees.

My knee aching like fire, I hobbled to the observation deck to get a better look where the tarp lay. I had to fight my way through overgrown thorny bushes to reach it. My shoes were soaked, clusters of thistle and prickles, spines of marsh plants were stuck to my pantlegs by the time I got close enough to the waterline for a better view.

One waxy, slim white foot exposed with painted toenails told me I'd been pranked. I cursed myself for falling for it. A mannequin, no doubt. Not a real dead girl. I hoped the teenagers who had tricked me weren't spying from a distance. I thought, *I'm here. I might as well check it out.*

Then it hit me in both nostrils: not the pungent odor of swamp rot but a powerful olfactory whiff on the breeze of something sickeningly sweet, a stench that I knew.

Now I had to get right down next to it, to see for myself. The hair on my neck stood up. I gently opened the loose end where the foot was visible. It appeared plastic, not real, not a trick of the light but a result of blood settling from gravity's tug, leaving flesh white, translucent.



My stomach lurched. I didn't want to see any more of it. I staggered back through the weeds, half-limping, half-trotting back to my Jeep. I drove home and called nine-one-one immediately.

One cop and a detective met me at my house, and I drove with them, sitting in the back seat of a cruiser, rubbing my aching knee. I led them to the observation deck and pointed from the railing into the sawgrass right where the body lay.

"Stay here," the cop told me.

I watched them work their way through the brush as I had done less than an hour earlier; they hunched down too low and I couldn't see what they were doing. They returned minutes later. Their faces grim but what they said shocked me.

"Is this, a joke?" the cop asked me.

"What—what do you mean, officer?"

The detective scowled. "You know what the penalty is for making a false report?"

It went downhill from there. My own explanation sounded stupid. When the detective asked me why I didn't 'ascertain' it wasn't a human being before wasting official police time, I didn't know what to say. I told him the smell had convinced me it was a real dead body.

"You've been around a lot of corpses, have you?"

I didn't answer.

"What kind of drugs are you taking for that knee?"

"Percodan, Vicodin mainly," I said. "Oxycontin—all of it prescribed."

"Better lay off the hillbilly heroin before you call nine-one-one."

I limped through the grass to look for myself. Nothing, no tarp, no body. No bloodstains or anything besides tamped-down sawgrass, which proved nothing.

"I know what I saw," I said when I returned; it sounded feeble.

The cops looked at me in a way that didn't require words to go with it. We walked back to the cruiser in silence, me bringing up the rear like a wounded straggler. When they dropped me off in my driveway, the cop stared at me. "You're that windsurfer guy, the one in the papers."

"Kitesurfer," I corrected.

"You like publicity," he said.

Shutting up seemed the only sensible response to his accusation.

I spent the rest of the day doping myself with Vicodin and pacing, burning with fury, shame, and confusion. I'd just about convinced myself my brain had done a number on me when I caught the last golden shafts of sunset bouncing off the porch windows. Despite my agitation, it produced an immediate serenity in me.

The temptation to get one more look with my field glasses while the light was still good was too strong.

Hobbling out to the farthest edge of my property without taking a tumble, I knew where to zoom in with my binoculars.

No tarp, no body, plastic or real.

I must have missed the spot—*No, that's exactly where it was.* I couldn't be wrong about that. I was annoyed, knowing I'd be a precinct joke for years, a publicity hound who wanted his name in the papers again. The cops had no idea who they were dealing with.

Then it smacked me in the face: the killer moved the body. Nothing else made sense. I scanned back and forth using the observation deck as a pivot point. Then I saw it, maybe I saw it. The light was tricky with the shadows of dusk; the last rays of the descending sun illuminated the underbellies of the clouds over the lake.

He crawled out from beneath the observation deck. I nearly dropped the glasses in shock. From this distance, he looked ordinary—nothing unusual in the way he suddenly appeared in my lenses. He was just *there*. It made no sense. Beneath the deck was all muck, sand, and cold water. He must have been underneath those boards, shivering, waiting for me and the cops to leave.

His back was to me. I watched him jerk something from under the deck, and when he pulled it free, I saw the familiar dark color and shape, and I knew exactly what it was.

Then he did something that turned my blood to ice: he turned around and stared upward across the inlet, his eyes searching until he found me looking back at him. No human being has eyes that good, I knew. Not possible! Yet he observed me as much as I observed him in that long moment, long enough to bare his teeth at me in a grin of recognition, as if he expected me to be looking down at him from a thousand yards distance at precisely that moment.

I hurried back to the house for my cell phone, had my thumb on the nine—when I stopped. *The cops won't believe me this time, either. By the time they got here, the killer would have been long gone.*

*What kind of drugs are you taking?* The cop's words stung; in truth, I'd loaded up on pills to dull the commotion I'd put my knee through. Crazy people don't know they're crazy but do sane people know when they're hallucinating? Ever since my fight with Lori, I was racking up mental zeroes.

Back outside for a last look before deciding, I saw no sign of the man or the body. The blue tarp was rucked up beneath the deck—my evidence. *Now they'd have to believe me,* I thought. *You can't wrap up a dead body and not leave DNA.*

I popped another pill, grabbed a flashlight, and left the house. My goal was to get the tarp, drive it to the station, and drop it at the feet of those cops. I would enjoy taunting them.

The drive down to the beach required one right turn at the end of my block. I barely managed it. My arms were spaghetti when I turned the wheel, and I nearly careened into the opposite curb. I'd slugged down a shot of whisky to take the edge off my bad mood that afternoon before the pill-popping. I was woozy but I had to find that tarp before it turned dark. The killer was toying with me. How and why were a mystery. All I knew was that this sick freak had singled me out.

I stumbled to the observation deck. My knee felt as if someone had been driving ten-penny nails through my kneecap. The dark was descending all around me fast.

I got down on my hands and knees and shone the flashlight beneath it from side to side. Nothing but black water lapping up against the pilings.

When I got to my feet, I was mumbling to myself. That's when a bunch of bright dots fluttered like tiny moths all over my chest, arms, and stomach. It took a moment to realize I was red-dotted by laser sights. The same detective's voice barked out commands from the darkness, ordering me not to move. A flurry of dark-clad shapes moved toward me—cops leveling weapons. I was dropped to the deck and cuffed. I blacked out while a SWAT officer above me droned Miranda rights at me.

They'd been surveilling me for months, ever since the body dump was discovered. Forensics found a single piece of Taser confetti with an identifying number linking back to my gun. I told you my second passion was kitesurfing. My first, and oldest, is hunting whores. I've done it for three years in five states.

The girl wrapped in blue tarp had cheated on me. I remember confronting Lori at my house. I remember rage settling over me like a red mist—then nothing.

The shrink told me I killed Lori in a fugue state, subconsciously denied it, and then reverted to old habits by wrapping her body and disposing of it in the wetlands. All along, he claimed, I really wanted her found just as I wanted to be punished for it.

He's an idiot but he's right about one thing. I'm looking at fifteen years on death row before they shove the needle in. My damaged knee hasn't healed. I hang sketches kitesurfing I doodled during my trial on my walls. I know the killer is real, I know he's living under the observation deck, and when he's ready, he'll show himself again.

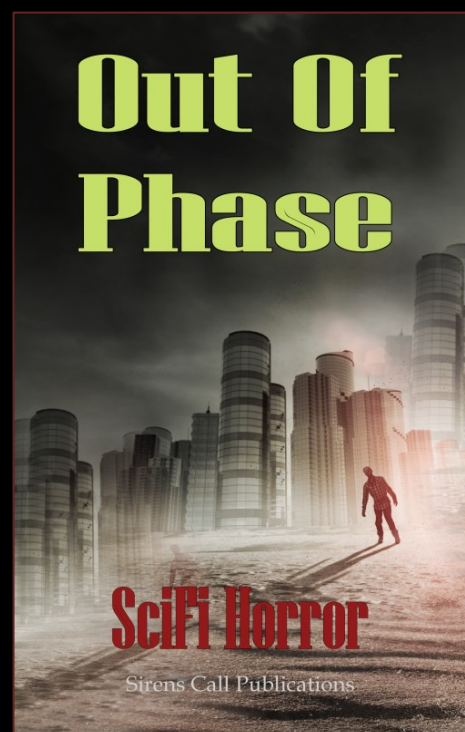
**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Robb T. White is the author of *Waiting on a Bridge of Maggots* (2015) and *When You Run with Wolves* (rpt. 2018). A recent collection of crime stories is *Dangerous Women: Stories of Crime, Mystery, and Mayhem*. White's latest publication is *Perfect Killer* (2018). A hardboiled novel to be published by Fahrenheit Press in the U.K. is *Northtown Eclipse*.

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## **Perceived Reality**

There are no stories written of my kind. No fables, no fairytales, no nightmares. I'm soft as rain and as dark and fiery as this rocky planet's core. I speak daydreams, but the lullaby isn't always a harmless tune. I'm formless and distinct: on the verge of the latent and the tangible. I run by the light of the moon, and I burn with foxfire. I come from everywhere and nowhere—a figment of perceived reality. I try to explain to the air that there is no 'before' when time had not yet begun—but what is a beginning if existence does not yet exist?—and, as always, am met with silence by ears that cannot understand me and others that choose not to. Shadows like stormy waves reach from my fingertips, but the blood I bring to the surface is temporary. It's the eyes of your soul that I seek. Through them I can see infinity. The universe around me shifts, no up and no down. Particles defying the laws of physics, as I defy the rules of my imprisonment and shake free of my Euclidean shackles to become one with the stars once more. Sunrise and sunset always look familiar, but the blue sky of day feels wrong. Am I from a place of perpetual long wavelengths? Am I accustomed to the edge? Night, dusk, and dawn—the only times that feel real. The shadow birds still come, but they keep their distance in a darker sky. My memories are filled with splinters from old beach-house porch steps, purple clouds over crashing waves, misty dunes, and a deep desire for something I cannot understand. I've been there a million times, but I don't know when or who I was. Invisible feet climb a staircase to a destination just out of reach. What will I do when I reach the end of the concrete steps, where it drops into air? There are ticking clocks among the dunes, but what do they measure? I think the clocks are really dragons, come to take back one of their own. I know they see me. I see endless staircases in my mind and tigers in the glass. I weave magic with words, see through multiple eyes, and always dance on my toes; am I a witch or a prophet? Sphinx of black quartz, judge my vow. It's what I know, and it comes from inside, but I don't know how it got there. I used to know my braids and my house and the dark voice that shadowed me, and the beach never recedes. It's always a darkening sky. The wind is always full of salt. The tide is always coming in. There are no seashells on this coastline. The perpetual tide brings something else. I know the darkness that calls me must live in the water, though its voice calls from the clouds. Bring me broken boards, broken shells, broken souls, and I will mend or destroy their essence.

## **Refraction**

Echoes in dark aether... I ask the magic mirror to say my name and tell me the future. Sometimes my reflection whispers back, eyes glinting gold instead of my cornflower blue. Every night I follow my own footsteps down the dirt path, toward the empty red house. I pause at the seventh fence post when I see him. The fox, eyes of onyx and coat of sinuous flames. He stares at me before the world melts away. I enter the woods from the west. I say woods, but they're

really just a few acres of pines to the east of the empty red house. A girl lives here. She lives behind the trees. She has unknowable form with edges of fire, made of salt and glass. You can see her if you have the right eyes and know the trees. I bring her offerings. She prefers the bones of sparrows, but most birds will do if stripped of their feathers and skin. Once I found the remains of a heron down by the marshes, sun bleached and smoothed over time. I took them to her, but she refused. She would have liked the heron's feathers, but the bones were for another time, another place. I buried them back in the marsh and sprinkled the ground with sawdust. Sometimes I hide dolls made of string and twigs among the trees for her to find. She loves to play, but you must watch out for her thorns. She's told me his name—the great dragon of crimson and jade that waits for me beneath the waves, his golden eyes glowing amongst the detritus on the sea floor. I acknowledge my fear, but also accept his presence and purpose in my world. He seeks the reflection that whispers, both myself and not me. The waves never lull me to sleep; I wait for the lightning to call my name. Where does the red fox go when I close my eyes?

### **Self-reflections, Distorted**

I am alive in the dark. Feelings come from the edges of my eyes, not my hands or my brain. What am I? If my soul finds a window, I'll fall long and deep into the blue sky and merge with the darkness beyond. The colors blend and I'm always running. I jump over the flames and close the door one last time, dispersing premonitions and finding places I cannot see inside. I cast no shadow when I walk these woods, even when the ashes of night give way to the blazing embers of the morning sun. In the marshes I seek the woman of the water. She knows. Her face is memory and her words revelation, but how can memory have form when I'm blind to the passage of time? She lives on a painted island in the midst of the chaos of living Earth, and she is luminescent. She ties my hair up with reeds and clothes me in the moss and lichen she finds in these silent waters. It is she who creates the day, and I lend my shadow to cover the night. She whispers that I am a daughter of moonlight, but born of fire and wind and sea. My feet turn to wings when they hit the sand, like they know every particle and seek to know every grain in the world. I make my way to the temple of ciphers by listening to how the thunder echoes against the jagged white cliffs to the north. I can only see it clearly when I am more than one soul, but appearances mean nothing in this place. The steps are only worn and cracked sometimes—if I know when I am, where I am. Columns of marble flash iridescence and humor; I belong here. Tigers roam the halls and specters lurk in dusky corners, but I find safety and kinship in their turbulent forms. They both are and are not, just as I exist within a space and time of imaginary numbers and trick mirrors. False reflections cannot hide the truth; even she with the golden eyes knows that. I am the tiger that roams the pathways of this island. I am the dragon in the sand. I am the shadow birds that follow. I belong to the rush of evening and slanting light in the darkening sky. The stars fear my name and run from me, but I am one of them, or will be, in the end. I drink from the sacred chalice to find the words, and then I speak life and death. These are my burdens to bear.

