

The Sirens Call



Halloween 2023

issue 63

*A Dark Fiction
& Horror Zine!*

*Short Stories, Flash
Fiction, Poetry,
and Artwork*

*Mike Lera's
Corridor of Horror:
Buried, Yet Undead!*

*Featured Artist:
Gerrie Paino*

*Featured Project:
Final Guys Podcast*

*Featured Author:
L. Stephenson*

*Featured Book:
'The Boatmore
Butcher'*

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“Ethie, how do you think this lamp would look here?”

Jim Roland bellowed the question through the house only mere seconds after he barrelled through the front door carrying armfuls of what his wife liked to call ‘old junk’.

“I swear to Jesus if he’s spent any more of our retirement fund at one of those damn antique auctions...” his faithful spouse of 39 years muttered bitterly under her breath as she marched from the kitchen to find her husband propping the tall thing up in the corner of the downstairs hallway. “James Sebastian Roland!”

“Ethie!” Jim’s grin gleamed as he greeted her with arms wide open. “Look what I bought for you. Ain’t it the prettiest thing? Just like my gal.”

“You must be talking about the neighbor’s dog, because that thing is ugly!” Ethie quickly gave in to his hearty embrace as she frowned at the strange gift.

The lamp’s wooden stem was long and gnarled, but the shade itself was made of thick stained glass.

“Just what do you think you are doing, bringing this thing into my house?” she asked him without letting the lamp out of her sight. “You better not be bringing any trouble in here, Jimmy.”

“It’s not what you think, I swear to you.”

“Oh, so there is something?” Ethie pulled away from her foolish husband, planting her hands firmly upon her hips. “Go on then, what is it? I know you’re just dying to tell me.”

“Well...” Jim chuckled guiltily, “they say it once belonged to a very powerful woman. A witch, who could see into the past, the present, and the future.”

His wife held back laughter as she shook her head at him with pity.

“Hang your coat up, troublemaker,” Ethie said, thumping him playfully on the back of his shoulder. “Dinner’s ready.”

She turned to head for the kitchen when she was stopped by the sight of the lamp as it suddenly hunched to the side with a *CLINK!*

The shade was still shaking when Jim turned from the coat rack to find his wife standing frozen in the hallway.

“It’s just the door,” he chuckled with amusement as he pushed the entrance of their home to a close. “Come on, you superstitious old bird!”

He slapped her gently on the back before he put an arm around her and walked her into the kitchen.

The bulb inside the stained-glass shade flickered.

In the dead of night, a scream ripped through the house. Ethie flew upright in bed as she awoke to a prison of darkness. Choked by a breathless panic, she blindly searched the pitch-black walls of her bedroom for answers. The scream had come from somewhere downstairs, she realized as she rolled onto her side to stir her husband from his deep slumber.

But Jim wasn’t there. He wasn’t anywhere. Which could only mean that—

“Oh, Jimmy, no!” Ethie erupted from the covers.

She called her husband’s name as she approached the top of the stairs. The light from the landing illuminated the whole way down, from the top step to the corner of the hall below. The stained-glass shade of the lamp waiting for her at the bottom reflected the light above her as she slowly descended the staircase.

Ethie was halfway down when she peered over the railing to find Jim’s body laying still on the carpet floor.

“Jim!” she cried out.

But before she could take another step down, there was a tiny *pop* and the light from the landing went out. She clutched the railing with both arms, steadying herself while her frantic mind tried to figure out what to do next.

The stained glass from the lamp began to quake rapidly as the bulb inside came on. It glowed brighter and brighter, and brighter still until it was burning white.

Ethie held out a single hand to shield herself from its blinding glare as she marvelled at it with that irresistible morbid curiosity that festers within us all.

Then, that bulb also went out, leaving Ethie once again in darkness.

But it didn’t leave her alone.

And she knew it.

She could feel it, standing up there in the dark, looking down at her from the landing.

A tear ran down her cheek as she drew in a deep breath, and then she let out a long whimpering sigh as she slowly started to turn her head.

Donna Roland stood outside her mother's hospital room, her big, curly hair whipping back and forth as she fumed at her husband, Benny. Benny leaned against the opposite side of the corridor, scratching his thick, red moustache.

"I have never liked that neighborhood," his wife raged on. "I knew something like this was going to happen."

"I know, babe," Benny said sympathetically. "You called it. We need to get them out of there."

"How's your father doing?" Ethie asked softly from her hospital bed, the left side of her face bruised to a blackish purple.

"Doctor says his memory's a little spotty," Donna told her as she sat alone in that room with her mother.

"Your father will be fine, my dear," Ethie assured her.

"I can't let you go back to that house, Mom."

"I don't want to go back there." Ethie surprised her.

Donna narrowed her eyes at her mother as she found her response to be unusually compliant. "Mom... What happened to you last night?"

"Nothing that you'll pay any mind to," her mother said stubbornly.

"Fine!" Donna huffed as she got to her feet. "Don't tell me."

Ethie grabbed her daughter's arm as she turned to leave. "Your father brought something into that house."

"Mom, what are you talking about?" She tried to escape her mother's bony grip to no avail.

"Do you remember getting that feeling, when you're walking through your own home at night, and it feels like there's something behind you, following you. Something that wants to hurt you."

"You mean the thing that makes you run back to your room at night?" Donna nodded. "I remember. Hmph, I still do that sometimes. But Mom, it's not real."

"Donna," Ethie tugged on her daughter's wrist, "whatever you do...*don't look back at it.*"

Over the next few days, Donna's family packed Ethie and Jim's life together away into boxes. Everything except one particular item, at Ethie's request.

"You're not so bad lookin'," Donna said to the lamp a second after she switched the thing on.

Just then, her phone rang. She pulled the device out of her large faux-leather purse and tapped the speakerphone option to answer.

"Mariana, your timing is impeccable as always," she remarked sarcastically. "I've just arrived at grandma and grandpa's house."

"What are you doing there by yourself?"

Donna rolled her eyes at her daughter's concerned tone.

"I just wanted to get a few things that I forgot to take home with us," the woman sighed heavily as she set her purse down upon the side table beneath the hallway mirror.

Without a sound, the light from the corner lamp blinked out.

Donna froze.

"Mom, you shouldn't be in that house alone. I would've come with you."

But someone did come with her.

It followed her as she walked back to the lamp in the corner.

She raised the phone to her lips as she focused on the bulb in the center of the stained-glass lampshade.

"Mari, I'm gonna have to call you back, sweetheart."

Donna tapped the screen before her daughter could respond. She lowered the phone to her side and kept her eyes on the bulb as she tried to listen.

The floor creaked beneath her feet even though she hadn't taken a step, nor had she shifted her weight. Her hands clenched into fists and her spine straightened up as she got the sudden feeling that her mother spoke of; the feeling that there was someone standing right behind her.

She held her breath and listened harder.

There was a faint rasping noise coming from somewhere.

Wasn't there? Or was she too afraid to admit that she could hear someone else breathing under the growing sound of her thumping heartbeat.

She closed her eyes and waited, praying that she wouldn't feel their breath on the back of her neck.

For a moment, just a moment, she thought she heard a whisper.

Shivering, she shook her head and gasped for breath as she reached up and nudged the bulb with the tip of her finger. The lamp lit up once again, and that horrible feeling that she wasn't alone in that empty house was gone.

"Mom..." she sighed with a smile, embarrassed at herself for getting caught up in her mother's story.

As Donna turned to call her daughter back, the lamp clicked itself off.

"Goddamn it."

The stained-glass shade rattled as she tried to get it to work.

"What is it with this thing?"

She gasped as she heard something hit the floor to the side of her. She fumbled for her phone's flashlight and shone its beam down the length of the hallway. She found her purse drooping over the edge of the side table, its contents in a pile on the carpet.

There was something else there, and it wasn't behind her. It was right in front of her, standing just outside the light, looking back at her from the dark. Her beam almost found it when she turned to a creak from up on the landing.

Donna screamed as a pale crone-like figure came tearing down the staircase, its long wispy hair rippling out behind it as it thundered down each step.

The shock caused Donna to lose her grip on her phone, and as the light darted over the walls and across the carpet, she caught sight of a second figure crawling along the floor towards her like a human spider.

She leapt back with a cry of fright before she snatched her phone up and ran, hurtling herself towards the front door.

She stopped dead in her tracks when she discovered her mother and father, Ethie and Jim Roland, standing there side by side in their hospital gowns.

"Mom? Dad?" their daughter whimpered. "What's going o—"

Donna let out a blood-chilling shriek as something grabbed her from behind and ripped her back into the darkness of that house.

Donna Roland's head swam in shadow as she moved in and out of consciousness. She saw a flicker of candlelight. She heard groans of agony and anguish. She smelled the thick coppery aroma of freshly spilled blood.

"Donna!" her mother's voice called to her in a hushed whisper. "Wake up, girl!"

She slowly awoke to find herself and Ethie sitting across from one another at what appeared to be an old stone table in a darkened room with walls of shadow, but no doors or windows. They were each bound tightly to their chairs with thick rope, and their hands tied behind their backs. Jim was seated at the head of the stone table. His head was bowed forward as his face streamed with his own blood.

"Daddy!" she cried weakly to her father. "Daddy!"

"Donna," Ethie called again. "Leave him be."

"What happened to him?" her daughter demanded. "What is going on here?"

That's when she noticed the stained-glass shade from the lamp sitting in the center of the stone table.

"All this, because of some goddamn lamp!" Donna uttered as she shot her mother a grimace of confusion.

"Oh, sweetheart..." Ethie groaned as the spider figure stepped forward from the shadows and gently lifted the stained glass. "It's not a lamp."

The underside of the lampshade was the flesh of three old faces, stitched together to form a dome of wrinkled skin. A symbol was carved deep into the center of each of their foreheads. The first symbol depicted a sunrise. The second depicted a midday sun. The third and final symbol depicted a sunset.

One of the faces ran red with blood as its long-dead eyelids bore a pair of fresh new eyes.

Donna could only squeal at the sight in horror. Even as the old crone from the staircase lurched from the back and dug the glistening blade of a dagger into Ethie's eye socket.

"No! Mommy, no!" Donna howled as the witch handed her mother's eyes to her servant.

Obediently, the spider figure fitted them into place among the trio of dead faces.

Ethie's head lowered forward as she fell still.

"With her eyes, I see the present," the crone rasped, her long white hair draped over her face. Her long fingers danced and cracked through the air as they pointed to Jim. "With his eyes, I saw the past."

The candlelight caught the blade of the witch's dagger as she moved in on Donna. "And with your eyes, I will see the future!"

Benny and Mariana stood in the hospital corridor peering into Donna's room as she sat on the edge of her bed, facing away from them as she stared out the window.

"You always hear about stuff like this happenin' on the news," Mariana said quietly as she played with her long curly hair. "She'll never forgive herself for missing Grandma and Grandpa Roland's funeral."

"Be kind to your mother." Benny crossed his arms at his daughter. "She was forced to watch both her mama and papa die right in front of her..."

It was checkout time for Donna as Benny lifted her overnight bag onto his shoulder.

"You good to go, babe?"

"I'll be along in a minute," she told him. "I just need to wash my hands."

"Sure thing." Benny smiled as he kissed his wife on the cheek and left the room.

Certain that he was gone, Donna reached under her pillow.

She drew back the curtain that divided her from the snoring old woman that she shared her room with.

The woman awoke to the sound of a *CLINK!* as Donna replaced the shade of her bedside lamp with one made of thick stained glass.

"Oh, what a beautiful lamp," the old woman beamed from ear to ear. "Is that for me? How lovely!"

All Donna could think to do was smile at her before she went to leave the room.

"Thank you, dear, for my new lamp," the woman called after her.

"It's not a lamp," Donna told her.

"What was that?"

Donna hesitated for a moment, but then she said, "Nothing."

How could she tell her? She would've never believed her.

Donna Roland was just lucky enough to be leaving that hospital room with two good eyes...

...and her life.

About the Author:

L. Stephenson's writing has been haunting anthologies and eZines since 2018, the best of which can be found in his collection, *Candles, Bullets, & Dead Skin*. Graduating university with a degree in Film & TV Screenwriting, Stephenson released his first novella, *The Goners* in 2021: the beginning of a trilogy that is now his debut novel, *The Boatmore Butcher*, due September 2023 through Dark Ink Books.

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CANDLES, BULLETS, & DEAD SKIN

L. STEPHENSON

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

The new neighbours, who moved in only a couple of months back, were now called the bloody neighbours from forty-six. Katie, a newcomer herself, was standing at the end of her drive with the two women who lived on either side of her, discussing them.

“Didn’t you hear her shouting at him? It was going on for ages,” Sarah said to Katie.

Before she could answer, Rosy said, “And she was hitting, kicking and spitting on him. When he locked himself in his car to get away from her, she started kicking it. In the end, I called out from my window, asking him if he wanted me to call the police. It soon stopped after that—”

“It didn’t,” Sarah interrupted. “I could still hear them shouting when they went back inside their house.”

Apparently, *the bloody neighbours from forty-six* had come home from a bender at three in the morning, and were arguing about something or other, before the girlfriend went *Mike Tyson* on her boyfriend.

“I didn’t hear a thing,” Katie said. Which surprised her, considering she wasn’t sleeping well. Something strange was happening, which prompted her to look into sleep paralysis. The article she’d read said it was common, but not common if it happens frequently. The article mentioned nothing about a man standing over you while you slept.

“You must sleep like the dead then,”—Sarah pointed at her, then to all the houses within the Cul-de-sac—“because you’re the only one that didn’t hear them.”

“Nope, not a peep. And I haven’t been sleeping like the dead either. Do you two know anything about sleep paralysis?”

They both looked taken aback by the abrupt change of subject before Rosy said, “It happened to me a few years back. It’s scary because you can’t move or scream. I thought I was going to have a heart attack.”

Pleased that she wasn’t the only one, she asked, “Was someone standing over you when it happened?”

“Oh, no.” She shook her head. “Why do you ask?”

Even though Katie was new to Hailey Road, she felt at ease around Sarah and Rosy. They were easy going and open-minded, so she spoke freely.

“Every time it happens to me, I see a man in white standing in the corner of my bedroom.” She rubbed her hands down her face. “But this morning, he was standing beside my bed, over me.”

It sounded ridiculous, saying it aloud, and she waited for them to make fun of her. But they both just looked at each other, then at nothing in particular.

Sarah cleared her throat. “Did you read the story in the news about the couple who lived in your house before you? The couple who wanted to remain anonymous?”

“Not that anyone could remain anonymous around here,” Rosy said.

Katie shook her head. “What story?”

“They said their house was haunted, and the husband said he woke up to a ghost trying to cut his hair.” At that, they all giggled. Who wouldn’t?

“Really? My house?” Katie didn’t believe in that rubbish. We lived in a day and age, where all myths were now proven to be a hoax or scientifically explained. Even the sleep demon myth was now known as sleep paralysis. Although, she wouldn’t have known that had she not experienced it herself lately.

“They really believed it, too. The house was back on the market shortly after they moved in.”

Before Katie bought the house, she’d brazenly offered ten thousand below the asking price. A price that was already below the market value. She’d been beyond shocked when the owners accepted her offer on the same day, and now she knew why.

“How about the people who lived there before the couple?”

Rosy tilted her head to the side. “They weren’t there long either, come to think of it. No mention of a ghost, though.” She smiled.

Katie returned her smile. “And you won’t hear me mention anything about ghosts either. Just weird nightmares about a man in white.”

When she thought the subject was about to change to something a little lighter, Sarah asked her to describe the man’s white attire.

“Oh, umm. It’s just the top half that’s white. I think his trousers are black. Although, I’m not entirely certain because I can’t move my head to see, and when I’m no longer paralysed, he’s gone and everything goes back to normal.”

“Except your pounding heart,” Rosy added.

“True.”

“Describe the top to me,” Sarah repeated her odd question.

“I don’t know.” She shrugged. “It’s like what a doctor would have worn back in the day. Oh, I know. It’s like a tunic, something a beautician or a dentist would wear.”

“Like something a barber would have worn back in the day?”

“Yes, that’s right. Now that you’ve said it, he definitely looks like an old-school barber. He even had a comb in his front pocket.”

“Oooh, looks like the previous neighbours weren’t completely bananas after all.” Rosy said, then clapped her hands together. “Anyway, I have to get back to work. Would you grab me some rum-and-raisin ice cream when you go to Lidl?”

“It’s already on my list,” Sarah said.

“And you should wear a hat in bed from now on. You wouldn’t want to wake up to a buzz cut.”

Katie laughed, then sobered when she noticed that Sarah barely cracked a smile. Curiosity got the best of her, so after they said their goodbyes, she stepped in front of Sarah. “Tell me more about what the previous couple said.”

“Katie, don’t worry about it. It’s probably just a coincidence.”

“What’s a coincidence? Tell me. I don’t believe in all that ghost rubbish, anyway.”

Sarah took a moment before answering. “Years ago, before my time, a barber lived and worked in your house. If you look there,”—she pointed above her window—“you’ll see some bricks are more faded than the others. That’s where his sign was.”

Katie looked. “I hadn’t noticed that before. Maybe that’s where the couple got their story from.”

“Possibly. But you didn’t know about the barber, did you? So that doesn’t explain where you got your story from, does it?”

About the Author:

Kelly Barker was born in Oxford and now lives in Witney with her husband and dog, Lana. She has been a barber for over twenty years, and loves her job, however, reading and writing is her true passion—a passion handed down to her from her great grandmother, Isobel O’Leary.

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Inside the House | *Merry Marcellino*

I loved the isolated old house, empty for many years. I dreamed of repairing the dilapidated place and living here. People were afraid, but I couldn’t imagine why. Sure, the leafless trees were sparse and creepy in the winter. Sure, it creaked. It was old. All the house needed was love.

I tapped the wall as I looked for a spot to start tearing wallpaper. Hmm...warm. Placing my hand flat on the surface, I crinkled my brow.

“What on earth?”

Hands grasped me and pulled, slicing my arm as splinters of wood grabbed at me. I died in the wall, eyes wide, with the *others*, facing any newcomers who dare enter.

About the Author:

Merry Marcellino lives in New Jersey in the US and works a full-time job as the Coordinator of Ministries at her church, while writing in her spare time. She enjoys reading paranormal romance and currently has self-published her first novel, *Demons and Shifters and Me. Oh My!*

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It was the first night without adults. We'd reached the big time, trick or treating on our own. I was dressed as a zombie, not a very creative costume, clothes that were ripped up, taking a cork and burning the end, rubbing it on my face and hands. Then I put my sister's blush around my eyes.

"Not too shabby," I told myself in the mirror. The doorbell rang, and my gang said, "Trick or treat!" My sister Danielle put candy in their bags, calling me to say it was time to go. I saw that their costumes were lamer than mine and relaxed. Billy Farley was dressed like a giant candy corn, wearing a hooded sweatshirt of orange with a yellow hood. Andy was a ghost made from a bedsheet with the eyes cut out.

"Mike," the guys said as I grabbed a canvas bag and joined them on the porch.

"Where are we going tonight?"

"How about the churchyard?" Andy suggested.

"There's no candy there, numbskull," I said this to put Andy down, but I was afraid to go to the cemetery on Halloween night.

"Hey, let's go down Brewster Street. It's the nicest part of town, and there should be a lot of good candy, not the crappy stuff." We all agreed with Billy. Wealthy people gave out better candy. It was just the way it was.

We cut across the Mission Rose Garden at the entryway of Brewster Street, normally a gated community, but tonight they took pity on us peons and let everyone in for the holiday. We started on the left side of the street, went a short distance, and then came back up on the right. It was a huge subdivision, and there was plenty of kids and action. Everyone had thrown themselves into the spirit. Lawns with scarecrows and dry ice cauldrons being stirred with boat oared witches. One guy was even screaming while a real fire boiled water in the kettle. How did they do that? We wondered.

We turned the corner and went down the next block. Running back and forth takes a lot out of you, not to mention the mile it took to walk here. I looked down. My bag was pretty full, and I figured I'd be in a diabetic coma by eleven o'clock tonight.

"Are you guys ready to go? We still have a mile to walk home, yet." Andy agreed, but Billy, no, he wanted to keep going.

"Guys this is only one night out of the year, and we don't have to be home until 9:00." He was right, of course. How could I let a detail like exhaustion stop me from collecting more goodies? Andy and I went along with it. At 8:30, we called it quits because we still had a mile to walk home yet. We trudged single file down the sidewalk. A car pulled up off the road.

"Guys, do you need a lift?" It was Coach Bentley. Wow, a ride sounded good right about now. I knew he lived on Brewster Street, so he must have been driving home. He had a couple of kids already in the car. We looked at one another, and all ran for the window seats in the back.

"Thanks, Coach." We climbed into the car and were reassured when he told us to buckle up. Yes, he was a caring adult.

"Did you guys get a good haul?" I asked one of the two kids in the front seat, but neither of them said anything. Coach pulled onto the road, asking our addresses, which we gave him.

"Did you guys get a good haul?" I asked louder, tapping the kid in the middle, who was sitting in front of me. He fell over onto the other kid, who hit the door with a thud. We screamed.

Coach Bentley wasn't a nice guy, the seatbelts were missing the flip tops, and the door handles had been removed from the back seat.

About the Author:

Dawn DeBaal lives in rural Wisconsin with her husband, Red, a dorky dog and a stray cat. She has published over 600 drabbles, short stories, and poems in online ezines and anthologies. She co-wrote a novel under the pen name of Garrison McKnight, was nominated for 2019 Pushcart Award by Falling Star Magazine, runner up in the 2022 Horror Short Story Contest.

Amazon Author Page: [Dawn DeBaal](#)
Facebook: [All the Clever Names Were Taken](#)

John instinctively reached for the pack of cigarettes that had always laid next to the glass of water on his nightstand. Until recently, he was trying to quit smoking. Frustrated, he grabbed the glass and took an aggressive gulp. He placed the glass back down with a hard thud, splashing water over the top of the nightstand.

“Goddamn it!” he grumbled.

He cleaned the spill with his shirttail, while wiping his nose with his fist, the knuckles scraping his nostrils in that way that hurts just enough to feel good.

“I need a fucking smoke,” he grumbled.

He grumbled a lot here lately. He grumbled more than a man his age should. He grumbled so much he was grumbling about his grumbling.

“Goddamn it,” he said as he turned the lamp on, “I really need a fucking smoke.”

The welcoming burn of the inhale, the relaxing cooling of the exhale. He needed the feeling of the familiar smoke in his lungs. His hands shook as he grew more agitated. He told himself he would quit, but there he was right this moment, grabbing the pack of cigarettes he knew were in the top drawer of the nightstand.

His eyes misted over with disappointment as he pulled the cellophane off the pack. Despite his failure with his New Years’ resolution, he yanked the cellophane off as eagerly as a child with a Christmas gift. He crumpled it and threw the trash down onto the floor.

Eyes glowing with excitement and anticipation, he pulled a cigarette from its resting place, waking up the tobacco flavors from its slumber.

He had a moment, one small almost nonexistent moment, where he thought about putting it down. He struck the match and as the sulfur burned he touched the tip of the filter into his mouth and pulled in the flame, lighting the end.

The cigarette screamed.

It let out an ear-deafening scream.

He jerked with panic, dropping the cigarette to the floor. The cigarette began to unroll itself, the filter detaching as a green pus-like liquid seeped out from between the two. Strains of tobacco began to pulse, to vibrate, and wiggle. They then began to crawl, and inch forward toward John.

“Oh shit, oh shit,” John yelled.

Flames leapt out of the discarded book of matches. Cigarettes began to inch their way out of the pack on the nightstand, rolling down to the floor where they too began to unroll and detach themselves.

“Oh shit, oh shit.”

He stood there frozen with fear as the papers began to split and break.

Tiny legs reached out.

They all resembled smoke as it rushed toward him. There was a horrible sound coming from John as their mouths opened wide. Wider, and still yet somehow wider. In the center was a rotten blackness, spiraling out and swirling toward John’s ice-clogged state.

He fell as he turned to run, his movements not catching up with his mental response.

As the darkness came closer he looked around frantically, in search of anything to help him ward off this demonic entity.

