



Indian Gothic

AUTUMN EDITION 2026

VOL 1 ISSUE 3

SPECIAL **HALLOWEEN** INTERVIEW !

GOTHIC & GORE

with Arunima Tenzin Tara

LOST IN THE WILD

Lian Dousel

A SOIRÉE WITH A VAMPIRE

Simon Collinson

MOLLY WHARTON'S ASTONISHING GIFT

Glynn Owen Barrass

THE DOOR BENEATH THE SOUND

Oliver Quinto

THE HUSBAND

Nileena Sunil

**AT LEAST EVERYTHING'S ALWAYS EXPLAINED
IN THE MOVIES**

Steven Whitaker

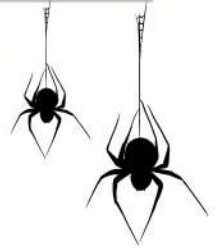
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**"IF YOU WON'T LEAVE ME, DON'T LEAVE
ME ALONE. NOT EVEN IF YOU DIE.
FOLLOW ME AS A GHOST, HAUNT ME."**

**— MARIANA ENRIQUEZ
(OUR SHARE OF NIGHT)**

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PUBLICATION

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AUTUMN EDITION

VOL 1 ISSUE 3

DATE

OCTOBER 2026



HAPPY HALLOWEEN FROM THE INDIAN GOTHIC TRIBE!



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ARPITA BHAWAL



ANAGHA MEHTA



SUSANNA MYRTLE



RITIKA BALI



AMBICA MILIND

Happy Halloween,
dear readers!
Tonight, after the
house goes quiet, listen
for the breathing that
isn't yours. It's not
anyone from Indian
Gothic, I promise! But
if it were, we would
already be inside...
close enough to watch
you reading this.



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BETWEEN WORLDS



BY ARPITA BHAWAL
FOUNDER & CHIEF EDITOR

The air is crisp. Breath fogs like floating cotton wool in front of your face. The streets glow with Jack-o'-lanterns. Was that the last fall leaf that just drifted to your feet? This is the autumn of Western culture that we have been sold. But this season of spooks and chills is much more than mere symbolism, though we need that too. What is your culture's version of Halloween? Is it really that different from the others? At least that's what you may think.

Long before the grinning pumpkin became a fixture on front lawns, long before Halloween masquerade balls became a thing, there was the dark and the dead (whom we feared we were forgetting). This Halloween, let's strip away the plastic skeletons, dissolve the sugar candies, and visit traditions older than the carved pumpkin during this magical time of the year when the veil between the worlds is said to be thin.

Many cultures set a place for their departed at the turn of the year. The Celts called it Samhain, and the Church dubbed it All Hallows' Eve and All Souls' Day. In Mexico, Día de Muertos celebrates the dead with marigolds, ofrendas and sugar skulls, suffused with warmth and colour, in sharp contrast to the Western dread. Cambodia spends fifteen days honouring the dead during Pchum Ben, and Koreans on Chuseok gather during the harvest to venerate ancestors and tend graves.

Across the world, autumn has always been about remembrance, an acknowledgement that our ghosts are closer to home than we think. Between harvest and winter, a time of abundance and endings, people prepare feasts and light up their homes to help the dead find their way back to loved ones. Even those who have passed without any family or friends to remember them are acknowledged because this period of time is believed to be a crossing point for souls in agony, who are lost and confounded, and stuck between worlds.

In the western world, particularly in the Americas, Halloween becomes a party; it gets the playlist, the costume, and Instagram reels, while in the eastern part of the globe, *shraddha*, reverence to the departed, is serious business — usually left in the care of elders.

India has kept its own traditions of the dead alive for centuries with rituals and ceremonies performed to pay homage to the deceased during Pitru Paksha and Mahalaya. In Bengal, on Bhoot Chaturdashi, people light fourteen lamps to ward off spirits and honour ancestors. That, in fact, is the closest Indian cousin to Halloween.



The bigger question is: Do these rituals and celebrations reduce our fear of death and the afterlife? Do we truly believe that our ancestors rest in peace? Hardly. Not everyone can forget the ancestor who was denied his last rites and is, therefore, said to be damned to roam the earth for eternity. Or the next-door neighbour who jumped to his death over a lost love, though his footsteps are still heard on the terrace. Or the child plagued by sickness because a ritual was left unfinished.

On Halloween, between the trick-or-treats of the Western world and the homage to the dead of the Eastern world, let's take a moment to also reflect on what other contemporary horrors await humanity. As we advance rapidly into an age that's beginning to resemble science fiction, there could be worse horrors than witches, zombies, and Dracula awaiting us.

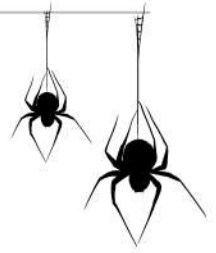
Our stories in this special Halloween issue are from all over the world. We are delighted to feature Arunima Tenzin Tara, author of *The Ex-Daughters of Tolstoy House*, a powerful Gothic novel that discusses the dark intersections of domesticity, violence and inherited trauma. Alongside stories from prolific international authors, we are also delighted to publish a story by Lian Dousel, author of *Peace in the Land of the Dead*.

So by all means, carve the pumpkin. Hang the skeleton. Feed the crows. Take out the procession. Tend the graves. Perform the rituals. Or plant the scarecrow in the field.

And don't forget to light a lamp by the window for the dead who may have lost their way. Masked or not, remember, it is harvest season.

Happy Halloween.

Arpita Bhawal





GOTHIC & GORE

WITH ARUNIMA TENZIN TARA

In an exclusive interview with Arpita Bhawal, Founder & Chief Editor of Indian Gothic, Arunima Tenzin Tara discusses the dark intersections of domesticity, violence and inherited trauma in *The Ex-Daughters of Tolstoy House*.

Reflecting on morally ambiguous characters, imperfect female solidarity and a house that becomes both sanctuary and prison, the writer examines the uneasy choices women make to survive within oppressive systems, female complicity for survival, how patriarchal systems shape women's lives, and why escaping the past may be far more difficult than leaving a house behind.

Qs.1. The Gothic often makes the familiar strange rather than introducing something wholly unfamiliar. In *Tolstoy House*, Sunday lunches, recipes, birdwatching, marriage, motherhood and domestic routines coexist with blood and murder. Did you think of the horror as entering an ordinary domestic world?

Ans. Yes, I wanted to look at horror as a part of our lives. While I love a good jump scare, what I was hoping to do in this book is allow it to creep up on you, to take things that are normally seen as comforting, nice or fun, like food, motherhood, a family lunch, and turn that into something sinister. Take something ordinary and push it and push it to the point where it becomes slightly ridiculous, because I felt it is only there that the reader would understand and feel the horror of *Tolstoy House*.

Qs.2. Blood is perhaps the novel's most powerful recurring image, but it refuses to remain a single metaphor. It is inheritance, menstruation, violence, family, complicity, nourishment and contamination at different moments. When you began writing, did you know what blood would come to mean in the novel?

Ans. Blood was always the myth that run as an undercurrent to this novel. The idea first came to me from menstruation but I didn't want to limit it to just that and so I let the blood take us down sometimes gory paths. As a true crime buff, the logic of cleaning a crime scene was also constantly on my mind, and blood is the hardest thing to clean and truly get rid of, so a solution for this was important. But all this blood came to me because while writing this novel I had surgery for endometriosis. After the surgery I watched, and re-watched the three hour long video of endometriosis excision surgery where they cut off bits of unwanted tissue in the pelvic region. It was a violent, fascinating, bloody watch and it really helped me write this novel.

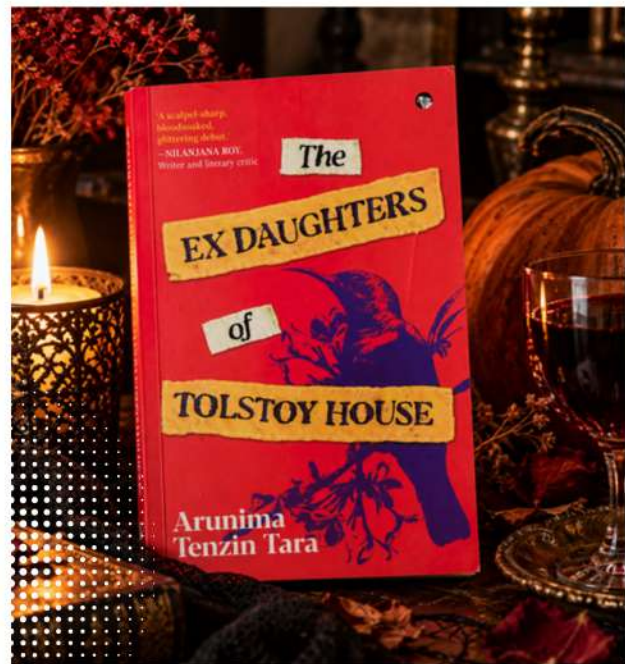
Qs.3. Meera is particularly unsettling because she is neither simply a victim nor simply an accomplice. She understands that something is terribly wrong, yet repeatedly rationalises her compliance as a way of protecting her daughters. What interested you most about the moral territory between being coerced and becoming complicit? And at what point, if any, does survival itself become another form of transmission?

Ans:

There are very few black and white characters in the novel, most of them reside in a grey area not just for the reader but also in the minds of other characters. It is this uncertainty I wanted to explore, particularly with Meera because complicity is something that is often uncomfortable to understand. I don't have a moral stance on Meera's complicity, and I'm not asking the reader to take one either. I want to experience Meera, see the choices she made and wonder if she really had any other way available. Survival is a part of who she is, it is essential for her and that's what makes her complicity all the more complex, because I think we can sometimes empathise with her and then the reader too is complicit.

Qs.4. The novel's title invokes Tolstoy and, inevitably, Anna Karenina and the famous idea that happy families resemble one another while unhappy families are unhappy in their own ways. Yet your novel seems interested in something slightly different: the performance of a 'happy' family, and the violence required to maintain that performance. Why did you choose the Tolstoy reference and what did the Tolstoy reference allow you to do that a more literal title could not?

Ans. I did not immediately think of Leo Tolstoy when naming the novel. The novel is set in a house on Tolstoy Marg, a popular, posh lane of Lutyens Delhi. As a part of Ambarish's character, it was important for me that he had a

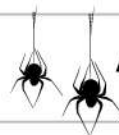


house with an address he was proud of, one that he could flaunt, hence the very respectable Tolstoy Marg. Also, I do believe he needed an address like that to get away with his crimes. A house with high walls, where everyone obeys, where no neighbour can look in or eavesdrop, is essential to get away with murder again and again. I knew I needed them to be a family that was not just wealthy but important.

The connection to Anna Karenina was a happy coincidence I realised while titling the novel.

Qs.5. There is an extraordinary tension between appetite and repression throughout the novel—food, cooking and feasting on one side, and blood, bodies and violence on the other. Food seems to carry memory and intimacy even as it becomes entangled with revulsion. Did your own relationship with food and cooking influence the way you constructed the emotional architecture of the Sehgal family?

Ans. I worked as a chef briefly and also occasionally catered, in addition to cooking most days of the week for myself. Food is very important to me and my life, and so it was



natural for it to take centre stage in my work. I have also learnt a lot of my cooking from my grandmothers and wanted to incorporate their food into the book.

To bring this back to horror, I did this because I felt many readers would relate to the comfort and nostalgia of my grandmothers' recipes and then perhaps find the twists and turns more jarring as a result.

My relationship with food did not change, but while writing I became a lot more aware of the physicality of working in a kitchen: the heat, how I stand, when my shoulder starts to ache etc.

Qs.6. One of the most disturbing things about the novel is that the women do not automatically become allies simply because they are victims of the same patriarchal system. They misunderstand one another, reproduce one another's wounds, and sometimes participate in the mechanisms that harm them. What were you trying to resist by refusing the more familiar idea of female solidarity as an uncomplicated form of resistance?

Ans: There is solidarity between the sisters, between Rini and Meera, between Mei Wan and Meera, particularly between Meera and Lakshmi. There is solidarity between Meera and her daughters too, though it may be hard to see sometimes. But solidarity is not total, and it is rarely at the cost of oneself, and it is this imperfection, this confusion that the book tries to explore.

About the author:

Arunima Tenzin Tara is the author of *The Ex Daughters of Tolstoy House* (Speaking Tiger, 2025), a gothic novel about serial killers, food, blood and women's bodies. This also sums up all of her interests. She is an editor at *The Bombay Literary Magazine* and her second novel is forthcoming in 2027.

When not writing, she is a filmmaker and a cook. She is currently reading her way through crime fiction around the world, from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe, on her Substack: arunima tara. She lives and works in New Delhi.

Qs.7. Gothic fiction often turns the house into a repository of memory—the architecture remembers what its inhabitants try to forget. Tolstoy House seems to work in precisely this way: it is simultaneously home, prison, archive and accomplice. By the end of the novel, do you think the daughters actually escape the house, or does breaking away from a family history require something more difficult than physically leaving it?