There are horrors beneath the city...

# BODIES



SU HADDRELL

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## Got Your Nose | *Hillary Lyon*

Lynette and Marcus were ecstatic when Lynette learned she was expecting; they'd been trying to start a family for years. Marcus daydreamed about teaching his kid how to play ball, ride a bike, fish. Didn't matter if the baby was a boy or a girl, he was set on being an involved, loving dad. And he knew Lynette would make an awesome mother; after all, she was attentive, nurturing, and empathetic. Together they indulged in dotting speculation—would the baby have his eyes, her smile, his ears, her nose? Already, they began to worry about getting the child in the right schools—starting with preschool. In this coastal city, it was never too early to submit applications.

She was eight months pregnant when the meteorite—the evil star, as the superstitious local hippies called it—crashed into the gulf, birthing a min-tsunami headed their way, with accompanying storm. Because that event coincided with the worst outbreak of flu in recent history, maybe those pagan tie-dyed freaks were onto something. Marcus, out of the country on business, called that same afternoon to reassure Lynette that she'd be okay, the baby would be okay, he himself would be okay. He knew she'd have been listening to the radio—she was a news junky, and often kept him updated on world events. His foundation for these assurances was little more than hope based on an article he'd read about his season's flu in the English-language version of *The Taiwan Times*. The article proclaimed, if one's blood type was B positive, then one had nothing to fear, according to recent studies done by virology research doctors in mainland China. As Marcus and Lynette were both B positive, he pointed out—with more confidence than he felt—that they'd be fine. But the baby, Lynette obsessed as only a new mother could—what about the baby? How could they know the baby's blood type? Marcus made light of her concerns; if, he emphasized, both parents are B positive, then of course the baby would be, too. He didn't mention to Lynette that it was just as likely their baby would be born with type O blood—the one type which was highly susceptible to the virus. Why add more stress to his already stressed pregnant wife? She had enough to worry about prepping for the newborn's arrival.

Lynette hung up the phone and walked out to the balcony of their high-rise apartment. Leaning her elbows on the warm railing, she watched the cars zip by below, and the pedestrians—a mix of university students, office workers, and homeless folk—moving along the sidewalks, with the occasional dog walker struggling with their beastly charges. As the sun set, lights flicked on in the numerous cafes and bars and businesses lining the thoroughfare below; Lynette loved to watch this gentle transition from day to night. She leaned into the antique brass telescope positioned on their balcony, to observe people going in and out of the many trendy venues, until her back began to ache. Only then did she stand up straight; looking at the distant horizon, she noticed the impenetrable dark clouds gathering in the fading light. She sighed to herself; so many people in this city oblivious to the coming storm.

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Marcus returned in the early hours of the following Monday. Exhausted and anxious, he was close to panic when he deplaned. Lynnette had not answered her phone in two days, and when he called the building's concierge, all he got was a cheerful recording apologizing for the disruption in custodial services. He couldn't even leave a message asking them to check on Lynnette, as the recording further stated their voice-mail was full. Sick with worry, he cut short his business trip, even though doing so would likely cost him a much-needed promotion, what with a baby on the way.

The freeway traffic was thick and slow moving, due in part to the never-ending road construction, and the unusually high number of cars in transit. He assumed those were driven by people fleeing the coming storm. The news hyped it as the 'Storm of the Century'—like they did with every major storm, every hurricane season. He wondered how people could fall prey to that predictable hype. His taxi driver, a grizzled old guy named Morris, didn't have to point out the ridiculous number of cars stalled on the shoulder of the road, but he did anyway. Marcus couldn't help but notice some of the empty cars had their driver's side doors open, and some appeared to have been left running. Between fits of wet, hacking coughs, Morris muttered under his breath how stupid people were to abandon perfectly good rides. The cabbie laughed as he signaled to move over to the exit ramp. "Serve them right," he said with a righteous air, "if somebody—somebody who *appreciated* a fine car—took one of those expensive automobiles home."

Finally arriving at his high-rise apartment building, Marcus found the high-security doors to the lobby wide open, and the concierge's desk unmanned. This was not good; it meant anybody could walk in off the street and do who knows what to the building and its inhabitants. Still, no one milled about in the lobby, where, usually, there would be a small clutch of young professionals giggling and gossiping about the day's work. Annoyingly, the decorative waterfall by the bank of elevators was filled with debris; at a glance, it appeared there were rags and sticks and dark brown moss tumbling in the little pool, clogging the filter. Marcus was too distracted to take a closer look.

That little scene should have disturbed him, but he didn't give it a second thought; he was more concerned with the elevator. Only one car was lit up, instead of all six; how could five be out of service at the same time? And where was the posted notice? He pushed the call button repeatedly, harder each time, until finally, the one elevator appeared to be on its way down. But it was taking so long, Marcus began to calculate the feasibility of taking the emergency stairs. That would take forever, and he was not in the best shape of his life, but a high level of anxiety could convince a person to attempt the otherwise unthinkable. But before he could seek out those stairs, the elevator dinged and its doors opened wide. He quickly stepped inside, surprised at the filthy condition of the carpet and the wood-paneled walls. It looked like somebody had been violently sick, and kicked one of the walls so hard they broke through one of the polished wood panels. Why had the custodian not cleaned this foul muck up already? And patched the damaged panel? And the smell! Marcus put his hand over his nose and mouth so as not to gag, and shook

his head in disgust; this place cost an arm and a leg as it was. He expected better. He hoped Lynnette didn't need to use this foul elevator. The doors shushed closed behind him.

Getting out on his floor, Marcus was in equal parts disgusted and disturbed with the stained hallway carpet, and dark glistening smears on the walls. Was the janitorial staff on strike? Had no other residents complained? That couldn't be; people in this building complained about every little thing. Someone didn't pick up, one time, after their perfect little Pekingese pooped in the front flower bed? Complain. Somebody's kid left a gum wrapper by the bank of mail boxes? Complain. A guest used the pool without signing in? Complain. So the current condition of the building had to be due to a strike; Marcus refused to believe this had anything to do with the virus burning through the world like wildfire through dry prairie grass. Yet his own fear of this very scenario began to spark and smolder in the back of his mind.

As he fumbled with his keys, he allowed himself to be convinced of the idea of a custodial strike. He imagined the conversation he and Lynnette would have over dinner regarding the status of the elevator. Marcus called Lynnette's name as he opened the door to their condo. No answer, no sounds, no lights. He flipped on the light switch near the door, calling her name again in the vain hope she'd merely not heard him—that she was engrossed on her computer, or that she was listening to music with ear-buds, or deeply napping. But he heard nothing.

Marcus ran through their home opening the doors to each room, turning every light—frantically looking for his wife. He found her, at last, slumped in a corner of their cramped laundry room. She was so cold, pale, and limp. His mind raced—she must have fallen and hit her head, or—even worse—gone into labor early and passed out. With great effort, he stopped his mind from going further with morbid speculations. Action was needed now. He knelt beside her and placed his fingers on her neck, attempting to find her pulse. He found nothing—he next grabbed her wrist, feeling for life there, but found instead a ragged gouge like something had taken a large, cruel bite. What animal could have done this? Some tenant's dog? The wound was too big for any of the little pedigreed fur-babies he'd seen in this building. Marcus slouched down beside her, and gave in to his overwhelming heartache and hopelessness.

As he wept, he placed a hand on her distended belly, grieving for his lost wife and child. Beneath his hand, the unborn babe kicked and struggled with shocking ferocity. Marcus jerked his hand away, at once horrified and grateful. His baby lived! Maybe he could save it, if he could steel himself to cut it out of his dead wife's belly. Could he really perform a caesarian? Marcus inhaled sharply; he would do what he must to birth his child. He convinced himself he could do this. He ran to the kitchen to get a knife.

A filleting knife, he decided, would be sharp enough, and thin enough, to do what needed to be done. In his mind, Marcus worked out the needed length and depth of the incision. He'd have to be so very careful not to hurt the baby; he had to save it. On his way back to the laundry room, he remembered to grab clean towels from the bathroom. Once brought into the world, the baby would need to be swaddled, to feel safe and loved. He would worry about what to feed it if it survived.

When he got back to the laundry room, Lynnette's body had tumbled over to one side. Impossibly, violently, she convulsed before his eyes—then she was motionless. Hope bloomed in Marcus' frantic heart. She was alive, still, and he would save both her and the child she carried.

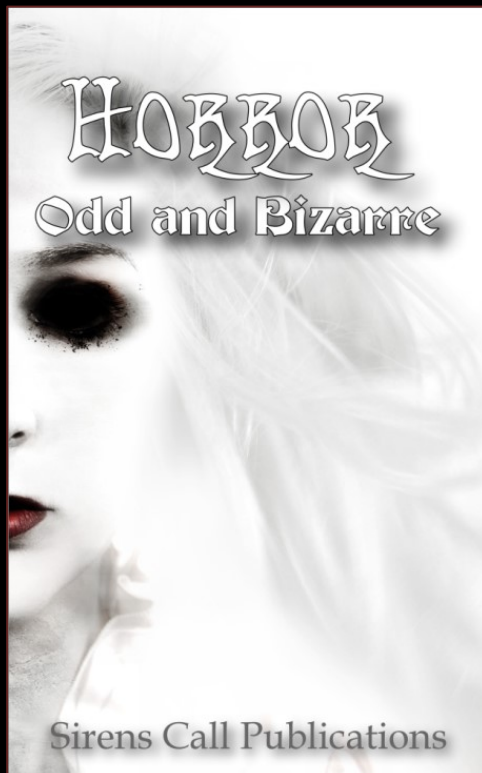
Gently, Marcus turned her over. At once, he dropped the knife and towels, and though he covered his mouth, he could not keep from throwing up between his fingers. Before his eyes, the taut flesh covering her belly stretched, roiled, and tore as the baby viciously clawed its way out of Lynnette's body, and ripped off its own umbilical cord. In horror, Marcus watched as this *thing* slithered up to its mother's face, and in a grotesque parody of an affectionate mother-child game, tore off Lynnette's nose and shoved into its black hole of a mouth before scurrying away.

Marcus's eyes followed the thing's slimy, bloody trail until it disappeared into the shadowy, tight space behind the washing machine. Upon seeing this, Marcus' mind surrendered to each and every nightmarish thought he could conceive, and several that he couldn't. Slack-jawed and whimpering, he slid down the wall into a crumpled pile of agony. There he waited to meet his first born, his only offspring.

He didn't have to wait long.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Hillary Lyon is founder and senior editor for Subsynchronous Press. Her stories have appeared in 365tomorrows, Night to Dawn, and Theme of Absence, among others, as well as in numerous horror anthologies such as Night in New Orleans: Bizarre Beats from the Big Easy, and White Noise & Ouija Boards. She's also an illustrator for horror & pulp fiction magazines.

Blog: <https://hillarylyon.wordpress.com/>



## Horror: Odd and Bizarre

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## **The Hand**

It was not the usual kind of hand. It was exceptionally soft with innumerable lines patterned intricately all over the palm. The nails had been shapely cut but there was no polish. That was unfortunate.

But what intrigued me most about the hand was the enormous ring on the finger. The heart shaped ring head was covering more than half of the ring finger.

I stopped examining the hand and tenderly wiped the blood dripping from it before hanging it on my wall. The space in the center was finally filled. It was now time to work on the corners.

## **Order**

“Let’s order something veg.” I said after scanning the menu.

Rishi looked at me surprised. “You, a vegetarian?”

I smiled at my school friend. Even though we were meeting after ten years, he still remembered my love for meat.

I took a deep breath and replied, “Sheeba loved having chicken here.”

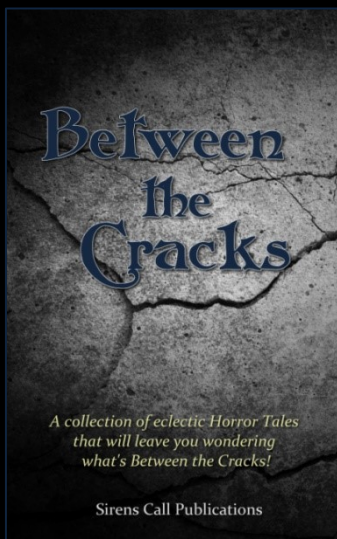
“Oh, I’m so sorry. I didn’t...”

“That’s ok. It’s been two years but still...”