His eyes fell on the label of the cigarettes right before he saw no more: *May Be Hazardous To Your Health.*

About the Author:

Carietta Dorsch currently lives in North Carolina. She can see the horror in anything and loves every sinister detail. She loves all things horror and true crime. She's been a fan of horror ever since watching *Scream* at the age of eight, and her all-time favorite horror film is *Sleepaway Camp*.





KOHLER HALL

65

Free Candy | Gabriella Balcom

Opening the door of her hut, Baba Yaga stepped outside and waved a hand at her home.

Ten-year-old Andi skipped along hours later. She gasped, seeing the cookie-shaped house covered in treats and 'Free Candy' sign.

Sweets were everywhere inside, and she stuffed handfuls into her mouth.

Baba Yaga appeared before her, ripped off the girl's right arm, and sucked the bloody end before devouring it. Andi collapsed, screaming hysterically.

Using a long, jagged fingernail, the witch beheaded her, cackling as blood spurted out. Baba Yaga gnawed straight through the child's skull and into the brain, eagerly smacking her lips.

In the Cemetery | Gabriella Balcom

"You sure about this?" Art demanded.

"It's Halloween and we're dressed like monsters, remember?" Cyril replied. "How would you feel if one appeared unexpectedly?"

"I'd be scared."

"Exactly. Come on."

The teenagers grinned at one another and hid behind tombstones. They popped up again and again, terrifying passers-by, who ran away screaming.

With no warning, the nearby ground opened. Dead people crawled out, their eyes glowing black. Some were skeletal. Rotting flesh fell from others' bodies.

Art and Cyril panicked, trying to flee.

The dead caught them, pulling them into the earth. The ground closed as if nothing had occurred.

The Halloween Prank | Gabriella Balcom

Jack chuckled.

"Quiet!" Victor hissed. "You'll give it away."

Young children soon walked by. "Ghost!" some screamed when a white shape flew toward them. Others burst into tears, and they all fled.

Since the phantom was Victor's drone covered with a sheet, he and Jack laughed their heads off.

But they fell silent as another ghost floated in their direction.

"Who's doing that?" Jack demanded.

No one responded, but more apparitions appeared, surrounding them.

Victor grabbed for one, but his hand went through it.

Blanching, he dashed away, Jack at his heels.

The ghosts swarmed the boys, and both vanished.

Trick or Treat | Gabriella Balcom

"Your turn." Ami eyed the next house.

"Okay." Dalton rang the doorbell.

The man who opened the door had skin peeling from his face, an ear missing, and one eyeball hanging from its socket.

"Great costume," Ami enthused. "We're zombies this year, too."

"Trick or treat," Dalton added. Pulling a rubber 'finger' from his pocket, he chewed it. "Yum, yum."

"I. Want. Flesh." Ami spoke in a monotone, then pretended to gnaw on her companion's arm.

"Not bad, but I can do better," the man commented. He lunged toward them, grabbing and yanking them inside. "I'm not wearing a costume."

Phineas rolled his eyes as the scratching sound traveled from behind him to his right, growing louder as it moved. "That's lame," he muttered, not bothering to turn around and look for the source. He glanced at his wristwatch, realized it was later than he'd thought, and frowned, quickly striding out of the room.

"The Meyer family moved from Pennsylvania to Texas in 1847," the tour guide shared a few minutes later. "George Meyer was a wealthy merchant, and he and his wife, Portia, had two daughters, Karina and Tabitha. The Meyers built this home in 1848. Sixteen-year-old Karina fell in love with the housekeeper's son, Alistair. He was eighteen. They met in secret and wanted to get married, but Karina's parents refused. They planned a match between her and the son of a successful financier."

"Did Karina and Alistair run away together?" a woman to Phineas' right asked. A dreamy expression crossed her face. "I hope so. I love happy endings."

"According to lore, that's exactly what they'd planned to do. But Karina's parents found out. Her father locked her in her room and nailed wood over the outside of her window, so she couldn't get out that way either. He kicked Alistair and his mother out. A constable escorted them out of town and threatened them with incarceration if they ever returned. When Karina learned her beloved was gone, she hung herself in her bedroom."

"That's the one we're in, isn't it?" another woman asked, voice squeaking.

"Yes," the guide confirmed.

The woman's husband told the other guests, "We asked which rooms were the most haunted when we called for reservations. That's why we chose that one."

"Throughout the years, Karina has been heard wailing and pounding on the door, calling for Alistair," the guide continued. "Some visitors have seen her walking the stairs and hallways. Others have seen her body hanging from the light fixture. It's believed that..."

Several people voiced their hope to see and hear the ghost.

Phineas almost scoffed but clamped his lips together. It wouldn't do to give away the reason for his presence; people would find out soon enough.

Resuming his spiel, the guide said a little girl had drowned in a tub in one room. A family had been murdered in a second. One man had leaped to his death from the roof, another having drowned in the nearby pond.

The stories were based on actual events according to Phineas' research. But he was sure the 'haunted' parts were sheer drivel spread to ramp up the Meyer House's reputation as one of the most haunted places in Texas.

Once the tour ended, he had a quick lunch before returning to his room. He flinched when a roach scurried from underneath the dresser, making its way across the room. The thing vanished once he stomped on the floor. He reasoned it must've skittered into a gap between floorboards.

Warm air blew on the back of Phineas' neck and he whirled around. Seeing no vent or opening behind him, he examined the wall and floor, found no hole, and scowled.

A blast of icy-cold air hit his face. He flinched, blinking rapidly as more blew into his eyes. Something cool touched his arm, but nothing was there.

"Not bad," he murmured grudgingly. "You have a few tricks up your sleeves, but I'll work out how you do them and expose the scam." He jotted down possible explanations for how things were staged.

Distant screams brought him surging to his feet, though. He charged down the hall, almost bumping into the woman who'd rented Karina's room. Her face was flushed, chest heaving as she babbled incoherently. Her husband hurried toward them, face revealing his cluelessness.

Once she calmed down enough to form proper words, she revealed, "I took a bath, and when I came out, she was standing at the door — Karina, I mean. She was crying like her heart was broken. I said, 'I'm so sorry, you poor dear,' but she changed from a sweet, sad girl into a rotting corpse and came straight at me. I almost had a heart attack. I thought she was going to kill me."

Phineas got the woman's permission to look around her room, and concluded the images she'd seen had probably been projected from a vent up high on the wall. Everyone chattered in the hallway, so he stood on a chair and used his pocketknife to remove the cover. But all he found was thick dust with no evidence of a projector or of the vent being disturbed in years.

The rest of the evening passed uneventfully, except for one couple reporting a chill in one corner of their room, despite the rest being warmer.

Chest growing tighter by the second, Phineas struggled to breathe. Something was around his neck, cutting off his air supply. He clawed at what felt like a cord or rope, tried to loosen the thing, but it merely tightened more. He wasn't in bed anymore, but dangled from the ceiling fan above it, spinning round and round.

"How could you leave me, Alistair?" a female voice whispered, ragged with anguish and tears.

Phineas opened his eyes and sat up, gasping for air. He looked around wildly and it took a few moments before he realized he was in bed. Although he knew he'd been dreaming, his heart wouldn't stop racing. The rope around his neck had felt so real, just as real as hanging and being unable to breathe.

Had the power of suggestion caused everything he'd experienced? Maybe there was a darker explanation. Meals and drinks were included in the overall cost and could've been laced with a hallucinogenic drug. That would certainly explain everything.

"You may fool me once," Phineas grouched. "Maybe twice. But no more. I'm not eating here anymore."

He waited until 2:45 AM before quietly heading for the basement. It was off-limits to visitors due to the central heat and air system supposedly having problems. A sign on the locked door proclaimed 'KEEP OUT' but he picked the lock.

It didn't take Phineas long to conclude he'd wasted his time. He found the heat and air system, but no sound equipment, cameras, projectors, or anything to prove the staff were behind the 'paranormal' experiences.

That left the attic.

But he fumed after leaving it. He saw TVs and ancient fans there, but nothing even remotely like a sophisticated set-up to fool people into thinking the place was haunted.

Disgruntled, Phineas returned to his room. A spider dropped onto his chest, and he gasped. He knocked it off, stomped on it, and glared at the pulverized body before sighing, shoulders drooping. His editor would stomp all over him if he returned without a story or concluded the allegedly paranormal events were real.

An idea popped into his head and he perked up. If drugs were being added to visitors' meals, maybe they were in the kitchen. And, he could sneak a look in the manager's office.

He found the office unlocked. Scant files were in an old filing cabinet but they weren't useful. His search of the kitchen was equally disappointing. No drugs were anywhere.

Rubbing his forehead, Phineas wracked his brain. Could the innocent labels on food containers contain other ingredients? He sampled some but they were exactly what the labels claimed.

A scratching sound came from his left, similar to what he'd heard the day he'd arrived. He smiled faintly, crept toward the noise, but took an involuntary step backward when it suddenly came from all directions at once. The scratching grew more frantic, a low growling accompanying it, and he retreated more and more, bumping into the wall.

Something shoved him violently from behind, almost sending him to his knees. He managed to stay upright, however, and couldn't keep from grinning. *Now* he understood. Some of the walls weren't solid. Confident about his conclusion, he examined the wall. But no matter how high or low he reached, he couldn't find any joint lines, secret compartments, or soft places. The wall seemed to be completely solid and normal in every way.

Phineas gritted his teeth, so infuriated he could've chewed nails. Miserable frauds. He didn't know how they'd pulled their shenanigans, but he'd figure it out if it was the last thing he did.

"*Lastlastlastlastlastlastlastlastlast*," voices around him whispered, but it didn't dawn on him that they'd plucked the word from his mind.

"Shut up," he retorted. Microphones must be hidden throughout the house. It didn't matter if staff had discovered why he was there, because he wasn't backing down. Not now, not ever. He'd come to debunk the alleged paranormal activities, and debunk them he would.

A man's head materialized across the room and flew straight at Phineas. He raised his arms to cover his face, but the head passed by his shoulder. He lowered his hands as a woman in white stepped out of the wall beside him. Lips trembling, he tried to find his voice, but couldn't make a sound. She walked toward him, ghostly eyes wide with terror, but sank into the floor.

Hands reached out of the walls, vanishing almost immediately. Two extended down from the ceiling, attached to impossibly long arms that stretched out toward him.

Phineas refused to run, certain he was on the verge of discovering something important. The Meyer House staff must've made tons of money by faking spooky events, and making the place appear haunted. They wouldn't have gone to all this trouble for any other reason. He was sure of it, and just needed to figure out *how* they were doing it.

Blood seeped from the fingers above him and trickled onto the floor. Impressed despite himself, Phineas snickered, and stooped to study what he was sure was another projected image.

However, when he touched the expanding red puddle, his fingers came away smeared in red. After taking a sniff, his breathing sped up. The substance smelled like coppery blood. Taking slow, deep breaths, he remained convinced this was a set-up. He had to do something, but what? Then it came to him. Grabbing one of the dangling hands, he yanked. It resisted for a second or two before coming loose so abruptly he lost his balance. He landed on his bottom, the arm in his hand.

He examined it, turning it this way and that. Amazingly, it felt solid and real but stunk like rotting flesh. Maggots oozed from the skin, wriggling onto him, and he couldn't hold back a shriek. He dropped the arm and it vanished before it hit the floor.

Something he couldn't see grabbed his left shoulder, and he had to fight to get loose.

Phineas couldn't stay calm, despite his former determination to find the answers. Sheer terror welled up inside him and he panicked. He opened his mouth but nothing came out. Fleeing the kitchen, he ran down the hall toward the front door as fast as he could, but hands shot out of the walls on either side of him. He managed to evade the first few, but more seized him by his left arm and shirt, dragging him to them. More and more grabbed at him. Unable to get loose, he screamed for help, begging for someone — anyone — to save him. But the hands were relentless. Phineas was still screaming when they pulled him into a wall, and everything went silent.

Voices rang out from all directions as the other guests and employees of Meyer House came out of their rooms to see what was going on. The manager looked as if he'd awakened from a dead sleep, rubbing his eyes and yawning more than once. Some of his staff looked equally exhausted.

Moments later, Phineas stepped out of a wall several feet behind them, face expressionless. Nobody noticed, and he joined the crowd in the foyer.

"Who was yelling?" The male guest's voice carried above the panicked chatter.

"I don't know," the manager replied, eyes troubled. "If everyone could please step outside, my staff and I will look around."

"No way," the man replied. "Whoever that was sounded like he was being murdered."

"I think we should stick together," a woman suggested.

"All right." The manager shrugged. "But let me do a quick head count first." He did, but no one was missing. "Follow me."

He, the staff, and the guests trooped from room to room, but found nothing amiss.

One week later

"His employer said he didn't return to work," Officer Bellamy stated. "He was supposed to a few days ago."

"I don't know what to say," Jon, the manager of Meyer House, said. "Phineas Wayne paid for a week, then left." He retrieved the old ledger from the foyer, flipped through pages, and pointed to an entry. "I keep electronic records, too, but this is a book I leave out for guests. They can list their names and addresses to be added to our mailing list, or write comments. The day Phineas checked out, he wrote this and dated it."

Bellamy read the entry, which was complimentary, snapped a picture with his phone, and returned the ledger to Jon. "Did he mention plans to go somewhere else?"

"Not that I recall, but quite a few people come through here. You're welcome to talk to my staff if you want. They might remember something I don't."

At the police station, Officer Bellamy leaned back in his chair. "As far as I can tell, no one had any cause to hurt the man. His editor said he went to Meyer House to prove the hauntings were fake, but no one there knew that. Even if they did, he'd talked to his editor a couple times and hadn't found anything to back up his suspicions."

"I've checked with the surrounding businesses," his partner, Officer Yurtz replied. "Two of them have cameras and surveillance. I got one set of recordings and the other set will be delivered soon."

"Well, let's look at one you have."

Four hours later

"There he is, leaving Meyer House." Bellamy pointed at the screen.

“You sure?” Yurtz rewound the tape, leaning in for a closer look. “Ah, I see him. You’re right. He was facing the camera when he talked to the cab driver. This matches up with the other surveillance we watched.”

“But get a load of his eyes,” Bellamy commented, chuckling. “They look like they're yellow and glowing.”

“That's neat. A trick of the light, I think.”

“His editor was wrong, thinking the Meyer House folks did away with him. We can see for ourselves he's healthy and leaving on his own accord.”

“I guess he made other plans without telling his boss. Maybe he couldn't face that he didn't find anything.”

Bellamy nodded. “We'll check with the cab driver to see where he was dropped off, even though it's a waste of time.”

“A *total* waste.” Yurtz snorted. “I'm sure he's fine, wherever he is.”

About the Author:

Gabriella Balcom lives in Texas with her family and writes fantasy, horror, romance, sci-fi, literary fiction, children's stories, and more. She has had 400+ works accepted for publication, and has five books published: *On the Wings of Ideas* (multi-genre), *Worth Waiting For* (romance), *The Return* (sci-fi), *Free's Tale: No Home at Christmas-time* (contemporary) and *Down with the Sickness and Other Chilling Tales* (horror).

Facebook: [Gabriella Balcom](#)

Apple Blossom Time | RJ Meldrum

She died in May, when the apple trees were full of blossom. She died on a sunny day, watching the white petals fall like snow onto the lawn outside the window. She died trapped in bed, surrounded by machines and monitors; she wasn't able to walk across the grass, she couldn't dance amongst the falling blossom.

Her death was so unexpected and happened so fast he had no time to prepare. The loss devastated him. For months after, he wandered the house they had shared, mindlessly talking to himself; trying to make sense of this new, unwelcome life. He locked himself away from the outside world, unable and unwilling to share his grief. Thoughts of her dominated every waking moment.

Months passed in a blur, his emotions raw. He sought for closure, sought a sign she was at peace. It happened in late Fall. Her favorite holiday was Halloween; she'd always loved it and insisted on decorating the house and welcoming trick-or-treaters. This year, he just couldn't handle it, so the house was left in darkness and undecorated. The morning after, on the first day of November, he rose from a disturbed sleep. Bleary eyed and hungover, he stood in the lounge and stared out at the front garden. She'd died in this room and this was the last view she'd had. But it wasn't May anymore and the view was brown, grey and barren. He felt tears pricking his eyes.

Suddenly, the apple trees were covered in blossom. He watched as the petals fell onto the grass. This was the sign he had prayed for. The one he needed to start moving on with his life. She had come back to tell him everything was okay.

For Sally

About the Author:

RJ Meldrum has been published by Culture Cult Press, Trembling with Fear, Black Hare Press, Smoking Pen Press, Breaking Rules Press, and James Ward Kirk. He's had stories in *The Sirens Call* eZine, the *Horror Zine* and *Drabblez Magazine*. His novellas “The Plague” and “Placid Point” were published by Demain Press in 2019 and 2021.

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It happened in a Mexican village, the kind known as Pueblos Mágicos, magic towns.

Like hand-painted Easter eggs, each magic town was similar yet unique.

Some nested on the shores near oceans bluer than the turquoise necklaces the old women hawked to tourists on white sand beaches.

Others were high in desert mountains where deep canyons seared the dry ground. Once a year, when the rains came regular as sunrise, the arroyos rushed with water, turning the barren hills green. On rocky crags barbed cactus exploded in delicate fragrant blossoms that lasted but a single night.

A few dotted the midlands, cobbled streets circled rocky hills like spiraling orange peels. Weathered crucifixes shaded rutted lanes.

All were small ancient places unchanged by the passing of centuries.

In these towns anything might happen. Lightning might strike twice in exactly the same place. Children would dream of flight and awaken to torn shirts, their floor littered with Flamingo-pink feathers.

In other towns nothing happened. And in this town of which I speak, it was nothing that made it magic. A nothing so perfect bluebirds roosted on the ground. Fledglings could hop out of their nests and stroll into the forest to search for worms, without even bothering to spread their wings. It was a nothing so undisturbed even the roosters didn't crow at night, which as anyone who's ever been to Mexico can tell you is very nothing indeed.

It was a nothing so peaceful that bulls never fought. No-one spurred the naked feet of birds and made them fight. No-one could conceive of an idea so cruel and unnatural. Stray dogs were well fed. Not one had mange or fleas. There were no stray cats, all had homes and were so fat and sleepy they did not bother to catch birds. This was a good thing, because as I've mentioned, the birds preferred to walk.

The only beings not wholly content in this place where nothing was magic were the worms and the old witch woman, Yadira Arevalo, who lived beneath a worn stone bridge that arched over a barren arroyo.

Each magic town has its individual customs. In this one, in the *Zocalo*, the central square, hundreds of piñatas dangled above narrow streets, over clay skeletons and skins of cardboard, bright loops of tissue paper clothed burros and lions. Brilliantly colored Micky Mouses and grinning demons swayed perilously in the gentlest of breezes. Every year on the first night of Día de Muertos, the piñatas were smashed.

On that night the children, faces painted like grinning skulls, were blindfolded. They spun round and round. Shrieking with joy they twirled, swinging hard wood bats, hoping to smash ceramic bones and release candied guts into the streets. The tiniest girls were always the most vicious.

Día de Muertos lasted two days. These were spent gardening and picnicking on ancestral graves. Children offered up pinwheels and candy. Women cooked for weeks and baked for months in preparation. Men brought their finest cigars and tequila to share with the beloved dead.

But one year, in this pueblo where nothing happened, something extraordinary took place. The first night of Día de Muertos came twice.

Afterward no one remembered the second coming, no one except for Yadira Arevalo.

After all, she had summoned it. For years she had saved the bones of fragile creatures, and distilled the juices of rare orchids. For decades she had hoarded the tears of young girls, and kept the cries of woman who died in childbirth safe in airtight Mayan baskets.

Late, late at night, after the piñatas had been pulverized, the sweets collected, and most eaten. When children slumbered fat and happy in their beds. When parents dozed exhausted by the reveries. Yadira gathered all the pieces of the shattered piñatas and carried them off to her home beneath the bridge.

Under the white full moon she sliced off the tip of the little finger on her left hand, and mixing it with tears, and pain, and bones, made offerings to the ancient gods of death and carnage. In the stillness of the village the gods listened. In the calm of the nothingness they came. Swiftly as desire they turned the clocks back.

Yadira stuffed the broken piñatas with dreams as colorful as the tiny woven dolls peddled by indigenous women in the *Zocalo*. She wove them back together with tendons of memory, readying them for the second first night of Día de Muertos. She wiped the town's memories clean as newly sewn communion frocks.

Beneath a second full moon, the blindfolded children swung wooded bats, harder than reality, shattering the inner clay. Dreams poured out, dispersing like sparks before reaching the ground, clouding the air with the acrid scent of desire.

The magic gushed through the streets, dangerous as sudden rains in the deep dry arroyos that surrounded the towns.

A boy wishing for a pony might arrive home to discover his house a stable. A man craving wealth would find his wife turned to gold. A girl wishing for a husband could find herself betrothed to an *anciano* older than her grandfather.

Amelia, a visiting American, was swept away by the unexpected deluge of dreams made manifest. She had been strolling the winding streets, wishing for an exotic romance even though Matt, her childhood sweetheart, waited back home.

Matt was as faithful as an albatross – birds so true they will circle the world to return to their mates. But Amelia was not thinking of Matt. She was not anticipating her homecoming. Instead, she was imagining muscled brown arms and glossy black hair.

Stumbling into the *Zocalo* she fell, deep and hard as the wooden piñata shattering bats, for the first man she saw. He had soft night hair, eyes dark as secrets, and was strumming a silver guitar.

Amelia couldn't understand the lyrics, but it was clear he was playing a love song. She didn't know that *desamor* meant not love but heartbreak. She didn't realize that desire provides a sandy foundation for anything lasting. Although Amelia was majoring in music, she didn't notice that he was out of tune.

She didn't stop to investigate or she might have discovered that the musician already had a wife, a mistress, and twelve children scattered round the country messy as sugared *pan dulce*.

Instead, she marched right up to him and laid her fingers on his strings. The man smiled up at her, and who would not? She was twenty-three and blond as sunlight.

The silver in his molars added gleam to his grin. Amelia was dazzled.

Things are going to go badly, you can already tell. But what is a story, or indeed a life, without difficulty? Misadventure is more interesting than happiness. It is why angels are boring and God is a bore. It is why heroes are unmarried and seductress smell sweeter than ingénues. The devil has better stories, and everyone knows he's a better musician. God hands out harps to anyone who'll take them, but the devil chooses his instruments with care.

Ricardo's smooth hands stroked cords in Amelia's chest she didn't even know existed. She tasted red wine, and inhaled the heady scent of night cactus.

She forgot Matt, even though they had been born only four days apart and had been friends from before the time of memory.

Ricardo glistened, inviting as a warm ocean. She didn't realize that he was too flashy for everyday wear. He was a piece of cheaply gilded jewelry that would slip through your fingers leaving them glittering but empty.

Amelia moved in with Ricardo, although he did not move in with her. He found her a job teaching English at a private school in town. He'd visit once a week then depart with a kiss sweet as lemon-aid.

"I must leave you now my darling," he'd say. "My heart breaks every time I do, but I must travel to the city to play."

"I could come with you," she said. "I hardly make any money at that school. I'm sure I could make more doing translations on-line."

"If only you could, my love, my life would be complete – but alas the children need you, and you would never desert them. You are selfless, darling."

Amelia hated the children. They were as rich and as rotten as week old menudo. She was poisoned by guilt.

Meanwhile Matt wrote. He sent daily email, texts and skyped. Amelia blocked her ears with wax and disconnected her internet.

He sent carrier pigeons who winged their way from the Midwest to the middle of Mexico, collapsing exhausted on Amelia's porch, hearts beating faster than a hummingbird's. Amelia ignored them.

At dusk Yadira crept out from under the bridge and carried them home. She wrung their necks and drained their blood into old salsa jars for use in love potions. Plucking off their tattered feathers, she roasted their naked bodies over Matt's unread epistles. The burnt words drifted into the night, making young girls dizzy with the smell of heartbreak and longing.

Matt waited but his birds did not return. He had read of pigeons navigating wars and across oceans to return to their mates, but his it seemed, were as faithless as Amelia.