Ans. Without giving away the ending, I'd say precisely for the reasons you have mentioned, and because the house holds onto so much, does the book end the way it does. In many ways the daughters do escape, but if we ever get a sequel perhaps we will learn that family histories don't remain confined within walls for too long.





AT LEAST EVERYTHING'S ALWAYS EXPLAINED IN THE MOVIES

BY STEVEN WHITAKER

Lauren's truck devoured the twisting turns of the mountain road. A trip to Colorado was one of the few journeys she looked forward to as much as the break itself: winding roads through vast blankets of trees that disappeared into the depths of the endless mountain range, only to climb high up the other side.

Getting away from that car-crash of a job as a production assistant (read as: dogsbody) would be epic. Overburdened, underpaid, and experiencing endless crappy movies had transformed her starry eyes into black holes. Urgh. A week of freedom was the perfect way to disengage until beginning a job hunt on her return. So disengaged was she that a brief karaoke turn overcame her as *Livin' on a Prayer* burst onto the radio.

Rounding a sweeping downward bend, a different view assaulted her. Two lumps of twisted metal that had locked horns lay immo-

bile at an angle to each other, virtually blocking the road. It was difficult to even tell the make or model of either car from her position. Steam gently escaped the disfigured front of the blue one, and... oh, God. There was a man on all fours in front of the black car, his head bowed. He could have been praying in other circumstances, but she knew he wasn't.

She applied the handbrake to her truck and exited, not knowing what she might find, but she had to try and help.

"Hello. Are you hurt?" Lauren called, jogging over and already dialling 911.

The man was on his knees now. He removed a pistol from his jacket, stopping Lauren abruptly as the distorted emergency operator's voice answered.

She stood, frozen, with phone to her ear, only yards from him. A rabbit caught in the most unexpected of headlights.

Sounds emanating from the man were oddly difficult to label. They could have been angry cries or whimpers. But such details were blown from her mind when the man raised the gun to his head.

"NO!"

It blurted out as a reflex before she could stop herself.

The man turned slowly towards her, partially lowering the gun, as if he'd only just noticed her presence. Their eyes locked. She poured her desperation and confusion into his, receiving only a black void in return.





Mechanically, the man returned his gaze to the mountains. The gun crept up to his head again. And fired.

A scream escaped her and continued despite both hands attempting to cover her mouth to stop the involuntary hysteria. She couldn't tear her eyes away from the scene, and while rain would eventually wash the road clean, nothing would ever remove the sight now stained onto her brain.

The shot had made her drop her phone. Realising, she fell to the road, fumbling at it through teary, frustrated eyes, but it had smashed. Despondent, she turned to look back down the road for what could have been a long time. Willing help to arrive yielded nothing. It

THE BABY SEAT WAS ASKEW AND NOT SECURED IN ANY WAY. THE BABY ITSELF, AT A HIDEOUS, RAG DOLL ANGLE, WAS ALREADY A DEATHLY BLUE-GREY.

was like being at work, only much more traumatic. This terrible situation was all hers to deal with, and the thought of other potential survivors nagged at her.

Staggering towards the wreckage was an ordeal, with the shot still seemingly echoing around the green-covered mountains. The blue car was closest. Cautiously, she peered through the open door, but it was empty.

Making her way over to the other car, her breathing was an erratic mess of gasps and sobs, in contrast to the crisp and peaceful mountain air.

A woman in the driver's seat of the black car was slumped over the steering wheel. The airbag had deployed, so maybe she was just unconscious?

Lauren wrenched open the partially bent door and crawled onto the passenger seat on her hands and knees. Reaching out to the driver's neck, she attempted to locate a pulse. No sooner had she started than her eyes were

drawn to the back seats. The baby seat was askew and not secured in any way. The baby itself, at a hideous, rag doll angle, was already a deathly blue-grey.

Lauren lurched back against the mangled dashboard and vomited. Far worse than watching a stranger commit suicide, it was the most horrific sight she was ever likely to see. Wiping her mouth with her sleeve, she screwed her eyes closed, whimpering as the latest horror absorbed her. She wondered if the man had been the driver of the other car. Had he been unable to live with an accident he'd caused? But the baby's seat wasn't fastened in; maybe it wasn't entirely his fault, even if he had caused the accident? Why was he travelling with a gun in the first place? A hundred questions and alternative scenarios bombarded her, but none of them mattered. Not really. Not with the sickening waste of life spread out before her.

As Lauren sat, numb, trying to make sense of the tragic mess she'd stumbled into, she tried to remember how happy she was only half an hour ago. It was something to focus on, a goal to find her way back to.

The woman in the driver's seat let out a loud, startling gasp, jolting Lauren back into the hell of the present. Despite being an emotional wreck at this point, and even over the sour stench of vomit, Lauren couldn't fail to detect something in the woman's deep, laboured breathing. There was a distinct waft of alcohol.

Regardless, Lauren racked her brain for an appropriate first-aid treatment, but now she was hearing voices in her head, too. How could this situation keep finding ways to get worse? The voices called out to her in greeting, asking whether anyone was hurt. What an odd thing for her brain to do, even under stress. No, wait, there were voices.

Scrambling out of the car and looking back towards her truck, she saw a silver bus. People. There were people heading towards her.

"Thank God," she whispered to herself, before screaming, "HELP!"





About the author:

Steven Whitaker is an English fiction writer whose works range across powerful drama, creepy tales, and humour.

A full list of publications can be found at <https://linktr.ee/StevenWhitaker>





THE HUSBAND

BY NILEENA SUNIL

I was idly looking out of the window when I heard the buzz of a notification on my phone. Ignoring it, I looked at the moonless sky and took in the chirping sounds of crickets. I wondered if this noise would keep me up all night.

I thought of how I should have been in Ernakulam, at the Halloween party with my friends. I only decided to skip it because I was afraid I'd run into my ex-boyfriend Nithin. So, I decided to join my mother, visiting relatives in Alappuzha.

I saw that my friend, Divya, had uploaded a bunch of pictures from the party on Instagram. She was dressed like a yakshi, in a white saree with fake blood on her lips. I resisted the urge to scroll further. I didn't want to see Nithin.

My mother was relieved when I told her about our breakup. Nithin was the perfect man in every way, but my mother didn't want me to get married. It had been twenty years, and she still couldn't get that old woman's voice out of her head.

I was with my parents at a temple festival on that day. I was watching the elephants in their gleaming forehead-plates when I heard her call out to me. She was a short, elderly woman in a white saree. "Girl, do you want me to read your palm?" she asked me.

I looked at my mother, who nodded at me to go ahead. I held out my palm, and the woman took a look. She then recoiled.

"What happened?" I asked.

The woman ignored me and turned to my mother.

"You should never get your daughter married," she said. "If she finds her husband... it would spell her doom."

"What do you mean?" my mother had asked.

"If your daughter ever starts thinking of a man—any man—as her husband, her life would be in peril. Don't ever think about marriage for her. Don't let her ever think about it either."

"What are you saying!" my mother said.

But the woman did not elaborate any further. She walked into the crowd without waiting for my parents to pay her.

"What nonsense," my father, who was ever the rationalist, had said.

He didn't remain a rationalist all his life. Ten years ago, on his deathbed, he told my mother that I shouldn't get married. "That palm-reader's voice keeps echoing in my head," he said. "I was wrong to dismiss her words."

"So your mother doesn't want you to marry? Lucky," Divya had said.

My friend often talked about how she wanted to stay single all her life, how marriage would stifle her independence. At times, I wished I thought like her and didn't have a sentimental desire for a family.



I kept telling myself the palm reader's words were baseless superstition. However, that did not stop me from sabotaging every relationship I had ever been in. That was, if my mother didn't do it first.

When did Halloween become so popular here, I wondered as I scrolled through Instagram. It didn't seem so long ago when we only heard about it in American TV shows and movies. I began thinking about Halloween itself. Didn't it have Celtic origins? Since I had nothing much to do at the moment and wasn't really sleepy, I decided to look it up on the internet.

I learned that Halloween was historically associated with both the pagan Samhain and the Christian All Hallows Day. I also found out that the festival once looked very different from how it does today. In Victorian England, it involved parties with divination games and a focus on romance and matchmaking.

I found out about a ritual often performed by young women in Victorian England during Halloween. They would look into a mirror and wait for a man's face to appear. They believed the face would be that of their future husband.

I found a website that mentioned certain magic words to be recited for the ritual. Curious, I turned to the mirror attached to the steel almirah placed against the wall. I found myself wondering what would happen if I said those words, like all those young women did back in the day.

I felt silly as I spoke the magic words. I was thirty-three years old, and acting like a starry-eyed teenager from more than a century ago. Then, for a moment, that palm reader's voice echoed in my head. If your daughter ever starts thinking of a man—any man—as her husband, her life would be in peril. I dismissed that thought. It was just superstition, though the ritual I was performing was no better.

I then stared at my own reflection. Of course, it was not like I expected anything else.

Then suddenly, I saw a flicker. Then, for a split second, I glimpsed a face. It was the face of a man, handsome, but ageless—he could have

passed for twenty or fifty. He had wavy hair and rather soulful-looking eyes.

So, this is my husband, I thought, before I started laughing at myself. Why was I being so stupid? This had to be a trick of my imagination.

I looked at my phone to check the time. It was way past midnight. I decided to sleep.

The next day, I went for a walk. I walked around the backwaters, looking at the fishing nets and the tourists pouring into boats. I suddenly heard a voice call out for help.

It was coming from the water.

I heard the cry again, and I turned to look. I saw a face and a pair of arms in the lake, clearly struggling. My blood ran cold.

The man had the face I saw in the mirror.

I looked around at the boatmen, fishermen, and the tourists who all went on with their day, paying little attention. How could they just let someone drown like that, I thought, as I jumped into the water.

I FOUND OUT ABOUT A RITUAL OFTEN PERFORMED BY YOUNG WOMEN IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND DURING HALLOWEEN.

I heard several cries of shock as I started swimming.

"What are you doing? Get back in, this is not a place for swimming!" I heard someone shout.

Couldn't they see that man drowning? With single-minded determination, I swam towards him. I was always a strong swimmer, but it had been a while since I had last gone swimming. Still, I needed to do this.

"Don't worry!" I shouted at the man in the mirror. "I'll save you."

I then blinked.

The man, who was right in front of me, seemed to have disappeared.

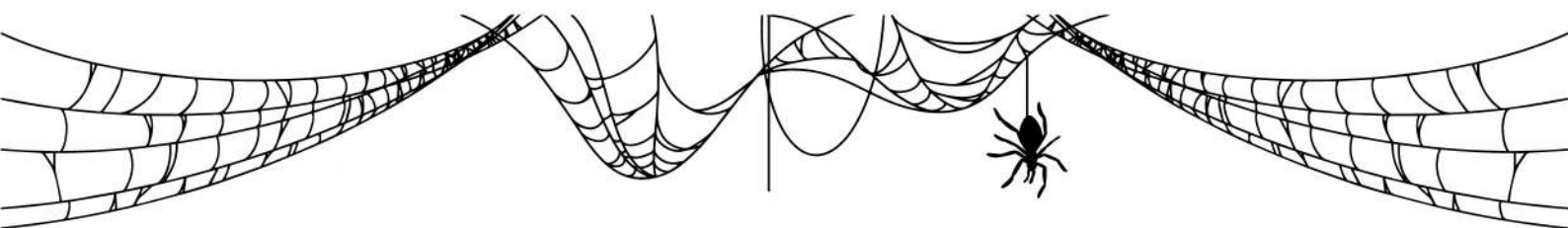
"What the—", I began to say when I felt something tug at my leg. Before I knew it, I was being plunged into the depths of the water.





About the author:

Nileena Sunil is a writer, journalist, and book reviewer. She has previously had her work published in Flash Fiction Magazine, Strange Horizons, Usawa Literary Review, Hooghly Review, 100 Foot Crow, and other places.





LOST IN THE WILD

BY LIAN DOUSEL

Southward along the bank of the Tuivai River, kilometres beyond the spot where her body was found on Christmas morning, the hunting party, joined by her older brother Tualson, came upon an area that indicated a brief encampment, with flattened patches of grass and broken leaves, and, most telling of all, smudgy footprints in the soft earth. No signs of a fire were anywhere nearby, so it couldn't have been hunters or camping woodsmen. They had to be on the right trail.

But what did they really know about demons? It had taken the appearance of a hapless little boy, made friends with the girl, fooled everyone, and could have turned into anything by now.

Nunpui was the youngest in the party, and the only girl. In the few days leading up to their departure, the whole village had caught wind of what was brewing among the young men, and most of them kept silent complicity, neither approving nor disapproving, quietly wanting the deed to be done, while praying for the success of those who would venture out to hunt. Those who did speak only spoke about making sure the hunters were well equipped, that they knew they were going with God, that they didn't forget why they were doing what they were to do, and not to lose faith. Nunpui's mother had heard as well, and the girl knew her mother would never

approve in a hundred lifetimes. She was only thirteen. So, on the night before they were to set out, Nunpui didn't sleep and, before the break of dawn, crept out of bed, slipped into clothes she'd set aside, and snuck out of the house like a ghost.