Yes it’s been two years since my wife died. Still it feels weird to have meat in any restaurant. But then it’s all my fault. I shouldn’t have thrown her body parts in the tandoor.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Sohini Ghosh has years of experience in content writing. She writes short fiction and contributes to microfiction platforms. Horror is her favorite genre, although a slight movement of the curtains can make her hide under the covers.

Twitter: [@soh\\_g](https://twitter.com/@soh_g)



## **Between the Cracks**

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## **Blood Red Jamaican Sunset** | *Rekha Ambardar*

The sun turns an indecent blood red at dusk in Claremont, Jamaica, and in the ensuing darkness, evil lurks.

I, Veronique, the village seer, sit on the veranda in my bamboo rocker, smoking a hand-rolled cigar, wondering if tonight yet another human will be lured and killed by the unseen vampire who is stalking the natives of the village. So much beauty in the lush greenery and the abundant red hibiscus bushes, and so much evil. If I had strength in my bones I would track this monster and put an end to its rampage and relieve our misery.

A woman sashays along the path of banana trees—Anastasia, my daughter-in-law. A swell of anger starts my blood boiling. She is the bane of all men on the island, including my son, who found this mulatto woman in Kingston, where he goes to sell fishing nets. Tall, with light skin and coppery hair, she sways toward me. But she has harnessed the power of the devil—she never ages.

“Veronique, are you coming to the bonfire tonight?” Her eyes flash, no doubt thinking of the men she will entice; they are blinded by her blazing beauty, the fools.

“People are being killed, and you talk of bonfires?” I say, almost spitting out the words.

“Life is short,” she says with a laugh. It’s a shrieking laugh, like that of a mad banshee.

“You will live forever,” I mutter under my breath. “You’ll see to it.”

At night, I go to the bonfire after all. Jacinta, my neighbor makes me. “You are like a tapioca root growing in the cellar. You need to be with people,” she tells me.

“We walk toward a hillock a little way up a ridge along the shoreline.

The bonfire is already glowing brightly. Anastasia is doing a dance to the clapping of the men. My son is in Kingston working and his wife is entertaining the men of the island.

After an eternity of whirling, she disappears, and the men and women sitting around the fire grow silent and drowsy from the tall, mesmerizing flames.

I follow Anastasia without telling Jacinta. I see my daughter-in-law’s silhouette as she goes into the dense part of the woods where there’s a shack. A young girl is tied to a stake. Anastasia pounces on her, pulls out a knife and stabs the girl in the shoulder. A scream of pain and terror, then voices behind me.

Two men pounce on the mad Anastasia. Jacinta unties the girl and cradles her in her lap. The wound is shallow.

“Jacinta, how did you know?” I ask her.

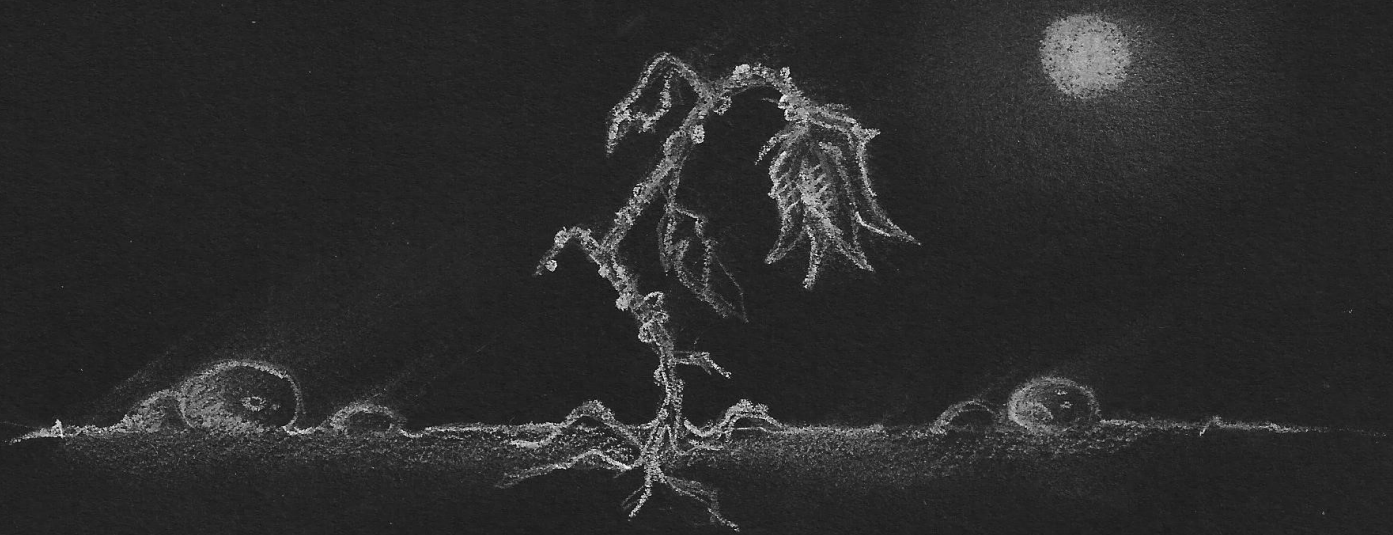
“I saw you follow her and I got suspicious, I forced Gerard and his brother to come with me.”

Anastasia’s secret for staying young? She bathed in the blood of young boys and girls.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Rekha Ambardar has published over one hundred genre and mainstream stories and articles in print and electronic journals. She is also the author of two romance novels published by Whiskey Creek Press and Echelon Press. A former faculty member at a business school in Upper Michigan, Rekha is now retired and plans to spend more time on writing projects.

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ON SOUR GROUND ONLY CROOKED THINGS GROW

## Vampires Anonymous | Lexie Carver

“Hello, everyone. My name is Lainie. Welcome to Vampires Anonymous, where we’re trying to learn how to control our urges and live among humans. As we do every week, let’s go around the room, and say a little something about ourselves. And welcome to the new members. Would you like to start, Paul?”

“Sure. Hi, I’m Paul and I’ve been human sober for about three years.”

Everyone clapped at his achievement. Paul smiled at each person in turn before proceeding.

“It’s been a hard road, and I’d be happy to be someone’s sponsor. I know how hard it is. It took a long time to get to a comfortable place. Things are going well with me and Angie. She doesn’t suspect a thing. I eat when she’s asleep. She’s actually the reason *why* I stay sober. The thought that if I don’t eat regularly, and I slip up, I could lose her or worse *kill* her? Well, that’s all the incentive I need to keep on the human-free diet, as I like to call it.”

There were a few chuckles from the group before Ethan stood up to address everyone.

“Hi, my name is Ethan. I’m a new member, just joined today, actually. Can I ask you a question, Paul?”

“Any member can ask any other member whatever you want. This is a safe place for all. We’re here to support each other,” Lainie offered with a kind smile.

“Thank you... Uh... well... Isn’t the diet hard? I don’t know how you do it. I slipped up yesterday. I didn’t kill anyone, I swear. But my fangs came out. I went...I went into a club. I made out with this girl and then boom; my fangs were out. I’m not proud of it and uh...well...I drank a little from her. She was okay after I left, just a little weak. I just... I slipped. I don’t want to feed on humans. I really don’t. The hunger, it just got too strong. It took me over. I was able to bring myself back, but I’m terrified that the next time I won’t be able to.”

“That’s okay, Ethan, everyone here understands what you’re going through. We’ve all been there. The hunger is always going to be there. You have to choose to ignore it, and focus on what you want, which is to live among humans. I’m glad she was okay, and the fact that you had the strength to pull yourself back is an extraordinary thing. Not many would be able to. That’s the first step. This is why we have these meetings, and this support system, but when that happens, what are you supposed to do?”

“I’m supposed to call you or my sponsor,” Ethan said in a shaky voice, head down.

“Yes, exactly. No need to be ashamed. This is just to remind you of the protocol so that next time, we can help prevent any biting on your end. You already know the procedure—that’s half the battle. You have to pick one of us, any one of us to call. We will talk you down and remind you of why you’re fighting. We would have instructed you to leave the second your fangs came out and go into an alleyway to talk to us. Let me just remind everyone here that any slip up is bad for our kind. If the police suspect vampires, we’re all going to be in trouble and they might even disband this group. This is a resource for vampires, let’s not let that happen.”

“Of course. I’m sorry,” Ethan stated with a tremor in his voice, his emotions betraying him for a moment.

The group responded with the slogan, “Don’t be sorry, be smart.”

Ethan smirked and nodded at Lainie. “Yes, ma’am.”

Lainie smiled warmly at Ethan. “Good. Thank you for sharing, Ethan, and welcome to the group. I’m happy you’re here. Amanda, I believe it’s your turn now.”

“Oh yes, hi. I’m Amanda, obviously. Um... yeah, so I’ve been human sober for a long time. I’m married with kids. They don’t know what I am. I drink in front of them and say it’s tomato juice. Humans don’t happen to like that very much. And even the healthy ones don’t want to drink straight tomato juice. I find for me, it’s easier to drink among humans. They eat and drink at least three times a day, and so do I. It makes it normal for me. No hiding, no drinking in the shadows. Monsters don’t come out in the open and that’s where I drink. I have a normal life, and the urges are kept at bay with the routine, and the normalcy of everything. I drink it with the insufferable PTA moms, at sports games and on date nights. It’s really a great method. I buy blood from a supplier. He gives me mostly animal blood with some human plasma from hospitals, for those really bad days when only human blood will do. I put it all in giant pitchers and juice boxes labeled ‘Tomato Juice’. My family just thinks I’m health conscious.”

“How are you able to—”

“Function, Ethan? I’d been lonely for a while before I found my husband. I’ve been going to this program regularly. Things will get easier after a while. I’m 200 years old, Ethan. You’re a young one. Don’t beat yourself up over it, it gets easier. Trust me. I love this human, and marriage is a human convention that they prefer to adopt when they find love. I never imagined kids, and without the amazing vampiric doctors, and the specific breakthroughs in vampiric fertility, it would never have been a reality. You know what humans think of vampires. It’s easier to just pretend. I can’t lose the kids or my husband. I couldn’t bear it, so I do what I have to, to keep them. It’s as simple as that.”

“But the cravings...” Ethan inquired.

“I drink mostly pig’s blood instead of human. The only human blood I drink is from blood drives. I can give you the number of my supplier, He offers discounts to newbies. He’s a great guy. Anyway, pig’s blood is not as sweet, but it does the trick. It provides all the nourishment a growing vampire needs. Drink as much as you need. There are some days when I need seven drinks, and some days when three is fine. Feed your urges safely, that’s the key. Now for the taste, well, you can always mask it with ginger, a little brown sugar and vanilla extract. I know it’s a weird combination, but it works, and it tastes delicious.”

Lainie’s eyes lit up at the mention of a tasty recipe. “Oh, that’s a good one, Amanda, I personally use cherry syrup, and graham cracker crust, and bake it into a pie. I have a giant sweet tooth.”

Amanda chuckled at that. “Remind me to come over for pie sometime, Lainie.”

“Anytime, Amanda. Actually, I’m having a party next week and would love for all of you to come. There *will* be pie.”

“But the urges...” Ethan implored, desperate to know the secret that everyone else seemed to have.



“Ethan, everyone here is ready and willing to help. Use us as a resource, that’s what this group is meant for. This was made to help our kind transition into a world built for humans, to exist peacefully side-by-side. We don’t have to be the monsters they think we are and we don’t have to hide in the shadows.

The urges will go away but you need a reason; love, morality, something bigger than the urges, to give yourself over to. A reason to remind yourself in those difficult moments why you’re fighting so hard. Only *you* can provide that reason. If you slip up, they will find you and kill us all. Self-preservation could be a reason. Think about what drives you and call one of us tomorrow. Use us as resources. Now, here’s another newbie. Lisa, right?”

“Yes, hi. My name is Lisa. My vampire doctor suggested I come here.”

“Dr. McClintock?” Paul asked.

“Yes,” Lisa replied with a small nod.

“Oh, he’s the best,” Amanda offered.

“Yes. Well, I’m here because, well, I just recently got turned. My sire dropped me off at the doctors and I don’t want to be evil.”

“Oh, dear me. I hate sires like that. I’m sure the Vampire Council will recall him. That is not allowed. You’ve indeed come to the right place, dear. We are the go-to for all vampire services in the community. Here is a list of all the services that our kind may need,” Lainie stated as she handed Lisa a colorful brochure.

“Have you eaten?” Lainie asked.

“Only a little at the doctors.”

“You poor thing. Okay, the Raven Cottage is where you must go next, Lisa. They tend to newbies and set you up with a caseworker and a chaperone, who is to accompany you on all outings for the first 50 years. Ethan, if you’d like the same, go to the Raven Cottage. I will call a vampire car service to take you both there. There will be blood provided for you both in the car if you’d like.”

Both Lisa and Ethan nodded. Lainie took a moment to text the car service. She didn’t want to make the newbies uncomfortable and thought texting over calling would be best.