Matt had always played the guitar, now with nothing to distract him he began to write and record songs. Plucking his battered guitar, he whispered into the mic as if it were a lover.

“When I call your name only wind replies
The words scald my tongue and that’s no lie
Your memory tastes like sorrow and regret
No matter how I try I can’t forget.
I call your name only wind replies
I call your name and hear only sighs.
I know I will never find another you
But you, you will never find another me
You’ll regret it girl
Don’t forget me girl
I’m alone in the night I don’t know why.
I love you babe that’s no lie.”

Matt’s music went viral. Asian girls swooned over his blond hair and round blue eyes, so different from their own. Latin girls appreciated his lack of machismo, so different than their fathers’. African girls admired the way his fingers drummed, faster than cicadas, round the smooth heart of his instrument.

Yadira collected the sorrow in these songs and the yearning they inspired. She wove them into colorful ribbons which she gave to unmarried girls. They were charms, she said, which would be sure to draw husbands. And they did. She did not mention that trinkets made from regret and bad decisions almost never attract true love. She did not tell them that a wedding is not an end but a beginning.

The married girls did not talk either. They were too busy at home, cooking, cleaning and caring for children. They were too embarrassed to show their bruised faces, split lips and battered limbs.

Because this is a story and not life, you might expect Amelia to hear Matt’s music. She would return and battle for her man, driving away his pretty, adoring, but essentially vapid, groupies.

But, because sometime fiction is almost as hard as life, especially when a witch is involved, this did not happen. Instead, Amelia got pregnant and Ricardo abandoned her.

Matt’s fame grew, he collected girls like charms for a bracket, but never opened his heart.

In the village where all had been content save Yadira and the worms, now only Yadira was satisfied.

She had become strong from the music of misery. She was a muse to the melancholy, a genius to the grieving. Under her inspiration romances turned to tragedies, and comedies blackened. Even the lightest work developed a Russian flavor. On the pages of books; lovers quarreled, children sickened, and the dog always died.

Thus, the town that had been magic for nothing, became a center for art and heartache.

Matt, whose songs had become increasingly depressing, went out of fashion. He developed a virulent case of writer’s block. His mind was not just miserable, but empty. His agent suggested a vacation.

“Why don’t you go to Sunny Mexico,” Matt’s agent said. “Why not go now and celebrate the Day of the Dead?” Matt agreed. It sounded like his kind of holiday.

As usual the town square was bedecked in piñatas. It would take much more than misfortune, misery, death, or even magic, to alter the traditions of an ancient pueblo.

Yadira had grown complacent. She no longer bothered to gather the death cries of pregnant women, or the sobs of shattered children. She let the rare orchids, whose juice was so useful in the making of concoctions, live. It was too much work to climb the steep, dry hills and scale the rough, tall trees where they thrived. Besides, why bother? Nothing had changed, nothing would change. An emotion in motion will stay in motion, and an emotion in depression will stay in depression. This was Yadira’s law. But laws, like piñatas, are meant to be broken.

Amelia had taken her daughter, Maria, to the square for the inaugural night of Día de Muertos. Maria was five. It was the first time she would be big enough to heft one of the piñata smashing bats.

Ricardo was there as always, playing his silver guitar and crooning. He was off key and Amelia knew it. Her Spanish had improved. She understood the meaning of heartache. She understood the meaning of regret.

The full moon rose. For an instant the brilliantly colored tissue skins of the hanging animals and demons glowed like dreams. Then a cloud drifted across the moon, or perhaps the moon hid. Either way, the result was the same. In near darkness the children went wild. Like blind armies they battered the hundreds of piñatas to bits.

Matt watched from the balcony of a night club. A straying breeze caught the ash from his cigarette creating small black eddies in the sky. He felt like he had seen it all, even though he'd never been to Mexico.

Just then Maria shattered one of the hundred piñatas. Candy fell about her like hail. She laughed with so much joy, Amelia couldn't help smiling too.

A fragment of piñata flew through the air and grazed Matt's hand. It cut him so deeply, a drop of blood dripped from the wound into the screaming crowd.

Just then, so unexpectedly it might have been magic, the moon peeked out from the cloud. Amelia's hair had turned white, but in the moonlight it looked like sunshine. Her face was worn and weathered, but in the dim light, lines smoothed by laughter, she looked like a girl.

Matt, gazing down, watching his falling blood, saw their joyous upturned faces. He heard a new song in his mind. This one had a happy ending.

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The Mystic | Gary Hewitt

Your eyes struggle to focus on a cracked leather sleeve. You discern the title from memory, the pages curl open to the third page. You recall your first true love. How she made you smile and the joy of her haunts you like a nameless wraith.

She passed through the veil twenty years ago. You raged at the divine, for all your knowledge counted for nothing in your vain efforts to save her. You stole her last breath with a kiss, promised her you would meet again.

You plunge into the book and reach the forbidden pages. You finger the characters of a simple powerful spell. The trader told you no-one ever dared recite the words for the incantation held the power to both slay and heal.

You take two deep breaths, trace arcane lines into blank space whilst chanting foreign words. The atmosphere takes on a pinkish hue and the palms of your hand tingle with alien electricity.

The world shrinks. You look down from high. You call out the name of your beloved. You swear you hear a response from a distant sparkle in the black. Your heart races when a fey green light draws near. You smell her essence, her aura merges with yours.

You urge her to join you in the planet below. She stands firm, you look past her to her remote home. You gaze upon another path.

You look below to see an old man crumple holding his ancient grimoire. You follow your beloved one to a place beyond time and all dimensions. You arrive at a realm you don't recall yet know you've visited here many times before. Your energies become one. Your love is everything.

About the Author:

Gary Hewitt writes a unique blend of grittiness mixed in with a dash of the unusual. His inspirations are Stephen King, James Herbert, Graham Masterton, William Gibson, JRR Tolkien and many more. Gary also works with Tarot, Reiki and other realms of the esoteric. It's all a quirky mix which can elicit some unusual inspiration for stories, poems and longer works of fiction.

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Sherlock Holmes

and the Arcana of Madness

Naching T. Kassa, Angela Yuriko Smith,
and John Linwood Grant

November 3rd



DARK
TIDE

Far above Bremerton in Washington State, a small black spaceship descended through a night-time cloud deck. Below, the Puget Sound waters were dark, while on the Kitsap Peninsula, lights marked the streets, including on this night only, the flashlights of trick-or-treaters. The ship hovered over an outer suburban street, then settled to the pavement, its body steaming. Its gull-wing doors opened, and two shapes emerged.

Inside the nearest house, brothers Ernie and Pete, both in their early thirties, watched the Seahawks-Chiefs game on the wall-sized screen, while on the floor, Pete's son Willy sorted his Halloween candy. On the screen, the news crawl said, 'Dallas: Patriots 12, Cowboys 6, first quarter. President: Aliens invade Earth. Green Bay: Packers 27, Bears 24, fourth quarter.'

Ernie looked at the feed from the exterior camera and said, "Wow, there's a great car and a couple of monsters!"

"Lizards!" said Pete. "Catch the tails! They deserve some candy."

There was a loud knock. The two men and Willy went to the door and opened it to see the two lizards, erect on their hind feet, about five feet tall, the one on the left with light green skin, the one on the right with blue.

"Best costumes I've seen all evening," said Pete. "You from around here?"

"We're from the planet you call Gliese 581g, twenty light-years away," said the green one.

"Well come on in. It's cold out there."

Willy, jumping up and down with excitement, said, "Daddy, can I do it? Can I give them candy?"

Pete patted him on the head. "Go for it, son."

"Your whelp," said the blue lizard, "Is that the correct terminology? Or are you ungulates?" Pete looked confused. The lizard took a piece of candy from Willy's bowl, then reached in its waist pack.

"Here, warm-blooded little sapient, this is for you." The alien handed Willy a piece of shiny yellow metal.

"Oh," said Willy, "It's heavy. Is it gold?"

Pete's eyes widened. Gold, he thought, gold. Hmm.

"Yes, juvenile mammal, it is."

"Thank you!" said Willy and held up his right hand. "High five!" he said, then counting the alien's paddle-shaped digits and opening his eyes wide, corrected himself with "High four!" The lizard slowly lifted his left hand and pressed it against Willy's, who shivered at the bristly surface of its finger pads.

"I'm Jones, Pete Jones, and this is my brother Ernie, and my son Willy," said Pete. "And you are?"

"In your language," said the blue lizard, "I'm Major Zweshnig, and this is my Adjutant, Captain Brakwitz."

"Can we offer you some coffee?"

"No coffee please. But could we have some water?" said Zweshnig. Pete handed them each a glass. They drank, their lips wrapped around the rim.

"Yes, yes," said Zweshnig, "dihydrogen monoxide." The lizard took another sip. "This is really good." Zweshnig's jeweled eyes teared up, and its hands trembled.

"Our world, Gliese, is running out of water. That's why we're here."

"Glad to give you more."

Zweshnig and Brakwitz looked at each other and muttered. Zweshnig spoke. "The fact is, Mr. Jones..."

"Call me Pete."

"We're not here on vacation."

"Understand completely, business before pleasure."

"No, no, you don't understand. This is an invasion."

"Not at all, not at all! Don't even think of it. We're delighted to have you!" There was a loud boom and a long roar from a hypersonic vehicle passing overhead. As the windows rattled and the lights flickered, the lizards looked even more uncomfortable.

"We know you sapients consider your home to be your castle," said Zweshnig, "but if you resist, there will be severe consequences."

"We do love our house," said Pete, patting the sofa. "But resist? No! We wouldn't dream of it. You're our guests!"

Ernie returned and handed them each two bottles of water.

"It sounds like you're planning to spend a little time here," said Pete.

The lizards emitted what may have been a laugh.

"I knew it," said Pete. "Then if you'd forgive me, I'd like to talk business. I just happen to have some lakefront condos for sale on picturesque Lake Cushman. Its pristine water comes from ancient glaciers high on Mount Olympus.

"These properties are going fast, but if you're interested, this week only, we're offering a fifteen-percent discount. By working with me directly, you avoid having to pay mortgage points, and I'm happy to take your gold at the spot price on the London exchange."

"If you'd come with me to my study, Major Zweshnig, I can show you some brochures..." He edged Zweshnig out of the living room and down the hall.

Captain Brakwitz remained seated, staring at the half-time festivities on the giant screen. Ernie tapped him on the knee.

"Excuse me, Captain Brakwitz. I couldn't help noticing that's quite an expensive vehicle you have out front. As you may not know, traffic here on Earth is just terrible." Brakwitz, with hooded eyes, turned to look at him.

"I'm an agent with the Kitsap Insurance Company. We take a holistic approach to protection. I'm prepared to offer you an exceptional policy to protect your car from fire, damage, and collision that you don't want to miss..."

Brakwitz held up its hands, spatulate fingers trembling, as if to push him away.

"No, no," said Ernie, as he pulled a two-inch diameter wooden disk from his pocket. "See this, Captain? It's for you." Brakwitz held the disk uncomprehendingly. Ernie said, "It's a tuit! A round tuit!" Brakwitz looked even more confused.

"Now you don't have to wait until you get 'around to it' before making this important purchase." Brakwitz let out a deep sigh.

Ten minutes later the two lizards left the house, dazed, and clutching the paperwork for their time-share and insurance purchases. "How could we?" asked Zweshnig, waving his brochures in the air. "We've sacrificed all our gold for this mess of paper."

As they approached their ship, their eyes widened. Its black light-absorbing surface was covered with white streamers and a translucent yellow and white substance that dripped to the pavement in long sticky plumes.

Brakwitz uttered a long moan, and said, "What has happened to our beautiful ship?"

"And look at that," it continued with a shudder, pointing at the pavement around the base of their ship that was littered with the center tubes of toilet-paper rolls and dozens of broken eggshells.

"Do these brachiating simians break eggs for sport? Do they not know how we give birth? Are they deliberately trying to show their contempt for us?"

While the two lizards used their precious water to clean the viewports, Brakwitz, still simmering, muttered about hominids, broken eggs, and insulting behavior. Zweshnig looked sympathetically at his adjutant, shook its head and thought, "It's going to be a long difficult invasion."

And sure enough, it was.

About the Author:

Seelye Martin is a retired ice scientist who writes science fiction and fantasy. His work is published in *Lovecraftiana*, *The Periodical Forlorn*, and *Two-Hour Transport*. He acknowledges his brother Bill and the writings of P. G. Wodehouse for inspiring this story. His interests include Captain Cook's 1772-75 circumnavigation of Antarctica, gardening, working on climate issues, and the many enthusiastic trick-or-treaters in his family.

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A late summer breeze tossed around several large leaves across the college campus pad. Students hustled throughout the quad through an ebb and flow of animated banter. Tracy sat with her new girlfriend alone on a stone bench, enjoying each other's company. They held hands as the sun peaked overhead.

Tracy cleared her throat. "There's something you need to know before we get too close."

Linda's heart dropped. Her perfect companion, someone who brought out her best, was about to drop a truth bomb that she hoped would be some mundane habit she'd been too embarrassed to discuss. Linda attempted to hold back the concern on her face with little success. "Okay?"

"Um, well, my family needs me for a ritual every year, around Halloween, and, um, I can't study with your group tonight. I'm sorry I hadn't told you sooner, but it's been hard to talk with our lopsided schedules and stuff. I didn't want to explain it over the phone." Disappointment wafted between her words.

"That's too bad." She cocked her head to the side. "What kind of ritual?"

"Yeah, that's the hard part of what I need to talk about. I know this will sound crazy, and I wasn't really planning to share today, but," she looked up to the cloudy sky for the correct ideas, "my family will be camping in my grandfather's private cemetery overnight. It's a tradition we do every year."

Linda's expression flooded over with curiosity. "Ooh, the one you pointed out on our way to the house party last month?"

"The same one."

"That sounds really creepy and cool."

"Yeah," Tracy sighed, "it's something."

"What kind of ritual? Animal sacrifices? Maybe a *virgin* sacrifice?"

"No, not so much, exactly."

"Oh, baby, you've sparked my interest. I love horror stuff." Linda's face lit up. Her heart pounded at the idea of such excitement. "Can I come?"

Tracy shook her head. "Unfortunately, it's family only. We get together for a private gathering. No visitors."

A mischievous grin crinkled along Linda's lips. "If we end up as a couple long enough, you know, and we get married, or something, would I be welcome then?"

Tracy took a deep breath. Her hopes for a simple transition from a quick disclosure back into their college afternoon faded away like a morning mist. "I really don't know. I guess that'd be a conversation I'd need to have with my family." Tracy directed a poignant glance up at a massive analog clock embedded in the upper wall of the finance building. "I, um, need to get to my Ethics in Business class." She stood up, pulling her backpack on.

"Your class isn't for an hour."

"Oh, yeah, right. Um, I totally forgot I've to get some studying in before class." Tracy fidgeted with a travel-size hand sanitizer container.

"Baby, if I overstepped, I'm really sorry." Linda held her beloved's gaze. "I didn't mean to insinuate anything."

"It's fine. I just really need to get to class." Her eyes fanned the ground. "I'll call you when I get back to the dorm tomorrow."

"*Tomorrow?* I was hoping we could, you know, *study*, before dinner." Her expression flashed an intense desire, hoping to entice Tracy.

"Yeah, no. I should really get on the road after my last class."

"But you live so close. Why the rush? Are you mad at me?"

"No, I'm not mad, I guess. I mean, maybe we could talk more about this tomorrow, but I really need to bounce." Tracy leaned in for a rushed kiss on Linda's cheek. "I'll call you."

Linda's heart wavered through a mix of unsettling emotions as she watched Tracy race across the quad. She crouched in frustration. *Dammit, Linda, why do you always find a way to make them upset.*

Linda's sedan rolled to a stop behind an abandoned gas station outside of town. She grabbed her camping backpack from the backseat and headed on foot towards a distant hilly outcropping. *If you don't want to invite me, Tracy, then maybe I need to take some initiative. We promised each other to be honest, so by not telling me what goes on during your ritual, then I'm obligated to see for myself.*

Gravel and small pebbles crunched under Linda's hiking boots as she rushed across the street. The setting sun threw an extended shadow behind her. Crickets and a lone bull frog warmed up their natural instruments as Linda ascended up the back way beyond Tracy's family's property. Tinges of a juvenile bonfire flickered in the distance. Wafts of burning wood

intensified as she crossed over the countryside. Linda hunched into a subdued bend as she crept towards the last oak tree standing before the cemetery's nearby fence. Several interwoven conversations became clearer as she chose a spot to overlook. She pulled a black felt blanket from her pack and wrapped it around herself, guarding against the incoming cool evening as it was to break up her silhouette. Linda unwrapped her father's surplus binoculars from a raggedy t-shirt. She peered over the graveyard. Wide swaths of stars twinkled overhead.

The raging fire crackled as it lit up Tracy's naked form stepping out of a massive canvas tent. Round, red symbols adorned her thighs, calves, chest and forearms. Alarming confusion anchored itself in Linda's thoughts. She furrowed her brows at such a display. *What in the actual hell?* Tracy walked towards a long wooden table set between two graves. Her brown hair caught a quick wind's passing and flickered around her head. She picked up an ornate knife. Firelight danced against the shiny blade. Tracy drew the top edge across her upper stomach. An angry crimson line formed. Tracy set the weapon down. Tracy ran her fingers across the wound, catching a thick swath of red on her fingertips.

The young woman raised her hand to the open sky.

"I give my life blood to the eons so that the world's dead remain in their resting places. From this evening until a year's time shall none rise to desecrate the land of the living." Her voice boomed as if being broadcast from a wall of speakers.

Tracy's mother and aunt stepped out of the tent wearing nothing but the same symbols. They walked over to individual graves flanking the table.

"Hear our summons, old ones of past. May her drawing of blood satiate your need to consume the living." The elder voices echoed from every direction.

Tracy drew the razor tip across her lower stomach. A second thick line of blood erupted behind the metal point. Heavy crimson drops slid down her flesh. She slid an index finger across the cut, bringing the bloody end high above her tilted back face. Slick red droplets splattered along her forehead and nose.

"Please have mercy and let us walk away from this sacred ground."

A thunderous boom rocked the countryside. Linda toppled over onto her side, slicing her hand on a rock's jagged edge. Blood trickled down its crags. A single drop touched the dirt, becoming soaked into the dark grains. A bright red light flashed against the starry sky. Linda recovered back to her position and realigned her point of view.

The three women stopped moving as if frozen in time. Tracy extended a bloody finger in Linda's direction. Her two family members turned towards the last oak tree before the cemetery. They each raised a single arm, pointed in its direction. The nocturnal orchestra of crickets and frogs became silent.

"Someone watches from afar, near the hanging tree."

The three women stared directly at her. Linda's heart fluttered as she trembled.

"Come join us, interloper. You have much to offer the gods." Tracy's mother announced. Her words boomed like cannon fire.

Linda fought against herself as she stood up. Her binoculars slipped out of her grip, falling onto the ground. A stone scratched the rounded lens. Her blanket slid off into a pile. She lumbered towards them with slow, methodical steps, shedding her sweater, t-shirt, and bra. Her pants and underwear fell behind her. She faced Tracy near the table.

Terror flooded through Linda as she stood exposed before the trio.

Tracy smiled with a sneer. "You wanted to be a part of our evening and know our ritual. After this night, you'll have wished you'd stayed home."

The three women raised their hands high in the air. "We offer you a living sacrifice, gods of eternity. Do with her soul as you please."

A multitude of thunderous booms rocked the ground, shaking each woman's stance. A lengthy chasm opened up in the dirt behind Linda, throwing soil and grass about like confetti. Her eyes searched around for any hope of mercy from one of the cultists. She found none. Thick light coiled out of the open earthen split like an illuminated boa constrictor. It slid up the outside of Linda's calf, past her hips, stopping at her neck. Its dazzling end passed through her skin, turning upward towards her skull. She gasped at its invasion. Rampaging emotional waves erupted through her thoughts. Her mind filled with unimaginable horrors, transcending her place in reality.

"Thank you for sparing us, eternal ones. We leave you to feed for the entirety of this sacred evening."

The light slithered deeper into Linda's body until she absorbed it all. Icy tears ran down her cheeks, freezing on her skin. She gasped at the archaic sensations bubbling through her organs. Her eyes became still, locking onto a distant bush near a gravestone without actually seeing it.

The women returned to the tent. Tracy's aunt released the flaps, letting the pair fall over the doorway.

Starry constellations rotated overhead in perfect silence. Linda garbled out incoherent words as cool tears hung like icicles off her chin. Hints of a fresh day teased along the horizon. The light retracted from her throat, following its original path down her body. Its end slithered backwards into the ground. Linda's chest expanded as she accepted her first lungful of air in hours. She collapsed to her knees, shuddering as if having spent the evening exposed on an arctic iceberg.

Tracy and her family exited the bent back tent flaps in jeans and sweaters. Her aunt carried a blanket made of dog fur.

Tracy's mother approached Linda. "Come with us into the tent. We must complete the final part of our ritual."

"Here, for you to warm up with, my dear, though, I'm sure you won't experience genuine warmth for some time." The older woman said as she covered Linda's back and shoulders.

Linda nodded and rose to her feet. The hostesses led her through the pitch-black opening.

Linda and Tracy sat together on a bench outside the graveyard. Passing autumn clouds held the sun's morning warmth hostage. Crumbs from Tracy's breakfast decorated a thick blanket wrapped around them both. Linda stared ahead into the distance with a muted expression across her face.

"I really didn't expect you to follow me last night, and to be honest, Linda, you should've trusted me enough to stay home."

"Stay home." Linda's voice arrived blunt and monotone.

"You're going to feel quite lost until my lovely Linda returns from the other side." Tracy leaned over. She planted a kiss on Linda's frigid cheek.

"Other side."

"Your soul won't be the same when it comes back. Something will change about you, but one can never know how exactly. Mary became hyperactive to the point of madness. Jenna lost all concept of time and took her own life. Sylvia. Well, Sylvia," Tracy paused in thought. She turned to a series of rounded headstones in the meadow's far corner. "It was unfortunate what happened to her and so many others, but I'm hoping you'll make it out okay, baby."

"Baby."

Tracy applied another kiss. She gazed up at a series of incoming clouds with a frown. "I just wish we got more than one solid rebirth every hundred years, but the old ones tell us everything they do happens for a reason."

"Reason."

"Good girl." Tracy squeezed her love's grip. "It's best you stay with my mom and aunt for a while. You'd bring too much attention the way you are. No one's going to care what happens to another missing co-ed for very long, at least by your standards of time."

"Time."

"Yeah, that's what we'll do. If things go south with you, Mom and Aunt Reddi will know what to do, and, honestly, no one will ever think of looking for you here."

"Here."

Tracy smiled. "Enjoy the morning air while you still can. We've got a nice coffin for you to settle into between our feedings."

"Feedings."

The fire's previous wrath settled into a warm glow.

"Tracy?" her mother called from a nearby mausoleum entrance.

"Yeah, Mom?"

"It's time for your love de jour to settle in for her rest. Your aunt has her coffin ready."

"Okay."

The young lovers held hands as the sun's juvenile rays cut between the clouds. Tracy rested her head on Linda's cool shoulder.

"Good bye, Linda."

"Linda."