Even in the sombre silence, the breeze wandering along the village streets since the funeral carried whispers, conjectures about where the demon could be heading. Nobody except Nunpui seemed to think the child they accused of being a demon might just be a child and nothing more. The 'demon' child had been her friend, just as much as Tualson and his sister were, and Nunpui felt she ought to be there if they were to find him. The others in the search party tried to make her go home, but she wouldn't. They would have to drag her home themselves, she told them, and they all knew she wasn't bluffing.

It had been almost five days since they set out. They spent New Year's Eve huddled in the cold wilderness within thick branches and plantain leaves fashioned into a crude tent, cosying up in pairs inside tattered sleeping bags and tarps, not too close to each other, although much closer than on their first night in the wild, all of them shivering to their bones, a smoky fire burning in the mist outside, the sight of which offered more warmth than the fire itself before it burned down to blackness.

The gloomy dawn of 1991 was brightened only by the chirping of birds unseen in the trees;



That too only momentarily. None of them spoke to each other as they rolled up their beddings, leaving their campsite to be erased by the indifferent weather.

Noon. Still no sun.

Sweat-stained evening brought on the cold again.

In the night they shivered within another crude tent, huddled close together like lost animals, no more embarrassment. They'd got used to their stink.

The gloom carried on into the next day, and then on to the next, and the next. And very soon the year wasn't so new anymore, and home felt so far away. Even the death of the girl felt like it was growing into a legend in their memories.

IF THEY WERE WRONG ABOUT THE DEMON, THEY WERE HUNTING FOR A SCARED TWELVE-YEAR-OLD BOY. THE THOUGHT OF THEM CATCHING UP TO HIM...

If anyone else was thinking about going home, they held their tongue.

Nunpui didn't want to appear weak. A part of her was waiting for someone to say something, but they all maintained their gloomy silences, content with the sounds of their own breathing disturbing the peace of the forest, with eyes so hardened they seemed frozen to the core of their brain, turning any rational thought hypothermic. And as the days' pain chipped away at their strength and the nights continued to freeze them up without healing, Nunpui began to wonder if anyone else was mulling things over in the quiet of their minds. Between the seven of them—five of them grown men—they had a .22 hunting rifle and their own daos sharpened every night. If they were wrong about the demon, they were hunting for a scared twelve-year-old boy. The thought of them catching up to him gave Nunpui nightmares and made her miss home even more.

Each morning before they set out, the leader of the party—a thirty-something who'd spent

half his adult life out in the woods hunting, or logging, or guiding, and learning the ways of the forest—would say a prayer for God to guide them. On the morning of 11th January, as their leader finished the prayer, Nunpui, who had another nightmare, couldn't bring herself to say, "Amen."

They had been getting lost in the wild, and then finding themselves again. Sometimes they came upon a nondescript settlement, and good people would feed them, roll out beds for them, give them provisions, and wish them well on their way—on those nights, they were bitten by bedbugs, and the food they were given quickly spoiled. The strange hills, and the grasses, and trees all somehow seemed teasingly familiar in spite of being so far from home. But the sky was never blue. There were never stars or the moon at night. And since that indication of encampment ages ago, they had found nothing else to tell them they were heading the right way. Where was God guiding them, Nunpui wondered. If she prayed to God and asked for things opposite to the others' prayers, whom would He listen to?

Before the last light of day extinguished, they found an abandoned hut in the middle of a sweeping meadow, surrounded on all sides by a looming forest with tall trees.

They hadn't smiled in many days, but the sight of shelter made them beam like the sun was shining through them. All aches and pains forgotten, they jogged towards the hut like kids running home. Their sedentary voices, hoarse from disuse, came to life: they thanked God, found humour in their struggles, and one of them even burst into song about the beauty of the lands they had cursed just hours ago.

Nunpui didn't feel like singing.

Straggling, the last wisps of daylight were disappearing behind the hut, and the convenience of a shelter suddenly appearing did not escape her, but she didn't want to think any further than that.

The hut was empty, except for a dry lantern that still smelt of kerosine, pieces of the brittle





thatch strewn all over the floor, damp firewood—some burned almost all the way down—and a cold hearth in a corner with fine ash that hadn't yet solidified.

No one was making jokes or singing anymore.

There were patterns in the dirt on the floor, like cloths had been brushed over it. That, and the ash, would've been evidence enough of a presence not too long ago, enough to be confident they were on the right track, but, tangled with some of the broken stalks of thatch, were also a few woollen threads, red, like the colour of the sweater the demon had been wearing on the night it fled.

Without wasting time, the leader took five of them and the rifle and led the battalion out of the hut across the meadow, towards the treeline.

Only Nunpui and Tualson remained in the hut. The leader told them they would communicate by whistling if needed.

They stood at the door, looking out at the dim lights of the torches moving farther and farther away, farther and farther apart, flickering behind the thick waves of grass.

And then the lights disappeared.

The two only had one torch between them.

Nunpui panned the light across the meadow.

"Turn it off," Tualson said, and went inside.

Nunpui realised then they had never been alone together for any length of time before this—if they had, she didn't remember it. She couldn't recall any private word they exchanged, much less anything intimate. She'd always been so sure in her knowledge of Tualson as a person, as a friend, but suddenly he felt like a stranger. The icy air drove her inside the hut as well. Even more disillusioning was that Tualson looked like a child. He was seventeen, and not long ago Nunpui thought seventeen was such a grown-up age.

Keeping one eye each on the darkness outside, they got a fire going in the hearth after a few tries. They sat by the fire, listening to the crackle of burning wood merging with the occasional rustle of the thatch in the breeze,

listening for the whistle-tune of their names in the wind outside.

They fed the flames mindfully.

Smoke rising to the roof.

Embers turning black.

Cold drifting in through the open door.

Nobody was returning yet. Nobody was whistling for them...yet.

"What will you do if we find him?" Nunpui finally asked, her whisper loud against the deep silence.

Tualson glanced at her but didn't answer immediately. And then, "My sister's blood won't flow in vain," he said, orange dancing in his still eyes, his voice low and steady as his fingers clenched into a fist.

SHE'D ALWAYS BEEN SO SURE IN HER KNOWLEDGE OF TUALSON AS A PERSON, AS A FRIEND, BUT SUDDENLY HE FELT LIKE A STRANGER. THE ICY AIR DROVE HER INSIDE THE HUT AS WELL.

"What if..." Nunpui said before she could stop herself, her voice shaking a little. She cleared her throat and began again: "What if he didn't do it? I mean, we don't know anything for sure. Right? How do we know he's a demon?"

Tualson kept his eyes on the fire. He didn't say anything and didn't give any indication he intended to. He grabbed a piece of firewood, cleared the ash that was building up, and pushed the wood into the hearth.

Although the silence stretched, Nunpui knew, even if Tualson hadn't said a word in response, he was considering her words, perhaps replaying the last few weeks in his head.

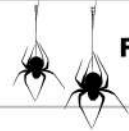
"Guilty people don't run," Tualson said finally, more to himself, like he was trying to convince himself of it.

"You'd kill him just for running?"

Tualson opened his mouth to respond when piercing whistles sounded their names from far away.

The two shot up and dashed out of the hut into the grassy darkness.





The light swung wildly in Nunpui's hand. But there was no light anywhere out in the distance.

Tualson put his fingers in his mouth and whistled; *Which way? This way!*

Another blast of strong whistles sounded from a different direction, but neither of them recognised what the tune was supposed to be saying.

Tualson whistled out the names of those out there one by one.

Five replies.

Then a sixth! From 'the different' direction, in the same unrecognisable tune.

Who are you? Tualson whistled.

No reply.

STRANDED IN THE DARKNESS, NUNPUI FELT THE AIR GROW COLDER, THE DARKNESS MORE OPAQUE, AND THE WORLD FULLER WITH THINGS THAT COULD HURT HER.

Without a word, Tualson began towards where the other five replies had come from, somewhere close to the treeline. Nunpui followed.

They got to the treeline and stopped there for a moment.

"Where are you guys?" Tualson shouted.

"Over here!" someone replied from deeper in the woods.

"Give me the torch." Tualson took it from Nunpui's hand. He nudged her forward, gently insistent. "You go alone. Meet up with them. Shouldn't be far. I'll go check what that other whistling was."

"But..." Nunpui began, but Tualson had already disappeared into the grass.

Stranded in the darkness, Nunpui felt the air grow colder, the darkness more opaque, and the world fuller with things that could hurt her.

Turning towards the dark woods, she asked, "Which way?"

Now nobody replied.

She put her fingers in her mouth and tried to whistle, but only shaky air came out.

She tried again and again, until the whistle sounded, off pitch; Which way?

Still nothing.

She continued, but no reply ever came. Nunpui rooted there for a while, unsure what to do, as each way she turned felt like there was death waiting for her.

Then finally came a whistle calling her name.

But it didn't come from the depth of the woods. It came from out in the field, somewhere close.

"Who's that?" She crouched and groped around for something, anything, that she could use as a weapon, and came up with a flimsy stick.

The whistle intoned her name again, a little farther out now.

"Tual? Is that you?"

No answer.

A snap! in the dark woods behind her.

She jumped and sprinted into the tall grasses and aimed for the hut. No thought. No sight of anything. Just run. Just survive.

The blades of the grass cut her like a razor. The tangled weeds on the ground tripped her. Her weapon caught and fell from her hands. She kept on running. Didn't know which way. Didn't matter, as long as it was away from the dark woods.

She heard panting other than her own. She changed direction.

Rapid footsteps behind her, closing in. She changed direction.

Frantic rustling surrounded her. She couldn't run any faster.

"Where are you?!" she screamed in the blindness, now completely turned around, not knowing if she was still heading towards the hut or even farther away.

A loud clap! echoed through the thin, icy air.

She staggered to a momentary halt before she changed direction and ran towards the sound—it had to be the rifle. It didn't matter which way it was or how far it was from the hut.



She had to find the others. The rifle, usually a sound of terror, now gave her hope.

Another clap, closer, straight ahead—certainly the rifle.

And a moment later, an agonal squeal like a pig brought to slaughter.

Nunpui almost tripped over the screaming guy down on the ground, buried in a tangle of grass, his hands clasped over his right thigh. In the almost absolute darkness, she couldn't see who it was, couldn't see the blood, but she could smell it, and based on the overwhelming stench, there must be a lot, and she could feel the warmth from it.

"Help! Help! He's been shot!" she screamed out, not knowing if anyone would hear, if anyone could hear, or at this point, if there even was anyone else.

She got down to her knees, and with trembling fingers groped at the body to assess how hurt he was. There was warm wetness everywhere.

"It hurts," the voice below her groaned, and Nunpui knew then it was Tualson.

"Where are you hurt?"

"My thigh!"

Nunpui groped with fumbling hands. Tualson screamed and writhed when her hands met his, clutching tight above the knee, slick and sticky, the bleeding rapid.

She screamed out for help again.

Ignoring Tualson's animalistic cries and her own rising nausea, she pressed down on the wound, putting her whole weight behind it. She didn't know what else to do. She'd never touched so much blood before, didn't know the smell could be so overpowering. Everything was growing hazy.

Then, a flash in the distance. Nunpui thought it was lightning for a fearful moment, but rustling sounds followed.

"Over here!"

The light glowed brighter.

"Tualson's been shot! He's bleeding out."

In the darkness, the dim torch felt like daylight for a brief moment, soiled by the

blackness of all the blood soaking into their clothes and seeping into the ground.

It was the leader of their group, with a torch and no rifle in sight.

Nunpui was relieved until she saw the look on the leader's sweaty face—mouth hanging open, eyes wide and hollow. But the man said nothing.

Without a word, he got down on his knees and tossed the dim light to Nunpui. He removed his belt, pressed his handkerchief over the wound, and wrapped the belt over it. Tualson screamed as he pulled the strap as if aiming to crush bone. And then he pulled some more, and then more, and twisted the buckle and the other end together, tighter and tighter, the leather screaming between Tualson's haggard breaths. And in the trembling light, the flow of the blood finally seemed to stop.

IGNORING TUALSON'S ANIMALISTIC CRIES AND HER OWN RISING NAUSEA, SHE PRESSED DOWN ON THE WOUND, PUTTING HER WHOLE WEIGHT BEHIND IT. SHE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT ELSE TO DO.

The leader got Tualson up and hoisted him over his shoulder while Nunpui tried her best to keep the light steady. And just as they were about to head back to the hut, whistling came from a distance.

Nunpui was about to respond, but the leader held up his finger.

They listened.

It came again, but a different tune, a different pitch.

The leader whistled back a name.

Yes! came the reply.

Come to us!

Who are you?

The leader whistled his name and nodded at Nunpui to do the same.

A moment later, the rest of the group appeared one by one, all of them with the same look on their faces as the leader had before. But none of them said anything, not just yet. All of



them had their eyes on Tualson as if they had seen in the darkness that this was going to happen.

They filed back to the hut, hands on each other's shoulders as they walked.