*Text: We have two newbies. Desperate here. Need a strong driver and blood provided in the back. Hurry.*”

Lainie returned to the group with a smile. “Let’s cut this meeting short to attend to our two new members. This was a very good session. Welcome to the vampire community and to this group, Lisa and Ethan. Stay safe and stay smart everyone.”

“Stay safe and stay smart,” everyone replied.

The limo arrived immediately. Lainie shepherded the two newly turned vampires into the limo, before any passersby could see that the bloodlust had made their eyes turn violet. Not a human color to say the least.

“Blood is in the refrigerator, both pig and human. Human snacks like crackers and cookies are in the cabinet to your left, Lisa.”

Lainie closed the door and walked quickly over to the driver. “Take them directly to the Raven Cottage. No stops for anything. Whatever they say, don’t listen. Make sure they get to the cottage.”

The driver looked a little apprehensive. He hadn’t driven newbies for a hundred years. But he nodded all the same, a steely determination coming over his face. “Of course, ma’am.”

“Thank you.”

Amanda, Paul and Lainie watched the car leave, wobbling a bit as it drove over the cobblestones and sped off onto the dark highway. “I always feel so good being able to help our kind like that, but our group keeps getting smaller and smaller and—.”

Amanda wrapped her arm around Lainie offering her some much-needed comfort. “They were referred here by McClintock. He’s doing his job, Lainie. More will come. We can only help those who want to be helped. We can’t help those who refuse to stop drinking humans dry.”

“Yes, more will come. McClintock is doing his job and I believe we have a large ad out in the *Vampire Weekly*, the only vampire-centric newspaper. I get upset when I read vampire deaths as well, Lainie, but we’re helping the community. As Amanda said, we’re helping those we can, and the ones we can’t help get recalled by the all-wise Council. We do our part. We can’t save everyone all the time. That just isn’t possible.

“Yes, the whole business in the town square yesterday evening...well, no talking, no *group* could have prevented that *massacre*. *Animals*, the lot of them. I’m happy they were recalled. If any vampire ever deserved a recall, it was those monsters. We couldn’t have saved those vampires because they were beyond saving. The system somehow failed them before we could ever have helped them. You don’t become that way by yourself, you’re made that way after centuries of loneliness, with no help or resources. Sometimes people fall through the cracks,” Amanda offered.

Lainie and Paul nodded as they all stood there in silence for a bit before Amanda spoke up.

“I really am sorry to leave you two especially on that note, but I don’t want my husband wondering where his wife went off to. He’ll be home soon.”

“Oh course, Amanda. Same time next week? You too, Paul?”

“Same time,” both Paul and Amanda said in unison.

They all walked away into the night, a common secret shared among them as they left to pretend to be human once more, secretly longing for next week to come around again when they could be their true selves.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Lexie is a feisty woman who lives out loud and is a veritable badass. She loves indie rock and a good cup of black coffee. She’s been writing since she was ten years old. Her love of horror started at the age of 11 with her first horror movie, a slasher. She has an adorable small dog named Remy who is quite a handful.

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Sanatorium, mental ward, psychiatric hospital - they're all the same. Places where the infirm, the crazy, and the certifiable go for treatment... Or what passes for 'treatment'.



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## The Sinister | Jon Olson

*When will it end?*

Struggling to catch my breath, I stop for a moment, hands on my knees. The door to my left is shut, I haven't been in there yet. Could that be a way out?

It always changes.

"Daadddeee..." My daughter's voice echoes through the halls, distant and menacing. "Where are you?" She giggles, and my skin crawls. The voice is my daughter's but the words are not her own.

They belong to the Sinister.

Bursting through the door, it quickly becomes obvious that I've misjudged. It's not the exit but another classroom. Like the others I've seen, the desks are overturned, strewn about. The floor's covered with debris. Even in the dark, I can see the walls are splattered and smeared with gore.

I thought I knew my way around her school after months of dropping her off every morning. For fuck's sake, the building is essentially one giant corridor with rooms branching off it; how hard could this be?

"Daadddeee... I'm going to find you!"

She's closer... its closer.

I thought I'd put enough distance between us to buy time. Creeping back to the door I peer out. The corridor is lit only by the flicker of flames burning sporadically within the building. Screams erupt from somewhere mixing with childish laughter.

I dash out into the corridor, avoiding a lick of the flame, continuing my search for the way out.

My daughter said... the Sinister said... there's a way out, and if I find it, it'll let us leave.

I slow my pace as the corridor begins to quake.

*Oh god, it's happening again.*

Walls crack and splinter while steel beams groan as they rip from their foundation. The ceiling and floor shifts position, altering the layout like a Rubik's Cube. The horror is indescribable; the confusion maddening.

The Sinister said we can leave; but I doubt it will let us.

I jog toward one of the freshly formed corners and my feet slide out from under me; I slip on the entrails of what looks like one of the school's administrators. Hitting the floor beside the lifeless torso, I see eyes frozen open in terror, they stare blankly at the ceiling. The lower half is nowhere to be seen.

"Daadddeee... you can't hide forever!"

*Holy fuck she's... it's close.*



Scrambling back to my feet I continue down the unfamiliar hallway. I don't know how long it's been since the nightmare began; the Sinister gave me a head start what seems like ages ago. Here and there I've seen other parents as desperate as I am to find their children and make it out.

I've also seen some that didn't make it. What of their kids?

Then all other thoughts are eradicated: *I see it.*

Barely visible, in the orange dancing glow of the flames, is an Exit sign above a heavy door.

Oh my god, *a way out.* My heart races.

With a new sense of urgency, I use every ounce of strength to propel myself toward the door.

Almost there... the ceiling shatters above me.

In a deafening crack, ceiling tiles, duct work and dust rain down on me, along with my daughter. I collapse under her and the debris, hitting the floor just a few feet from the exit.

"I found you, Daddy," she says.

Gripping me with inhuman strength, she flips me onto my back and my heart breaks.

Her arms are gone, ripped out of their sockets and replaced by greyish-pink appendages with six oversize claws protruding from stumpy, inhuman hands. She still has her own legs but has sprouted elongated talons that tear through her tiny Mary Jane's. Her face is still that of my little girl, but her mouth is permanently etched into an unrelenting grin.

Worst of all; her eyes. Her beautiful blue eyes have been torn out leaving empty sockets.

"Baby girl," my voice cracks with emotion. "The exit is right here."

"You almost made it, Daddy," she says and her voice softens. "...almost..."

"It's right here, honey. Let's leave... me and you..." Even I don't believe my words.

The Sinister creeps back into her voice. "But then the fun would end. You don't want the fun to end, do you, Daddy?"

"What the hell happened here?"

She giggles, digging her talons deep into my chest. I feel them scrape between my ribs.

"Oh, my dear Daddy," she squats, pressing her full weight into my chest. "You just answered your own question: *Hell happened here.*" She twists her talons deeper, nearly piercing one of my lungs. "Besides, how can you leave something that's already everywhere?"

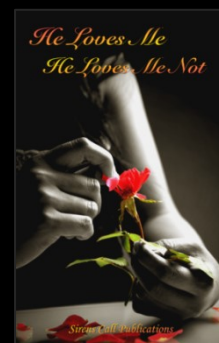
Tossing her head back, she erupts into a shrieking laugh.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — As an author of horror and dark fiction, Jon also has a passion for science fiction and comic books. He's a proud member of Pen of the Damned and the Horror Writer's Association and resides in Eastern Passage, Nova Scotia with his family.

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**He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not  
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## What's That Sound | *Ryan Benson*

Reby looked at 'FOR SALE' signs dotting the street.

They'd popped up since the buzzing began at the military base, though Army brass denied the sound's existence. Bob complained about near inaudible vibrations too, but Reby'd never leave.

Screams broke Reby's thoughts. She rushed inside

Blood smeared the wall from kitchen to staircase. Guttural growls emanated from the second floor, choking out, "REBY."

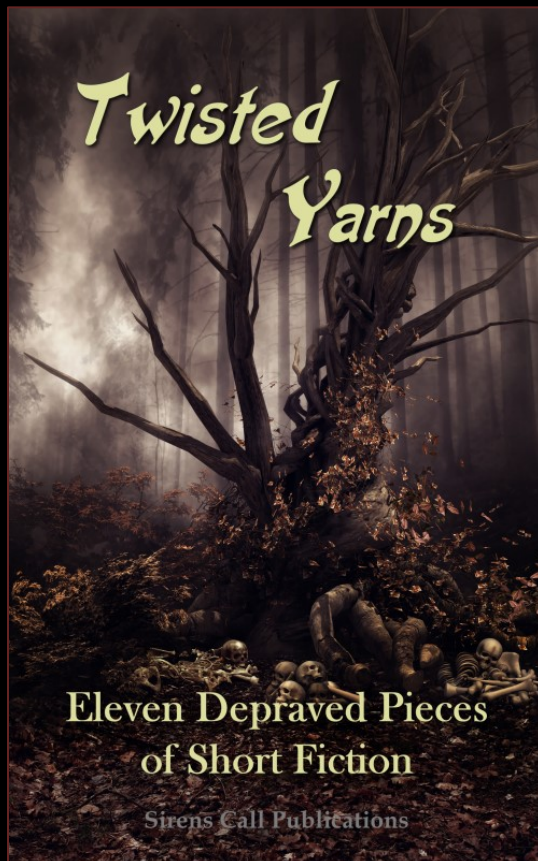
She climbed the stairs. "Oh, my God..."

Upstairs, Bob sat cross-legged with bloody chunks and fur in his teeth. Their decapitated cat lay in his lap.

A 'FOR SALE' sign stood in Reby's yard the next day.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** —Ryan Benson previously found employment as a professor in Boston, MA. He now resides outside of Atlanta, GA with his wife and children and writes with a focus on speculative fiction. He hopes to one day complete a novel, but until then he keeps himself busy writing short stories. *Suspense Magazine*, *The Collapsar Directive*, *Short Fiction Break*, and *Trembling with Fear* have published Ryan's work.

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## Twisted Yarns

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and iTunes

## Full Moon Saga | Kathleen McCluskey

The sallow orbital specter rose through the cold arctic sky. The craters and scaring reflected the turbid water beneath. The soft glow woke the ancient mortal enemies. They had fought once before ending with the rival of peace enjoying the victory. The Earth had suffered one of its greatest calamities at the hands of this adversary, the ice age. Now once again they would clash, holding the Earth's future in the outcome. Mankind, as always was oblivious to the ways of the planet.

The shell of the great loggerhead breached the water first. He had lain dormant for centuries. Now needing a moment to gather its thoughts and to stretch the long comatose muscles it floated in the frigid foam. The icy flotsam and jetsam began to bubble and pulse as the great defender of Mother Earth began to rise. He breached the water, his long, gray hair and beard dripped and moved in the sea breeze. His lengthy slumber healed the massive wounds inflicted in the previous battle. The ancient monolithic man spotted his long-detested opponent.

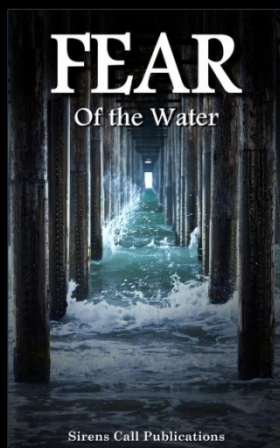
The adversaries were ready, eyeing each other as they circled in the bitter liquid. The turtle lunged first hitting the muscular man in the chest. Waves of tsunami size gushed in every direction as the man went down, down under the water. He crashed to the sea floor with the turtle in his hands. Cracks formed in the seabed as the Earth quaked and rumbled. The water rushed over both of them. The surface was briefly calmed then the whirlpool began. Rising with the loggerhead in his grasp was the defender of Mother Earth, his large calloused hands held the mighty beast by the head. He begged the Earth to persuade her loyal companion to let loose his freezing blue hue. The moon complied and as the great defender stood on the turtles back they were once again frozen in time.

Slowly they sank to the depths to await the moment when once again the fate of the planet would be decided.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Kathleen is a very busy mother of two teenagers. Originally from Plum Borough Pennsylvania she now resides in West Mifflin Pennsylvania. She is the novelist of THE LONG FALL Book 1: The Inception Of horror now available on Amazon. Her second novel in the series will be out mid-August. In her spare time, when it arises she enjoys swimming, reading and of course writing.

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## FEAR: of the Water

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# DRAGON BORN



*Ela Lourenco*

**Available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble,  
Kobo, and iTunes**



Sergeant Mike Barton was bored. Before an operation, some men of Joint Task Force Hotel Six would get nervous. Others would become jittery as adrenaline pumped through their veins. Barton just felt a bland impatience.

Barton and the other officers and senior NCOs of JTF-H6 were in a gymnasium that had been converted into a tactical operations center. His commanding officer, Captain Marlow, stood next to a projection screen, briefing the men on their upcoming mission. Barton noticed a faded banner on the wall behind Marlow's head—Home of the Tigers.

*Not anymore*, Barton thought.

"Men," Marlow said, "today's operation will involve an assault on a two story private home with a basement. Intel shows two Victors using this structure as their base of operations. A possible Victor-friendly human is also on site."

Barton stifled a yawn. He had read the assessment. He never went up against vampires or their human servants without knowing exactly what to expect.