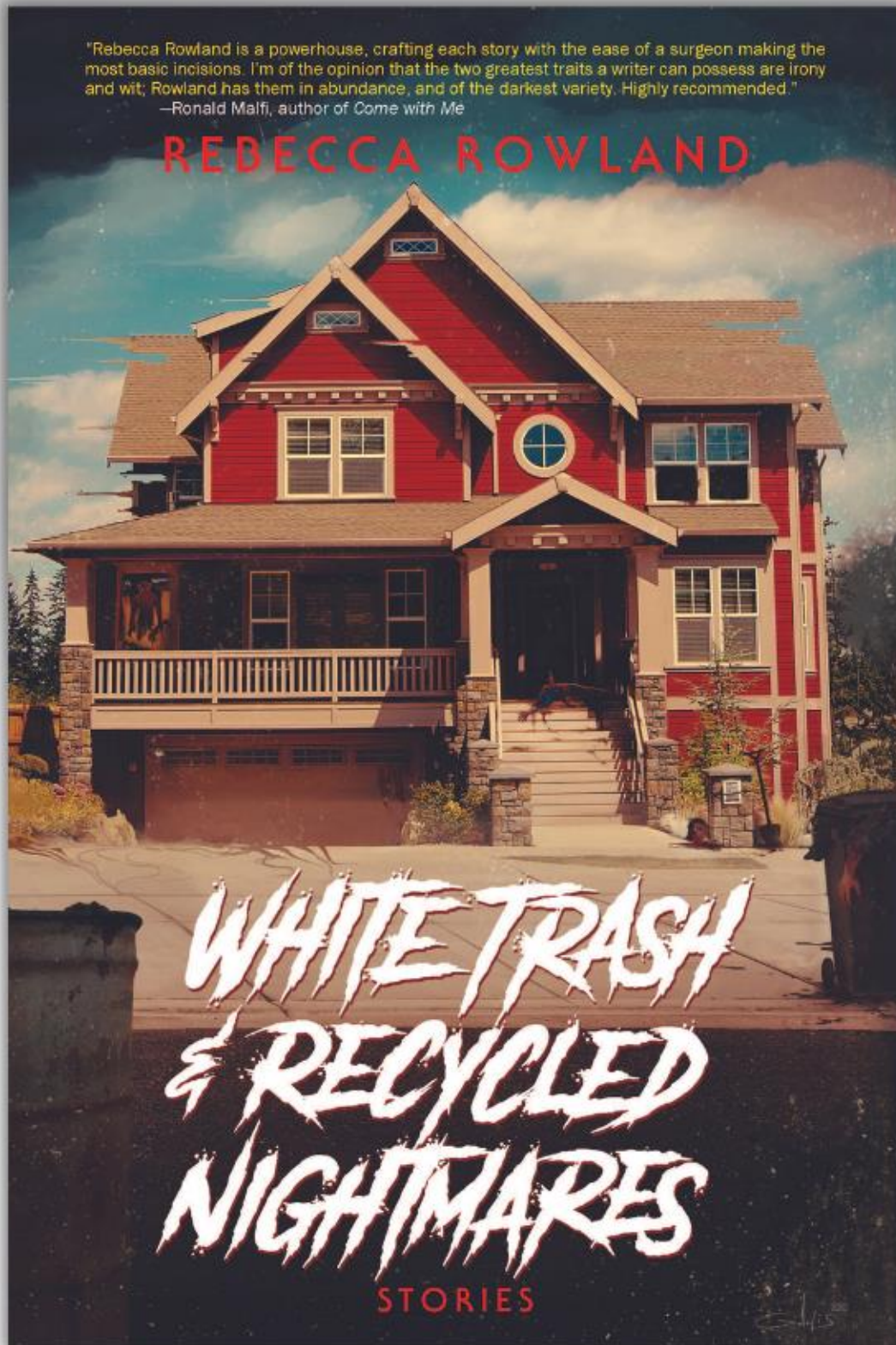
About the Author:

JB Corso enjoys slithering through the darker shadows of their readers' minds. They provide mental health care to vulnerable populations. They served throughout Europe as a combat arms veteran. They are a Horror Writer's Association member. "Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn." Facebook is a good place to make contact... for those willing to risk their sanity.

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The most sinister objects of fear are never truly discarded...
just **repurposed**.



from **DEAD SKY** Publishing October 10, 2023

When Mickey first told us the story, we took it with a grain of salt. Mickey wasn't exactly known for keeping the truth on the straight and narrow, even when stone cold sober, and he was halfway through a six-pack of beer. But we'd known Mickey for half our lives, from way back before Libby was even out of diapers.

We were sprawled lackadaisically in the seats of Sadie's SUV on our way to a Cure concert. A half hour away from the venue, the maroon Hyundai came to a screeching halt, hundreds of cars snuggled up against one another on Interstate 90 in a bumper-to-bumper stoppage as three lanes bottlenecked into one, dripping like a slow faucet leak off the exit to the outdoor theater. All around us were concert goers stuffed into yuppie hybrid automobiles, doppelgängers of ourselves, forty-somethings sporting bad 90s haircuts while blaring alt rock classics.

Sadie hit the steering wheel with the heel of her palm, then pawed around her center console, feeling for the pack of contraband clove cigarettes I'd smuggled down from Canada the month before. "I told you we should have left earlier, Bill," she said.

I located the box and handed her one of the thin brown sticks. She lit it with a plastic yellow lighter and the car's interior immediately filled with a smoky, savory-sweet aroma like autumn burning. "You wanted to tailgate? Are we twenty-five?" I asked.

Mickey groaned, then rummaged around in the cooler by his feet. The four of us had gone to college together. We weren't exactly best friends while on campus, but after twenty years of running randomly into one another on the subway, in the grocery store, once even in the waiting area of the local police station, we raised a white flag to fate. Sadie and I began dating in our mid-thirties and married soon after. Simon, the perpetual bachelor, resolved to remain unattached if only to amuse us with his colorful stories of the dating world.

Mickey, though.

At forty-six, Mickey was married to a woman half his age. "You know what they say: for every gorgeous woman, there's a man tired of fucking her," Mickey told us over beers at our favorite joint a year after tossing a ring on his finger. "In my case, I was tired of *not* fucking her." Libby, blond and buxom with a degree in social work, quit her job a month before the nuptials. She said I Do and then proceeded to Don't within a month of getting her dress back from the cleaners. I saw it propped up in the hall closet once when Sadie and I came to visit. There it was: her whole princess gown, complete with five-foot train and matching veil, hermetically sealed for eternal preservation, not unlike Libby's vagina.

"Hand me one of those," I said, leaning an arm over the seat, and Mickey obliged. I opened the can, letting loose a satisfying metallic gasp. Simon said nothing but loaded a cartridge into his vape pen.

I peered forward, squinting to try and determine if the traffic jam would untangle itself soon. At the mouth of the exit ramp, a scraggly-looking man in a long dark coat held a brown cardboard sign, but we were too far away for me to read the words written on it. Sadie was looking at him, too.

"Are you kidding me?" she said, a fragrant wisp of smoke encircling her mouth. "Begging for change on the turnpike? Isn't that illegal?"

Simon rolled down his window and exhaled a green skunk-smelling cloud of white. I watched it waft into a neighboring vehicle and the passengers lift their noses in curiosity. "He's not harming anyone," Simon said. "When did you become so jaded?"

Sadie rolled down her window as well. "If he can haul his ass all the way out here every morning, he can get a job, work for what he has. I'm not jaded: I'm a realist."

"A housefly has no teeth. Did you guys know that?" When Mickey said this, none of us were particularly shocked. He was known for injecting non-sequiturs into conversations, ambushing perfectly fine discussions with bombshell announcements. Usually, we ignored his bizarre declarations, but we were stuck in standstill traffic with no respite in sight.

"Is that why they throw up on their food?" I asked.

"Right, right," Simon said. "Brundlefly. Gross."

"A sponging mouth. That's what a fly has," Mickey continued. "It stakes its claim on what it wants then places an enzyme onto it to break it down. The fly has to liquefy its meal in order to eat. Kinda like that chick on your floor junior year, Sadie: the one who had her jaw wired shut to lose weight."

Sadie frowned, thinking. "I don't remember, but I don't doubt it. It was the 90s."

"The housefly sponges up the sustenance." Mickey nodded his head toward the scraggly man in the distance. "And *he* eats the fly."

Sadie, Simon, and me focused our attention on the man in unison. "I'm sorry, what?" I asked.

Mickey took a long swallow of his beer, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and turned toward his window. "The spider man," he replied, his voice hushed to an eerie whisper. "The spider man eats flies for dinner."

Something in the tone of his voice sent a wave of goosebumps traveling along my arm. Before I could respond, Sadie glanced in the rearview mirror at Mickey and then volleyed a sideways smirk at me. *He's drunk, just ignore it*, the look said. I closed my mouth.

"Last year, I set up this whole fancy dinner for our anniversary," Mickey began, still turned toward his window. "Five years. I arranged days before for this nice restaurant to have her favorite dish, her favorite dessert. But when we sat down, all she did was complain. The table wasn't in the right place, the lighting was too bright, that sort of thing. When the dessert came—baked Alaska: she had talked about how much she loved that thing from our very first date—she took one look, stabbed a fork in the center, and crossed her arms over her chest."

Simon exhaled more white smoke. "Frankly, I'm surprised she didn't climb onto the table and take a dump on it," he said. The wind carried the cloud inside the car. "I'm sorry, but she's a ball-buster, dude."

Mickey scratched at the side of his beard. "The next day, I drove to the grocery store, and there was a guy standing on the traffic island at the entrance. Homeless guy. Young, maybe twenty-two, twenty-three. His hair was dirty and sticking out every which way, and he had dark circles under his eyes." Mickey took a sip from his can. "He held a sign. I had to stare at it for a long time to make sure I was reading it correctly."

I frowned. "What did it say?"

"*Put her to sleep.*" Mickey uttered a little laugh, drank another sip of his beer. "*Lullaby Cure, \$50.* I was stopped at the traffic light, so I had some time to really study the sign, and that's what it said. Funny thing is, no one else seemed intrigued by it. All the other cars just drove away when the light turned green. I pulled over, though. I had to know."

"The kid came right up to the truck, but not to my window. Instead, he walked directly to the passenger side door and waited for me to unlock it. I let him in. He smelled ripe: piss and funk and garbage, all at once. But when he spoke, his voice was clear, clean, like he'd just gargled with spring water. He pointed to the back of the store's parking lot and told me to drive. I thought, this kid is about a hundred pounds soaking wet. If he tries to roll me, he'll be sorry. Still, I wasn't worried about any of that. He said he would bring me to the man with the Lullaby Cure and that it was that man who could tell me all the details. Something inside me needed to know, you know?"

"I pulled around back, parked next to one of the dumpsters. 'He's in there,' the kid said. 'Through the door in the wall.' I jumped out of my truck and the kid did the same, holding his sign against his chest. Sure enough, on the back of the dumpster, there was a plain gray door, just tall enough for me to walk through if I ducked."

"You walked into a dumpster?" Simon asked.

"That's just it," Mickey said. "It was deceiving. The door led to this tiny enclosure, more of a large metal box than a room, a section of the dumpster walled off from the trash. It smelled god awful, like roadkill baking in the sun. A man sat at a small table. He had scraggly hair..." Mickey stopped here to look slowly at the man on the side of the road, ten cars ahead of us. "And a dirty coat caked in mud. He motioned for me to sit down. When I did, he pushed his coat sleeves up to his elbows, and three fat spiders, their bodies nearly the width of nickels, scurried out to his wrist, circled his forearm, then disappeared back inside the sleeve. I nearly shit myself."

"And then he explained what the Lullaby Cure was and offered to perform one for me," Mickey said, his voice dropping to its previous raspy whisper. "I paid him and sure enough,"—he swallowed hard—"sure enough, he was true to his word."

Everyone was quiet for a long moment, waiting for Mickey to go on. When he didn't, I asked, "So what is it? What is the Lullaby Cure?"

Mickey looked down at his can, then lifted it to his mouth, emptying the remainder of its contents into his throat. He placed the empty can in the cooler then looked up. He wouldn't meet my eyes. "You don't want to know."

Simon rolled his eyes. "You're so full of it, Mick. First of all, no one is writing that on a sign when they're trying to beg for money on the streets. Second—"

"It changed." Mickey looked down at his empty hands. "The sign. When I drove away, I passed the kid again. His sign read *Hungry. Any spare change helps.* Same lettering, different words."

"He probably turned his other sign around," I offered.

"NO!" Mickey's sudden change in volume made us all jump. He took a deep breath and ran his hands down the sides of his face, smoothing his beard. "I saw the back of his sign when he was getting out of my truck: he was pressing it against his chest. The back had a shipping label on it, some Amazon swirls, that sort of thing. No room to write."

The car began to inch forward. "Ugh," Sadie groaned. "Finally. Thank God I got gas before we left."

As we neared the exit ramp, the man holding the sign became clearer. His face was gaunt, angular, but his dark eyes remained wide and alert. He wore a long dark coat splattered heavily with a dried brown substance. He held a cardboard sign tightly in both hands. *Will work for food*, clean block lettering. As we sidled by, his eyes honed in on our maroon SUV and followed it, silently, his mouth hinting at an insidious grin, until we were a half dozen car lengths past.

The four of us said nothing. Even the Spotify playlist had gone silent.

"I haven't seen Libby in a while, not since last summer," Sadie said finally. "Where has she been?"

Mickey stared out of the window once more. "She's somewhere." The spider man's profile became smaller and smaller behind us, and Mickey focused his gaze out of the opposite window.

"Sleeping," he added.

About the Author:

Rebecca Rowland is the best-selling editor of seven horror anthologies, including 2023's *American Cannibal*, a winner of a Godless 666 Horror Fiction Award, and an Active member of the Horror Writers Association, and her speculative fiction, critical essays, and book reviews regularly appear in a variety of online and print venues. Her new short fiction collection, *White Trash & Recycled Nightmares*, releases from Dead Sky Press this month. In her spare time, she pets her cats, eats cheese, and drinks vodka, sometimes all at once.

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Adam or Eve | Gwynne Weir

I watch. I watch and I wait.

Hunting can be the best part of the night, but it can be the worst as well. There are so many factors, not least of which is who I need to feed off each night. See, when I feed it changes me; I take on aspects of the person whose life force I consume. So, I need to make sure that they are the right person, the right type of force.

I spent my human years trapped. Locked up in a body that was often so, so wrong. On bad days, I would stay in the dark...avoid mirrors...some things haven't entirely changed I suppose. The good days were when I could make my outside reflect how my inside felt; I could find the right outfit, style my hair, I could feel comfortable in my skin. On those days it was always so clear; I walked easily, I smiled easily.

Then there were days when I was happy in the skin I'd been born in; they were pretty good too, but I always ended up feeling conflicted – like I was betraying the other me.

The worst days were the ones when my brain refused to align. I floated in a limbo; was I one or the other? Was I one, and then the other? Was I both at the same time? Remembering how that felt makes me sick to my stomach.

Now, it is much easier. If I feel one way, then I find someone that reflects that. When I take on their aspects, it amplifies the feeling and I can feel myself changing.

Tonight, I am Adam. I don't look like Adam, not yet. At the moment, I look soft and gentle so I need to find someone that will sharpen everything. Someone who will lend me their masculinity for a little while.

I should explain that feeding doesn't change me completely. I don't become a man when I feed from one, but it gives me the aura, the appearance, of someone that is more man. When I am Eve, I find the curviest, most sultry woman out there and I drain her dry.

About the Author:

Gwynne Weir has been writing short fiction for a number of years. Having completed an MA in Creative Writing through the Open University, she has written in many genres, including horror, science fiction and fantasy. Growing up on a diet of Stephen King and Anne Rice led to a love of dark tales, and writing her own has become a passion.

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Nadia led him to a flight of stairs down into the basement of a decrepit church.

He stopped her at the landing. "I'm not a church-goer."

"Don't worry," she'd assured him, "it was desanctified years ago."

They stepped down, emerging into an open space thirty yards long and twenty wide, veiled by clouds of tobacco smoke. Two groups of people were clustered at tables at opposite ends of the room, with a no-man's land in the middle.

"Nadia pointed at the closest group. "This is where you sit, the beginner's group. I'll be at the other end. People are encouraged to smoke here. But not dope- clouds the mind. Don't make any of your sarcastic snap judgments - just listen."

David inserted himself between a tee shirted woman with tattoos on her neck, arms and hands, and a tie choked man drab-dressed as if for a funeral. A pathologically obese man at the front of the group began leading a recitation which the other members seemed already to know.

"Came to believe a power greater than myself could relieve me of my inhibitions."

"Made a decision to turn my will and my life over to the care of a dark power much greater than myself."

And so on, twelve steps in all. As the recitation droned on David glanced at the woman's tattoos. They seemed to be cabalistic.

The speaker paused. "Would any newcomers please raise their hands?"

David said nothing, but the funeral director was staring at him with hungry anticipation. He raised his hand and mouthed the words Nadia had provided, "My name is David and I'm a chronic relapser into moral conformity."

"Welcome David," the group chanted.

The group leader proceeded. "Tonight we continue our focus on another of the seven deadly sins- sloth. What does sloth mean to you David?"

"Ah, laziness or inactivity instead of needed action."

"Partly yes, but only the commonplace part. Listen everyone, real sloth means taking credit or money for the work of others without contributing anything yourself. Who can give me examples from their lives of how they've been able to achieve this?"

Nadia had encountered David in a singles bar called The Body Shop. She was seated at a table with two men competing for her favors when David also sat down. In fifteen minutes, David had instigated an argument between the two men and moved Nadia over to the bar to continue talking.

"They seem to have lost interest in you."

"Is your usual pick-up gambit to get other people to fight?"

"Only when I'm outnumbered."

They word-sparred easily, building on each other's innuendos, and left together. Nadia was surprised to hear herself agreeing to stop by David's apartment, and surprised again when she made the move that lead to their tumbling into bed. David was manipulative during sex, but aware of Nadia's needs.

They pillow talked afterward about what, other than sex, got them aroused. For both that involved breaking rules and laws. Nadia delighted more in violating the rules of decency. David preferred illicit sensation without heavy thinking, maximum experience for acceptable risk.

That next morning Nadia convinced David to go on a shoplifting trip. They acted as lookout and diversion for each other, actions meshing almost without speaking. They tallied price tags over lunch. Nadia had outscored David by about \$250.

"All right," David said, "I'm envious. You stole better than I did this time. Just wait. Since I lost, I'll buy lunch."

"Neither of us is buying."

"And both of us are getting arrested."

Nadia grinned. "I don't think so. I've been watching the waitress and manager. They both make trips to the kitchen and stay there for two or three minutes. The next time they're both in there we take a brisk walk out the door. Better go through your preflight check list."

After the fifteen-yard dash through the front door they slowed to a stroll and kept talking. They were both fans of heavy metal music, and overlapped on each other's taste in movies- Nadia for horror, David for comic book violence.

Nadia noticed that David never cursed or blasphemed, almost as though it was superfluous. He seemed content to maximize sensory pleasures, restraining himself only when the risks were big.

She envisioned him as modern art, an oil painting entirely in matte black, with no distracting moral highlights. He embodied perverse modesty- he could commit offenses without feeling guilt or pride. His calmness hid a quagmire she wanted to be sucked into.

They'd been together for two weeks when she wrapped her torso over his and whispered in his ear.

"Do you wonder where I go evenings between eight and ten?"

"Not really. But okay, what drags you away from me three evenings a week?"

"It's a meeting David, for people like us. It helps me to overcome my doubts about what I'm doing. You should come, it'll change you."

"I don't need to hang out with strangers to figure out what needs changing."

"Don't pretend to be that dumb. You've no knowledge of what you're missing. And it's an anonymous program- really anonymous, we punish people who even hint about it to outsiders."

Nadia knew he would be a major addition to the group and cajoled David until he agreed to come. She then worked up the courage to mention him to Abadon, the group leader.

Nick Abadon studied her for a long minute expressionlessly. She feared him in such moments. "You may be right Nadia, he sounds interesting. Bring him to the Monday meeting."

As David sat half listening to the fat man, he became aware of someone standing behind him. The tattooed woman and the undertaker winced and peeled off their seats without a word. The man moved from behind him to the illustrated lady's chair.

"Hello David."

David turned in his seat. "Who're you?"

"Abadon. Nick Abadon. You don't smoke?"

"Don't drink either. Your drug habits are no concern of mine, but I don't like taking anything that dulls my edge."

"Interesting. I don't use drugs either, although I promote their use."

David looked more closely. Abadon was old, but his slick ivory complexion made guessing his age impossible. His eyes were very bright, but occluded, as though he was holding back on their full force.

"Do you have a sponsor, David?"

"I'm not interested enough in what you do to get one. Seems like just a lot of chanting and slogans."

Abadon didn't smile, but his eyes brightened slightly. "David, the worst offense we commit against ourselves isn't to let fear drag us into religion- it's indifference to what we could become. There are so many who just loiter on the side lines and abuse themselves- they're already damned but never open up to enjoy the process. Our program tells you in twelve steps how to come awake and really live."

"Yeah, well, not giving a damn is a useful posture. Look Mr. Abadon, Nadia asked me to come here so I did. But I'm content with what I am. You're not showing me anything I want. You seem to have your members intimidated, but I go my own way, without the melodrama."

"Nadia said you were self-propelled. Would you describe yourself as a hedonist David, out for yourself?"

"Of course."

"And that you would take violent action to improve your situation?"

"Depends on the risk."

"And that injury to others is sometimes necessary?"

"Collateral damage can't be avoided."

"David, David, you're an idiot savant- doing our kind of things, but crudely, without the refinements that add so much to enjoyment. Here's what I propose. Accept me as your temporary sponsor. Come to a meeting a day for the next ninety days. If after ninety days you don't think you're getting a lot more out of life, I'll help you become a Jesuit."

"That's a lot of meetings."

"I'll show you how to enjoy them."

When David told Nadia that Abadon had become his sponsor she was vaguely fearful. Abadon hadn't accepted a sponsee in all the time she'd been going to meetings, despite several people asking him.

After a few meetings people noticed the tutelage that Abadon was providing David, and began currying favor with him. But Nadia knew that David used people in a one-way fashion and was uncomfortable with relationships, even venal ones. He slashed at their overtures until they stopped making them.

Abadon began giving David assignments, service work he called it. Nadia at this point was living with David- there had never been even a suggestion of his moving in with her. She never asked David where he went and what he did, but sometimes David took her with him. Nadia's guilty pleasures focused on actions rather than injury to others, and she hated what David was beginning to do.

He developed a scheme for robbing the old and infirm on subway rides, a procedure Nadia was forced to watch on several rides that they took together. But David tired of it- boring, he said.

At Abadon's direction David began to entice and bring home young girls from the bus terminal, use and mildly abuse them, and then discard them back at the bus station. Nadia tried to be out of the apartment when David did this, but sometimes walked in on David and a sobbing teenager.

Nadia finally left David after they had broken in on an elderly woman. They occupied her apartment, and forced her to sign checks and provide account numbers. They roped her to her bed, unfed and unsanitary, until there was no more money or possessions to steal. David had persuaded her to share the custodial duties, and she had forced herself to tell David their treatment of the woman was viciously harsh. David had stared flatly back at her, a look rawer and cruder than Abadon's, but conveying the same threat. She only said it once.

David finally untied the old woman and left her in her bed, starving and infirm, unable to move out of it. He threw a potted of cold water on her, facilitating a rapid death from hypothermia.

Nadia felt coated in self-revulsion. She left David, quit going to the meetings, and never told anyone in the group where she now lived. She kept but didn't use her cell phone, hoping David would call and say that he, too, had broken things off with Abadon. Several other group members called and left messages of concern and threats, but not David.

She thought about going to a church, but decided it was not only hypocritical but useless. No minister accustomed to garden variety transgressions would understand. She thought briefly about suicide, but didn't want to die feeling like she did about herself. The moon cycled twice before David called.

"Look Nadia, I'm afraid of where Abadon is leading me. Can we get together to talk?"

"I can't let you know where I live, David."

"I understand. Let's meet at the downtown Sheraton. Lots of people and anonymous."

"I don't know that I can help you David- you're really deep into the program, deeper than I ever got."

"At least talk to me Nadia- tell me how you got out."

They met on Sunday morning for brunch, watching the sauce congeal on their Eggs Benedict without eating them.

"I miss you Nadia, you're the only person other than Abadon I'm able to open up to."

"David, I'm afraid for you, and maybe afraid of you too. It's like you've awakened and you're not the cute guy sleeping next to me anymore, You're something I don't want to touch. It was a mistake for me to join the group, and doubly wrong to bring you into it."

"Abadon wondered for a while if you'd come back. Now he knows you won't. He's dangerous Nadia, really dangerous. Stay hidden. I only wish I could get out."

"I ran away because I'm scared as hell. I'm never going back. Don't get trapped, David. Run away."