Later on, they'd admit they had all heard something at the edge of the treeline. One of them had seen something, although he couldn't be sure, and they had gone to investigate. But the grass—it was like it came alive, they'd say, like it grew thicker between them, sturdier, wrapping around them, separating them. And then they had each heard sounds, rustling, brief, like something scurrying and stopping, like a mouse in a bed of straw; they whispered to call attention, then something responded in whispers, too low to make out what was being said, if anything was said at all. They followed the sounds, each going their separate ways, farther and farther from each other. They called out each other's names.

SHE'D ALWAYS BEEN SO SURE IN HER KNOWLEDGE OF TUALSON AS A PERSON, AS A FRIEND, BUT SUDDENLY HE FELT LIKE A STRANGER.

Nobody answered. Nobody heard anyone else calling. And there was something in the air they all felt, not a scent, not an odour, just something making them feel a sensation, apprehension, paranoia, rising steadily; their chests thudding, sweat blooming, something tuning their perception, toying with them. Then their flashlights flickered. They panicked. All of them lost, and alone, but not really alone. They fumbled around, groping their way through the thick darkness, making noise, hearing noise behind them, and in front, and all around. They ran. Something chasing. The shape of someone disappearing ahead of them or appearing behind them. The leader had tripped and dropped the rifle—it didn't discharge, he'd say. He looked for it but couldn't find it again. And as he kept on running, he heard the gunshots.

When they finally got back to the hut, the fire was out, and they had to relight it. They set Tualson down by the hearth and surrounded the paltry fire, feeding it with all the wood there was, coughing and wincing in the white smoke, stretching out their shivering hands inches from the licking flames, nobody yet talking about what they had just gone through.

Tualson had to get back home, they all agreed, or any other village, tonight, right now, or it would surely be too late.

Nunpui sat in a corner farthest from the flames, and everyone's shadow danced on her as they hurriedly prepared for the journey back into civilisation. She kept silent, and every word that trickled out of the others felt like needles stabbing deep into her fluttering heart, hoping that someone would eventually say something that would make sense of it all, perhaps something simple but obvious in hindsight that would calm the constant thudding in her chest, and calm all of them down. She glanced at Tualson. He had stopped screaming. Stopped crying. Just weak moans coming every time someone moved him.

They stripped the hut of its wooden rafters and cutting twines and fashioned a crude stretcher with their tarps. And within the next hour, they packed up and left the hut, left the fire burning, notwithstanding the depth of the night and the burning cold, and made their way out of the meadow, retracing their steps, as best as they could remember, to the last settlement they passed.

They had only one light left between all of them, but the sky had cleared up. The stars were out now, and a waning gibbous moon midway between the horizon and its pinnacle lit their way and guided them through the darkness. It was a sign, one of them said, that God was still listening to their prayers, that they'd be safe at home soon. Nunpui wanted to respond: did anyone pray for Tualson to be shot?

She was walking beside Tualson, who was prone on the stretcher. He was deathly silent, eyes opening and closing, as if trying hard to wake up.



"Stay awake," Nunpui or someone carrying him would say, and shake him now and again.

And then his eyes would slowly open, but only for a while.

Everyone was silent for most of the way back, but the air was heavy with all the things unsaid, all the feelings that they couldn't leave behind at the hut, and every thought that bubbled out from their harrowing experience. Even with all the things in their minds, there was nothing that felt appropriate to say aloud, except lacklustre motivations, which the speaker sounded like the least likely to believe.

"Not far now."

Tualson seemed to hear none of it.

They nudged him.

He seemed to feel none of it.

He mumbled something nobody could make out. His breathing grew rapid and then slowed down again. There were layers of tarp and extra clothes on him, but he still shivered. The terrain was rough, and their movements ungraceful, but he didn't seem to feel any of that. He barely seemed to feel anything. And, at some point, unnoticed by anyone, the tourniquet had come undone underneath all the covering.

Quietly, his blood flowed freely, and in the dim moonlight, they couldn't see the trail of red they were leaving behind.

A faint bluish light painted the horizon when they finally saw houses in the distance. Although it was still quite far away, probably a full day away, the sight of it gave them an increment of vigour and awakened them from a near-death exhaustion.

Nunpui reached down to shake Tualson awake and tell him they were safe now.

But Tualson wouldn't wake up. He was already beginning to grow stiff. And by the time they reached those houses, Nunpui thought, he might be as stiff as when she had found his sister in the river.



About the author:

Lian Dousel is the author of *Peace in the Land of the Dead*. He is a writer from Lamka, Manipur, with a master's degree in Literary Art from Ambedkar University, Delhi. His fiction has appeared in various outlets such as *Hammock* and *The Little Journal of Northeast India*, and he has been shortlisted for the Deodar Prize 2026. He is currently based in Delhi.



A SOIRÉE WITH A VAMPIRE

BY SIMON COLLINSON

It was upon a tingly, star-crusted night that I stealthily crept up the stone staircase leading to Thomas Reece's rooms with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension.

Thomas Reece was one of those rare college creatures who, through a lack of personal appearances during daylight and extreme solitude, had built up a reputation as a somewhat shadowy figure.

In the old country, he'd be called 'a mighty strange one.'

Many couldn't remember seeing him on Matriculation Day, or remember if he was in the college photograph for his year. The fact that one individual appeared smudged and grainy in the college photograph for that year only added to the mystery.

His appearance was certainly bizarre and therefore memorable. Some called it eccentric yet wild. Others said he scared the living daylights out of them. He looked all haggard, like a walking corpse. His fear-inducing feature was amplified by the frequent appearance of red lines resembling dried blood visible below his lips. But he may have been a nervous shaver, for I had noticed his hands frequently trembled and

quivered.

Thomas Reece was one of those people whose mere presence could suck the life out of a room. When he stepped through the door, gloom quickly followed him into the room, as the conversations quietened.

The fact that Thomas Reece made most of his appearances creeping around in the evening, in the narrow, dark corridors of the college, may have driven this fear.

He was given to taking long solitary walks beyond the walls of the college, when the moon was shrouding Oxford in its baleful and melancholy pale blue light. Where he went, or whom he met, nobody knew. He was easy to spot. His awkward gait was singularly jerky, and he habitually threw out his arms and hands like a spiky tree greeting a gale.

When I was out around the streets of Oxford, taking my usual evening constitutional, I often saw this remarkable individual, creeping around cadaverously like an inquisitive stick insect. I enjoyed a stroll in the shadows. That's when I found Oxford came alive for me. Maybe it was the same for Thomas Reece.

Others told frightful tales of Thomas Reece spending large amounts of his leisure time studying graves. I could attest to that, as when I passed through the abandoned graveyard at St Giles, I frequently saw the figure of Thomas Reece hunched over some damaged, decaying grave.

Not much was known about Thomas Reece.



He was a man of few words, and fewer friends. He did not seek the company of others, preferring to study alone the ancient questions that had baffled the great ones.

I had it on good authority that Thomas Reece had not entered the college chapel since arriving at Oxford. I did not hold that against him. I had never set foot inside the college chapel myself. I told my acquaintances that I worshipped elsewhere.

Thomas Reece rarely attended college dinners, which was more often than I attended. I didn't hold that against him, as the college food wasn't to my taste. The college gossip was much vexed by the fact that Thomas Reece was never seen to speak Grace, not even an "Amen" at the end of prayers.

SUFFERERS WENT PALE AND WERE MORE DRAINED OF ENERGY WITH EACH PASSING DAY. MANY OF THOSE I ENCOUNTERED IN THE JUNIOR COMMON ROOM IN COLLEGE HAD SUCCUMBED...

People remarked that they had never seen Thomas Reece eat or drink at the college tables. Perhaps he was one of those obsessives who get so deep in thought upon a particular subject that they forget a trifling detail like the meal in front of them.

Nevertheless, it added fuel to the gossip that swirled about Thomas Reece.

In the absence of facts, rumour and speculation rushed in to fill the vacuum at the talk around the college tables.

It was rumoured that Thomas Reece was interested in alchemy and the secrets of the dead. That he was seeking to acquire forbidden knowledge. It was believed that he conducted dangerous experiments to seek communication with other beings beyond the veil, or to attain the words to summon demonic beasts and monsters from other realms.

There were suggestions that Thomas Reece was responsible for the disappearance of certain Latin texts from the Bodleian Library, on the

subject of summoning demons.

Some even whispered that he was the creature who apparently stalked the college and the walls around Turl Street at night, looking for nourishment. They linked this to the activities of a shadowy figure who had attacked some of the students near the Sheldonian during Hilary term. A quite messy and bloody affair. Only to be expected from a place ringed with the carvings of frightful and fearsome faces. The police and college authorities were tight-lipped about it all. This only fuelled the tall tales being told.

The college scouts swore blind that something sadistic and sinister stalked amongst the spires. They muttered darkly about strange comings and goings around Carfax Tower.

The frightful thing had lately been reported prowling and attacking people upon the Parks. I must admit that I had seen Thomas Reece wandering around the Parks when I was out strolling in that part of Oxford bathed by the evening's blue shadow. But it couldn't be denied that most of those who went out walking at night felt uneasy and were constantly looking over their shoulders.

The worry and anxiety had taken their toll in college. I knew that many of the students complained of unusual tiredness and lethargy. The common rooms were full of students stricken with – (not suspicious, maybe lethargic or morose?) and languid upon the lounges, devoid of all life and spirit.

The doctors were baffled and prescribed the usual tablets and tonics, and yet the problem persisted. They called it "Oxford's Sleeping Sickness" or, to others, "Oxford Blues". Maybe it had something to do with all those "dreaming spires" in Oxford coming together in making them all sleepy and weary, or possibly down to too many Pimm's being consumed by the banks of the Thames during Torpids.

Sufferers went pale and were more drained of energy with each passing day. Many of those I encountered in the Junior Common Room in college had succumbed to this mysterious weary illness. It was as if a mysterious force had





Chained them to their chairs. Some even had lost the will to write an essay for their tutor.

Some whispered nervously that Thomas Reece was a vampire, draining them of all life.

Whether Thomas Reece was a vampire, I could not tell. But I admit to being very curious to find out. Enigmatic figures have always intrigued me. And at Oxford, there was no bigger enigma than Thomas Reece.

The opportunity to meet Thomas Reece presented itself midway through Trinity term. I saw that a note had been left in my pigeonhole at the porter's lodge.

It was a short and terse note inviting me to a "soirée" at number 6 on staircase 6, tomorrow evening at six pm. It was sent from none other than Thomas Reece.

You could imagine my shock and surprise. But for the larger part, I was intrigued to find out the truth about this unusual person.

I admit my head was reeling from it all. How I got such an invitation from Thomas Reece, I couldn't guess. I had not spoken more than six words with Thomas Reece in the past two years. For such a scholar, he had a terrible memory. He had always mistaken my study and thought I was a historian or an archaeologist.

The very thought of such notions made me shudder.

Maybe he would remember my specialism correctly at the soirée?

I found out during lunch that invitations had been sent to many of my acquaintances that shared a table, well away from the disapproving stare and scowls of the wise owls who ate at the high table.

"Well, Owen, it's a soirée. Better get our glad rags on," I said.

Those who lunched around me were surprised by it all. But like me, they were more than a little curious. What manner of rooms did such a character keep? Is it true what they say about those frightfully horrid forbidden books he's said to consult? What else would we learn about the personal habits of one of the most mysterious and shadowy characters at college?

And the question on everybody's mind was: Were we about to dine with a vampire?

Like all creatures of the night, there was something compelling about Thomas Reece. Vampire or not, none of us could resist the invitation to attend Thomas Reece's soirée.

So here I was, outside his doors. Nervously, I knocked. The door quickly opened. An angular, pallid-faced man jerkily appeared. A brief smile that quickly disappeared. Replaced by a grimace.

"Ahh, you're, eh, the anthropologist," he blurted.

I winced. He still could not remember my actual specialism. And of all things to be called an anthropologist! I groaned and exhaled. The deepest cut wounds the most. He'll be calling me an accountant next!

WHAT MANNER OF ROOMS DID SUCH A CHARACTER KEEP? IS IT TRUE WHAT THEY SAY ABOUT THOSE FRIGHTFULLY HORRID FORBIDDEN BOOKS HE'S SAID TO CONSULT?

Thomas Reece was wearing the same jumper and slacks he'd worn all week. It was evident he didn't believe in dressing up for evening soirées. It was ironic tonight as everyone else was dressed to the nines and Thomas Reece was still in casuals.

I quickly glanced around. The walls were bare of any adornment. The bookcases showed no signs of forbidden literature.

I soon discovered that I was one of the last to get there. Thankfully, as I would have found it difficult adding to the six words that I'd already spoken to Thomas Reece. He was a man of very few words. But I was soon to learn he was a man of many suits.

Thomas Reece was proud to show off his wardrobe with an array of smart suits and jackets. Yet none of us had ever seen him wear one in nearly two years at Oxford. This Thomas Reece was evidently a curious character and getting curiouser by the minute.



I was pleased that my glass was soon filled with Oloroso sherry, soon after the tour.

I was glad to see the deep red colour of the sherry with its promise of a little sweetness. And drank it neither too quickly nor too slowly.

There was no sign of any snacks. No nibbles to nibble on. That didn't worry me.