"Sergeant Wallace, your men are the assault team today. Sergeant Clay's squad will be in a support role. If you need assistance, use channel 6."

Wallace gave the Captain a thumbs up. "Roger that, Sir."

"Sergeant Barton, you and Max will go in with Wallace."

"Thank you, Sir," Barton said, trying to muster some enthusiasm. "Max and me are looking forward to taking down some bloodsucking motherfuckers."

"Very gung ho of you, Barton."

Marlow went on with the briefing, but Barton drifted off. He knew the drill by heart. He felt good about this being a daylight assault. Most vampires slept during the day and all were vulnerable to sunlight. However, they were still stronger and faster than humans and the silver jacketed bullets the soldiers used would only hurt vampires. Only a stake to the heart or sunlight would kill them.

"Okay, watch each other's backs out there," Marlow said, ending the briefing.

Barton went outside. The unit was using an abandoned school as a staging point. Doc Jay, the unit's senior medic, was in the parking lot, waiting with Max. He was sitting on the buckled asphalt, his back against a Humvee. Max—a compact black and brown Belgian Malinois—was curled up next to him.

As Barton walked up, Doc Jay said, "Hey man, you keeping my bro up late or something?"

"Naw, Max is just saving his strength." At the sound of Barton's voice, Max's ears perked up. He patiently waited for Barton to scratch under his chin. "Who's the best dog in the whole Army?"

Max barked.

"Damn right."

Doc Jay stood up and brushed off his pants. "I better go make sure my boys are ready for any casualties."

“Yeah. Thanks for watching Max.”

“Don’t gotta thank me for hanging out with *mi holmes*.” He bent over and patted Max’s head. “Keep this guy out of trouble, yeah?” Max barked. “See ya when I see ya.”

Barton performed his normal pre-operational check of Max. The dog’s silver-capped teeth were clean and his padded harness secured. Max was an important part of the team, having been trained to locate vampires.

“Hey, Mike!”

Sergeant Wallace was waving him over. Wallace’s squad had gathered around a Humvee, looking at a floor plan spread out on the hood. Barton leashed Max and joined them.

Wallace said, “Sergeant Barton and Max are our MWD support today. We’re going to break into two elements. Alpha will go in through the front door. That’ll be me, first fire team and Barton. Bravo will be Corporal Weber and his fire team. Weber, you’ll head in through this door,” he pointed to a side door that led into the kitchen, “hold the kitchen and the stairs into the basement. Alpha will clear out the first floor, proceed to the second floor, clear that, then join Bravo in the kitchen. Both elements will then proceed into the basement. This is where we’ll most likely find our Victors. Barton and Max will sweep for hiding spaces, we locate the Victors, and stake them. Any questions?”

No one said anything. From experience, they knew that going up against vampires in a restricted location was dangerous. An assault team could get bottled up or forced into close-quarters fighting, where a vampire’s speed and strength gave it an advantage.

“Okay, ready up. We move into position in 15 mikes.”

Barton doubled checked his Kevlar vest, making sure the ceramic inserts were in place. He fastened a thick, leather collar around his neck. He tightened the straps of his knee and elbow guards and slipped on a pair of heavy gloves. All the armor was hot and uncomfortable. However, it kept him from being clawed or bitten. While being bitten didn’t guarantee turning, he didn’t want to take a chance.

The squad loaded into their Humvees and drove to the forward staging area, a dilapidated church in a deserted residential neighborhood. The windows of the church were boarded up and the walls covered in graffiti. The roof was topped by a broken cross. Many of the surrounding houses had overgrown lawns and the deteriorating appearance of buildings that were not maintained.

As they waited for the order to proceed, Barton lit a cigarette and shifted the weight of his slung M-4 carbine. Max sat patiently next to him.

*Everyone else is hyped up, but not Max. He’s steady, a 110 pound rock. We should all be more like him.*

Barton had been on enough missions to know this was the kind of place vampires favored. Decaying urban areas gave them access to a food supply and limited the chance of exposure. Anyone living here would mind their own business.

It was also good for the men of JTF-H6. There was less chance of witnesses who would be believed. Barton knew that the public would panic if they learned there were vampires and that

the government was waging a covert war against them. When he had first been recruited from the US Army Rangers, he thought it was for counter-terrorism operations. He had soon found out that there were worse things than militant fundamentalists and political radicals. Although he had been shocked at first, after almost two dozen counter-vampire operations, that had worn off. Now he just did his job and tried to survive another day.

“Okay,” Wallace said, “we just got the go ahead. Let’s move.”

The target was only two blocks away. It was the third house from the corner. It looked like the rest of the homes in the area. At least, those that were not burnt out shells. The first floor windows were covered in plywood sheets and siding was peeling from the house in long, aluminum strips. It gave the impression of a body in the process of being flayed. The lawn was a tangle of weeds and garbage.

As the squad approached on foot, Bravo Team split off and headed around the side of the house. Alpha Team carefully crossed the lawn to the front door. Wallace gave the hand-spin to enter the house. One of the men - Corporal Lister - fixed a small breaching charge to the door and backed away.

“Clear,” Lister said as he triggered the charge. With a loud bang, the door blew open.

The team filed inside of the house. In the living room, there was a couch, a coffee table and a flat screen TV mounted on the wall. The coffee table was covered in fast food cartons and cigarette butts. The team continued down a short hallway. As they passed stairs leading to the second floor, Wallace said, “Diaz, Kowalski, security.” Two of the men took up a position at the foot of the stairs.

The corridor they were in ended in a closed door. Wallace said, “Barton, you’re up.”

Barton squeezed past the men and unleashed Max. “Search.”

Max sniffed at the door. Barton knew that if Max pawed at the door, there was something undead behind it. Instead, he stared at it, waiting for a command.

“Heel.” He returned to Barton’s side. “Looks good, Sergeant.”

“Okay, let’s check it out.”

Barton and Max remained behind, while Wallace and the two other men moved forward to sweep the room. Wallace opened the door and the three men rushed in.

“Aw shit,” Barton heard Lister say.

“Stay,” Barton said to Max. Standing in the doorway, he could see why Lister swore. Lying in the middle of an empty room were two bodies, wrapped in plastic sheets.

“Okay,” Wallace said, “stake them and move on.”

Lister pulled stakes and a hammer from his belt pouch and drove the sharp, polished wood straight into the hearts of the corpses. Each let out a soft sigh, a sign they had been gestating.

“Let’s hit the second floor,” Wallace said. Before anyone could move, there was the ‘chuff-chuff-chuff’ of a suppressed M-4 firing. Barton was the first to turn and advance down the hall. Max was at his feet, ready to attack on Barton’s command. Diaz and Kowalski were both pointing their weapons up the stairs. Wallace tapped Barton on the shoulder and he moved to one side.

“Max, heel.” Max sat in front of Barton, while the other men joined Wallace at the stairs.

“What’s going on?” Wallace said.

Diaz answered him. “Someone’s up there, Sarge. Looked like he had a shotgun, so I lit him up.”

Wallace shook his head. “You better hope this fucker has a gun. Otherwise, your ass is gonna be in a sling, right along with mine.” Wallace looked warily upstairs. “Hey, show yourself, hands behind your head.”

They waited for a moment, but there was no reaction. Wallace took a deep breath.

“Damn it. Okay, I’m on point, Diaz, Kowalski, Barton with me.”

Barton and Max joined the rear of the file of men heading up the stairs. At the top, there was a shotgun lying on the floor and the dingy beige carpet was stained dark red with blood.

“Told you he had a gun,” Diaz said.

There were four rooms on the second floor. Only one of the doors was closed and there was blood on the door jamb. Wallace tried the knob. Finding it unlocked, he motioned to Barton to toss in a flash bang grenade.

Wallace opened the door just wide enough for Barton to lob a black cylinder inside. He slammed it shut as the grenade went off. There was a loud boom, followed by screaming. Wallace opened the door, charging in. Barton and Max followed.

There was a man lying on the floor. His hands were pressed tightly over his ears. His face was contorted by pain. He wore a white tee-shirt, which was turning red from blood that streamed from a ragged hole in his left shoulder.

Wallace said, “Diaz, zip him, then get on comms. Let them know we have one detainee and that he’ll need a medic as soon as the building is cleared. Then get a bandage on his injury and watch his ass. He’s your responsibility.”

“Got it, Sarge.” Diaz zip-tied the man’s hands and feet as the other men—with Max in the lead—left to clear the rest of the floor. The other rooms were empty and Wallace ordered his men back to the first floor.

The squad reunited in the cramped kitchen. As soon as the basement door was opened, Barton unleashed Max and said, “Search.”

Max crept warily down the steps. Barton followed, flipping the light switch on the wall. A single bulb flickered on, casting a dirty yellow glow. He continued down the stairs, M-4 ready. The rest of the squad followed closely behind him. When he reached the basement landing, he saw Max standing in front of a curtain covering the far wall, pawing the ground.

“Behind the curtain,” Barton managed to blurt out before two figures tore through it. Max was swept aside and smashed into a pile of furniture. He lay motionless.

“You fuckers!” Barton screamed.

The sound of gunfire was deafening in the tight confines of the basement. The lead vampire—a young woman with short brunette hair and pale gray skin—was hit by a salvo of silver slugs from Barton’s M-4. They chewed into her chest, reducing it to a bloody pulp. She stumbled backwards, screaming in agony.



The other vampire, a male with long blond hair in a pony-tail and deep blue eyes, pushed her aside, sending her sprawling to the floor. He reached Barton before he could shift his aim. The hand that wrapped around Barton's arm compressed like a vice. Barton howled in pain. He was thrown across the room and slammed shoulder first into a wall. He rolled slowly onto his back, arm and chest burning with pain.

Vision hazy, he saw the male vampire punch Wallace hard in the chest. He heard the distinct crack of a ceramic plate shattering and Wallace slumped to the ground, doubled over and groaning.

Lister—who was next in line—fired a series of three-round bursts at point blank range into the vampire's face. Part of the head disintegrated under the hammering of silver slugs. He stumbled away from the squad and turned to face Barton. One eye was gone. The lower jaw was shattered to the point that Barton could see the tongue flop around in the ruined mouth. A piece of skull was missing and Barton thought he could see exposed brain, a sickening jumble of red and white.

While Barton watched, the forehead exploded outwards. Lister had stepped up and fired, the muzzle of his gun almost against the back of the vampire's head. It stiffened for an instant, then fell forward, hitting the concrete with a sharp crack.

The female vampire tried to sit up, damaged muscle and bone healing before the eyes of the soldiers. A couple of the men rushed forward to hold her down and stake her. As the needle-sharp wood pierced her heart, she let out a high-pitched scream. Lister rolled the male over and staked him, causing a bubbling exhalation.

Barton rolled onto his back, the pain spreading from his side to the rest of his body. Lister leaned over him. "Hey buddy," Lister said, "medics are on their way. Just hold on."

"Not dying, just kinda fucked up. Wallace?"

"Kowalski is looking after him. He'll be fine. Sarge has taken worse hits than that."

Sudden panic hit Barton. He tried to sit up as he shouted, "Max!"

Before Lister could speak, Max shoved his narrow, friendly snout into Barton's face and gave him a quick lick. Barton relaxed and slumped back onto the floor.

"Good boy."

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Jeffrey Durkin is a writer living in Arlington, Virginia. After 14 years of Federal service as a computer engineer, Jeff transitioned to full-time writing in 2013. He has published short stories in the science fiction and horror genres and owns and operates a number of movie and pop culture blogs. He published his first novel, *The Age of the Jackal*, in 2015.

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## Your Head | *A. Fernandez*

Klatts looked back at the den of his true kin, desecrated and abandoned after six centuries. It was the end of a two day tour around the former sanctuary, now nothing but a hive of grime, pests and the skeletons of his ancestors. And in that moment when he stood outside the shale entrance, he knew what he had to do...

*Kill them! Each and every fucking one of them!* He'd known for some time he was not of the average plains of the world; being from a race of predatory monsters known as the Hunters of Kapu. They lived among humans up until late medieval times, when most of them were wiped out by the Brightclad paladins of England. Some Nests managed to survive, but not long enough to maintain hierarchy among the world of monsters. Vampires refused to opionate. The Devils up to Lord Selviticus went as far as laughing at the name of Klatts' Nest: Skorj.

Now, it was time to do what Dreykai the First Decapitator would have longed for: Perform the Ritual of Crowns with the severed heads of everyone at Claire Mill High School.

*Revenge... how sweet.*

He didn't show it until recently, but Klatts loathed wearing a human disguise. With or without it, he was still bullied in his youth. On top of being forced to attend the school in order to blend in, he was assaulted by the clique of popular kids on a regular basis.

He knew it was wrong that he wasn't with his people studying things like the Blood Oath of Sabuza from the get-go. There was no curriculum in human school; it was all just students showing off their guns at lunch and graffiti on the outside walls. This drab routine of human culture didn't at all lead Klatts to believe that there was anything to pity. Not for them or for any other homogenous youth who believed one way to live is the only way.