"I don't know if I can. Let me top up your coffee."

While sipping the coffee they talked about the fragments they had left in common, but Nadia no longer took comfort from their prior intimacy and affection. The conversation eventually broke down under its own inane weight. As Nadia stared at David her eyelids began to droop.

When she opened them again she was stretched out naked in her own bathtub, immersed in warm water. She tried to move, then tried to scream, but could do neither. She could barely concentrate enough to breathe. David was seated on the edge of the bathtub.

"Glad you're awake. You're not able to talk or move, so please just listen. We tracked you here several weeks ago, but kept hoping you'd come back to us."

A sudden fright showed in Nadia's eyes.

"What is it? Ah. No, I didn't have sex with you. That would have been inappropriate."

“We can’t have you fleeing toward repentance Nadia, not with your knowledge of us. You’re going to apparently commit suicide. I do regret this, after all it was you that brought me to Abadon and helped me awaken and transform. You’re woven into my life.

“Fortunately you’re still damned for prior offenses. Abadon wouldn't want to lose you.”

Nadia began to cry soundlessly, droplets wandering down her face.

“I’m going to miss you Nadia. I doubt I’ll ever be this close with another woman.”

David had been holding a double edged razor blade. He picked her left arm out of the bathwater and stroked her hand before cutting deeply into her forearm just above the wrist. He gently lowered her left arm back into the water and plucked out the right arm, repeating the process. The bath water reddened in sluggish swirls.

Nadia’s vision began to fail. She strained to keep focus on David’s face, which stared back at her with a bemused, almost fatherly expression. "Abadon was right," he said. "It's better to kill someone you love."

About the Author:

Ed Ahern resumed writing after forty odd years in foreign intelligence and international sales. He’s had over four hundred fifty stories and poems published so far, and seven books. Ed works the other side of writing at Bewildering Stories, where he sits on the review board and manages a posse of eight review editors.

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Aliens Ate My Pizza | *Rie Sheridan Rose*

It all started as a typical Saturday night. I was working the evening shift at the local pizza parlor. I’d been delivering pizza for *Pie in the Sky* for five years now, ever since I got my driver’s license.

Charlie Perkins was my dad’s college roommate, and he was happy to give me a job. It made high school a lot easier, having tip money in my pocket, and Charlie always gave me days off if I needed them, no questions asked.

The store was a second home to me, and I learned the business from the ground up. I could’ve been a manager, but I liked delivery—talking to the customers; exploring the town until I knew it better than I knew my own name. Peter Gray, by the way. Not that it matters anymore, as you’ll see.

I got a call to deliver a dozen Meat Lover Supremes to a Halloween frat party out in the boonies. The frat house lay down a dirt road at the end of a long, dark tunnel of trees. Five or six cars stood parked outside the dilapidated Victorian, scattered like dominoes, with no attempt at order. Typical frat boys. I parked and got out of the car, grabbing my pizzas and juggling the stack like a very simple Jenga game.

Yeah, I know. I turn to gaming analogies when I’m frightened. And by the time I peeled away from the frat house, I was terrified.

Struggling up the porch steps with the pizzas, I tried the doorbell first. I think it rang, but the pounding bass of Heavy Metal thundering inside the house made it hard to tell. An odd smell seeped out of the building...like rotten food and burned copper. I wrinkled my nose. What had these dorks been smoking?

After a reasonable waiting period, I banged on the door with a fist. I heard some scrabbling noises inside and put an ear to the door. I couldn’t hear any of the noises I expected at a frat party—uproarious laughter; cries of “Whoa” and “Dude!”; some sort of sports on the television—but someone was definitely in the house.

I banged on the door again. The scrabbling grew louder, and the smell got worse. What the hell was that?

The curtains on the living room window were open a crack, and I put my eye to the slit of light pouring out. What I saw inside drove me back a step. Blood spattered the walls and pooled on the floor. Bodies sprawled over the furniture like broken dolls, blood-stained costumes ripped asunder and expressions of horror and pain frozen on their faces.

I backed away from the window, heart pounding. My gorge rose into my throat, and I fought the urge to be sick. I knew some of those kids. We’d gone to high school together. I think I’d dated the girl lying across the coffee table.

The scrabbling got louder, and a tentacle slammed against the window, cracking it across. The appendage was greenish blue, with brown speckles, and as thick as my thigh. I really did not want to find out what it was attached to.

I stumbled off the porch, somehow keeping my stack of pizzas from hitting the ground. I'd have to eat the cost, but that was the least of my worries at the moment.

The door ripped off its hinges and disappeared into the house. Some *thing* slithered out of the interior. A hulking blob of semi-transparent turquoise flesh rippled across the boards of the porch much faster than it looked capable of moving.

Instinctively, I fired a pizza box at the creature. The box hit it in the face and fell to the ground. The creature roared and flowed across the box. I tossed another one at it, and the box fell open, spilling its contents into the dirt of the yard. The creature stopped dead in its tracks, and—with a curious gurgling noise—slurped up the fallen pizza.

Since it bought me time, I tossed the creature another. I didn't know what the hell the thing was, but I didn't want any closer acquaintance with it.

I started to turn my back on it and realized that would be a huge mistake. Especially since a second one now squeezed its way out of the doorway. I threw it a pizza too and backed toward my Honda as quickly as possible.

The creatures snuffled at the pizza boxes, making little burbling noises at each other. I threw another pizza box any time they started toward me again. A third, smaller creature joined the others. I think they were a family.

By now, the yard was littered with pizza boxes. Now I knew to look, I saw the wild lightshow I had thought was from the party appeared to be coming from behind the house. Was it the aliens' ship? *Were* they aliens? Though...what else could they be? Overgrown garden slugs?

I fumbled behind me for the handle of the car door. It opened with a metallic groan and three gelatinous heads swung my way. I frisbeed the remaining pizza across the yard, hitting the largest blob in the head, dove into the car and peeled out in a cloud of dust.

I took the tunnel of trees with the accelerator red-lined. Adrenaline spiked through my system as I fought to keep the car straight on the road. I was practically flying when I exited the trees.

What should I do? Aliens had invaded...pizza-loving aliens at that. I needed to tell someone. Who should I tell? The cops? The army? The president?

The car jerked backwards, front wheels unable to get any traction as something pulled it back toward the frat house. I gulped, turning my head to peek.

The turquoise gel covered the back windshield and oozed up the windows. I realized there would be no chance to tell anyone. As I heard the metal of the Honda crumpling around me, I understood there was no more time. I was about to be digested by alien stomach acid.

And all because of a dozen pizzas. What a world....

About the Author:

Rie Sheridan Rose multitasks. A lot. Her short stories appear in numerous anthologies, including *Killing It Softly I and II*, *On Fire*, and *Hides the Dark Tower*. She has authored twelve novels, six poetry chapbooks, and lyrics for dozens of songs. Her favorite work to date is *The Conn-Mann Chronicles Steampunk* series with five books released so far. Rie lives in Texas with her wonderful husband and several spoiled cat-children.

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Vic and Holly burst out the backdoor shrieking at each other again. Vic was beating the hell out of one of Holly's dolls while wearing his Green Goblin mask. He had already pulled the poor doll's arms out. Now he was twisting one of its legs and yanking on its hair. Their sibling rivalry had just entered new heights. Their mother told them it was because they were born at the same time. Fraternal twins. She told them she wished she'd had them years apart. Having them both together had nearly killed her.

"Give it back!" Holly screamed, her voice not quite dark with rage but almost. She didn't want Vic to think he was getting the best of her. She nearly tripped over her witch's dress as it was slightly too long for her.

"I'm bored anyway." He threw the doll onto the ground where his sister scooped it up and patted its hair. "C'mon, let's go to the pits."

"Yeah!" Holly's eyes lit up.

"You kids don't go far," their mother called from the backdoor. "Dinner is soon and then we're going trick or treating after."

"Okay mom," they said in unison.

"And stay away from the sand pits. They're dangerous. Stick to the woods."

"Yeah mom," Vic called as he raced off ahead of his sister, kicking the collection of pumpkins across the backyard they had planned to carve later that night, dead leaves scattering into the air.

"Wait up!" Holly rushed behind him, her pointed boots kicking up dirt.

The twins weaved into the thick woods with its ancient, gnarled trees and hollow deadfalls and played their favorite game.

"Robin!" Holly called and pointed, dead but colorful leaves crunching beneath her feet.

"Nope, that's a Warbler!" Vic curled up his hand, bit down on his bottom lip and punched her in the shoulder.

"Ow...that's too hard."

"That's how the game works. The more you get wrong the harder the punch."

"Whatever."

A caw caught the twins' attention and both swerved to look behind them.

"Raven!" Vic pointed up into a skeletal tree where a black bird had perched.

"No sir, that's a crow!" Holly wound up and punched her brother in the arm.

Vic laughed then glared at her. "You call that a punch? Didn't even hurt. That is so a raven."

"No, it's not. It's too small."

"You don't know anything."

"I know more than you!"

Vic curled his hand into another fist but Holly bolted through the trees and into the shadows. "No!" She bellowed, heart pounding. "You're cheating."

"Am not!" Vic raced after her.

The two of them flitted through the dense woods, on and off trails, over massive tree stumps and moss-infested rocks to the edge of a ravine. The sky glowed with pale orange and yellow hues, as if the spirit of Halloween itself spread its cloak across the land.

They stopped and looked down at the pits, a big construction site that was being cleared for a new housing complex.

It was deathly quiet and though it was the middle of the afternoon the trucks were empty and the men who worked down there were nowhere in sight. Probably had taken the day off because it was Halloween and they wanted to take their kids out into the neighborhood streets soon.

Holly noticed that all of the trees around the edge of the pits seemed dead, like deader than dead. Not just that their branches had shaken their leaves off but their trunks were withered, their branches rotting and the bark seemed a sickly, pale color. It fascinated her. She'd never seen them like that before and she'd grown up exploring every inch of these woods.

"C'mon, let's go," Vic said, sliding his mask to the top of his head and eyeing his sister.

"Mom told us not to."

"Shit ... do we ever listen to her?"

"No."

"Well then?" He jumped from the ravine onto the largest pile of sand they'd ever seen. Holly followed his lead.

They rode the sand all the way to the bottom, laughing all the way. Vic pushed Holly again and again as they climbed onto the slumbering trucks and digging machines and jumped in and out of holes.

"Hey, look at this!" Vic stopped to check out a fresh hole in one of the biggest mounds of dirt, set up against the high wall of the construction site. It looked almost like the entrance to a mine. "Maybe there's treasure down there."

"I don't know. Looks dark and scary."

“Oh c’mon. Don’t be a chicken shit. You’re not a baby are you?”

“No, of course not.” Holly shook her head. “But today is the day of the dead ya’know?” There was slight crack to her voice, as she lowered it, as if she was trying to sound sinister and spook her brother.

“So what? Halloween is for babies. Let’s go. I see some sort of light down there.”

Holly watched her brother slide down into the hole. She looked around the area, swallowed some air and followed him down.

The tunnel was damp and cold. It smelled musty but Vic was right, there was light flickering way down below. They followed the tunnel down as deep as it would take them, along the way they noticed a couple of hardhats, a boot here and there and some gloves. They finally found the source of the light in a circular chamber.

Construction lamps sat on the floor and all around them hung tangled tree roots. A nest of them clustered together at the back. Something shifted within them. A shadow thrived. Vic and Holly moved closer for a better look and the roots parted. Within their embrace sat a withered, ancient creature the color of sand. Dark stains encircled a lipless mouth, its eyes were pale yellow, and its skin looked wrinkled and worn like old leather. The tree roots pierced its body, supporting it, sustaining it like feeding tubes in an incubator. Like the one their mother had told them nourished the two of them when they were babies who’d been born too early.

“Hello...” the creature rasped.

Holly stood beside her brother transfixed, unable to believe what she was seeing, but unable to look away. A surge of horror tingled down her spine but the excitement at something fantastical, something out of stories and legend, tickled the inside of her chest and overrode the fleeting instinct to turn and run. “Hi...” she managed to squeak out.

“I am so glad to see you both. I have been down here for such a long, long time.” The tree roots quivered as it spoke.

“You have?” Holly continued.

It nodded. “I’m so thirsty. If you help get me something to drink I will grant you anything your heart desires.”

“Anything?” Holly asked.

“Anything you wish. You must have dreams and wishes that even come to you in your sleep. Your young, healthy heart yearns for it. You think of it day after day and now you can have it. You can have anything you want. I can grant this to you. Anything. Anything your heart desires. I just need to drink some blood. Can you bring me some or someone filled with blood, the life-giving essence for you and I? Anyone?”

“Anyone?” Holly asked.

“Anyone will do. It will make me strong enough to give you what either of you wishes.” It kept its yellow eyes locked on both of their gazes. The tree roots coiled, clicking against one another.

Vic shivered.

“Blood...?” Vic whispered.

Holly stared at him, watching his hands tremble. It was the first time she’d ever seen her brother afraid of anything. She always thought he feared nothing, he charged into everything head on, he never thought of the consequences, the repercussions. There was never any worry of what result his actions would cause. It was always instant gratification for Vic. Act now, worry later. Give it to me. Give it to me now.

She looked him up and down then turned to the thing rustling in its nest of tree roots, having survived its underground slumber with the nourishment of the woods themselves.

The creature smiled, a toothy, crooked grin that cut across its old, dusty face like a gash across a rotting jack-o-lantern. Its feral eyes stared straight into Holly, seeing deep down into her soul. It nodded.

Vic’s breathing quickened and filled the tunnel. Holly could almost hear his heart beating faster and faster. He went to take a step back when Holly pushed him as hard as she could with both hands.

He crashed into the network of roots and they immediately snaked around his body, dragging him kicking and screaming up to the creature’s grip. It eyed Holly with a pernicious smile as her brother’s wails filled the chamber and sunk long fangs into Vic’s neck. The creature drank deeply.

“Okay, here’s what I want,” Holly said.

About the Author:

John Grover is a multi-genre fiction author residing in Massachusetts. John grew up watching creature double feature with his brother on Saturday afternoons. This fueled his love of monsters, ghosts and the supernatural. In his spare time, he loves to cook, garden, go to the movies with his friends, read, talk about food, bake amazing desserts, play with his dogs and draw-badly.

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I knew Jack well while his body still roamed this Earth. He was the sort of man who would jump in front of a bus to save a stranger, the type to take off his coat and offer it to some cold, lonely soul. He was a kind man with a generous heart. Just being around him made people joyful; their cares seemed to drift from their thoughts in his presence. The light of his life was too bright to lie in shadow.

Holidays were always a big deal for him. He wanted to share in the celebration with everyone in town. Halloween was no exception. It was, in fact, one of his favorite days of the year. His house never failed to impress. Even the adults without children at least drove by to see what terrifying wonders he'd have out on display. Every kid in town made sure to make a stop there, no matter how far they'd have to walk, or beg their parents to drive. And Jack never let them down. He'd always buy more than enough candy so that no one would be left out, and everyone got more than one piece.

Life has a way of bringing tragedy to all great tales, and Jack's was no different. One Halloween night nearly a decade ago, Jack had his most impressive display ever. It probably used enough electricity to power a small village. But it was spectacular. I remember sitting on my porch, bathed in light and sound blasting from his front lawn. Everyone couldn't wait to get close and experience it in full after dark.

But just as the sun was setting, and children were prepping their yearly choice of costume, Jack's display caught fire—and so did Jack. He burned alive among the plastic skeletons and foam gravestones. His screams were drowned by the crackling blaze. Everyone gathered in the street, their makeup half-done, outfits partially put together, and stood speechless as they saw Jack walk out onto the lawn, completely engulfed in flames, before he dropped to the ground. His house burned to ashes.

Halloween in Modena has never been the same since. There are less decorations than there used to be, less elaborate costumes, and a solemn feeling hangs in the air every year. I sit on my porch, across from the empty lot where Jack's house once was. I carve pumpkins, light them, and set them on my stairs. But one always burns brighter than the rest. No matter what kind of candle I use, one shines more vibrant and with a different light than all the others.

And every Halloween, as the town makes their rounds through the neighborhood, each visitor leaves a piece of candy at the base of that pumpkin—a gift for old Jack.

But as the years have passed, and the stories told by children in school have faded and become nothing more than faint whispers, less and less candy has been left for him. That pile dwindles in size with each passing October. And across the street, the first concrete has been poured for a new home over where his once stood.

In my old age, I wonder about a lot of things. I think of the death that awaits my own body, how time slowly creeps in and makes us too brittle for this world. I wonder what might happen when no one is left to tend the flame. When no one remembers his name—when the candy stops coming and poor old Jack is forgotten. I wonder, in my old age, I wonder.

About the Author:

Lee Andrew Forman is a writer, editor, and publisher from the Hudson Valley region in New York. Lee has published three books to date, *The Bury Box*, *Zero Perspective*, and *Fragments of a Damned Mind*, along with numerous short stories in multiple anthologies. He is a co-owner of *Sirens Call Publications*, a regular contributor to *The Lift*, and writes non-fiction pieces for various periodicals.

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The

BURY BOX

LEE ANDREW FORMAN

Available on Amazon

On the thirty-first a determined Basil Pruid would always don a costume and amble off into the adolescent dusk for some serious Trick or Treating. Not only at the end of October like most kids, but every month exceeding thirty days. Ergo, the enterprising twelve-year old solicited treats seven times a year in the surrounding neighborhood of his Tucson, Arizona suburb. The tradition was inaugurated at the ripe old age of eight, two months after Halloween, his birthday.

Winter evenings were more lucrative for young Basil as early darkness provided added TOT time before he'd call it quits at 10:00 pm, a self-imposed curfew. His parents, when home (both worked long hours as veterinarians), attempted to dissuade the boy against this strangeness. But Basil was a headstrong lad not to be deterred; knew his parents feared him. Everyone did.

The neighborhood's surrounds adjusted to Basil's added costumed visits. Eventually. Although some neighbors' adjustment needed a catalyst. Only a few, however, received the added persuasion. Word spread at net speed.

Basil stepped out his front door, an aberrant chill in the January twilight air. Another thirty-first. Behind, a large wheeled mailbag trailed, one he'd pilfered from the mail carrier a few years back. Never reported missing, its sturdiness perfect for containing the abundant treats collected. When it came to candy, Basil demanded the good stuff. Only the good stuff, and not in the bullshit fun size/bite size. Full blown chocolate candy bars only; the neighborhood complied accordingly. Many residents kept a substantial stash at the ready; greeting Basil empty-handed unthinkable.

As the youngster sauntered down the sidewalk, a single tear moistened his left cheek. Basil had decided this would be his last year as a Trick or Treater. He'd turn thirteen at the end of October; fitting his final costumed trek would terminate on Halloween next (and birthday thirteen, the reverse of thirty-one). Officially a teen, Basil would leave childish endeavors behind. Those memories, however, would be savored for a lifetime.

The first half of the evening went without incident. He'd always take the same route around the neighborhood, in the fall and winter months an expanded jaunt. Divided it into two halves both ending at his doorstep. After completion of half one, he'd unload his chocolate booty inside the house, take a brief pitstop to relieve and hydrate himself, then head out once again, turning in the opposite direction for part deux. Having an accurate internal clock (and an occasional peek at his phone), he would adjust his pace accordingly endeavoring to end his costumed excursion at precisely 10:00 pm back at his own front door. Sometimes he'd misjudge his stride, but a curfew was a curfew and the rare occasions his phone's alarm buzzed before his route ended, he'd simply beeline home. Missed out on a few bars of candy; not many.

During the second half of January's chocolate expedition, he encountered unexpected resistance. It wasn't the first time during non-Halloween runs this occurred, but normally the situation resolved itself quickly and without incident. A friendly reminder usually sufficed.

This time, however, would require something a bit less amicable. A *little* more persuasive.

The Olsen home sat a mere two blocks down the street from the Pruid household. Route wise, however, it neared the end of the night's Trick or Treat trek. Marked the final leg of the tour, the home stretch. The Olsens habitually retired early as both Karl and Harriet worked predawn shifts; no children meant no problems with their schedule; been doing it for years. Lights out early. Except on thirty-firsts when Karl lingered in the darkness of the foyer, a supersized candy bar at the ready. Even during Halloween, the Olsen home went dark to discourage the costumed kiddies. *No treats here.* With only one concession.

As Basil approached the Olsen abode, a look of surprised etched his face. For the first time since he could remember, the home's front porch light gleamed. *Strange*, he thought. Basil pressed the doorbell three times in succession. Did that with all the houses except the Pavlov's whose bell had broken years ago and remained unrepaired. Three loud knocks let Mrs. P know the special Trick or Treater awaited.

After three presses of the doorbell, Basil stood back expecting an immediate response. Mr. Olsen knew the drill. The entire neighborhood did. When the door remained closed a good thirty seconds, he again pressed the doorbell three times. Followed up with three knocks. Hard. He could hear the patter of hurried footsteps approaching from the inside. *About damn time.* The door opened slowly as a young woman's face peered out.

"Yes?"

The boy irritably responded in segments – a trio in rapid succession. "Trick or treat; where's Mr. Olsen? And who the hell are you?" Basil, a creature of habit, expected the same from his neighbors on the thirty-first.

"I'm Elvira and watch your tongue, young man," the startled raven haired woman replied. "Didn't your parents teach you any manners?" *Too many latchkey kids with attitude around here.*

"I said trick or treat. Where's the damn treat?"

“Oh, you must be *that* boy. Aunt Harriet did mention you’d be coming around; I thought it was tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow’s February first!” Basil retorted, barely controlling his rage.

“It is? My bad. I’ve been house sitting for the past week. Guess I lost track of the days. The Olsens have gone to Hawaii; twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. I’m watching the house.”

“Trick or fucking treat!” Basil was behind schedule. At this rate, he’d have to jog the remaining route and that mail carrier bag had gotten considerably heavier.

“Okay, okay. By the way, I like your Dracula costume.” She turned and headed to the kitchen suddenly recalling the Olsen’s stern warnings about this child and their specific instructions. *But he’s just a kid*, she thought. *A little bastard of a kid*.

The house sitter returned with the treat. “There you go, young man. Enjoy.” She handed him the treat accompanied by a broad toothy smile.

“An apple!” Basil was incredulous. “Where’s the candy bar? I *always* get a candy bar. Chocolate.”

“Aunt Harriett mentioned something about that, but an apple is what you get. I just couldn’t convince myself to buy one of those processed, over sugared things at the supermarket. They’re so unhealthy.”

Basil, enraged, pushed through the entrance of the home, slamming the door shut behind. Rage - the catalyst for his metamorphosis. Like a caged animal it was, fiercely pacing back and forth inside him . . . eager to escape.

Every thirty-first Basil would don a different costume. He preferred the classics like Frankenstein, Wolfman, and Mummy. His father made them; much more realistic than those cheap store-bought ones . . . and under certain circumstances so much more. The Catalyst.

Elvira, paralyzed with fear, could only watch in horror as the boy transformed into the actual infamous bloodsucker, hovering ominously over her. As he attempted to grab at her throat, she found her legs and barreled toward the back of the house, the only available exit. With vampire quickness, Basil caught her as she reached for the back door. The horror-stricken woman screamed then fainted into his arms.

As he sank his fangs into her neck and began to suck the crimson nectar, Basil considered the ramifications of his actions. Although young, he was quite adroit at analyzing situations. And this one needed to be handled prudently. After pondering several scenarios, he took the path of least resistance.

He made her a vampire. Dragged her to the backyard to finish the task. *God, that blood tasted good*. When she came to, he explained the situation; made it clear any contrariness would result in dire consequences. Guaranteed. It was an easy sale. In her altered state the young bloodsucker now saw things differently; the hunger for the crimson liquid overwhelming.

She readily agreed to Basil’s terms. Simple, really – no hunting anywhere near the suburbs, and under no circumstances was she *ever* to return to the Olsen home. Failure to abide by those rules would mean . . . she knew exactly what it would mean. Over the back fence and into the darkness she scampered.

In less than a minute, Basil returned to being Basil again and trudged straight home, his night regrettably over.