At least that took away all worries of matching the food to the sherry for the rest of the guests.

None of that "if it flies, if it swims, or if it runs" nonsense, for there was no food at all to match.

Thomas Reece moved around awkwardly, as though he carried a huge burden.

I could hear the conversations.

BUT IN THE REALMS OF MYSTERY AND ENIGMATIC BEHAVIOUR, THOMAS REECE HAD INCREASED HIS REPUTATION FOR BEING THE MOST UNUSUAL CHARACTER AROUND COLLEGE.

My friends had lots of questions to ask Thomas Reece. To all, he gave a very short, terse reply. It was obvious that Thomas Reece was rapidly losing the will to maintain the conversations, vital for such an event. He was running out of energy to maintain such a feat.

I was watching a person drain before me.

Andrew Watkins asked Thomas if he was doing anything tomorrow night.

He replied, "No".

Andrew followed up by asking if he wanted to go for a drink tomorrow in the 'Bulldog'.

To which Thomas Reece replied tersely, "No."

There was no coming back from that for Andrew Watkins. He remained silent for the rest of the night.

I took the opportunity to slip out and take my sherry into Thomas Reece's kitchen. I sought solitude, as being in company rapidly drains me.

I found his kitchen to be as spartan and bare as his other rooms. Indeed, he seemed to own only one mug, one bowl and one plate. A single

half-full box of plain porridge stood out on the shelf.

Thomas Reece was certainly frugal, but he did eat food.

Whoever heard of a vampire eating porridge? I thought.

I left the kitchen with an empty glass of sherry. And walked back into a quiet room of awkward silences.

The energy in that room sharply went down. All around I could see tired, yawning people. The guests looked at their watches, studied the floor, glanced frequently at the window or observed their feet.

I must admit I knew very little more about Thomas Reece than when I first entered his door. When we all finished our first sherry, and were waiting for another, we were surprised and shocked when Thomas Reece told us all the soiree had ended and it was time to go.

And then he drove us all away like a sheepdog drives a flock.

It had been an interesting evening. The most unusual soiree I had ever attended. Most of the guests left with the question of Thomas Reece's vampire status unanswered, as well as a thirst and a hunger. But in the realms of mystery and enigmatic behaviour, Thomas Reece had increased his reputation for being the most unusual character around college.

He had perhaps added a reputation that night for being parsimonious.

I never did get the answer to the biggest mystery of all.

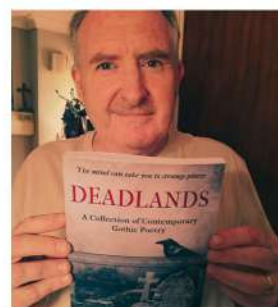
How did I get invited to such a soiree in the first place?

It was summed up best by Caroline as she tiptoed down the staircase. "It was a soiree, Owen, but not as we know it."

Thomas Reece, a mighty strange one indeed, I thought.

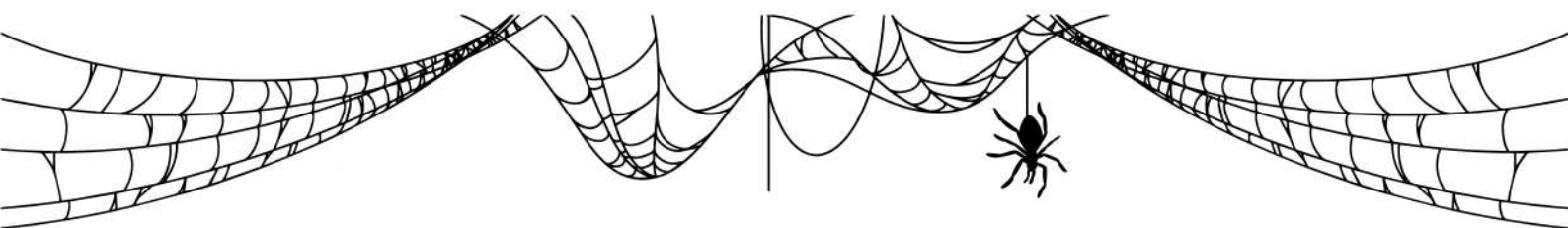
But as far as Thomas Reece being a vampire? I think not.

I would have been able to smell and taste a fellow vampire a mile off.



About the author:

Simon is a ND writer from England. He is a member of the All Seasons writing group. He will be publishing, "Deadlands", a collection of contemporary Gothic poetry later this year. He seeks stillness and solitude.





MOLLY WHARTON'S ASTONISHING GIFTS

BY GLYNN OWEN BARRASS

Madame d'Esperance knew she had the gift, had known from a very early age. As a young girl, with bows in her hair and scuffed knees, she had a knack of knowing where lost things could be found. From Momma's favourite brooch to Poppa's spectacles, the child who would become Madame d'Esperance always knew where to find them. She knew about a relative's surprise visit beforehand, and when a person was going to die. She predicted her parents' deaths; the darkness lurking always on the wings to balance the light. This universal rule, although on the surface it appeared unfair, permeated every aspect of existence.

Or so Madame d'Esperance told herself. For what, if anything, could she do about it?

Tonight she was hosting a session at a gentleman's club, and felt she needed to look her best. Her dressing table mirror reflected her grey-haired head, hair once apricot red, tied back in a severe, matronly bun. For clothing, she

wore her scarlet, high-collared dress. Attached to it was her mother's favourite brooch. A cameo of a lady with curly locks and a pearl necklace. The gold trim surrounding it was inset with diamonds. No matter how hard times had been in the past (and some of those times did not bear recollecting), she had never considered selling it.

But orphaned Molly Wharton was now Madame d'Esperance, Spirit Medium Extraordinaire, earning a small fortune weekly to go towards her dotage. This dotage could not come sooner, she mused, rising from her seat and experiencing the pains of approaching old age. Sometimes, she required her stick to rise after sitting for a time.

And on this cold, autumn night, she would be doing a lot of sitting, while performing her feats in the venerable Osiris Club's parlour.

"Tonight, good luck will favour us all," she said, turning to her assistants. They worked industriously at a table littered with the tools of their trade. She always checked over them before a performance. "Inspecting the Troops," she whimsically called it, and sometimes, her assistant Archibald even remembered to perform a witty salute.

Madame d'Esperance pushed her seat under the dressing table and approached her assistants. Gas lamps illuminated the room, though a soupy evening light filtered in from the room's one unwashed window. Rain was coming. She felt it in her bones.



Miss Dorris looked up from her packing and gave her a ruddy-cheeked grin. A plump, red-headed young woman from Edinburgh, tonight she wore her best blue dress. Miss Dorris was her main assistant and researcher. Currently placing cheesecloth in the pockets of a large black body covering, during the performance, she would put the covering on her Madame, tie it tightly, and blindfold her. After Miss Dorris sneaked the cheesecloth into her mouth, Madame d'Esperance would disgorge it as "Ectoplasm." Miss Dorris's most important task, however, was to research the backgrounds of those attending her sessions. Unfortunately, she had gained very little information for tonight. The ancestors of The Osiris Club's members were interred in private plots and locked tombs, their close-mouthed servants immune to gossiping.

HIS MAIN TASK: CREEP AROUND THE DARKNESS DURING THE PERFORMANCE, MAKING SOUNDS WHERE SOUNDS SHOULD NOT BE, MOVING OBJECTS THAT SHOULD NOT MOVE.

No matter. Madame d'Esperance mused. She would still put on quite the show, anyway. She felt a motherly attitude toward Miss Dorris. Unlike her own mother, Miss Dorris's mother was alive and well and keeping her local Gin Palace in business.

Terrence stood packing musical instruments, which he would invisibly move and play before a stupefied audience. Beneath his brown waistcoat, white shirt and brown pants, he wore a skintight suit of black fabric, the hood and gloves stuffed in his outer pockets. His main task: creep around the darkness during the performance, making sounds where sounds should not be, moving objects that should not move. He looked a little haggard tonight, his features appearing thinner than usual, and his black hair lank. He had addiction problems, but what they were, whether the pipe or Mother's Ruin, she did not know. He kept it out of the

performance, and while he did so, his job remained secure.

Archibald, the final member of her team, and a young lad still in his teens, wore a white shirt, black pants, a chequered flat cap over his blonde-haired head. He was checking through their inventory for the evening. A decent artist, he painted faces on the balloons for him or Terrence to move about in the darkness. Madame d'Esperance, being a skilled ventriloquist, would throw her voice to give the balloons sinister, spectral life. Archibald, stripped to his black under suit, would creep behind the audience, rapping on walls and floors to mimic communication from the spirits.

Her inspection complete, and the troops waiting patiently, Madame d'Esperance said, "All ship-shape and Bristol fashion, as Poppa used to say. Now, you may entertain yourselves as you like before the carriage collects us. But no drinking..." She sent a squinted eye to Terrence at these words. He opened his mouth to object, but she continued, "...and no squandering your pennies at the bookmaker," she said to Archibald.

He nodded assent, a serious expression on his freckled face.

Madame d'Esperance made a gentle waving motion with her hands and said, "Goodbye, my fine boys and girl," and turned to her dressing table. She felt more jewellery was in order for tonight's performance.

The gentlemen are not dealing with a pauper after all, she thought, but someone equal of their station.

The door opened behind her, closing shortly after.

As she reached the dressing table, she saw Miss Dorris behind her in the mirror.

"Let me help you with your seat," Miss Dorris said in her Scottish lilt, and, stepping ahead, pulled the seat out from beneath the dressing table.

"Good girl," thanked Madame d'Esperance as she squeezed into the chair, hiding the discomfort sitting caused. Her left shoulder and





arm pained her somewhat tonight. Pulling herself in, she noted Miss Dorris's pursed lips and wondered why she remained.

"Tonight may be a strenuous performance, my dear. You might desire a little rest beforehand."

"I..." Miss Dorris shuffled where she stood.

Madame d'Esperance looked at her worried face.

The girl is definitely troubled by something, she thought, and asked, "Miss Dorris, Tabitha, what is bothering you?" She hardly ever used Miss Dorris's first name, and added, "Tell me while you help me put jewellery on."

"I—"

"The pearls first, Miss Dorris, and do carry on."

"I have been thinking this for a while, Madame," Miss Dorris replied. She removed the pearls from a stand on the dressing table and stepped behind the chair.

"When we started this venture, we did not perform so many... tricks on the audience."

She placed the pearls around Madame d'Esperance's neck, clipped them together.

Madame d'Esperance examined herself in the mirror. The pearls looked expensive, but she could do better.

"And your belief is we are going a little far? Remove the pearls and give me the garnets."

"I just..." Miss Dorris went about replacing the pearls. "I do wonder whether the spirits make a presence during our performances at all."

Miss Dorris's reflection frowned. Ah, so there it is. My girl is losing her faith.

"This is far better." Madame d'Esperance examined her reflection. The necklace held seven clusters of garnets, each cluster bearing nine gems apiece.

"I have a ring and earrings to match these, do I not?"

Miss Dorris's reflection nodded.

"My dear," Madame d'Esperance shuffled around in her chair. "Give me your hands and kneel, please." She spoke soothingly, taking the

girl's hands gently as she crouched to her knees.

"When I was a little girl," she continued, "I could locate the things people lost. Knickknacks and keys, lost coins and jewellery. Also, I used to see another little girl around the house, and in our garden. And you know, that little girl looked exactly like me."

Miss Dorris nodded, lips tight.

"Not only that, she always appeared dressed like me. We played together in the garden, talked at night about all sorts of things. No one else could see or hear her. Momma indulged me and called her my "Imaginary Friend." Poppa poo-pooed any mention of it."

"So this little girl, was she a spirit?"

"More," Madame d'Esperance replied. "But I shall get to that. You see, while we played, she told me things no one could possibly know. She described events that eventually came to pass, secrets of the people in our lives. It felt quite amazing to a small girl, yet eventually, it became commonplace. Some of these things I told Momma. They frightened her, and she made me promise to keep them to myself."

THE GIRL IS DEFINITELY TROUBLED BY SOMETHING, SHE THOUGHT, AND ASKED, "MISS DORRIS, TABITHA, WHAT IS BOTHERING YOU?"

Miss Dorris stared at her raptly, absorbing the tale completely.

"So it happened that when Poppa fell ill, I kept the knowledge of his upcoming death to myself, the same with my dear Momma."

Dark memories of a life with her brutal uncle surfaced. Madame d'Esperance pushed these aside.

"It was upon Momma's deathbed I discovered I once had a twin sister. She died in her infancy."

"Ooh!" Miss Dorris's eyes widened.

"So I realised, all along, my sister visited from the other side, growing up alongside me in the Spirit Realm. This began my interest in Spirituality, which eventually led to my, our,





seances."

"Do you still see her?" Miss Dorris asked, her expression one of rapt attention.

"Alas, not," Madame d'Esperance replied, and felt a true sadness over the fact. "As I grew older, she appeared less frequently, yet I could still perform my feats for many years after. But as I have aged, my powers have become somewhat dormant. Still, the people of this world need to believe in the Spirit World. For their happiness, so they can sleep secure in the knowledge that their loved ones continue to lead happy, productive lives. So you see, Tabitha, the fabrications we perform, they only make those we... mislead, more content in their beliefs."