*They'll make perfect sacrifices.*

The creature, whose true name was Klatts Skorj-Trauwog, death-growled as he leaned back on the extra arms connected to his spine. He then stretched himself with them out of a hole in the grimy ceiling of the old ruin.

He was now in a barren area not too far from the school. While in one of the chambers, he found something he never thought he would have seen in his lifetime; the perfect tool to carry out the slaughter of the school, then humankind...

*The Ghastblade.*

He may have been the human equivalent age of 24, but he knew what this meant to all of the Nests left. With that certain sword, he could have ended the world of mortals if he wanted to.

And after the carnage that would happen at the school, he would very well do that.

\*\*\*

The school day was still new. Students on most floors were in class, while the majority of Class 12-B was in the nearest bathroom yammering over weed.

Andre Eastwick was among them. He wasn't in 12-B but was still 'cool'. Grinning, he took a stick of the blunt and lit it with his own lighter. Taynick Davie wanted to make a comment on how smart he presumably was now, but felt no one would care.

Andre had since taken the pot as casually as possible. Hoping no one would mention that he had a mild run in with that creepy loser Jake Echs from down the hall, he took his first drag as Power Stevens stared at him blankly.

Power started point blank as the smoke cleared: “The fuck you doin’ this weekend? Suckin’ cracka Seymour dick?”

Andre did what he thought was playing it cool with his head bowed, and responded, “I’m playin’ *Sergeant Guts* at the tournament in town. And this nigga right here is my second in command on the team.”

He gestured toward Taynick, who was quick to deny and shook his head. Power bowed his head in turn, and Andre knew where this was going...

Power low-fived Greg Sanders and Hakeem Little as he came up to Andre. He then took him by the shoulders and pinned him to the plain sided wall of the restroom.

Andre yelled as Power clutched harder onto said areas. Taynick covered his mouth as this happened. As he grew silent, it was taken off.

“The fuck is this about? This is one of the only fuckin’ moments we’ll get to take pictures of and shit after this shit-ass senior year done. We about that 4:20, know what I’m sayin’?”

Power wasn’t buying it. He still had a strangely collected look on his face as it was still bowed. Then he said, “You be tellin’ Aiden Campbell and his Cali cracka sister to come to Super Kon with us. Then you got the dick to give them group tickets with me and my niggas’ names on ‘em.”

Just as Power took out a switchblade from his right pocket, the lights in the bathroom went pitch black.

Power scowled in the darkness. “Turn that fuckin’ light back on! You wanna be kicked out of 12 Mill too?”

“It wasn’t me!” shouted Greg.

An erratic noise sounded over the school comm link all of a sudden. Usually it was static for a second and a half but it was longer and louder now.

Over the air, there were high screams, like someone or more than one person was dying. Before anyone on the floor could figure out what else was happening, it stopped.

Greg opened the door to see the hallway was pitch black, no light at all. He peered down to the right side of the locker-filled corridor for signs of the windows that were there.

Purple ripples of smoke came from out of the square viewpoints of outside. They grew bigger and less like veins as they neared the restroom and stretched to everywhere else in the school. An ethereal, haunting growl filled the air...like that of a beast above beasts.

Greg instinctively pulled out a small gun only to feel something dug into his gut. It was a strand of the purple smoke....

Another growl of judgment filled the air all around as the Last Hunter of Kapu’s skull-like, reptilian mug came out of a hole in the ceiling. The rest of his body was an amorphous, dark blue goo-like substance, with light blue markings around said form.



Klatts the Chosen formed into his base body, then and there, in front of the restroom doorway. Greg's clique screamed as they backed further into where the stalls were.

The creature turned his skull mask-like head to the teens. The ripple already was starting to twist Greg's body inside out in the most literal sense. His intestines fell out of both sides of his body, and the end result was the young thug contorted, dead, and bleeding horribly with some insides still hanging from his waist. His head was still intact.

Klatts lifted an arm and it turned into the Ghastblade...he'd since become one with it, as it left the mark of his forefathers on said limb.

*This... is only the beginning.*



## **The Rules** | *Sophie Kearing*

The building in which Steve and I work is the obvious choice for our newest game. It has an elevator, ten floors, and its geriatric tenants are out of our hair and in their beds by nine p.m. Also, there are cameras everywhere, so keeping an eye on Andrea will be easy.

We sit in the security station watching her leave one frame and enter the next.

“Jesus, girl,” Steve says into his headset. “That backpack is bigger than you.”

In black and white, Andrea's lips move. “Oh, I packed some oxygen.”

“Oxygen?” I ask.

“They say it can be hard to breathe over there, and if you pass out, you wake up back at home, cursed.”

I scoff. “Do you two really believe that?”

“It says so right here.” Steve points to his tablet, where he's got a game website pulled up. On it, there's a column packed with Asian characters and a column written in English.

I study the screen. “Usually game rules are in English and Spanish. Why are these translated into Chinese?”

“This is a *Korean* game,” Andrea says, stepping into the elevator. “So the translation is actually from Korean into English.”

“Okay... fourth floor,” my coworker instructs her.

Andrea rides the lift to the fourth floor. When the doors open, she doesn't get out. I frown.

“Second floor,” Steve prompts, though I get the feeling that Andrea knows the sequence by heart and is only listening to him for comfort.

Upon arriving at the second floor, our friend pushes the button for the sixth floor. Never exiting the small compartment, she travels down to the second floor, then up to the tenth.

“Now I want you to push the ‘five’ button, then close your eyes. Don’t open them until I tell you it’s okay.”

Andrea obeys and the elevator settles on the fifth floor. Steve and I watch in amazement as a girl neither of us knows boards the lift.

Earlier, Steve had informed me that the player *must* be alone in order for the elevator game to be valid. I throw my hands up. “Great. Now we have to start over again, and all because of this weirdo visiting her grandma in the middle of the night.”

Annoyed, my friend shoves his iPad at me.

I read aloud, ““On floor five, a woman may enter the elevator. DO NOT look at her. She is not human and will have power over you if you look at her or speak to her.””

The stranger stands alongside Andrea, whose lids remain tightly down over her eyes.

“How’s she supposed to work the elevator if she can’t see?” I demand, my skepticism about this game having been completely eviscerated by the arrival of the ‘nonhuman.’

“She’s practiced.”

Andrea brushes her fingertips over the buttons. She depresses the one for the first floor. I’m shocked when, instead of the compartment descending to the lobby, it climbs. On top of that, the odd girl begins to speak. Steve and I can’t hear what she’s saying, but we can tell by the way her face contorts into a sinister network of sharp angles and dark crevices that it can’t be good. The girl orients her body toward Andrea, who presses her palms against her ears.

My grip on the iPad tightens. “She can’t *touch* her, can she, Steve?”

“She can’t do shit unless Andrea looks at her or talks to her. It’s the rules.”

The girls ascend to the tenth floor. As soon as Andrea feels the subtle vibrations of the lift stopping and its doors whooshing open, she barrels into the carpeted hallway. Steve and I can see that the nonhuman is shouting, “WHERE ARE YOU GOING?” Once the doors close, the video feed no longer shows Andrea in the tenth floor hallway. Static creeps into our ears. Even over the crackling, however, we can still hear our friend’s sharp intake of breath.

“It’s true,” she whispers. “There it is.”

“What is?” I ask.

Steve taps on the tablet brusquely. I read about how the players of this game find themselves in another world—one in which she or he is the sole occupant. In that world, there’s a glowing red cross in the distance, which is what Andrea must be referring to. Over our earpieces, we hear the pneumatic sound of the stairwell door being pushed open.

“What the hell are you doing, Andrea?” Steve barks. “Get back in the elevator!”

We hear our friend’s labored breathing as she begins her unauthorized descent.

Steve leaps out of his chair. “Andrea, *stop!* You’ve seen that the game really does work, and exploring anything beyond that isn’t worth the risk. Get back up to the tenth floor right now.”

The hollow bang of her footfalls on the aluminum stairs tapers off until all we’re left with is loud static.

“Fuck—Andrea! Get your oxygen out! Do you hear me?! Do *not* pass out over there!”

I rake my fingers through my hair. “Should we go get her?”

“We can’t. Only one person’s allowed over there at a time.”

We both press our earpieces deeper into our heads, straining to hear any clues as to Andrea’s whereabouts during the occasional breaks in the white noise. Suddenly, there’s a click followed by leaden silence.

“We’re disconnected,” I say, nausea blooming inside me.

“Christ. She must’ve fainted. That means she’ll be back at her apartment.” Steve scoops up his keys. “Let’s go.”

“Well... only one of us can go. If management finds out that we both—”

“Yeah, yeah. You’re right. I’ll call you when I get there.”

When I turn back to the monitors to watch Steve make his way to the parking garage, I’m shocked to see a face that’s so close to the elevator camera, it fills the entire screen. It’s that girl, but she has no pupils and no irises. Her eyes are completely black: inky pools of pure malevolence.

“Jesus *Christ!*” I stumble backwards, sending my chair crashing into the wall.

I hold the iPad over the screen until I can get that bank of feeds turned off. When I lower the tablet from the blank screen, my attention returns to something that I’d noticed when I’d first glanced at the rules: There’s a lot more written in the Korean column than in the English one. I had initially attributed this to the possibility that it could take more characters to convey the same rules in Korean, but now I can see that the disparity is just too great. There *must* be more information on the Korean side. I press my finger to the screen, then hit ‘select all’ and ‘copy.’ I paste the instructions into a translation app. I scroll through the paragraphs, now in English, until I get to an unfamiliar section. It states that if a person can journey all the way to the red cross without fainting, they’ll be transported out of that barren, urban landscape to yet another dimension. This dimension is a mirror to our world, yet the things a person desires are manifested with ease. People get thin without dieting, get rich without trying, and they even ‘imbibe’ without getting hungover. It doesn’t say whether a person can travel from that idyllic realm back to this one.

Twenty minutes later, Steve calls. “There’s a note here, man. From Andrea. Sh-she did this on *purpose!* She didn’t take that freakin’ oxygen to make sure she’d get back to the elevator safely. She took it so she could make the trek all the way to that damn cross, man.”

I feign surprise. “What? Why the fuck would she—”

“Because she’s an idiot, man. She thinks there’s some other world—some *better* world—for her to start a new life in. Well, what about *me*, man?”

“I’m so sorry, Steve... I know you were gonna tell her one day... how you feel about her.”

“Now I never can!” he sobs. “She’s gone for good.”

Later that night, I dream that I’m in the other dimension. Not Andrea’s destination, but the realm that’s bathed in the hateful red glow of that god-forsaken cross. I can barely breathe. I can hardly think. When I finally find my way back to the building I work in, the lobby somehow continues to elongate so that I can’t reach the security station by walking at a normal pace. I break out into a jog and manage to clamp my hand onto the doorknob. As soon as I throw myself

into the small office, I wake up, sheets drenched, heart hammering. The next night, I could swear that it takes me ten minutes longer to traverse the lobby and pitch myself into the office. The night after that, it takes me 45 minutes. The next time I fall asleep, I alternate between sprinting and speed walking for a full hour before I finally reach the security station. The fifth night, I simply can't bear the thought of that desperate clambering. I drink coffee and energy drinks, which make my stomach sour and my eyes twitchy, but at least they keep me awake. On the sixth day, I fall asleep during my shift and it takes me over an hour to cross the lobby and wake up.

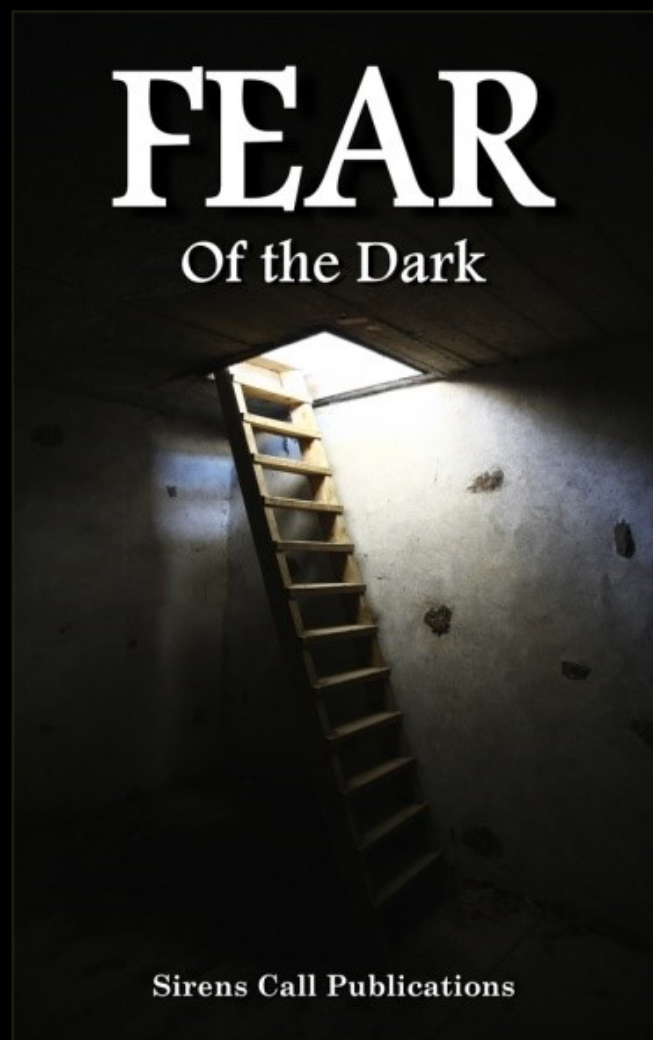
Every day I live in abject terror that eventually the lobby will expand with such staggering speed that I'll won't be able to get into the security booth, and by consequence, I won't wake up. I'll be stuck in that crimson, desolate realm. Running. Forever.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — S. Kearing is a coffee-obsessed night owl who writes flash fiction, short stories, and novels. Her short fiction has been picked up by *Ellipsis Zine* and *Horror Tree*. She loves writing on rainy days, reading books that smell fantastic, and Netflixing with her fur babies in her lap.