October 31. Halloween; the final Trick or Treat. About an hour before sunset, Basil readied himself. His swan song costume was ghoulish. Literally. Mom helped him with the makeup after he donned a proper costume meticulously sewn (with requisite random rips) by his father. (It was Sunday, his parents atypically at home.) Basil practiced his lumbering walk in the mirror until satisfied of its authenticity. Ready.

As dusk trundled over his quiet suburb, Basil ventured out in full costume for the last time. Melancholy tugged at his core as he ghoulish-walked down the sidewalk. A sad day it was, a multitude of emotions swirling inside. Just the opposite for the neighbors, however, as Basil had advised them of his decision during his rounds on the last day of August. To mark the occasion, several households planned elaborate celebrations after the final visit – best Halloween ever.

The newest neighborhood teenager sensed the relief in his community as the house calls mounted. Many neighbors offered substantially more candy bars than the one required. But as his postal bag quickly filled, he realized he’d have to make an unscheduled trip home to unload the overflowing bag. Now he was behind schedule. To make up lost minutes, he ditched the ghoulish walk.

Basil reached the last leg of his journey with no time to spare. The Olsen house. As he rang the doorbell three times, he thought of past January and Harriet’s niece. When the Olsens returned to find Elvira missing they suspected the worst. Never called the cops, of course; knew better. When Harriet’s sister asked about her daughter’s whereabouts, the Olsen’s feigned ignorance. Told the sister the truth (but not their theory) – when the couple returned from Hawaii,

Elvira was gone. No note; no anything. Harriet's sister filed a missing person report, but nothing came of it. Just like thousands of other similar cases each year, it went cold. Elvira cold.

For the first time Basil could remember, both Mr. and Mrs. stood at the door. Harriet forced a smile as she handed Basil the requisite candy bar. "End of an era, eh?" The aroma of chocolate fondue floated through the open entrance.

"Yup," I'm getting too old for this kid stuff. Time to move on."

"Well, we'll keep some candy bars handy if you ever change your mind," Karl replied. Insincerely.

Sensing Karl's drift, Basil answered, "After downing my Halloween haul, I've promised myself to start eating healthier. Maybe more apples." He couldn't resist the irony.

"Good for you. Our missing niece, Elvira, loved apples; they were her favorite."

Basil didn't like the inference. Too close to home. Started to piss him off.

Karl continued, "We didn't mention it to anybody, but suspect you must have been the last to see her on January 31."

"She handed me a candy bar after I rang the doorbell; that's all I know," Basil lied as the continuing aroma of heated chocolate aroused his nostrils. "By the way, is that chocolate fondue I smell?"

"Yes, just like you we love chocolate, but prefer it melted and warm," said Karl. "Would you like to come in and have some?" Both Mr. and Mrs. chimed in together.

"Thanks, let me finish my rounds. I promised myself I'd hit every house on my last Halloween. I'm almost done; can I come back, say in about twenty minutes?"

"Sure, we'll be waiting. We'll melt some more chocolate in the meantime. If you'd like to bring something from home to dip, please do," Harriet said.

"Okay, I think we have some strawberries in the fridge. I'll see you soon." With that, Basil headed to the side walk, double time.

The newbie teen returned to the Olsen's place in about twenty minutes as promised with strawberries in tow. A couple of bananas as well. Since he was in a hurry, he arrived wearing his Halloween outfit. Luck always seemed to go his way.

Harriet escorted the costumed guest into the breakfast nook where the fondue sat. Almost overflowing with melted chocolate, it was the most scrumptious chocolate setup Basil had ever encountered. Karl seated him at the table and Basil got to it, slowly dipping the strawberries he brought into the warm sweet liquid before inserting them into his eager mouth. *Paradise found.*

As Basil devoured the last dipped strawberry, he prepared to peel one of his bananas for slicing. That's when he felt it. The icy steel of a Glock pressed to the back of his skull.

"A family can only take so much shit, Basil. For years we've endured. The last straw was January when Elvira went missing," said Harriet. "What did you do to her? I need to know before I blow your fucking brains out."

"Nothing, I swear!" Fear morphed into instantaneous rage a second before Basil heard the Glock explode. Too late. For the Olsens. The horrific ghoul grabbed the couple, each one caught in the thing's vice-like grip. No escape. Harriet hysterically emptied the Glock into the miscreation's head and trunk before the life was torn out of her. Bullets didn't faze the morphed Basil. Not in the least.

Still in a rage, the ghoul surveyed its handywork – bloodied body parts strewn everywhere; a masterpiece of gore. Time to feast. Fondue style. The warm meat so much tastier when dipped in heated chocolate. Palate nirvana.

Sated, Basil morphed back into his teenage body. Surveyed the situation. Weighed options, came up with a plan.

After that fateful January night, Basil had kept in contact with Elvira. Didn't trust her as she grew stronger with every passing month. Needed to be reminded periodically who she was dealing with; keep the fear fresh just as he did with the entire neighborhood. Extracted a phone from his blood soiled pants pocket and called.

"What now, Basil?"

"You thirsty?"

"Always."

"Your lucky night. You get a one-time free pass to return to the Olsen's."

"What did you do to them?" she queried, neither angry nor frightened, but intrigued.

"Self-defense. The way I figure it, I'm doing you a favor. I need a cleaner - all the blood you can lap up off the floor . . . and there's puddles of it. You can suck the remaining blood out of the bones as well. Afterwards, make the evidence disappear. Even stay for a while if you promise not to hunt where you sleep. Make it appear they're still

around; up to you.” Basil abruptly disconnected, not allowing Elvira the opportunity to respond. *No worries; she’ll be there.*

It’d be a pity to let all that fresh blood go to waste.

About the Author:

An admitted MBA workaholic, Charles Sartorius does make time to write short stories and music lyrics. His *The Missing Case of the Missing Case* and *Boo Hag* have been published in recent anthologies. Another creation, *The Ancient Forest of Terror*, appears in an upcoming Sirens Call anthology. Songs, like *A Fart is the Best Response*, appear on conventional venues such as Amazon and Apple Music.

Hunter | *Naching T. Kassa*

The village lies sleeping beneath a silver disc of moon, and the beast walks its streets.

The woman staggers out of the pub with two gold pieces and a song on her lips. She makes for the dark street and I follow, walking as silently as a ghost in a graveyard.

Her voice fills the empty thoroughfare, ringing off the cobbled stone. She sings of a boy called Billy, one who’s stolen her heart away.

A strange coincidence. Billy is my name.

It’s a cold night. The kind that chills a man to the bone and causes steam to rise from a severed artery. I can almost smell the blood now, its metallic, cloying scent makes my mouth water. Her footsteps lead me farther into the darkness.

She pauses, her song dying away. I halt too. I strain to hear the sound which has stopped her in her tracks. It could not be me. Never me.

She resumes her song and moves on to a nearby building where she leans and pours her heart out into the sky. Her voice cracks, as she curses the boy she once loved.

A breeze rises, carrying her scent—meat pie and beer—toward me. There’s another smell too. Tobacco. My heart quickens.

There’s a soft rustle up ahead. I hear it long before she does, and I can barely contain myself. Soon, I will bite into soft flesh and gorge myself on a fountain of blood. The anticipation weakens my knees.

As the woman passes the mouth of the alley, a place enshrouded in shadow, he leaps out. His knife gleams in the moonlight.

He would’ve taken her in his arms and silenced her screams with a single slash at the throat, had I not leaped into the way. I barrel into her, knocking her aside. She falls. I think she might scream, but she doesn’t. Instead, she scrambles up and flees.

My prey, the one I have waited for so long, stares at me with wide eyes. His hand quakes as he grips the knife and I swat it away when he tries to strike. It tumbles, end over end, and clatters against the wall. He stands helpless before me.

My voice, rendered a guttural growl by the fullness of the moon, has long lost its humanity. I cannot speak and so I howl. He shrieks.

The village continues to sleep beneath the silver disc of moon.

While I slay the beast.

About the Author:

Naching T. Kassa is a wife, mother, writer, and head of Talent Relations at Crystal Lake Entertainment. She’s created short stories, novellas, poems, and co-created three children. She resides in Eastern Washington State with her husband, Dan Kassa. Naching is a member of the Horror Writers Association, Mystery Writers of America, and The Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association.

Instagram: [@nachingkassa](#)
Author Website: [Frighten Me!](#)

The child appeared in the narrow grassy lane between the trees. She stood on the rutted ground among decaying apples—their overripe flesh attracting wasps that swarmed around her bare legs. She didn't flinch, even when the insects brushed against her skin. The child's hair was a tangle of brown curls that touched the grubby shoulders of her t-shirt which was at least two sizes too big. She was exactly what Arden was looking for, but I kept quiet as we walked by. I hadn't wanted to be here, but since this was my last job, I'd had to show up. Arden had threatened to tell Joyce all about my career choices and the things I'd done to succeed. "One more," he'd said. "That's all I need from you." Joyce was a real cracker of a woman—big-boned and quick to laugh—and I didn't want her to ever find out about the darkness that lay in my past.

We'd been at it all weekend, Arden and I. We'd started on Friday night—trawling the arcades and trampoline parks, then gravitating to the playgrounds and farmers' markets on Saturday. But we'd had no luck so far. Seems like families stay closer together these days. Parents are true helicopters—buzzing around their kids and watching their every move. It was my idea to try the pick-ur-own at the local orchards on Sunday. Parents spend so much time reaching up into the branches of the trees they forget to keep an eye out at ground level. It's easy for little ones to wander off, easy for people like me and Arden to swoop in.

Don't get me wrong, we're not taking kids for malicious reasons like those brown-toothed, stoop-shouldered men with their nasty, sewer-level desires to fulfill. We've got a living to earn just like everyone else. It's just our living depends on the skills of our staff. And our staff happen to be under the age of twelve. There are houses asking to be broken into—McMansions with no security systems, houses in neighborhoods where people have a false sense of security and think locking their doors is enough, houses where pets roam free. Not following me? You can lock your door and think you're safe, but those pet doors are just asking to be crawled through. Those windows you leave open just a crack to let in fresh air through the still, humid nights? Little kids are the perfect size to squeeze through.

The child standing in the orchard was the right size and, just as important, she was alone. But something about the way she looked at me made me pause. Maybe it was the half smile playing around her mouth—as if she knew something I didn't. The afternoon was lousy with mosquitos, I scratched at my arms and neck, digging deep with my nails and drawing blood. And that stench of overripe fruit—it turned my stomach. It took me back to my own childhood. I'd loved fruit as a kid, but my mother delighted in telling me stories that'd chill the skin off your bones. Stories about fruit-loving demons who sniffed out kiddies who'd gorged on apples and pears and bananas. They used to terrify me so much I'd wet the bed rather than risk setting foot outside the safety of my covers. Haven't touched a single piece of fruit since.

I sped up, hoping Arden didn't notice the girl standing there all by herself. But I was too slow.

"Hey!" Arden grabbed my arm and pulled me back. He stood looking at the tawny-haired child, chuckling. "Well, what have we here?" He let go of my arm and approached the little girl, who watched him like a cat watching a bird through a closed window. Her pupils were large and black.

"Arden, her family's gotta be around somewhere," I said, feebly.

Arden made a show of looking up and down the tree alley. "I don't see no-one," he said. "Little girl, are you lost?"

The girl's smile got bigger, lighting up her whole face. "I'm waiting," she said.

Something about that made my flesh creep.

Suddenly, the light seeping through the branches didn't look right, as if it was oozing along the limbs—like the light was taking a while to touch all the shadows. The girl's shadow looked impossibly long for a second.

"Yo, Arden, let's keep looking, okay?" I grabbed at his sleeve, but he pulled away and strode towards the girl.

He crouched down, so they were eye to eye. He matched her smile, but the way he was waving his hands at the wasps still buzzing around the rotting apples, gave away his discomfort. "Waiting?" Arden asked. The girl nodded. "Yeah? For your mommy?"

The girl looked over her shoulder, then turned back to Arden and shrugged.

"Aha," said Arden, also looking over the girl's shoulder. "And when will she be here?"

"When it gets dark, silly." The girl laughed, a surprisingly deep chuckle that made her whole body shudder.

"Well," continued Arden. "The thing is, she asked me to watch you until she got back."

The girl tilted her head to the side. "Did she?"

Arden nodded and took one of the girl's hands in his own. "What's your name, sweetheart?"

"Lilith."

“Okay, then Lily. Let’s go. Chop chop.” Arden got behind the girl and nudged her along the alleyway. The girl’s smile was gone.

“It’s Lilith,” she said, quietly.

We kept the kids at a cozy little farm a few hours north. No-one could ever say we didn’t provide for them: they had food, books, toys, fields to look out the windows at. Arden’s plan was to drive there overnight. Stopping at a motel would be too risky, he said. I didn’t mention my RV idea again. I’d always thought using a camper van would make it a lot easier, people tend to mind their business in campsites. But Arden always shot it down, saying people would remember an RV, but they paid no attention to a run-of-the-mill gray Ford Taurus. I strapped Lilith into the back, while Arden kept an eye out for her family. Then we took off.

The sun was drifting towards the horizon as we made our way out to the highway. The road ran along the crest of a hill and we could see for miles. The landscape was a patchwork of fields, dotted with little white farmhouses and rustic red barns. Idyllic. But I felt unsettled, my stomach was in knots and my skin itched furiously.

“Stop scratching, man. You got fleas? Jee-sus.” Arden hit the palm of his hand against the steering wheel and squinted at the road ahead.

I glanced over my shoulder at Lilith. She looked small and vulnerable gazing at the countryside beyond the window.

I sat back in my seat. My eyelids were heavy, so I let them drop, just for a minute or two.

Scritch scratch scritch scratch.

I gasped and came awake, my mother’s voice still lingering in my ears.

Arden glanced at me and smirked. “Sweet dreams, little baby?”

I ignored him. *Scritch scratch scritch scratch*—the sounds the fruit demons in my mother’s stories made before they ripped your head off.

“It’s almost here,” Lilith whispered from the back seat. Then, so quietly it could have been the ghost of my memory “Scratch.”

“What?” I turned around, craning my neck to look at her.

Lilith just smiled that creepy smile and carried on watching the passing fields. I faced the windshield and held tight to the sides of my seat. I felt unmoored, like I was about to float away, that feeling you get when you’re heading into a nightmare and can’t wake up. And my skin itched like a thousand ants were crawling under it.

Being a parent wasn’t a thing my mother was any good at. Pretty obvious I suppose from her choice of bedtime tales. I can’t even justify her wickedness by saying she was young and didn’t know any better, that her unwanted kid stole the best years of her life. She was middle-aged by the time she had me. She’d already had plenty of chances to live the high-life. It was more like I was something she turned to when she was bored. Something she took pleasure in scaring the shit out of. Those fucking fruit demons have followed me into my adult nightmares. So what if Lilith had said ‘scratch’? It was a common enough word and I doubted she had anyway. I was sure it was just my stupid imagination dredging up those childhood dreams, but it freaked me out something rotten.

We were still hours away from the farmhouse. I was getting hungry, despite the nauseous feeling in my stomach and the soda I’d drunk at the Mickey D’s earlier was starting to grumble in my bladder.

“Gonna pull off soon,” said Arden, as if he’d read my thoughts. “There’s that rest stop ahead.”

“That one’s closed,” I pointed out.

Arden glanced over at me. “What are you, a little girl?” He looked at our passenger in the back seat, then out the windshield again. “You can go in the woods, or behind the dumpster. Jeez!”

I didn’t want to stop at an abandoned rest stop in the dark, but I kept quiet. Arden would never stop at a gas station with goods in the car. And he’d never let me live it down for asking.

The sun had fully set by the time we pulled in. There was no moon and the sky had clouded over. Arden pulled the car to the back of the lot, next to a copse of trees. It was almost black in the shadows. The car headlights drifted across the trunks and lit a path into the small woods. I thought I saw something skitter away from the beams.

“What was that?” I asked.

Arden rolled his eyes at me. “I’m gonna take a piss. If you’re too chickenshit to get out here, watch the kid.” He slumped out of the car, slammed the door closed, then stretched his arms above his head. He loped towards the trees. I

wanted to tell him to stay out of the woods. But why? Had I really seen something? Or was it just my imagination, fired up because of the way Lilith had me feeling?

I heard a rustle from the backseat and turned. Lilith's eyes glinted in the darkness. For a second it'd looked as if she'd been cocooned in a blanket. That gave me the willies. I thought about things wrapping themselves in webs then emerging as something entirely different. I turned on the overhead light and as the inside of the car lit up, I saw the girl had just tucked her arms inside her massive t-shirt. She looked a lot older than I remembered. Her face seemed different—her cheeks weren't as full and her mouth turned down.

"Turn it off." Her voice grated through me, like steel wool against a rusted pipe.

"What?" I didn't like looking directly at her. Which was ridiculous. She was a kid. But I flicked the light off, more for my own comfort than hers. As the darkness engulfed the car again, I swore that t-shirt had shrunk a couple of sizes. She wasn't the peanut we'd snatched from the orchard. I willed Arden to hurry up.

Insects swirled in the glow of the headlights. I couldn't see Arden beyond them. The squeal of the back door opening barely registered. I was still staring into the dark, watching for Arden to come back to the car—*praying* for him to hurry the fuck up and get back to the car.

"Scritch, scratch." Lilith's voice was hoarse. Ancient. The sound of something that had clawed its way out of the ground.

I stared ahead, not wanting to turn to look at the little girl on the backseat. Not wanting to see what she really was. I jumped as the backdoor slammed shut, remembering, too late, the sound of it whining open a moment before. I swung around to see the backseat empty. Lilith was gone.

"Shit." I scrambled out of my seatbelt and was just about to get out, before I stopped myself. Was I really going to go after whatever it was we'd kidnapped? I looked through the windshield. The high beams shone into the woods, but the light didn't cut through the darkness. The shadows coalesced, spinning and forming into something solid. I made out Arden's lanky figure striding through the trees. But something wasn't right. I watched in fascination as the shadows loomed over him. My legs were rooted to the seat and I couldn't bring myself to touch the door handle, let alone open it. It felt as if I'd been dropped into the middle of a nightmare and there was nothing I could do to warn him. *What are you, a little girl?* Arden's words rang through my head. *Yeah, well, there was a little girl in an orchard a few hours ago and look how that's turning out.*

I wanted to call out, to tell Arden to run, I really did. But my voice was stuck somewhere deep in my gullet and I watched, in horror, as he raised his head to the swirling darkness. He opened his eyes wide as his hands dropped to his sides. His head twisted up, up, up, stretching impossibly high. It wasn't until blood spurted like a geyser from his neck and his body slumped to the ground, that I understood. Arden's head had just been ripped off.

A strange squealing noise sounded inside the car, getting louder and louder as I watched Arden's body twitch on the ground outside. It took a second to realize it was coming from me. The seat beneath me was warm and wet. Thank the lord Arden wasn't there to see I'd pissed myself. I'd never live it down. Strange, the things that go through your head right before you lose it.

The mass of darkness headed for the car. I had a few seconds to wish I'd followed my gut instinct and left Lilith in that sun-drenched alleyway between the gnarled apple trees. The shadow stretched across the windshield, filling the car with an inky blackness. Lilith's face emerged from the shadow, her jaw elongated, eyes like voids in her distorted face. She smiled and I felt my bowels loosen at the rows and rows of jagged teeth that filled her maw. The sweetness of rotting fruit filled my nostrils—cloying, nauseating. And a child's voice whispered. "Scritch scratch."

About the author:

Josephine writes tales that tend towards the darker side of fiction. She is represented by Alyssa Eisner Henkin of Birch Path Literary and is currently working on a rewrite of a middle-grade fantasy novel. You can read her work in *Spirits and Ghouls Short Stories* by Flame Tree Press, *72 Hours of Insanity* Volumes 8 and 11, and *Fudoki Magazine*.

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The run from New London to Worcester was less than two hours, so short it was almost stupid. On paper both shows were close enough to hurt each other's draws, but the beauty of New England was that there was a separate diehard metal scene every 60 miles.

So, it was a short run. A sleep late, roll out just before check out run, because they'd sold a night-in-a-Hampton-inn amount of merch instead of a night-on-a-punk-house floor amount of merch. Kevin found a good diner downtown and they took it slow there too.

Now they were making their way north, towards *Woostah*, trailing the Connecticut river as it wound its way through wide valleys and postcard perfect New England towns, old mills waiting to be turned into microbreweries and artist studios lining the river.

Chrissy was behind the wheel so Pete Steele was on the Bluetooth singing about werewolves. Kevin rode shotgun, his window open, arm out soaking up the still-warm October sun. Kevin loved the feel of it, tattoo damage be damned. He was looking down on the forested valley, Halloween perfect in red and orange with yellow accents and the CT river shining silver at the bottom. Ben was sprawled out on the bench seat behind them reading a sci-fi novel.

Kevin dug his phone out and snapped a picture.

"Gotcha."

"What? Ah, you fucker."

Ben had his phone out, was typing away.

"He getcha?" Chrissy said, snapping her gum, grinning at him, grabbing her phone out of the cup holder and flipping passed her map ap to the gram—

"How about you drive?" Kevin said.

"Yoooo!" Chrissy was chortling, steering with one hand and holding her phone out at Kevin with the other.

"Gramming the gram!" Ben said, popping into the front seat and trying to give Kevin a raspberry. Kevin shoved the little nerd back into his bench seat. He checked his phone, saw a picture of himself taking a picture of the leaves outside. He thought he didn't look half bad.

"When's load in?" Chrissy said.

"7:30," Ben said.

"Cool!" Chrissy chirped and whipped them off the road onto a gravel drive, the van fishtailing a little, Kevin dropping his phone, shouting "Damn it Chris!" as they bumped and shuddered into the forest.

"Look at this place!" Chrissy yelled.

The gravel drive had led to a dirt road that wound down along the river. Kevin lit a smoke and stretched. Even with all the miles he'd logged in the van, at 6'4" he was really never comfortable in it for long. Or maybe at 38 he was just getting too old for it.

Ben was wandering from roadside to roadside snapping pictures. On the river side were the stacks and ruined walls of a mill. The end of the mill closest to them was largely gone, just brick walls chewed by time to waist height, the remaining brick swarming with poison ivy, some of the greasy leaves turning red and yellow in a perverse mockery of fall colors. The far end of the mill was in better shape, the great peaked roof still largely complete. Kevin pulled his hat down lower over his eyes to block the weak light.

He could see where there'd been windows in the roof, a nineteenth-century take on overhead lighting, except the glass was mostly gone, probably knocked out by generations of townie kids throwing rocks. *Speaking of—*

"Hey, where are we?" he said.

"Pittstown Massachusetts," Chrissy said. "Site of the Red Mill massacre."

"Say what?" Ben said. He took a few steps closer to Kevin and Chrissy. He'd been wandering the forest side of the road, where a row of smaller, one-story brick buildings, *worker housing* Kevin thought, were slowly being devoured by the forest.

Chrissy had her phone out. She flicked open the screen and cleared her throat. "In 1910, 7 mill workers were hacked to death in the mill, and—" she pointed toward the row of little brick buildings where Ben had just been lurking, "a further 5 people, including the wife and children of the mill owner, one Increase Jackson, were murdered in their houses. Hold up." Chrissy scrolled, then started again. "Holy shit. All 12 of them had their hearts cut out and they were chopped limb from limb."

"Holy shit," Ben said and suddenly he was dead in the middle of the road, equidistant from the ruined mill and the moldering brick buildings.

Kevin took a drag on his smoke and looked from the buildings to the where the sun was starting to sink into the trees on west bank of the river.

"You're amazing," he said to Chrissy. "You've like out murder-toured yourself on this one."

"Hey, all some bands do is drive from show to show and never see anything but the bottom of a bowl. Man is the Warmest Place to Hide sees the sites....and the bottom of the bowl," she said and winked. "Speaking of," she said and dug in her fanny pack. "Anyone?"

"Count me out," Ben said. "You two are begging for a slashing."

"Bah," Chrissy said and took a hit.

Kevin met her halfway, took a pull from the bowl and said without exhaling, "Ain't nobody fucking. We're just getting stoned. We're safe."

"He's just permanently bugging since last Halloween."

"And you wouldn't be?" Ben said.