Seemingly sated, Miss Dorris smiled.

"Do you feel better now?" Madame d'Esperance questioned.

"I do." Miss Dorris nodded vigorously. "I sincerely do!"

IN A FREEZING COLD ROOM USED BY THE SERVANTS OF ALL THINGS! THIS, COMBINED WITH SQUEEZING UP THIS TIGHT STAIRCASE, MADE THE PAIN IN HER SIDE WORSE.

"There's my good girl," Madame d'Esperance said, releasing her hands. "Now, please be a dear and help me find my earrings."

From the room's single window, a spatter of rain hinted at worse to come.

Less than an hour later, Madame d'Esperance led the charge toward the waiting coach with her umbrella drawn. A private, luxury coach, it bore a royal seal upon the door above a logo written in Latin.

Her host, Lord Foulsham, certainly seemed a man of means, she thought as the driver helped her up the steps and through the door. And just in time: the spitting rain suddenly transformed into a tumult, the clouds ripping open with a thunderous roar.

As her dress brushed the walls of the narrow staircase, Madame d'Esperance again reflected on how rude it was of Lord Foulsham to make them wait downstairs. In a freezing cold room used by the servants of all things! This, combined with squeezing up this tight staircase, made the pain in her side worse.

From a velvet-lined carriage to a scullery! What a night!

She harrumphed, pulled her dress closer as she neared the top of the stairs. Feeling a little out of breath, she paused and looked behind her. Miss Dorris and Terrance were directly below, Archibald invisible behind a bend and already stripped down to his undersuit.

"Now, troops," she said, smiling, "You all know your roles, so let us charge into the face of the enemy!" Turning to the door, she braced herself and entered.

A darkness greeted her as she stepped inside, the only light issuing from the candelabra upon a nearby table. The nebulous space before her smelled of burning coals and strong tobacco.

Her heels sounded noisy on the floorboards as she approached and passed the table. She paused in front of it, facing the direction the low mutterings and tobacco whiffs issued from.

Quite a crowd there, she thought. The room seated around thirty, with this space again for her performance.

Lord Foulsham appeared from the seating area, bald, florid-faced and white-bearded, impeccable in his dinner suit. He bowed before her with a smile. She proffered her hand, which he shook gently before turning to the audience. Behind her, she heard her people unpacking.

"Good gentlemen." Foulsham addressed the audience. "We have for you this evening a display from the most talented Spirit Medium of our age, Madame d'Esperance."

The invisible audience clapped. Lord Foulsham waited till the applause ceased, and continued.

"Most experienced, the Madame is. Tonight, she promises to reveal secrets from beyond the grave, exhibitions that prove beyond a shadow



of a doubt the souls of the deceased may be contacted, even manifest themselves upon this earthly plane."

More clapping followed. Lord Foulsham's words made her forgive him for placing her in the servants' room. He turned and grinned, heading back into the darkness of the audience.

"Thank you," she said, taking a couple of steps forward. "As the good sir says, tonight I shall prove to you that souls continue to exist after death. That it is possible to speak to them. I have many tools to facilitate this, including ones that shall prove no fraud is possible."

"Now." She put her back to the audience to face the table and her companions.

Miss Dorris and Terrance were unpacking musical instruments. Archibald would be hiding in some corner or other.

She stepped past the pair, winked at Miss Dorris, and paused near the fireplace on the rear wall.

"The magnetism is best here," she said, reasoning the heat from the smouldering coals might be good for her. "Miss Dorris, bring a chair and my robe."

Madame d'Esperance watched Miss Dorris dragging a chair from the side of the room. As she passed him, Terrance handed her a black bundle.

"Tonight," Madame d'Esperance said, "You shall witness ectoplasm, dematerialisation, premonitions, table-turning, and more, this depending on what the spirits gift us with."

Miss Dorris placed the chair beside her and shook out the black bundle.

"Put it on me," d'Esperance ordered, raising her arms, and winced at the pain in her left arm and shoulder.

"This costume will ensure I can commit no fraud," she explained, feeling the pain reach her jaw. *Goodness, this is going to be a long night*, she thought, moving her mouth gently to see if it relieved the discomfort.

It did, and Miss Dorris placed the robe on her, arms first. Madame d'Esperance felt relief as she lowered her arms, and Miss Dorris, having

stepped behind her, began buttoning the robe.

Terrance, his arms laden with boxes, headed past them toward the door. With little light to see by, the audience was meant to believe he was leaving the room.

Madame d'Esperance examined the instruments on the table. A bass drum, a fiddle, a trumpet, a horn and a tambourine... they were all there.

"As you bear witness," she addressed the audience. "There is no way I can use my hands." She braced herself for pain and raised her arms again. "The cuffs of this robe are tied together. Now, Miss Dorris?"

Miss Dorris shuffled her toward the chair.

"All goes well, my dear," Madame d'Esperance whispered to Miss Dorris, and the girl smiled.

Miss Dorris, producing a strip of black fabric from her dress, covered Madame d'Esperance's eyes. A blindfold, or so the crowd was meant to believe, but the fabric, thinner around the eyes, meant Madame d'Esperance could still see rather well.

MISS DORRIS AND TERRANCE WERE UNPACKING MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS. ARCHIBALD WOULD BE HIDING IN SOME CORNER OR OTHER.

"Now..." Madame d'Esperance explained. "I need my girl beside me to utilise my speaking trumpet. The spirits use a Medium's vocal cords, manipulating our voices to send messages. The trumpet will magnify these words for you to hear."

Miss Dorris hurried to the table, retrieved a long brass horn from amongst the instruments.

She returned to Madame d'Esperance and spoke in her ear.

"We're ready," she whispered.

"Go extinguish the candles. All but one," Madame d'Esperance instructed.

Miss Dorris went to the table, licked her fingers and began snuffing out the candles. A short hiss accompanied each extinguishing.





The light from the final candle was weak and just illuminated the table.

Miss Dorris came back to her side.

"I shall now attempt contact with my Control," d'Esperance said. "He is a departed Mohawk Indian, who acts as my spokesperson when I am in trance. Squanto, are you there? I need your assistance."

A loud "rap" issued from somewhere to the left.

People in the audience exclaimed.

A rap issued from their right this time, followed by two more behind her.

"Ah, Squanto, my spirit friend. Are you well?"

Another knock came from behind the audience, accompanied by more surprised utterances.

"I kindly request of the Spirit Realm, you, my Spirit Guide, to bring forth a soul so I may prove the existence of the afterworld," Madame d'Esperance asked. "Oh. You wish to speak through me? Miss Dorris? The speaking trumpet, please."

THE TAMBOURINE JINGLED. A MOMENT LATER, THE FIDDLE ROSE, THE STRINGS PLUCKED BY UNSEEN HANDS. GOOD BOY, TERRANCE, SHE THOUGHT.

The trumpet appeared at her lips, and Madame d'Esperance used a voice she had been practising and honing for years.

"I am here, mistress." The voice she spoke in sounded deep, monotone.

"There is a spirit close by," she continued, "by the name of Tommy Swift. Tommy Swift, come forth. Reveal yourself."

Miss Dorris lowered the horn from her mouth.

Madame d'Esperance grinned as the tambourine elevated from the table before them.

Terrance, invisible to both her and the audience, lifted it on a piece of wire.

The tambourine jingled. A moment later, the fiddle rose, the strings plucked by unseen hands.

Good boy, Terrance, she thought.

The tambourine shook. The fiddle issued a discordant screech.

Next, a trumpet rose from the table. It joined the racket with a loud wail. The instruments cavorted in the air, producing a cacophony of noise. A tea bell rose and joined the ghostly orchestra.

Her audience should be amazed by the demonstration. She could not hear them for the clatter of the instruments, though. Her assistants were excelling themselves tonight.

A bang from the wall behind her made Madame d'Esperance jump in her seat.

Another issued from the other side of the room, behind the audience again.

Miss Dorris took a few steps forward, lifted her head to stare beyond the audience. She sent Madame d'Esperance a confused glance.

The instruments continued their cacophonous dance. At least two pairs of hands were manipulating them.

So who is battering the walls? Tommy Swift was as much a fabrication as Squanto. Unless, she wondered, a spirit had actually arrived?

An array of crashes above their heads made Madame d'Esperance flinch and Miss Dorris duck. The sounds continued through the room and past the audience.

Abruptly, the instruments dropped to the table with a metallic clash.

Silence prevailed, a brief but awed one.

The audience began speaking loudly, some shadowy shapes standing from their seats.

If the lights come on, they shall discover Terrance and Archibald. I'll be ruined!

"Miss Dorris!" she snapped. "Here. Here!"

The girl rushed to her side.

"The horn, quickly now!"

The horn was raised to her lips. As she went to speak, a thick, foreign substance materialised in her mouth.

"Gentlemen, come closer now," another voice ordered through the horn.

Madame d'Esperance looked to Miss Dorris and shook her head vigorously. Miss Dorris held



the horn steady.

"Billy Swift shall now bring ectoplasm from the Madame's body," the voice continued. During a regular performance, right about now, Miss Dorris would sneak some cheesecloth into her mouth.

Madame d'Esperance moaned. The pain, having resumed in her arm, radiated through her chest.

Beyond the table, a clot of dark shapes approached.

Miss Dorris, realising things were amiss, waved a hand at the approaching crowd. "Please stop, sirs!"

The foreign substance forced her mouth open, the horn moving away as Miss Dorris cried out in horror.

Madame d'Esperance's eyes watered. The pain filling her upper body made her lurch sideways. Her heart beat like a drum, pounding against her ribcage. The sound of it filled her ears. She breathed fitfully through her nostrils, snorting in panic.

Hands steadied her from behind, stopping her from falling.

Archibald, Terrance? Could be either, neither.

The approaching forms now bore faces, staring at her curiously, or with shock.

Someone from the audience exclaimed, "Look at her face!"

"It is ectoplasm!" another man cried.

She watched a glowing white substance escape her mouth, travelling snake-like down her chin.

Can none of you fools tell I need help? She silently screamed. And where were Miss Dorris and the others?

The white matter moved down her front, the tip twisting like a serpent's head.

It must be ectoplasm! Madame d'Esperance realised through her pain. *I knew I had it in me!* The ectoplasm's tip moved upward. Expanding as it rose, it became a throbbing white bulb. The substance left Madame d'Esperance's body, allowing her to take painful, ragged breaths. Her heart hammered against her chest at an intoler-

able rate.

The undulating bulb transformed, some sections receding, others growing out. They formed eye sockets, a nose and a mouth.

"It is you, isn't it?" she asked the rapidly forming face.

Madame d'Esperance's mirror image smiled and nodded. After this revelation, her heart stopped beating, and the assault on her ears was replaced by a loud hiss.

Her sister spoke, the words inaudible through the noise. Madame d'Esperance's field of vision shrank to black. She tried to talk, only to discover she no longer possessed a mouth to speak with. The darkness felt painless, however, and soothingly silent.

And she was not alone.

IT MUST BE ECTOPLASM! MADAME D'ESPERANCE REALISED THROUGH HER PAIN. I KNEW I HAD IT IN ME! THE ECTOPLASM'S TIP MOVED UPWARD.

The red-headed woman stood before the grave in a black dress and mourning bonnet. She held a bouquet of orange lilies in one hand; more colour to add to Mother Nature's own. In the other, she held the wooden handle of a black umbrella.

Purple Crocuses dotted the grass in defiance of winter, as did white, bell-shaped Snowdrops. The ocean of flowers surrounded the grave, life from death, light from darkness. Crows cawed raucously in the distance. Apart from that, the cemetery stood silent.

The gravestone was new and shiny, a replacement for the family's previous one. Its companions were older, half-smothered in clutching ivy and spattered with bird droppings. Where visible, their lettering had begun to fall off. The new grave's gold-lettered epitaph shone in the early afternoon sunlight.

Tabitha Dorris admired the carved stonework. An anchor with a chain draped across it, the





Words "In Affectionate Remembrance Of" surrounding it in gold.

Madame d'Esperance's father spent many years at sea. Hence the anchor, and the words below, which Tabitha Dorris read,

*"John Wharton,
Of Middlesbrough, Master Mariner
Who Died November 6th, 1823
Aged 43 Years
Also Of Margaret, Widow of the Above
Who Died September 7th, 1827
Aged 28 Years
Also of Kate Gertrude Wharton, Their Daughter
Who Died December 12th, 1817
Aged 2 Months"*

A gap in words followed, filled by a delicately carved sunflower. A significant symbol to the Spiritualist Movement, it represented light and truth, the quest for spiritual connection.

Miss Dorris read the following inscription and smiled.

*"Also of Molly Wharton, Their Daughter
Also known as 'Madame d'Esperance'
Who Died December 12th, 1882
Aged 65 Years."*

"Madame," she said, breaking her silence. "The newspapers are filled with mentions of you. They call you a true, honest Spirit Medium! And I am glad of that. The Spiritualist Association has just about made you a martyr for the cause. You should have seen the attendance! I could hardly make it to the grave. So I came here today for a wee chat."