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## Watching | *Joe Giatras*

One night, a monster came to my bedroom window. I was young then, but the years in between have never cast a deep enough shadow to hide the memory within my mind. It perched upon my windowsill, bathing in the silvery moonlight. It parted its lips to reveal a mouthful of broken jagged teeth as if it had snacked on shards of glass. Its eyes were the color of earwax—I stared into them like a deer stuck in the glow of the headlights. I waited for my window to shatter, and then I was going to make a break for the door. I imagined hearing its bony claws thumping against the carpet as it chased after me. I would grab the doorknob and get it open a crack before slender nails would wrap around my throat. The creature would snatch me back into the room and rip my intestines out like a magician pulling scarfs from his sleeve. I sat in a cool sweat as I waited for all that to happen—it never did though. I watched the creature until dawn, and then it vanished before the first ray of sunlight brought color to the night sky.

I couldn't move until light scared away all the shadows in my room. Then I slapped myself to make sure I was awake. The sting in my cheeks crawled through my entire body, shocking my muscles enough to help me sit up. I told myself it was a nightmare. As real as it seemed, it was just a vivid dream, the kind that forces you to walk around and touch everything upon waking, proving to yourself that you're in the real world again. I swung my legs over the bed and let my feet hit the floor. I rubbed the soles of my feet along the carpeting, feeling the heat between my toes. The warm touch told me it was real. I was awake and alive. Just a nightmare, that was all. I wondered why the hell I was so tired though.

I got up and went to the bathroom. My feet cooled as I stepped onto the linoleum and flicked the switch on the wall. Light exploded. I pressed my fingers against my eyes to massage the throb away. I could feel the tiny spiderweb veins crisscrossed over the whites of my eyes, pulsating as if they had their own heartbeats. Blindly, I reached for the sink and turned on the tap. I cupped my hands and felt for the cool water. I collected it and splashed it across my face, feeling the tension slipping away with each new rinse. When the pain started to subside, I gripped the edge of the sink to steady myself, and looked into the mirror above. Even with my blurred vision, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. The reflection was a sickly yellow-like jaundice. As the image sharpened, I saw indents where my cheeks were once rounded, and bruised bags that made my eyes seem to droop as if I'd just had a stroke. It didn't look like one night of sleep was all I lost. I looked like a patient who didn't respond well to the chemo. I leaned closer to my reflection as my sight adjusted to the light and returned to normal. I felt my whole body start to collapse as I noticed the whites of my eyes. Between the red veins like stitching on a baseball, was something barely visible, like the old scar of a removed tattoo. In my eyes, I saw the imprint of a smile, a toothy ravenous grin. I lurched over and vomited into the sink.

When my mother found me in the bathroom, I told her to look at my eyes. She didn't see anything but tiredness, and possibly the flu she said. She told me to sleep it off. I went back to bed, wanting to believe her. I coated my restless mind with optimism. It was only one night of

my life. I told myself I would forget all about it in no time. I slept all day, and when night came my mother gave me a pill she often took to cure sleepless nights. For a while, the medicine helped. Until, I heard tapping on my window.

Tink-tink-tink.

I lifted my head from the pillow. The creature's shadow waved at me from the wall opposite my window. I watched its willowy fingers dance along my wallpaper—a smoky silhouette in a shadowy frame. My skin started to prickle. I felt my pulse punch my neck as I rolled over and faced the window. Our eyes locked, and it grinned. It pressed its witch's nose against the pane like a child staring through the exhibit glass at the zoo. Steam from its breath swelled on the window, heavy and rapid like a dog in heat. It salivated, sickly green fluid falling over its lips—and I knew it couldn't wait for the taste of my salty flesh on its tongue.

My whole body jumped at once, and I slipped off the edge of my bed. Pain exploded in my shoulder as I came down on it. I grabbed the needling flare and rolled onto my back in time to see the creature throw its head back to laugh. It cackled like a villain in a silent movie, the laughter muted by a barrier of glass. I kicked my heels against the carpet and shuffled backwards underneath the sanctuary of my bed.

I shivered, waiting within the unsettling calm with only the sound of my quivering knees knocking against the floor. I prayed for that thing to go away. I begged God to intervene—to come down and swat the devil away Himself. The sound came back though.

Tink-tink-tink.

Every tap sent a current of electricity through my heart. I grabbed a clump of my hair and pulled, screaming senselessly as I imagined that thing enjoying every second of the torture. I knew it was laughing, content with patiently playing the game it loved so much. Eventually, it knew it would have me. All it had to do was wait and watch like a vulture biding its time as it circles a wounded calf.

My parents found me in the morning, using my head to beat a shallow indent into the wall beneath my headboard. That was how I ended up in the hospital. My father carried me in, a shriveled and broken boy who looked as though he had been locked in a cage for weeks without a scrap of food. I couldn't tell them what was wrong though. Even as the doctors and the psychiatrists poked and prodded me, I couldn't hear a word they said. The click of the beast's nails upon my window followed me everywhere I went, as though the night never ended.

It was decided that a mental rehabilitation center was best for me. My first day there, I let myself be fooled into thinking I was free. Everyone told me it would get better. The nightmares were over, just as long as I never went back to that bedroom. I truly believed them too. It was the bedroom that was haunted, not me. Of course I was wrong though. When the moon took the place of the sun, all hope drowned in the darkness. The creature followed me.

No matter how loud I screamed or how many times I begged them, none of the nurses or doctors would look at the thing in the window. Even as that thing sat there, chuckling as it had the time of its life, the nurses and doctors only cared about strapping me down or shoving some pill down my throat. I asked them to board the window up then, if they didn't want to look.

Throw a sheet over it or fill it in with bricks. It didn't matter how they did it, just as long as I didn't have to stare at that maniacal grin anymore. They told me they couldn't do that. Covering the window would only set me back, indulge the delusion. They thought sedating me constantly was better. What they didn't understand was that it didn't matter if the drugs worked or not. That thing still came either way. I could feel it watching me even as I slept. It waltzed into my dreams like a debt collector and repossessed every fragment of sanity it could carry. After six months at the center, I realized I was alone in my war—the cornered soldier in a standoff with the enemy, and the cavalry wasn't coming. I decided that if I was going to die, I needed to die fighting.

On the night I made my stand, I kept my eyes shut until the nurse cut the lights in my room. When her footsteps were far enough away in the hall, I swung my legs over the bed and spit the pill I hid under my tongue onto the floor. I went to the window. I looked out onto the usually ornate courtyard, covered in darkness like a blanket over fine china. The whole outside world seemed still, as if it knew what was coming and waited with boiling anticipation.

I saw myself in the reflective pane for a moment. The skin around my face was taunt and ghoulishly translucent. My hair had thinned, leaving patches of powder white scalp. I stared at a ghost who had been dragged through hell and spit back up again. The more I looked at myself, the more I hated that creature for what it did to me. I wanted it to come then—so I could kill it.

Tink-tink-tink.

Suddenly, I wasn't looking at my broken body in the window anymore. We were face to face. The yellow in its eyes swirled like molten lava as it smiled with blissful insanity. Muck, the green of infection, dripped from its fang, flinging onto the glass as it started to chuckle. It pressed one wiry claw against the window, leaning in to laugh in my face. I put my own hand there to match it and something zinged beneath my palm. Two energies scuffled between us—merging into one enlightening power that made me feel all the pain the demon ever put me through all at once. I felt my youth fleeing. I felt the fog it cast over my mind. I envisioned the life that could have been—a chance at a normal life. Normal was impossible. Now, my life was suffering and I refused to suffer alone.

I sent my fist through the window. My hand dug into the thick of the creature's eye, and when I pulled back to strike again, all that was left at the top of my forearm was bone. I brought the freshly cauterized wound before my eyes and stared at it—examining the clean cut just above my wrist, my hand missing. For a moment I could still feel it, as if the disappearance were only an illusion. The daze passed though as soon as the creature started cackling again. I looked up to see the monster's shoulders hopping up and down as it wailed with enjoyment. The sound grew to insane volume, moving like needles through my ear canal. I screamed back, “why are you doing this?”

The monster's laughter died as if it had never existed, leaving behind only a phantom ringing in my head. The creature cocked its head as its brow came together. It stared at me as if my voice had startled it—a foreign sound it struggled to identify. The black lids around its yellow eyes narrowed like an eclipse over the sun as it started to shake its head slowly. Its lips



curled again as it answered my question as calmly and as obviously as a man who is asked why he breathes. “Because I can,” it whispered in a voice that slithered.

I uttered a cry of lunatic rage. I lunged out the window and wrapped my arms around its beastly torso as we made the plunge toward the earth below. Every second of the drop felt like hours of sweet vengeance. I watched the color in the monster’s eyes fade, the fiery yellow dulling to a decaying brown. It was my turn to smile then, I gave the monster the biggest shit-eating grin I could. I even started to laugh, howling like a maniac as I nose-dived toward death. I felt the monster’s fear all around me and it spread through me like a high that sets the mind free. I heard the sound of children cheering me on in my mind, the sounds of the others who suffered sleepless nights—the many victims that abomination drove mad with its stare. I could see their small faces, watching me with empty eyes as I bested their tormentor as its own game. They begged me to kill it—and I would not deny them their last request.

I pumped my forearm in the air, forgetting my fist wasn’t there, and yelled into the sky—a battle cry for all the victims that monster took in the night. I looked into its eyes one last time before we hit the ground, taking climatic pleasure in the fear I saw in it during its final moments. I watched its head crack like an egg as we hit the pavement of courtyard.

When two nurses found me, I was covered in a putrid black substance that smelled too foul to bear. Both of them ran from me like the plague. More of them returned a few minutes later, protected by surgical masks. They found me grinning from ear to ear as I tried to move my broken arms back and forth to make a snow angel in the pus I laid in. I was never happier in my entire life.

They labeled it a suicide attempt. As to where I put my hand after I chopped it off, they left it a mystery. I let them have their story. I could have told them the truth, but who would listen? I kept the victory to myself. It wasn’t for them anyway. It was for me, the sleepless, and the ones who would now sleep soundly because nothing would ever be in their bedroom windows. On the ride to the hospital after my fall, I shut my eyes as I teetered back and forth with the stretcher I laid on. I let sleep consume me with the comforting knowledge that I would never hear the sound of those nails against my window again.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** — Joe Giatras is the author of *The Ghost Writer*, published in the anthology *Between the Cracks*, as well as *Friends Even After the End* and *What I Have Done* from issues 33 and 38 of the *The Sirens Call*. He lives in the suburbs of Chicago, Illinois with his wife and two cats.

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## An Interview with Alex Woolf, Author of *The RIP*

Phrenic Press, the short story imprint of Sirens Call Publications, recently released Alex Woolf's novella *The RIP* so we sat down with him to pick his brains about it and his writing.

In case you're not familiar with him, Alex Woolf is the author of over 20 commercially published novels and chapter books aimed at young and YA readers. They include *Soul Shadows*, a horror novel about cannabilistic shadows, shortlisted for the 2014 Red Book Award, and *Aldo Moon and the Ghost of Gravewood Hall*, a Victorian supernatural thriller that was one of *Lovereading4kids'* books of the year in 2013. He's also had numerous adult stories published by Sirens Call Publications, Strange Circle and Vagabondage Press.

**Sirens Call Publications: Welcome Alex! Tell us, what made you decide to become a writer?**

**Alex Woolf:** There was never a decision. I was a storyteller from a very early age. The toy soldiers in my attic room peopled my first tales. Doodles in a notebook became fictional worlds. Authors like John Wyndham were my inspiration. I continued to write for pleasure as an adult, but for a long time lacked the confidence to try and make it my profession. Circumstances conspired to bring this about, firstly through my work as an editor and the contacts I made through publishing, then redundancy and freelancing, and finally, about ten years ago, an offer to publish my first novel, *Chronosphere*.



**SCP: What is *The RIP* about?**

**Alex:** It began with a question: what if a rip opened up in the air? I explored this further: what would it look like? What would it *be* exactly? A portal to another world? An eye into our own? These questions, and the answers they prompted, enabled me to sketch out a story. The story is very simple in inception, but intriguingly complex in the way it plays out across time and space. If you like a love story, but one that also raises interesting philosophical questions about the nature of reality and destiny, then you should enjoy this one.