Kevin exhaled and considered this. He loved the little runt and trusted him. If he said he saw a ghost at a house show, who was he doubt it? *More things on Heaven and Earth*, Kevin thought and then Chrissy handed him the bowl back.

He took a hit and it was almost like he could see the shadows creeping across the river from the west. Like an undercurrent to that washed-out October light. It was beautiful. Maybe even a little spooky.

"Beer?" Chrissy said to him. He nodded and she bolted for the van, smacking Ben on the ass as she went. Kevin wandered a little toward the mill. Keeping an eye on the poison ivy he followed the crumbling brick wall for a few feet.

"Here," he heard from behind him. He heard the snap-hiss of a PBR opening. Then Chrissy was next to him. "Here you go," she said and kept pace, wandering with him.

"After you madam," Kevin said and bowed. There was a doorway in the brick wall.

"Thank you!" Chrissy said and hopped over the sill. Kevin was right behind her, following her into the cavernous space.

"Wait up!" and then Ben was there. Kevin slung an arm around him and pulled him close. Scruffed his hair. "Fuck off," Ben said. "I'm not trying to hang out by the murder houses alone."

Vines had taken over the broken walls and climbed down their insides. Trees, small skinny twisted oaks and something that looked some kind of Locust, covered in thorns and with compound leaves, had broken through the floor.

"What kind of mill was this?" Ben asked.

Kevin looked at the floors. They were concrete and there were drains that ran the length of the walls, the drains choked with vines and growths of pale mushrooms.

"Drains like that, probably textiles," Kevin said.

"Correct!" Chrissy said. They'd wandered deeper in now, almost to the place where the mill's more remaining walls and roof threw a shadow like a great yawning cave. Chrissy was maneuvering her phone in the gloom, trying to read. "The Red Mill was a textile mill. Looks like they dyed...oh wild. They dyed clothes for the Catholic church? Like they specialized in dyeing clothes for the Church? Seems like this Increase was a real religious nut."

Kevin snapped his fingers. "Tell me he was the killer."

"Brains *and* beauty. He sure was."

"Holy shit," Ben said.

"I guess...Increase killed those mill workers and his family to deliver them from devils."

"I hate you guys," Ben said. "What happened to him?"

"You want to guess?" Chrissy said.

Kevin looked from the mill yawning like a mouth in front of them to row of workers houses across the road. He tried to imagine the place in action, smoking, stinking of chemicals but full of life. And making money for Increase Jackson. "Nothing. America is America," he said.

"Right again!" Chrissy said. "Increase died in an asylum in Danvers in 1930."

Kevin could feel himself spooling up as he looked into the darkness of that mill, except darkness wasn't quite right because the gloomier it got the more he realized that those sickly white mushrooms were starting to softly glow. "Nothing changes man. You're rich enough, you can do whatever the fuck you want, chop however many mill workers into pieces—"

“Speaking of, let’s go see the houses,” Chrissy said, putting an arm on him. She held up her phone, looking at the time. “We need to split soon and I don’t want to miss where he chopped up his kids.”

“Yeah yeah, sure” Kevin said. Ben was out first, practically running out of the mill. Kevin felt a little chagrined, felt a little of that stoned-spotlight on him, like maybe even if his bandmates agreed with him, he didn’t need to rant at them all the time. Maybe this was why he didn’t get laid more he thought, as he followed Chrissy out the doorway.

He turned. Behind them, in the cavemouth of the roofed mill ruins he thought he saw movement. He stepped back in and starred.

“Yo,” he said quietly. The far end of the mill was gray-black in the gathering dark. The only light was from the mushrooms in the drains except now that he looked, or now that it was darker, he could see where there must be mushrooms sprouting up the walls because there were faintly glowing shapes hovering at about chest height in the dark.

“C’mon!” Chrissy said and he shrugged and pushed through the screen of trees and bushes that clung to the mill wall, minding the poison ivy as he went.

Ben was ignoring her, pacing a circle in the dirt road, looking from his phone to the mill to the ruined houses and repeating it all again. Chrissy was hovering at the open doorway of the nearest of the little brick worker’s houses. Kevin was thinking about the glowing mushrooms, trying to think of where he’d ever heard of such things.

“You ready?” Chrissy said.

Kevin did not want to go in that house, but no way was he letting Chrissy go alone. “Sure,” he said.

“Jesus, this place stinks,” Chrissy said. The little brick house was pitch black, Kevin comforted a little by the lack of soft-glowing fungus, but she was right; it reeked. The timber roof was shoot through here and there with holes but it wasn’t a damp stink. In fact, as Kevin’s eyes adjusted, he thought it was maybe the cleanest abandoned house he’d ever seen. There was the odd roof timber and some glass from the windows but overall, the place was clean.

Which maybe didn’t account for the stink. Or *helped* account for it. It wasn’t a damp, rotten stink, it—

“Smells like the tiger cage at the zoo,” Chrissy said.

Kevin took a deep breath. “You’re right. It smells like tiger piss and meat in here.”

“I think this is the house. The. House. Where they found Increase and his family. You know after he cut out his family’s hearts, he burnt them and drank the ashes?”

“Jesus Christ.” Kevin was starting to think he should have hit that bowl one less time. His eyes were adjusting to the dark and now he could see that there was a door at the far side of the room. Where did it lead? A kitchen? A basement? In the gray black gloom of the house, it was a black-black rectangle whispering to be explored.

He took a step forward, slipping his beer into his cargo pocket and feeling for his phone.

“You going for it?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.” There was something about that darker than dark rectangle in front of them. Looking at it felt like standing on the edge of a subway platform and yearning to step off. There was a name for that feeling and he couldn’t remember it, but damned if he didn’t *feel* it as he stared at that doorway.

“If you don’t I will,” Chrissy said. Her hand found his and he jumped a little. “Or we could go together.”

“Call of the void!” Kevin said snapping his fingers.

Chrissy dropped his hand.

“What?”

“You feel it? Cause I fucking do.”

Chrissy was shaking her head in the dark, looking like she’d just come-to from a big nap. “Yeah. Shit. And it stinks even more.”

Chrissy was right. The tiger piss and meat stink was thicker now, so thick Kevin could almost see it materializing as a weak green glow from deep in that back room.

“Guys! Guys! We gotta go!” Ben was shouting from the doorway behind them, bouncing there in his sneaks like a kid that had to pee.

That was it. The call interrupted, Kevin moved to shove Chrissy out of the house but she was bolting and grabbing his arm at the same time, making sure she didn’t leave him behind and as Kevin ran he took one last look at the door. The faint green glow was stronger now, flashing like a distant aurora but ten feet away and shaped like a man, the reek of predator-piss and rotting meat almost choking him—

“Keys!” Ben yelled and Chrissy threw them to him.

“What the fuck are those?” Chrissy yelled. Green, man-shaped lights flickered in the ruined mill, screened by the twisted trees and poison ivy. Ben had the van’s engine roaring.

“Come on, come on!” he yelled. Chrissy hit shotgun and dove in and Kevin ripped the passenger doors open and dove onto Ben’s usual place and pulled the doors behind him. He turned and scrambled to the windows as Ben turned the van around so hard, he spilled Kevin to the floor.

“Chris, so help me God I’m taking away your fucking Google!” Ben was shouting, Chrissy was screaming but laughing too and Kevin was pulling himself off the floor, wanting to curse at these two idiots or scream in triumph because they were still alive but instead, he was gasping like the thing he’d seen in the doorway had stolen his voice.

“Kevin, you ok?” Chrissy said, looking back at him. Ben was looking too, from the road to Kevin.

How could he describe the glowing green shape that was at the front door? The flickering human shape held there by the last of the weak October daylight?

He held up the PBR he’d forgotten he still had. There was beer all over his shirt. Kevin smiled and said, “One of you motherfuckers owes me a beer.”

About the Author:

Andy Martin is an archaeologist and musician who lives in South Philly with his partner and cat. His short fiction has appeared at the Horror Tree, Cultured Vultures, Midnight Tales, and The Sirens Call Issues 59 and 62 (thanks Gloria, Nina, and Lee!). His novelette “Stumpehead” was published in Gravestone Press' Monstrous Tales Volume 5, and he was DandT Publishing's Emerge Author with “Adios Hombres Lobos” in December of 2022.

Costume Party | P.S. Traum

Mark was angry he never got invited to the cool parties. He had decided to crash the big bash at the old mansion.

It was surprisingly easy to sneak in. The snobs all looked drunk as hell, shuffling and stumbling.

The veiled Princess must’ve spilled her wine; her dress was covered in splotches.

The King clanked around and slipped on the fluid leaking out his armor.

Suddenly Mark realized all the guests were soaked in blood. They were actually freshly-murdered mutilated corpses, defying death for one last Halloween party...

Halloween Roast | P.S. Traum

“Baby Petunia sure cries a lot. Maybe she’s hungry?”

“Hey...why doesn’t Halloween have a feast? Christmas and Easter have turkeys and ham and all kinds of stuff!” Bryan stomped his feet.

“Yeah!” Evan poked his brother. “Why does stupid Thanksgiving get PUMPKIN pie and not Halloween? How does that happen?”

“Who knows. But you know Mom and Dad don’t have money for turkey and ham.”

“Well, I say we have a feast anyway!”

That evening their parents returned from work.

“Say! What are you rascals cooking? It smells delicious!”

Mother entered the kitchen. “Boys, where’s Petunia?”

About the Author:

P.S. Traum is a lifelong horror fan and a newer horror author with a range of styles who has had short stories and poems published in several small press genre publications. Traum eschews publicity in the hopes the storylines and characters get all the attention without preconceived perceptions of external context.

Amazon Author Page: [P.S. Traum](#)

Facebook: [P.S. Traum](#)

Samuel and I walked the brick path with bags in hand, approaching the well-lit house. It was our last stop that Halloween night. However, before we could climb the steps, a vision came to me.

When I'd hit puberty a few months ago, I started having occasional glimpses of the future. They warned of impending trouble, either at my exact location or somewhere nearby. And the event would occur a few minutes after the image appeared. The only person who knew of my ability was my best friend Samuel, and he'd kept it a secret ever since I confided in him.

Samuel gawked at me, his brow furrowing. "What's wrong, Brad?"

I glanced over my shoulder. When I didn't see Ben, I immediately scanned the street. There were a few kids scattered about, but Ben was nowhere in sight.

"Where's Ben?" I asked.

Ben was new to our neighborhood, and we'd invited him along to trick-or-treat.

Samuel looked around, then shrugged. "I don't know. He was just with us."

I extended a hand, gripping Samuel's arm and guiding him away from the house.

"I had a vision," I whispered.

"Just now?" Samuel replied.

"Yeah. I saw Ben go up to Mr. Jennings's house, and the old man pulled him inside."

"What?"

I pursed my lips and turned my head. Mr. Jennings lived two houses down from where we stood, and I eyed his front yard. The driveway lamp post and porch lights were off, and I couldn't even detect a faint glow from inside the house.

"I don't see anyone at his house," Samuel noted. "Are you sure?"

"Maybe Ben's wandering around," I said, "and he'll show up in a couple of minutes."

I walked down the driveway and took a right, heading in the direction of Mr. Jennings's house. I heard Samuel's footsteps behind me, and he eventually sidled up to me.

"We're going over there?" Samuel said with a hint of anxiety in his voice.

"It's the only way," I replied. "If Ben shows up, we don't want him to get abducted."

Samuel huffed but didn't protest. A few seconds later, we stood at the steps of Mr. Jennings's front porch, my head on a swivel as I frantically searched for any signs of Ben.

"What now?" Samuel asked.

"We wait."

"Seriously?"

"Do you have a better idea?"

"I don't like being so close to the house," Samuel said. "We can just stand in the street and watch for Ben. Why do we have to hang out here?"

"Just to be safe."

"This is anything but safe."

"You know what I mean," I said.

"All I know is that Mr. Jennings has a reputation. No one is stupid enough to trespass."

Light in my peripheral caught my attention. Mr. Jennings's front porch lit up, and the door whipped open.

"What are you kids doing in my yard?" Mr. Jennings shouted.

My heart raced, thumping up into my throat. I looked to Samuel, who could only stare at me with wide eyes.

"Get off my property," Mr. Jennings barked, his gray hair and salt-and-pepper beard becoming more visible as he stepped into the light.

"I'm sorry, sir," I stuttered. "We're just looking for our friend."

"Well, he's certainly not here," Mr. Jennings said. "I don't care for kids, especially trick-or-treaters."

"Maybe you've seen him—"

"Leave!" Mr. Jennings snapped.

I didn't bother putting up a fight. Instead, I swiftly made my way to the street, Samuel right on my heels. When I observed the house, Mr. Jennings's door was closed, and the front porch sat in darkness again.

"I told you this was a bad idea," Samuel said.

I shook my head. "I don't get it. Ben should have been here by now."

"Unless Mr. Jennings already has him inside."

"That wouldn't make sense. I've never had a vision after the fact."

"Maybe this is a first for you."

I deliberated. It was possible, but it seemed unlikely.

Then a noise distracted me. The sound of sneakers scuffing against pavement. I pivoted to look, noticing a silhouette in the neighbor's driveway. The house, much like Mr. Jennings's place, was void of any light.

I squinted. "Is that Ben?"

"Where?" Samuel asked.

"In Mr. Richardson's driveway."

I didn't even wait for a reply. I immediately darted in that direction.

"Wait," Samuel said.

But I didn't oblige. The person was already climbing the front steps, so I sprinted into Mr. Richardson's front yard.

"Ben?" I said.

The person stopped, then turned to me.

I closed the gap. And that's when I recognized him. "Ben. It is you. Thank God."

A creaking noise caused me to look away. Mr. Richardson's front door was ajar, and a large figure loomed in the doorway. I grabbed Ben's wrist and tugged, urging him to come with me.

"Come on," I said.

Ben didn't resist but when I turned to bolt, I nearly smacked into Samuel.

"What's going on?" Samuel said.

"Don't worry about it now," I insisted. "Just come on."

I led Ben to the street, and the three of us ran for two blocks before finally coming to a halt.

"What was that all about?" Samuel asked, panting.

I took a moment to catch my breath. "I had the wrong house."

"You mean it was Mr. Richardson?"

I nodded.

"What are you guys talking about?" Ben said.

Ben didn't know my secret, so I didn't care to elaborate. Instead, I changed the subject.

"Why did you wander off?" I asked.

"Sorry," he said. "I got curious. That's all."

Samuel hunched over, resting his hands on his knees. "I say we call it a night."

"I agree," I said, glimpsing Ben. "We'll walk you home first."

"Sorry again," Ben said. "I shouldn't have gone off on my own."

I managed a smile. "Don't worry about it. We're just glad you're okay."

About the Author:

Kevin has dabbled in many genres over the years. A few of his stories have been contest/award winners, and Kevin's work has appeared in more than twenty anthologies. When Kevin isn't reading and writing, he enjoys watching crazy squirrels outside his office window.

Author Blog: [Kevin Hopson](#)

Amazon Author Page: [Kevin Hopson](#)



No one crosses the mob and goes unscathed. Monsters included.



Kevin Hopson

THE **MONSTER**
VS
THE MOB

A girl
in danger!

It's still
ALIVE!

The Mob
finds its match!

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

Kyle felt the twitch as he sank into the pillow. The crises at the office had exhausted him, so he assumed it was one of those involuntary jerks that shot through you sometimes as sleep came on. He'd read there was a name for that, but he had no time to dwell. The effect was instant. He was in a different place.

Call it an ethereal plane.

She emerged through a swirl of fog amid a copse of leafless trees that weren't trees. Hank found himself almost frozen in place, forced to take her in. Tousled hair fell to shoulders just slightly revealed by short, puffy sleeves that slipped down just a fraction.

He'd written copy once that let him know technically the dress was a pinafore, beige checked, the hemline enough above mid-knee that it lost some of the style's Dorothy Gale innocence. She was a dream girl after all, with just a few hints of a young woman interning in accounting. He hadn't had time to meet her; it wasn't a good time for him to introduce himself to an intern.

He moved toward her, not waiting for her to beckon. "I don't remember making a wish," he said.

If this hadn't been a dream it wouldn't have been a great line, but she laughed a little. "Am I what you would have wished for?"

"Very much so."

A wind rattled the branches around them, and she folded her arms. He realized he was wearing a blazer. Convenient. He slipped it off and draped it over her shoulders.

"Maybe we should find somewhere a little warmer," he said.

"Chivalry or lechery?" she asked.

"Little of both?"

She let him take her arm, and they moved through dense mist a few paces until the glowing lights of a diner greeted them.

"A clean well-lighted place," Hank said.

She took his arm now and led him through the doorway into a spot so retro it might have been an actual fifties diner. Was he longing for a simpler time? A different era? He reminded himself to analyze later. For a change, one of these dreamscapes wasn't a trip down anxiety lane.

They slid into a booth of bright red vinyl, and in an instant, thick milkshakes topped with cherries and whipped cream were in front of them. The young woman let the straw gently brush her lower lip—a lip he realized in this light, that was as red as the booth, as red as the maraschino cherry.

"So, if a wish brought me, what would the next wish be?"

It was a dream and a game after all. "Maybe it would be unspeakable," he said.

"Ummm." She sipped slowly, not moving her gaze from his. "Is that how you do things? Would you put something in this drink? Render me limp and helpless?"

He felt his expression blanch. He didn't want that kind of banter. He shook his head.

"I could put a quarter in the juke box, and we could dance," he said.

She stretched a bare foot out past the booth's edge and wiggled toes. "I don't have my saddle shoes on. Why don't we get out of here?"

She took his hand, and they were in the fog again without exiting through a doorway.

"Where are we going?" Kyle asked.

"It's not far."

"Your place?"

Maybe he'd blink, and they'd be in another spot as vividly realized, maybe in front of a fireplace on a soft rug.

"It's a family place," she said.

And they were suddenly in a dark passage, something like a cold constricted squeeze in a cave. Just ahead he saw a wider opening, and shadows moved there in some sort of eerie light, long shadows that curved and coiled and twisted against walls that were distinctly stone. Then something that twisted and swayed darted past the opening, and he had the impression of a red-black appendage, like something missing the first layer of skin.

"What's up there?"

The girl was silent. He looked her way and saw she was shimmering, as if phasing from one reality to another.

"It's fah-mah-lll-iy," she said in elongated syllables.

Then she stilled again and smiled. In another time and place, it would have been promising and inviting.

“My mother always gets the first dance,” she said.

Another time the face that poked into the opening might have woken him screaming, but now his screams just echoed here against the stone, none of them escaping this dark space.

About the Author:

Sidney Williams is the author of the Si Reardon thrillers from Gordian Knot. His body of work also includes traditionally published novels from Kensington Books and original titles from Crossroad Press including *Dark Hours* and the Lovecraftian *Disciples of the Serpent*. Sidney’s recent short stories include “By Side Saddle” in *Unknown Heroes vs. the Forces of Darkness* and “Odditorium” in *Dark Corners of the Old Dominion*.

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The Black Hat Club | Brian Rosenberger

The Coven gathered. It was a time-honored tradition and the tradition dictated the host provide the food as the Coven discussed current Witchy topics.

Snail tea was provided for their drinking pleasure.

Witch Hazel, the current host, apologized in advance.

“As you know it’s not been a great year for the Sisterhood. Advances in science have labeled our nighttime broom rides as Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena. Not a great year for our legend in cinema or TV either, leading to decreased job opportunities for us, the subject matter experts, as set advisors. Not many new recruits either. The young seem more interested in this new magic, social media. The Face-Tok and Tik-Book and others. Also, as a reminder, All Hallows is closer than you might think. Maybe you’ve already seen the decorations in the stores and its only summer.”

Peter the Spider, the familiar of Witch Goonda and the Coven’s social media expert, chimed in, “Recruiting is down but our homemade candles saw a sales increase this quarter.”

Witch Hazel continued, “Some of our traditional herbs and potion ingredients have also suffered from supply chain issues and also global warming concerns, concerns we shared with humanity for centuries. Largely ignored. As a result, the stew I present to you, my sisters, has a few substitute ingredients which I hope will still be to pleasant your palette.”

Witch Hazel kept the substitutions to herself.

Eye of newt replaced with eye of goldfish.

Death Cap Mushroom, chopped, replaced with Mozzarella cheese, shredded.

One frog tongue replaced by one oz SPAM.

Three lizard toes replaced by two TBSP Tofu, slightly fried.

Extra salt and pepper and strychnine to taste.

From her cauldron, Witch Hazel plopped dinner into the Coven’s bowls.

After the first sip, Witch Eva said “Interesting blend of flavors.”

Witch Bela Badlove commented, “Not as tasty as a wayward orphan but not bad.”

It was Witch Goonda who told her familiar, Peter the Spider, what all present were really thinking,

“Another damned stew? Why not a simple salad for a change?”

And the Monthly Meeting of the Black Hat Club continued.

About the Author:

Brian Rosenberger lives in a cellar in Marietta, GA and writes by the light of captured fireflies. He is the author of *As the Worm Turns*, three poetry collections, and an assortment of odds and ends in various anthologies, websites, and zines.

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21 June 1921

I am not – have never been – given to flights of the fantastical. To be sure, from time to time, like many of my contemporaries, I have been enthralled by Poe's tales and those of Lovecraft and Hodgson. But they were fictions, diversions from the mundane, nothing more. Certainly, I never for a moment believed these entertainments were attempts to render true experiences.

Yet, now I have the gravest reason to doubt that judgment, for I myself have been witness to an event of such extremes that it cannot be counted as anything but lying beyond the precincts of the natural world. And because it is so far from reality as normal men understand it, I can only confide the particulars in this journal.

The story begins shortly after Christmas last when my dear friend Hugh Fletcher was having tea of an afternoon in an Oxford Street cafe not far from Cavendish Square Gardens. He and I had met while both at Eton and become virtually inseparable mates. We maintained our close bond after graduation when my path took me to the London School of Economics while he pursued his dream of studying art. The choices fit our personalities – I, the pragmatic, materialistic one; Hugh, much the romantic, fond of poetry and the serendipitous. And, I should say, a painter who possessed genuine talent. At the age of twenty-six, he was beginning to gain a modest reputation in the city for the quality of his work, which was on offer at a small gallery in Vauxhall.

On the day in question, as Hugh recounted it to me, while having a second cup of tea and reading from a newly purchased edition of Shelley, his attention was drawn to a young woman who had risen from her table in a far corner of the cafe and was preparing to leave.

"She was singularly striking," he told me, "tall, ivory-skinned, with great, dark tresses cascading around her face, encircled with the lush collar of a rich fur coat. It would have been sufficient," he went on, "just to savor her unrivaled beauty as she passed a few feet away, but as she neared the door, she turned and locked her smoke-grey eyes with mine. It lasted only an instant, but the effect was profound."

The woman exited the cafe into the chill late afternoon as snow was just beginning to fall upon the city. Hugh said he did not hesitate a moment, but leaped from his seat, shrugged into his Chesterfield and rushed into the street.

"I could not explain my actions, save that I knew I must not allow her to get away." Within a block, as he weaved rapidly among the sidewalk throng, he had caught sight of her. And as he neared her at a corner, though he was behind and she had not seen him, she stopped and turned.

"It was uncanny," he told me. "With certitude, I sensed she *knew* of my approach, that she *expected it*."

To be sure, Hugh was taken somewhat aback, further unsettled by the way those eyes of hers bored into him, seemingly able to discern his innermost thoughts. He stammered an introduction and expressed his fervent desire that she agree to sit for him while he painted her portrait.

Her name, she replied, was Lizbeta and at first, she demurred, explaining that she was not a professional model and that her time in London was limited before she must return to her native Romania. But Hugh was insistent, pressing his case and proffering one of his business cards, which she accepted.

"I returned to my flat in a fever," he said, "and spent the night unable to banish her from my thoughts. And when I fell at last into fitful sleep, it was she who dominated my dreams."

The obsession persisted upon his awakening, depriving him of an appetite, prompting him to pace nervously about his atelier, unable to concentrate on finishing a modest commissioned still life he had begun.