She placed the flowers gently on the grave, and continued.

"Archibald left us after that strange night, but Terrance remains. He has put his back to his vices and is eager to continue the performances."

Miss Dorris looked away for a moment, and returning her eyes to the grave, said, "I have been practising nightly, and believe I have got it

down right. I shall continue the performances, in your honour, and who knows..." She glanced at her brooch, a cameo of a lady, with a gold trim inset with diamonds. Along with the performance, Miss Dorris had inherited all of Madame d'Esperance's jewellery. "Perhaps real spirits may make an appearance, as they did with you."

A low wind appeared, bending flower stems, rustling the paper holding the lilies.

A sign? Miss Dorris wondered, and decided, Yes, *this is a sign.*

A droplet of rain spattered against her hat, followed by a few more upon her shoulders.

Thinking of returning to her carriage before it worsened, she said, "Goodbye, Madame," and walked away from the grave.



About the author:

I live in the North East of England and have been writing since late 2006. I've written over two hundred short stories, novellas, and role-playing game supplements, the majority of which have been published in the UK, the USA, Spain and Japan. To date I've edited and co-edited ten anthologies, and am part of the editorial team for the magazine *Weird Fiction Quarterly*. I've been the recipient of two Ennies awards for my gaming work.





THE DOOR BENEATH THE SOUND

BY OLIVER QUINTO

I.

The house has seven steps at the front. I learned that long ago, so I don't need to count — memory kept the number without being asked, along with other measurements: the width of the threshold, just over a foot; the distance between the third and fourth step, slightly higher than the rest, the place where my father stumbled when he came home late.

The door is green. Dark green, nearly black, peeling at the lower right in a pattern that advances inward like a coastline with no name on any map. The handle is brass, a Victorian lever model set into an octagonal rosette, two of its four screws replaced — the new ones are Phillips head; the originals were flathead. I estimate the handle is forty years old. Perhaps more.

I enter without knocking.

The sitting room is as I left it sixteen years ago, except that it isn't. The furniture occupies the right places — the grey-blue velvet sofa against the north wall, the side table with the

bevelled glass top and a water ring in the shape of a half-moon that was there when I was nine, the bookcase with the 1987 Encyclopaedia Britannica, kept in immaculate condition because my mother never let me open them — but there is a wheelchair by the window that wasn't there before.

And in the chair, my mother.

Maren Voss is sixty-seven years old and one side of her face doesn't follow the other. The stroke had caused the left corner of her mouth to slightly droop and the left eye was narrower. The right side functions normally. She is looking out at the street when I come in.

She doesn't turn.

On the wall between the windows, there is a violin. It's not an ornamental piece — there is a distinction, and it matters. The instrument hangs from two blackened brass wall mounts; the kind sold in music shops for next to nothing. The wood is dark, stained mahogany or ebony, with yellowed varnish along the ribs and a hairline crack running from the end button toward the bottom block — four centimetres, perhaps five, depending on where one starts to measure. The bow hangs below, parallel to the body of the instrument, its hair completely slack. Slack hair doesn't vibrate. Doesn't resonate. Someone slackened it deliberately — bow hair doesn't loosen like that through neglect, through gravity, through time. Someone sat down, turned the adjuster, and let it go on purpose.

I go to the kitchen to make tea.



The kitchen has a four-burner Belling cooker, white, with a circular scorch mark on the front right burner that I remember from when I was eight years old. The model was discontinued. On the beige-yellow Formica worktop — the shade white turns after twenty years of grease and light — a navy-blue mug with steam rising from the rim.

I touch the side with two fingers. Hot. Not warm — hot, made less than five minutes ago. My mother is in her wheelchair and the cooker is cold and the kettle on the far end of the worktop is dry on the outside.

I move my hand away. I open the cupboard, take another mug — white, with a chip on the handle that my father used to cover with his thumb when he drank —, make fresh tea, carry both mugs through to the sitting room.

IT WASN'T THERE THE LAST TIME I WAS IN THIS HOUSE. IT WASN'T THERE SIXTEEN YEARS AGO, OR IT WAS AND I DIDN'T SEE IT, OR IT WAS AND I SAW IT AND WIPED IT FROM MEMORY.

Maren takes the mug without looking at it. She holds it with her right hand. The left rests in her lap, fingers slightly curled over the fabric of her trousers, still.

We sit in silence for a time I don't measure.

"The quart's just as he left it," she says.

The street outside is an ordinary residential street in a small town: concrete pavement with roots pushing up the slabs at angles nobody has ever corrected, a grey Volvo V60 parked opposite with an out-of-date MOT sticker on the windscreen, a tree with ashen bark and bare branches — I don't know its name, I never did. My father knew the name of every tree on this street, and I never asked when there was still time to ask.

"That's fine," I say.

She drinks her tea. I drink mine.

II.

The spare room has a single bed with an eight-centimetre foam mattress over a wooden base, a bedside table with a drawer that won't close fully, and a window overlooking the back garden. The blinds are aluminium, ivory-coloured, with two twisted slats in the middle section that admit two strips of light when there is light to admit.

I fall asleep at 11:10.

I wake at 2:17. I know the time because the digital clock on the bedside table — a Braun BC02 alarm clock, AA battery, red display — reads 2:17 when I open my eyes, and I watch it long enough for the numbers to change to 2:18.

The sound comes from below.

It is not music. Not yet. It is a single note — held for three, four seconds, then silence. Then the same note. A longer silence. Then a different note, a semitone higher, held for less time than the first, cut off before it resolves.

Like someone tuning. Like someone deciding whether to tune.

I go out to the landing. The landing is six metres long, with a worn track down the centre of the burgundy carpet that has always been there, a light switch with its faceplate slightly askew to the left. On the middle wall, a framed photograph of a beach that none of us ever visited — we bought the frame to put in a family photograph, but when the time came, nobody could agree on which one, and the beach stayed.

At the far end of the landing, the staircase. Beneath the staircase, the cellar door.

The cellar door has a padlock. A discoid lock, stainless steel, shackle with rust-orange marks at the base but the body intact. It wasn't there the last time I was in this house. It wasn't there sixteen years ago, or it was and I didn't see it, or it was and I saw it and wiped it from memory.

The sound stops.

I stand on the landing for a while. Then I go back to bed. In the morning the navy mug is in the kitchen, washed, upturned on the draining board by the sink.





Maren is in her wheelchair by the window, looking out at the street.

"There was a padlock on the cellar door," I say.

She raises her eyes to the violin on the wall. The bow hair is still slack. She looks at it for a moment, then looks at me.

"Your father always locked the cellar when he was working down there."

"He's been dead sixteen years, Mother."

Maren drinks tea from the mug on the side table — tea I didn't make, in a mug I don't recognise, blue as well, but a different blue, darker, almost navy, but not quite.

She says nothing more.

That day, a neighbour comes by. Sable. Fifty-something, a grey wool coat with horn buttons, dark hair pinned back with a mock-tortoiseshell clip. She brings a cast-iron casserole dish — white enamel outside, cobalt blue within — with a lid she doesn't lift. She sets it on the cooker. She straightens the kettle, which wasn't crooked. She greets Maren by name, with a familiarity that carries weight, that was built over enough time to carry weight.

She doesn't greet me.

"Your father was very devoted to his work," she says, without looking at me.

"He was an electrician."

"He was."

She leaves.

I touch the casserole dish. It's cold. She had come from some distance.

III.

Edric Voss's bedroom has a double bed with a faded blue cotton coverlet, topped by two pillows in white pillowcases with yellowed edges. A dark wood wardrobe with a bevelled mirror on the right-hand door and a white porcelain knob with a diagonal crack. On the dresser: a natural-bristle hairbrush with white hairs caught in it, a bottle of Old Spice cologne with less than a centimetre of liquid left in it, a pair of tortoiseshell reading glasses folded over a sudoku book with half the puzzles filled in — the handwriting is not my mother's.

It is his.

I open the top drawer of the dresser. Folded shirts, pale blue, white, dark blue, all pressed. A brown leather wallet with no money, but with two expired laminated cards and a passport photograph I cannot look at for more than two seconds. I close the drawer.

In the middle drawer there is a hard-backed black notebook, spiral-bound, A4.

It is not a diary. It is musical scores — page after page of handwritten staves, a single melody copied with obsessive fidelity, the variations between one version and the next almost imperceptible. Some pages have crossings-out. Some have only four or five bars before a single firm horizontal line strikes through everything.

SHE LOOKS AT THE COVER. SHE DRAWS HER RIGHT HAND ACROSS IT — SLOWLY, TOP TO BOTTOM, WIPING SOMETHING THAT ISN'T THERE. THEN SHE HANDS IT BACK WITHOUT OPENING IT.

The notation is dense and technical, with dynamic markings in Italian — *pianissimo*, *con sordino*, *sempre legato* — and bowing indications drawn above the notes with a precision that speaks of years of practice.

In the margins: numbers. Series of numbers with no identifiable unit. Not bar counts, not frequencies, not dates. I don't know what they are.

In the middle of the notebook, a single line written differently from everything around it — smaller, pressed hard into the paper, without the characteristic slant of the other annotations:

If I stop, she goes.

I carry the notebook to the sitting room. I place it in Maren's lap.

She looks at the cover. She draws her right hand across it — slowly, top to bottom, wiping something that isn't there. Then she hands it back without opening it.

"He played to keep me here," she says.

"Here, where, Mother?"

It isn't a question. It left me without the into-





nation of a question, and she answers without the intonation of an answer.

"Here."

She looks out of the window. The ashen-barked tree is there. The bare branches. September.

I hold the notebook for a while. Then I set it on the side table, next to the bevelled glass top, next to the water ring in the shape of a half-moon.

That night, I cannot sleep before 2:17.

IV.

I find the envelope inside the notebook the following morning — between the last pages of staves, thin, brown kraft paper, no address. Inside: three photographs.

THE PADLOCK GIVES AFTER SOME EFFORT. THE SHACKLE HAS RUST MARKS, BUT THE MECHANISM INSIDE WAS OILED RECENTLY — IT OPENS WITH LESS RESISTANCE THAN IT OUGHT TO AFTER SIXTEEN YEARS.

In the eleven photographs of Edric Voss that I carry in my head — that I have carried in my head for sixteen years, catalogued with the precision of someone who has reviewed them many times without having the physical object to hand — my father does not smile. Not in any of them. He always looked directly into the camera with an expression that, as a child, I read as severity, and that I now recognise as something else, though I have no name for that something else.

In these three photographs, he smiles.

They are old photographs, printed on glossy paper with white borders, the kind that used to be developed at the chemist before everything went digital. In the first, my father is standing in the back garden, beside the ashen-barked tree, holding a child who must be two, three years old. The child is me. Edric Voss smiles at the camera with his eyes slightly narrowed against the light, one hand resting on the trunk of the tree, the other holding my leg.

He smiles.

In the second photograph, he is alone, indoors, facing the violin on the wall. The photograph was taken from the side — he doesn't know he is being photographed, or he knows and doesn't mind. His arm is extended, his fingers resting lightly on the body of the instrument, not holding it. He smiles at the violin.

The third photograph is from the cellar.

Edric Voss is seated on a wooden chair, facing the concrete wall, with the violin at his shoulder and the bow raised. The photograph was taken from above, from the staircase probably, and captures only his back and the wall before him. On the wall, visible even through the granular resolution of the print, parallel marks at bow height. Few marks. Recent.

He is not smiling in this photograph. It is not possible to see his face.

On the back of the third photograph, written in pencil in the small, pressed hand of the notebook: Week 1.

I put all three photographs in my breast pocket.

The date printed in the lower right corner of the first photograph — as was customary — corresponds to when I was four years old.

V.

On the third night, I go down.

The screwdriver is in the kitchen drawer — second drawer, right side, beneath a roll of twine and a thirty-centimetre ruler. I haven't opened this drawer before. I open it now without thinking. My hand goes directly, the way one reaches for tools in one's own house.

The padlock gives after some effort. The shackle has rust marks, but the mechanism inside was oiled recently — it opens with less resistance than it ought to after sixteen years.

The cellar.

Concrete walls painted white at some point; now, the paint is yellowed and peeling in triangular flakes near the skirting. Raw cement floor. A workbench along the left wall — pine, oil-stained surface, with a cast-iron bench vice at





one end, turned wooden handle. On the bench: needle-nose pliers, cutting pliers, screwdrivers in three sizes, all rusted, but arranged in descending order of length in a wooden holder with hand-cut slots. An open fuse box, the ceramic fuses laid out beside it like extracted teeth. A coil of two-and-a-half-millimetre electrical cable, red sheathing, partially used.

In the centre of the cellar: a wooden chair. Rush seat, two holes in the rush on the left side. Four legs with damp marks at the base. Facing the far wall.

On the wall, directly before the chair: marks. Parallel, horizontal, at the height of a violin bow for a seated man. Not careless scratches — deliberate grooves, made hundreds of times along the same arc, deepened by accumulation. The paint gone. The concrete exposed. White dust settled at the base of the wall below the marks in a quantity that speaks of years.