**SCP: What is the one thing you'd like readers to know about *The RIP* before they read it?**

**Alex:** Keep an open mind. Don't go in with any expectations about where the story might lead. Just enjoy the ride. That's all really.

**SCP: What is your writing process? Do you consider yourself to be a planner or a pantsier?**

**Alex:** Not sure what a pantsier is, but I don't think I'm one of those. I'm definitely a planner. I enjoy plotting so much it's almost more fun than writing. Because of this story's complex interwoven timelines, I had to create an Excel spreadsheet just to get it all straight in my head. *That* was tremendous fun.

**SCP: If you could cast your favourite story in the collection, who would you choose to play your main characters?**

**Alex:** In *The RIP*, Chris would have to be played by an everyman sort, like Martin Freeman. Or,

if this was being made 50 years ago, James Stewart. Sian would have to be a quirky intellectual superheroine who looks cool in specs. It would have to be Tatiana Maslany, the amazing actress from *Orphan Black*.

**SCP: What is the hardest challenge that you have faced as a writer?**

**Alex:** Staying focused and disciplined. I used to be able to knock out 3000-4000 decent words a day no problem. These days I'm lucky if I can write 2000.

**SCP: In your opinion, what sets *The RIP* apart from other books of the same genre?**

**Alex:** I think it stands apart from other stories for the very reason that it doesn't fit neatly into any genre. It has a quirky, surreal quality all of its own. And it's carefully structured, rather like a Russian doll, with mysteries inside mysteries that gradually reveal themselves as you read.

**SCP: Are you reading anything right now, or have you read anything recently that is worth mentioning?**

**Alex:** I've just finished reading Stephen King's short story collection, *Bazaar of Bad Dreams*—a rich, imaginative assortment of tales, some straight-up horror, others decidedly not, though there's almost always a disturbing element. I like the short introductions before each story explaining his inspiration or something about the history of its creation.

**SCP: Who are some of your favorite authors? Favorite novels?**

**Alex:** *The Unconsoled* by Kazuo Ishiguro; *Nine Stories* by J D Salinger; *The Kraken Wakes* by John Wyndham; *Carrie* and *The Stand* by Stephen King; *Deadeye Dick* by Kurt Vonnegut; *Success* by Martin Amis; *Don't Look Now* by Daphne du Maurier. Those are just a few I can think of.

**SCP: How do you define success as a writer? Have you been successful?**

**Alex:** I try not to think about it in those terms. I enjoy writing and am grateful I can make a living from it. If a bigger kind of success comes my way, I'd be happy, obviously. But that's not what motivates me.

**SCP: Do you have words of wisdom about writing that you want to pass on to novelists and writers out there who are just starting out?**

**Alex:** Read as much as you can. Write something every day—even if it's just a paragraph. Read every sentence you write twice: first as yourself, and second as your intended reader.

**SCP: What should readers walk away from your book knowing? How should they feel?**

**Alex:** I would never deign to tell any reader what they should know or feel after reading any story of mine. I hope they'll feel uplifted. It may leave them intrigued and thoughtful. It might even prompt them to ask questions about their own lives and whether they may have come untracked at some point, perhaps while in a supermarket aisle staring at some soup cans. If so, go see Sid. He'll sort you out... I'll say no more. Enjoy the story.

**Thank you Alex for taking the time to answer our questions! *The RIP* is available exclusively on Amazon for purchase or borrow:**

[US](#) | [UK](#) | [Canada](#) | [Australia](#) | [Germany](#) | [Italy](#) | [Spain](#) | [France](#) | [Japan](#) | [Brazil](#) | [Mexico](#) | [India](#) | [The Netherlands](#)



Imagine the air as a piece of paper someone just grabs and rips...  
Something has been opened that maybe shouldn't have been...  
It has the appearance of damage...



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## An Excerpt from *The RIP* by Alex Wolff

### CHAPTER 1

Chris: 26.11.14

The first time I saw the rip, I was coming home from a meeting with my publisher in town. It was raining hard and I was in a rush, just like everyone else, only thinking about being home and dry again. My umbrella was my weapon against the world, defining my personal space among the surging tide of strangers. Collar up, eyes down, my expression cold, saying *don't look at me, don't talk to me, just keep out of my way*. I'm surprised I saw the rip as I wasn't looking anywhere but straight in front, and I was in no mood for *seeing* anything. Nothing ordinary could have stopped me that night.

There were hundreds of us sharing the pavement. Hundreds like me, heading back to our cozy homes, our televisions and microwaves. Why did no one else see it but me? Maybe they did and just didn't react. That shouldn't surprise me. There is a theory that inexplicable things appear in front of us all the time, but we just don't see them, and when we do, we ignore them, because it's easier.

There's a sad little triangle of grass near the bus-stop, opposite the old travel agent, the one covered in graffiti and adverts for *sensual Thai massage*. This little strip of street lawn had been crushed by the heels of the bus crowd, seeded with their cigarette butts and defecated on by every passing pigeon, but clumps of it remain, tough and wiry as a bag lady's beard.

That's where I saw the rip, hovering about three feet above that little turf isosceles like it belonged there. No, not hovering. That implies effort, and the rip wasn't making any effort. It was just there in the way a mug is just there on your desk. It was offering no explanation. Accept me, it seemed to be saying, or bugger off.

Rain like we had that night makes everything misty and indistinct. Yet, perversely, it shows certain things with startling clarity, like a patch of *no* rain, for example—like a little patch of dry. Nothing exposed to those teeming black clouds should have been dry that night. Nothing should have been less wet than me, for example. And that was the first thing I noticed about the rip—its dryness. The second thing was its shape, which was exactly like... well, like a rip. Imagine the air as a piece of paper and someone's just grabbed it and ripped a hole in it, a square hole about two foot to a side. That's what it looked like. It was rough at the edges, the way paper rips are, and there was even a little scrolled-up bit at the bottom, as if the ripped portion of air had furled itself up. And inside the rip? Nothing. Just blackness. Dry blackness.

I saw all this in a flash, in less than half a second, as I was passing. *A little patch of dry in all this wet*, I thought absently. I was fully five yards past it by the time my brain processed its weirdness. I stopped in my tracks. *Did I just see that?*

When you stop suddenly in the middle of major foot traffic while the rain is pelting down, the world doesn't stop with you. It doesn't politely step to one side and continue on its way. It barges into your back and swears at you. It tries to swat you aside. Grimacing with pain and

apologies, battered by briefcases and pierced by the pronged edges of umbrellas, I forced my way back through the hawk-faced hordes to check if what I'd seen was real.

There it still was, still reveling in its own impossible actuality. *It's a rip*, I said to myself after a moment of staring. The word immediately seemed right. Not *tear* or *gash* or *cut* or *split*, but *rip*. It had the right kind of sound, the right kind of violence. Something had been forced here. Something had been opened that maybe shouldn't have been. It had the appearance of damage.

I looked around at all the hardfaces charging past this marvel, this strange piece of vandalism. *Why couldn't they see it? What was wrong with them?* I went closer, pushed my hand toward the opening. The blackness was hollow. It had no surface, yet it appeared dense as coal, capable of swallowing me up and crushing me to atoms. It was implacable and also somehow alive, patiently waiting for my touch. Just inches from its surface, my nerve failed. I withdrew my hand. I brushed the air alongside it, tracing out the rough border of the square. People muscled past me. I was an obstacle to them, as irritating as any beggar or street evangelist. My eyes were probably a little mad by now.

I circled it, eager to see how it looked from the other side. There was no rip there though. There was nothing. It was a one-sided rip. I walked through the bit of nothing where the rip should have been, then turned around, and there it still was. Anyone who'd been watching would have seen me coming right through it. But no one was watching.

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When I got home, I was in quite a state. Sian was there, feet curled beneath her as she sat on the sofa, watching a film on her laptop. The flat was warm, verging on stuffy, just as she liked it. She was in shorts and a loose top, dressed for August.

"You'll never guess what I saw," I said.

She looked up, startled, like a mad scientist caught in the midst of a dangerous experiment. She peered up at me from the shadow of her dark mess of a fringe—eyes blinking yet bright with dystopian possibilities. The laboratory-blue glow of the laptop screen reflected in her glasses. Sian had been teleported straight from the pages of a graphic novel written for adolescent boys. Intelligent-bordering-on-geeky, with unrealistically perfect cheekbones and breasts. I stood looking at her for a fraction longer than a lodger should look at his landlady. I tended to do that. It didn't matter though. She never noticed.

She was bleary after too much screen, not quite with me yet.

"What's that?"

"I saw a rip. In the air. Outside the tube station."

"Huh." Her mind was swimming back from wherever it had been, starting to hear me. "What do you mean a rip?"

By now I was walking to the kitchen, fetching myself a beer. "I mean like someone had just ripped a chunk out of the air," I shouted, "like the air was made of paper or something."

“That sounds cool!” she shouted back.

By the time I’d returned to the front room, she’d closed her laptop and was eager for more, like a puppy. “What was it, Chris?”

The beer tasted good. Having all of Sian’s attention felt even better.

“I don’t know.”

“Well what did other people think? Someone must have had a theory.”

“I was the only one who saw it.”

“But you said it was outside the tube station.”

“Yeah, and it was raining really hard, and no one paid it any notice except me.”

I was starting to feel stupid. But Sian’s excitement was in no way diminished.

She stood up. “Let’s go see it now,” she said.

I put down my beer. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“You’ll need to put something warmer on.”

“I’ll take my camera,” she said. “You took pictures, did you?”

“No,” I said, feeling more stupid.

“It’s okay,” she said. “I’ll take my Canon Legria. We need to get moving images. This could be big, Chris. This could be the biggest frigging thing in the world.”

Then she blinked. “Oh, shit. Toby’ll be back any minute.”

On cue, we both heard the key in the lock. Toby came in, big and dripping, not caring about the mess his raincoat made on the carpet.

“Fucking rain,” he said, shrugging himself out of his wet things. He smacked his lips against Sian’s, grabbed her bum and pushed himself against her. I looked away. There was a freebie newspaper on the coffee table. I read the headline a few times without taking it in.

“Missed you, babe,” I heard Toby mutter. Then he noticed me. “Hey, Chris. Had a good day writing? How’s the novel?”

“Chris saw a rip,” said Sian, gently extracting herself from Toby’s embrace. “A rip in the air. Fancy that?” The front of her top was damp from being pressed against him. I could make out the shape of her breasts. “We were just thinking about going and checking it out, weren’t we Chris?” she said. “Do you think that’s a good idea, darling?”

He looked at both of us, a frown inscribing itself on his big handsome face. “I have no idea what the fuck you’re on about,” he said. Then he threw himself onto the sofa, chucked his legs up on the coffee table and made a grab for the freebie. “God, I’m knackered. What a day!” He started flicking through the pages. “Shall we order in tonight, babe, what do you fancy?”

Sian shot me a small smile. “I’m okay,” she said. “I ate something earlier. You go ahead and order whatever you like.” She started out of the room, but he seized her wrist.

“Where are you going?”

“To see this... this thing that Chris saw,” she said, looking at me again. “You’ll show me where you saw it, right?”

I started to say “sure, course I can,” but then Toby pulled her down next to him and started kissing her and groping her breasts. “I’ve just got in, babe?” he mumbled into her hair. “How about a little bit of Tobe-and-Sian time, hmm?”

Her noises of protest soon turned to giggles. By the time I left the room, he had his tongue in her ear.

I returned to the kitchen and took ham, margarine, sliced bread, and a tomato out of the fridge. I began slicing the tomato as neatly as I could, using a sharp knife. Even so, some little seeds escaped and juice pooled on the chopping board. I could hear gentle laughter from the front room.

I ate the sandwich staring at the rain splattering against the window. *Had I seen it? Was it real? It was dark. Streetlights and headlights reflecting in puddles. Everything so misty and wet. Maybe it was nothing.*

I washed up my plate, the two knives I’d used, and wiped my hands on a tea towel. Sian had put some clothes out to dry on a rack in the middle of the kitchen. One of Toby’s big work shirts hung there like an eagle swooping on its prey. I switched off the light and went upstairs to bed.

The rain declined to a drizzle, a dull rustle against my bedroom window, rising and falling with the wind. From the room next door I could hear moans and bed-creaks, gasps and grunts. Love, through a wall, can sound a lot like torture. I turned and faced the wall, pressing my pillow down firmly over my head...

### **Here's a little more information about *The RIP*:**

*Imagine the air as a piece of paper someone just grabs and rips...  
Something has been opened that maybe shouldn't have been...  
It has the appearance of damage...*

Chris is in love with Sian.

Sian is dating Toby, and although she’s not sure she loves him, they’re going to have a baby together.

Are Chris and Sian destined by fate to live this unfortunate and separate reality, or did they take a wrong turn somewhere along the way? Perhaps the rip might provide a clue... But whatever it is, its sudden appearance shakes up the lives of Chris and Sian, and nothing will ever be the same again.

In this unsettling tale of romance, voyeurism, and alternative reality, is the rip a portal to another world, or an eye into our own?



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