There is no violin in the cellar.

I look at the marks for a while. Then I sit in the chair.

The concrete wall at this distance has an uneven texture — coarse aggregate showing through in places, smooth surface in others, a damp stain in the upper right corner in a shape I will not describe. The height of the marks is exactly level with my eyes when seated. Exactly.

My father was my height.

I go back upstairs. In the hallway, I stop in front of the sitting room. The violin on the wall is in a different position. The body has been slightly rotated — the top, previously facing directly into the room, now sits at perhaps fifteen degrees to the left. The bow hair, which was completely slack, is tensioned.

I don't touch the violin. I go to bed.

In the morning, Maren is better. She talks more. She eats breakfast without my having to reheat it twice. She asks me to sit beside her, and when I do, she takes my hand with her right hand — firm grip, cold fingers, nails cut close.

"He never stopped playing," she says.

"Mother."

"That's why I'm still here." A pause. She looks out of the window. "That's why you came back."

I look out of the window too. The Volvo V60 is still there. The MOT sticker is still expired. The ashen-barked tree — whose name my father would have known, and I never asked when there was still time to ask — has bare branches in September, and I think for the first time since I arrived that perhaps there is nothing wrong with the tree. Perhaps it is simply that species. Perhaps God made certain trees to sadden the landscape.

Maren squeezes my hand once and lets it go.

VI.

On the fourth night, I don't sleep.

I sit at the kitchen table with the score notebook open at the first page, trying to read what I never learned to read.

THE VIOLIN ON THE WALL IS IN A DIFFERENT POSITION. THE BODY HAS BEEN SLIGHTLY ROTATED — THE TOP, PREVIOUSLY FACING DIRECTLY INTO THE ROOM, NOW SITS AT PERHAPS FIFTEEN DEGREES TO THE LEFT.

The notes are black dots on five-line staves with a meaning I can recognise as existing but cannot access — like a language heard in childhood and lost before it could take hold. The Italian markings I understand. *Sempre legato*, always connected, no separation between the notes. *Con sordino*, with the mute — the small device that reduces volume and alters timbre, that makes the violin sound as though it is coming from inside something else.

At 2:17, the music begins.

It is a violin. Unmistakably a violin, played with correct technique and wrong intent. The right notes, precise fingering, the bow well-drawn, and yet, something fundamentally awry in the direction of the melody, like a familiar phrase spoken with the cadence of a different phrase entirely, the meaning shifted one degree without the words changing.

I recognise the melody.

It was a melody my father played when I was five, six, seven years old — at night, downstairs,





While I lay in bed. He said he had composed it. That it existed nowhere outside that house, that violin, those walls. I believed him because I was seven years old and there was no reason not to believe him, and then I stopped thinking about it because there were other things to think about, and then I stopped thinking about my father because there were other things to think about, and then I stopped.

I sit at the kitchen table and listen. And remember.

I remember that my father did not die in a workplace accident. He died in the cellar. The account Maren gave — electrical shock, an unremarkable hazard for an electrician, a domestic tragedy with no one to blame — was an account with the right structure and the facts arranged in an order that makes sense when sense is required of them. I was twelve years old. I was in the house that day. I was in my bedroom upstairs, doing what one does at twelve years old on a Saturday afternoon.

I HEARD IT FOR HOURS — THE SAME MELODY, REPEATED, WITH VARIATIONS THAT ONLY SOMEONE WHO KNEW IT WELL COULD HAVE IDENTIFIED AS VARIATIONS.

I heard the violin.

I heard it for hours — the same melody, repeated, with variations that only someone who knew it well could have identified as variations. Then the violin stopped. Then there was a silence of a specific duration I cannot quantify.

Then there was a sound that was not musical.

Then Maren came up the stairs.

If I stop, she goes.

I sit with that for a long time, at the kitchen table with the notebook open, with the music coming from the cellar below me, with the bow hair of the violin in the next room tensioned on a night when no one went into that room.

My father was not playing to keep my mother alive.

My father was playing to keep something at bay. And when he stopped — when he died, when the sound ceased on that Saturday afternoon — whatever it was did not wait outside.

I look at my hands on the score notebook. The fingers of my left hand are positioned on the paper in groups of four, the index finger separate, exactly as a violinist's fingers sit on the strings. I don't remember moving them like that.

I don't play the violin. I never have.

The music stops.

The silence is the same specific duration as that Saturday afternoon many years ago.

VII.

Dawn.

I am sitting on the wooden chair in the cellar, facing the marks on the concrete wall. The light coming through the gap at the top of the staircase door is that particular light of six in the morning in September — white and uncommitted, the light that makes no promises about the day to come.

I have no violin in my hands.

The fingers of my left hand are curved over the air, index finger separate from the rest, thumb held away as though bracing a neck that isn't there. My right arm is raised to shoulder height. The elbow slightly bent. The wrist in the position of someone drawing a bow in legato — without excess pressure, at a steady pace, the hair flat against an invisible string.

My feet are on the floor. I feel the cold cement through my socks. I feel the chairback against my spine. I feel the weight of my own body in the wood of the seat.

I feel all of this with the clarity of someone who has felt nothing for a very long time.

On the wall before me, the parallel marks at eye level. Some have a depth that took years to accumulate. Some are recent — pale concrete, white dust still at the base. Some have the exact width of bow hair from sixteen years ago, and some have the exact width of bow hair that was tensioned tonight.



Maren Voss is in the sitting room, by the window, with the mug I didn't make in hands that warmed it on a cooker she cannot reach. She is looking out at the street. The ashen-barked tree has bare branches. The grey Volvo V60 is parked opposite with its expired MOT sticker. The pavement has roots pressing up the slabs at angles no one has ever corrected.

She is smiling.

Not at the street. At the reflection in the glass — at what the window returns of the room behind her: the grey-blue velvet sofa, the side table with its bevelled top, the encyclopaedias that were never opened, the violin on the wall with its hair tensioned and its bow parallel to the body of the instrument.

The empty space beneath the violin, where a person would be standing if they were standing there, looking out at the street alongside her.

Maren Voss's smile is not one of relief. It is the smile of someone who has waited long enough to be past the need for relief.

It is the smile of someone who knew what time her son would arrive.

Callum Voss never described how he got to town. There is no car. There is no luggage. There is no telephone call to say he was coming. Maren said, "The room's just as he left it," before knowing he intended to stay. Sable did not greet Callum. She greeted only Maren. His cousin Theron didn't answer. Didn't call back.

Theron attended Callum's funeral. Sixteen years ago. The same week as Edric's. Callum did not come back to care for his mother. Callum was called back to play in his father's place. And the melody that Edric Voss claimed to have composed — that existed nowhere outside that house — goes on existing. In that house. In those walls.



About the author:

Oliver Quinto is a Brazilian horror writer and poet, art director and illustrator. His stories have appeared in *The Hemlock Journal*, *Remington Review*, *Journal de Folie* (UK), *Lemon Jelly Press* (UK) and *Berlin Literary Review* (Germany), as well as in numerous Brazilian anthologies.

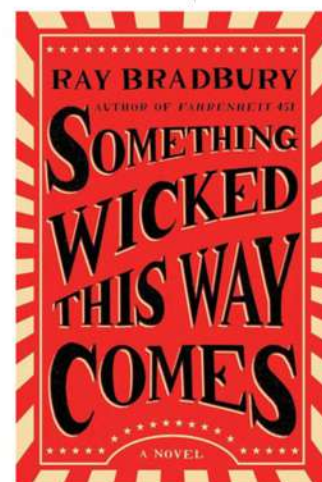


BOOKED FOR A FRIGHT

Spooky Night



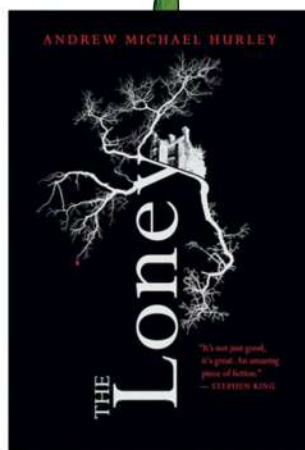
A stranger claims to be a werewolf and draws a Kolkata professor into a story that stretches back to Mughal times. Bloody and disconcerting, this is a Halloween pick for readers who like their monsters complicated and their dark fantasy to have teeth.



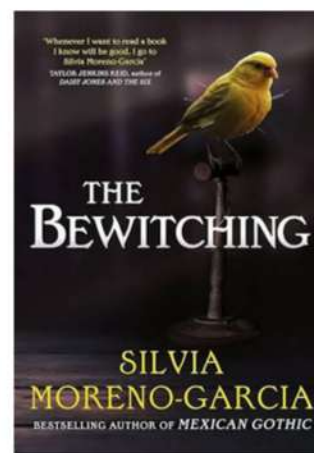
A mysterious carnival arrives in a small town shortly before Halloween, promising wonders that come at a terrible untold price. With its sinister fairground and dangerous wishes, Bradbury's novel captures the season's magic.



Familiar paths and quiet hill stations become unsettling territory in this collection of supernatural stories. These tales make excellent Halloween tasters: short enough to dip into between plans, but memorable enough to follow you on the walk home.



A devout Catholic family travels to a bleak, treacherous stretch of the English coastline in desperate search of a miraculous cure for their mute teenage son. A chilling story of religious fanaticism, local folk horror, and a dark secret to unpack on Halloween.



This multigenerational gothic horror novel spans three decades, tracing a malevolent witchcraft force. The story links a 1990s graduate student in Massachusetts, a 1930s college disappearance, and a 1908 Mexican family curse. Creepy, scary and supernatural enough for Halloween!



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AFTERWORD

BY L A NOLAN
CHIEF MANAGING EDITOR

It is common knowledge, clearly referenced in dark tomes and dusty grimoires, that All Hallows' Eve is the malevolent stepchild of the ancient Celtic festival of Samhain. During that dreary threshold, as summer slowly bled out and rotted away to lay the table for winter, after the last harvest had been gathered and stored, and while the night's creeping murk stretched ever longer to begin its haunting reign, the Celts believed the boundary between the living and the dead grew perilously thin. Quickly, the fires were kindled. Vigilantly, fearful eyes scanned each shadow for spirits, and no prudent soul ventured far from the hearth.

Then came the Church. During the sermons of fire and brimstone, it was a simple enough task to apply new names to old gods and see them transformed into monsters and ghouls.

Simpler again to proclaim ancient rites and rituals as devil worship or witchery. Samhain slowly yielded to All Hallows' Eve and All Saints' Day. Yet the antediluvian beliefs did not die. No. They lingered. They breathed. They took to ground and buried themselves in the sodden earth of Britain and Ireland, entombed themselves in tales of restless spirits, witches, and things that walked abroad after dark. They were reshaped into stories of dread, whispered, and shared, and feared, and loved, until generations of immigrants carried them across the Atlantic to the New World. There, in that great seething cauldron, this bygone night of ghosts and darkness was reborn. Turnips became pumpkins, disguises became costumes, and offerings to the dead became candy for the living. Bonfires became porch lights, and the babe grew, nurtured by their glow.

Halloween.

There are, of course, those who insist that Halloween is a time for frivolity. To them I say: utter rot. Halloween is a time for reading horror. In fact, it is the best time to revisit those ancient myths and legends, or explore new fictions, if that is what they are. Those whispers of dread, tales of the unspeakable, the unimaginable, and the unstoppable. Enigmas of terror that don't reason, don't pity, and don't feel remorse. They simply do what it is in their nature to do. For centuries, the masters of the craft, those evil tricksters, have led us into damp basements, cobwebbed attics, weathered castles, and reeking swamps. Into grim back alleys, old barns, abandoned hospitals, and overgrown graveyards. And oh... how we follow. Blindly. With childlike glee and innocence, we put our tiny hand into theirs, and sometimes, after as little as a single step, they bite it. Without fail, without guilt, without regret. One need look no



no further than the authors in this very publication to see pestilent grins with veins in their teeth. They've done their job, wouldn't you agree?

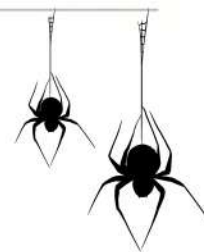
I extend my deepest thanks to the authors who lured us into the dark this time around, and to our guest author, who joined in... with fangs bared. And of course, thank you, dear readers, who gave their hands without hesitation, and who, I am sure, will come back with them bandaged for the winter issue.

It is my hope this special Halloween edition has honoured the oldest tradition of all. Long before the costumes, the candy, and the carved pumpkins, there was the fire, and the people gathered around it, telling each other what waited out in the dark. Not to summon it. To survive it. Because a fear that is named can be faced, and a fear that is shared becomes something very close to safety. But not quite.

I ask you to keep your porch light burning tonight. Not to melt the darkness away, but so that the darkness knows where to find you. After all, something is out there listening, and it is only polite to give it a story.

Happy Halloween!

L.A. Nolan





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GOODNESS IS ETERNALLY DIFFICULT."**

**— ANNE RICE
(INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE)**





HALLOWEEN SPECIAL
Autumn Edition 2026
Volume 1 Issue 3 – October

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