At precisely 10:00, as Big Ben tolled the hour, Lizbeta rang his studio bell. Hugh welcomed her with delight, noting that, in the morning sunlight spilling into the room, she was even more ravishing than she had appeared the day before.

"Although she still insisted she was an unworthy subject," Hugh related, "she had found me flattering and persuasive enough to agree to a sitting. But, of necessity, it would be a *single* sitting. She had no choice, she said, having been summoned to return to Bucharest the following day to deal with pressing family affairs."

With little time to lose, Hugh hastily arranged his studio, positioning his easel and mounting a freshly gessoed canvas upon it. He bade Lizbeta to recline on a divan of brocade and mahogany, posing her in such a way that the sunlight brought out the finest qualities of her lustrous hair and perfect complexion.

"I knew I had but a few hours with her, so I rushed with a speed I did not know I possessed to block in the essentials of the painting and begin rendering her likeness."

And paint he did, using every available ray of light until the late afternoon shadows deepened and Lizbeta made ready to leave. Hugh expressed his dismay at her departure, so smitten had he become.

"I inquired when she would return to London so that I might present her with the painting. She did not know, so I asked if she might leave a shipping address. She promised to send it as soon as her business in Bucharest was completed."

And with that, Hugh said, she turned her mesmerizing grey eyes on him a final time and left.

Now commences the strangest part of this tale. Hugh immediately returned to the canvas, feverishly working his brushes and oils, attempting to reclaim from the memory of Lizbeta each curve, every contour, line and shadow, the very essence of her extraordinary beauty. Using what lamplight, he had at hand, he pressed on into the night, until exhaustion overtook him and he slept.

The next morning, he arose at first light and without hesitation, returned to his obsession. Since I hadn't spoken with him in several days, I rang him up at the noon hour just to make idle conversation. Instead, he implored me to come to his atelier immediately to view his latest work. There was in his voice a tone of urgency such that I left my office at once.

When I arrived, Hugh barely took the time to let me into his studio before he was at his canvas again. And as he painted, he recounted the whole story of his encounter with Lizbeta. It took but one glance at the woman's image to understand why he said it had been 'branded on my soul'. Her face and figure were perfection and her eyes possessed a depth of power and mystery that was mesmerizing, indelible.

But it was not only his desire to capture the woman's every nuance that was driving him forward. He could not account for it, he said, but his paint was thickening, becoming more viscous and hard to handle.

"When I apply it to the canvas, it pulls at the brush – more so, it seems, with every passing hour – as if it doesn't want to let go. I've never encountered this before, but it is imperative that I complete the painting as soon as possible."

It was clear that his distraction was total, so I took my leave with a wish to see the portrait once he'd completed it.

The rest of my day was crowded – appointments through the afternoon, a dinner engagement with a client that led to brandy and cigars at my club. By the time I reached the door of my apartments, it was almost midnight. And no sooner had I entered than the telephone began to ring. It was Hugh, frantic.

"You must come at once!"

"But the hour . . .," I protested.

"*At once – do you hear me!*"

Quickly, I rushed to the street, hailed a cab and was delivered presently to Hugh's studio. The trip was short, but it gave me enough time to conjure dark thoughts about my friend's obsession and his grip on reality.

When I arrived I found the door to his atelier unlocked, which I thought was odd, so I entered with a degree of caution, calling his name repeatedly but with no response. I could see very little because the only light in the room was provided by a floor lamp Hugh had moved beside his easel, which was positioned in such a way that the back of the canvas was turned toward the door. With my trepidation growing, I walked slowly forward. Perhaps, I thought, Hugh was so absorbed in his work that he neither heard me enter nor call out to him. But as I neared the easel, what caught my eye was not my friend. Instead, beyond the edge of the painting in the pool of light thrown by the lamp were his palette and one of his brushes, both gleaming with wet paint, lying on the floor. They did not appear to have been placed on the parquet but rather dropped or cast down.

My heart by now was pounding in my chest. I fought against my worst fears overwhelming me as I stepped around the easel and turned my full attention to the canvas.

Now, you who know me have always judged me a sober, eminently rational individual. So, too, do I consider myself. I ask you to weigh what I recount next with that in mind.

I was aghast at what I beheld. At first, my eyes refused to believe, but there was no denying what was in front of me. It was the figure of a woman in an emerald-green gown reclining on the very divan that sat a few feet from me, just as I'd seen Hugh painting hours before. I say the *figure* of a woman because this was not Hugh's careful rendering of the ravishing Lizbeta, but a grotesquerie – a withered, gnarled crone whose grey hair hung in matted ropes, framing a face, shrunken and deeply creased. Her mouth was open in a hellish grin, baring teeth blackened with rot. And the astonishing eyes that my friend had found so compelling were now but sightless sockets.

But what was most horrifying, what caused me nearly to faint dead away, was that held tightly in the outstretched grasp of this corpse was the figure of *Hugh himself!* Against all reason and the laws of God and Nature, there was my friend clutched firmly in the embrace of two stick-like arms and bony fingers that curled around him more akin to the long talons of a bird of prey. His countenance was that of a man overwhelmed by hysteria – eyes wide with

anguish, mouth open in a plea for salvation, and one arm thrust out towards me, fingers extended to their extremity. My mind reeled. If only I could find it within myself do something – anything – to help him!

At that moment I hit upon an idea. It was improbable, yes, but no less than what I saw upon the canvas. Perhaps, I thought, if I could paint out the hideous figure of the woman, its power over Hugh would be broken and he would be restored to the world. Swiftly, I retrieved the palette and paintbrush from the floor. I gripped the brush and dipped it into a thick pile of a deep blue paint. I recalled Hugh's description of how the pigment had grown thicker, and I noticed this myself straight away. As I neared the tip of the brush to the canvas, to a spot over the hag's face, I had the sensation of an electric shock course through my fingers and hand, and the bristles were pulled as if by a magnet onto the painting's surface. Reflexively, I jerked the brush away, though the tingling in my hand lingered. I thought this a passing strange occurrence, but I concluded it must have been a momentary episode of static electricity and nothing more, so I again lowered the brush toward the painting.

This time the effect was more pronounced. As the tip of the bristles came into contact with the canvas, not only did a sharp tingling ripple into my hand but extended part way up my arm. At the same moment, I beheld a large globule of the thick paint flow up the handle of the brush until it touched my fingertips. Again, there was the sensation of a magnet's pull, this instance stronger than the first. And this time, with amazement, not only did the paint continue to ooze upon my fingers, but I saw the tip of the paintbrush bristles actually *penetrate the surface of the canvas!*

Horrified, I used my left hand to tear myself free of the force which was growing in power. Deeply shaken, I realized what Hugh's fate had been and that I dare not risk a third attempt to alter the painting. And, I can confide in these pages, I was overcome with raw fear, so much so that I hurled the palette and brush to the floor, and, with a long, wrenching backward look over my shoulder at the image of my friend frozen in his eternal torment, I turned and, God help me, *I ran!*

About the Author:

Nick Young is a retired award-winning CBS News Correspondent. His writing has appeared in more than two dozen publications including the Pennsylvania Literary Journal, The Garfield Lake Review, Backchannels Journal, the Nonconformist Magazine, Sandpiper, the San Antonio Review, Flyover Magazine, Pigeon Review, Fiction Junkies, Typeslash Review, The Best of CaféLit 11 and Vols. I and II of the Writer Shed Stories anthologies. He lives outside Chicago.

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Instagram: [@zenblues](https://www.instagram.com/zenblues)

Snicker Treat | John H. Dromey

I'm a nocturnal creature. Even in the dead of night, though, I often wear a disguise to hide my ugly mug. Anxious to attend the most popular Halloween event in town, a masked ball for couples only, I used a handsome stranger's photo to arrange a date online.

Lucille laughed at my costume. That was a good start. We danced and we danced and had a jolly good time, but left the party early.

In her apartment, I peeled off my costume and revealed my true, monstrous self. Lucille stopped laughing. For me, however, my vampiric fun was just beginning.

About the Author:

John H. Dromey was born in northeast Missouri. He likes to read—mysteries in particular—and write in a variety of genres. His fiction has appeared in over a dozen previous issues of *The Sirens Call eZine*, as well as in numerous other publications. He's had poems published in *Eye to the Telescope*, *Star*Line*, the *Dwarf Stars 2022* anthology, and elsewhere.

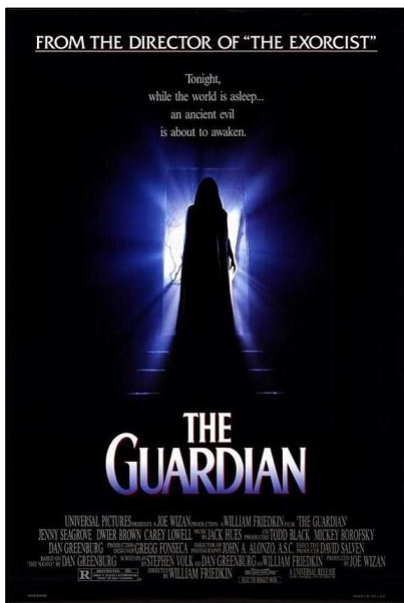
Buried, Yet Undead
Digging up Underappreciated Gems in Horror Film Graves

While we've seen countless magnificent horror movies throughout film history, there are also scores of idiotic, terrible terror flicks that often leave us wondering, "How in the name of cinema did *this* monstrosity ever get created?"

But even more frustrating are awesome horror films that have somehow, somehow evaded us like phantasms. Hidden, underrated scary "jewels" that remain locked within mausoleum vaults or tucked away six feet under.

In adding to your trick-or-treat bag of fright films in which to curl up with this Halloween season, we present to you a few obscure "masked" monster movies in desperate need for an unveiling!

The Guardian (1990)



Legendary director William Friedkin, who unfortunately left us this past summer, will remain a pillar of not only the fine art of horror filmmaking, but crime and psychological thrillers as well. *The French Connection*, *Sorcerer*, and, of course, *The Exorcist*, rated amongst his greatest achievements.

Yet amid Friedkin's masterpieces lies a *miscellaneous* body of work of his that has gone unnoticed for decades, and, at the time of its release, received numerous negative reviews - Friedkin's *The Guardian*.

Based on Dan Greenburg's 1987 novel *The Nanny*, Friedkin's *Guardian* draws on all the bizarre and subtle grimness of the classic bedtime stories we've grown up with and created an eerie, contemporary *horror fairy tale*.

The Guardian is about an average couple who hire a mysterious, yet charming nanny to care for their newborn child. And while her qualifications and "references" check out perfectly, there's just oone

little detail about this young, beautiful woman that the couple don't know - she is a supernatural being who wishes to sacrifice their baby to a gigantic, hideous tree monster!

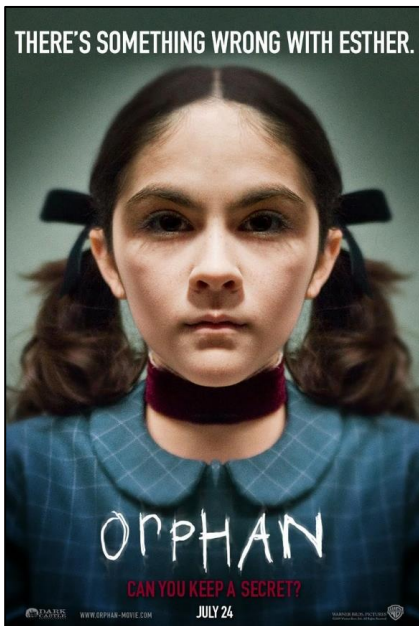


There are various possible reasons why *The Guardian* received criticism and not the praise it deserved. One theory is that fans of Friedkin's acclaimed *The Exorcist* had high expectations for this second horror film of his, and though *Guardian* was released almost 20 years after the Ellen Burstyn/Linda Blair classic, the iconic ghastly face of Regan was still plastered in everyone's minds. While it is apparent that *Guardian* stands inferior to *The Exorcist* (as countless other horror movies) and was made on a lesser budget, the film *does* have enough Friedkin freakiness to send chills up your spine - one vertebra at a time!

R.I.P. William Friedkin (Aug. 25, 1935 – Aug. 7, 2023)



Orphan (2009)



Why this little package of suspense and psychological terror remains hidden is a complete mystery.

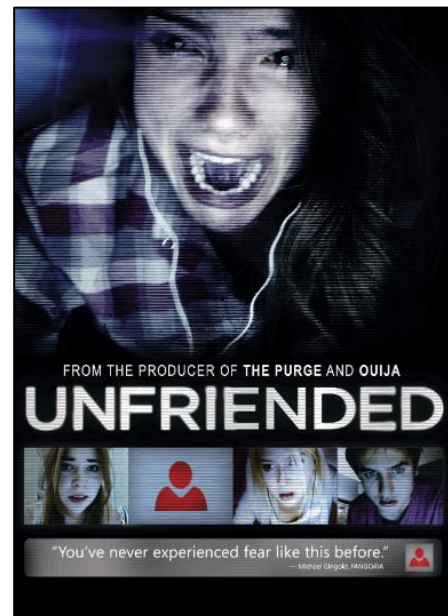
Produced by Leonardo DiCaprio and Joel Silver and starring The Conjuring's/Bates Hotel's Vera Farmiga, Isabelle Fuhrman, Aryana Engineer, and Peter Sarsgaard, *Orphan* tells the strange and creepy tale of Esther, a precocious and precious nine-year-old girl from Russia whose entire family had died in a fire.

After suffering the painful loss of their daughter during birth and unable to have any more children, a married couple decide to adopt Esther from a church orphanage and bring her home to their two other children. At first, everything seems picture perfect and complete, Esther becoming the daughter the family had tragically lost. But it's not long before "things" start happening, because, as the movie's tagline says, "There's something wrong with Esther".

What's great about *Orphan* is how it takes a very basic premise and, rather than over complicate things and muddy up the story, keeps it simple for the viewer to just sit back, relax and enjoy a nice thrill ride!



Unfriended (2014)



Ah, the found footage/mockumentary subgenre. Beginning with *The Blair Witch Project* and the great outdoors, followed by the just-as-scary *Paranormal Activity* - the great indoors – collectively shot on budgets well under \$215,000. And with the rise in Skype and FaceTime after these two successful films, it made perfect sense to have a supernatural-slasher horror film take place entirely in a cyber chat room!

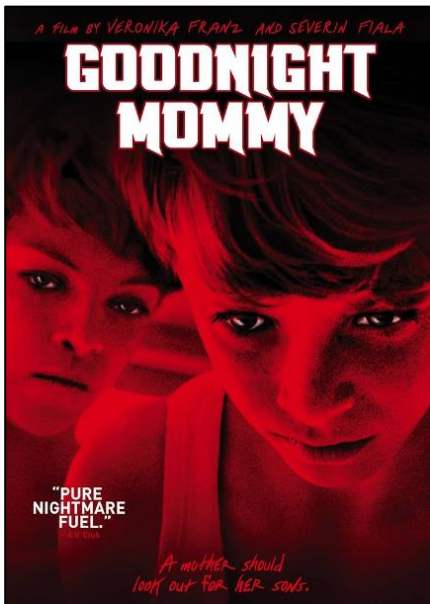
Schoolmates Blaire, Mitch, Jess, Ken and Adam are enjoying a typical evening on Skype, engaging in the usual adolescent nonsense, when suddenly, a "6th" profile box appears in the chat room with them - a faceless picture named "billie227". After numerous attempts to kick out the mysterious, unwanted "visitor", the group is unsuccessful, and instead, are sent personal, embarrassing and ultra secretive videos to each other – of each other – creating intense chaos within the group. Blaire researches "billie227", linking it to a social media account named "Laura Barns" – her deceased childhood friend who had killed herself one year before because of cyber bullying. It is then that "billie227" wants Blaire and her friends to play a little... *game* within the chat room – a room they dare not leave!

Since *Unfriended's* release in 2014, we have seen a healthy share of cyber bullying amongst students, often leading to catastrophic events such as school shootings and suicides, which makes the film a timely and relevant horror piece. We have also seen a significant rise of online chat rooms and Zoom calls in recent years due to the pandemic, creating an uncomfortable and *too familiar* vibe for the more current viewers of *Unfriended*. And while there have

been other excellent slasher films taking place on uncomfortable and *too familiar* vibe for the more current viewers of *Unfriended*. And while there have been other excellent slasher films taking place on computer screens, *Unfriended* is of the few that maintains the discipline in keeping *everything* claustrophobically tight within an 11 by 13-inch screen for an entire hour and thirty minutes!



Goodnight Mommy (Austrian Original, 2015)



For those fond of *foreign* horror film noir and its brand of *different* storytelling, this one's definitely for you.

Set in the rural countryside of Austria, *Goodnight Mommy* is the tale of twin brothers Lukas and Elias, age 9, whose mother has just returned home from the hospital after undergoing extensive plastic surgery. Her face fully bandaged, the twins notice something... *odd* about their mother. Something quite not right in her behavior and moods, and as they investigate further, the lads are convinced this woman in their home is *not* their mother – and is dangerous!

For anyone who hasn't yet seen *Good Night Mommy's* recent 2022 American remake (starring Naomi Watts), we highly recommend *first* watching the 2015 Austrian original (in German language), being on the more ambiguous, eerie side and standing as a good example of dark foreign film avant-garde. To note, the movie takes some time in the "build up" process and you may find yourself getting a tad dreary in some parts, but like a classic Hitchcock story, the "payoff" is worth the stretch!



About Mike Lera:

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

Having written and produced several short horror films based on successfully published stories of his, Lera has found equal success in both the film festival and streaming service circuit with his screen work. When not scaring people, Lera scavenges comic/martial art/horror cons for anything to wear, hang, tac, shelf and add to his geek shrine.



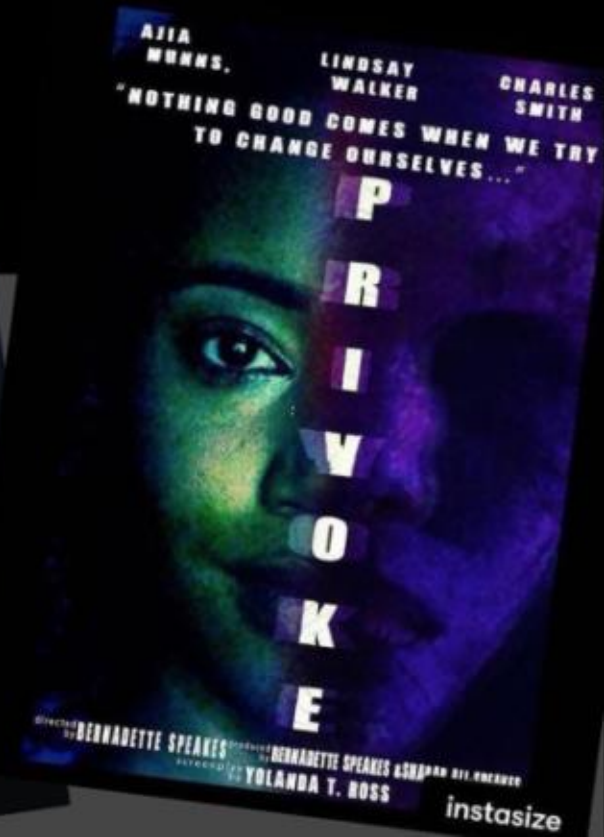
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MIKE LERA'S HORROR SHORTS STREAMING ON CATCH COD!



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Scooping out the sticky innards of a pumpkin is always fun and messy. It's one of the best ways I know Halloween is finally here.

Halloween is my favorite time of year. The weather is nice and crisp, the leaves are turning on the trees, and everything is spooky. Jack-o-lanterns, spiders, bats, skeletons, ghosts, witches. You name it, it's spooky, it's here. And it's so much fun.

My favorite thing to do is decorate my house. The theme changes every year but I always have one jack-o-lantern on my porch. It takes up a lot of space but it's always amazing. The jack-o-lantern tends to be the creepiest decoration and I often get great comments on it. It takes a long time to make just right but it's worth it.

I always start with hunting down the perfect one. Searching through places and studying each one carefully. You have to have a good base to be able to create a good jack-o-lantern. I take my time and choose which one I'll be using for this Halloween. Getting it home can sometimes be difficult but I manage.

Once home, I take it down to my basement. It's easier to think here, to plan out what I'm going to create this year. Besides, I wouldn't want to ruin the surprise for my neighbors and the rest of the neighborhood. I keep all my tools down here too. They're all in one spot and in their correct places.

I start with giving my new pumpkin a good wash. You never know what it might have picked up traveling around in the world. I like having a clean canvas. Then I start by slicing it open and scooping out the sticky innards. It gets messy but I'm used to it. The smell is something else I've gotten used to and have started to anticipate each year. It's warm and musky and is just more proof that Halloween is finally here.

After discarding the innards, I clean up again. First the pumpkin, sluicing it down to get rid of the sticky mess, then my hands, and finally the table. Once that's finished, I take some time to study my canvas again. Each one is different and often gives clues to what the final result should be. I wonder if this was how Michelangelo felt, staring at a block of marble before taking hammer and chisel to it.

Eventually, my pumpkin speaks to me and I decide how I'm going to carve it this year. I choose the first knife from my tools and get to work. This knife is for the big cuts, the basic design. It's far too big for fine detail but it works to start the design. I'm careful with it, dragging the knife through the lines and curves of my design. I'd cut myself a few times when I first started carving pumpkins and I had no desire to repeat the experience. Sometimes, some of the sticky innards cause my knife to slip. Never bad enough to ruin the design because I carve slowly but it does make things interesting at times.

Once the basic design is finished, I choose a smaller knife and get to work on the finer details. Any loops or whorls are roughed in now. I start working on the design, cutting out the pieces to create the final shape. This takes longer, and sometimes the knife slips, but I keep at it with steady hands. My lips pull back from my teeth in a pleased grin. The scent from the pumpkin is stronger now, still warm and musky. Maybe before I put the candle in, I'll sprinkle some cinnamon inside it. That sweetens the smell.

After finishing with the details I can do with my second knife, I choose the smallest one I own. This knife is for the finest and most finicky of details. As I carve, my tongue pokes out between my teeth in concentration. I can't mess up now; I've come too far. And getting another pumpkin as perfect as this one to be my canvas would be difficult. I put the finishing touches on my design and step back. It looks just as good as I'd hoped. I let out a satisfied sigh and start cleaning my knives. After putting them away, I start digging through my collection of candles.

I have so many different types and shapes of candles. Some pumpkins can be odd-shaped inside and each one needs a different type of candle. This pumpkin has plenty of room so I choose a fat, short candle. It will light the inside, providing a warm, golden light that will make my design pop out.

I tuck the candle into the pumpkin and haul it outside. All of my other decorations are up, having been put up during the past few days in between searching for the perfect pumpkin. This piece was the last of my decorations, the crown jewel of my spooky design. I set it on my porch, moving it here and there and rearranging it. The placement has to be perfect to display my hard work.

As I finally find the right place for my soon-to-be jack-o-lantern, a few neighbors have gathered outside my fence. They wait, talking quietly with each other and pointing out decorations here and there. The conversation stills as I pull out the candle and check the wick. It doesn't need trimming so everything is ready. I set it back inside the pumpkin, striking a match and lighting it.

My neighbors clap in appreciation as I step back and set my hands on my hips. I watch for a moment, making sure the candle will stay lit and that the light spills out from the cuts in my design. It's perfect, just as I'd hoped it would

be. Just as it had been for the last fifteen years. I join my neighbors at the fence, smiling and thanking them for their compliments. It really was one of my best yet.

I just wish they'd call it a jack-o-lantern and not a carved corpse. I made a jack-o-lantern and it's been the same thing every year for the past fifteen years.

About the Author:

I am an indie author and poet. I enjoy playing with words and seeing what I can create. I've written *The Accidental Heroes Chronicles*, *A Weight Relieved*, *Shadows and a Touch of Magic*, and *Underneath*. They are a variety of genres from sci-fi to urban fantasy to romance. I've also contributed to past issues of the *Siren's Call* ezine, specifically issues 44 and 57.

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Doing the Work | AD Schweiss

The eating is most of the problem, and the second-worst part of the problem, is not being believed. Also, I have no insurance, but you come highly recommended. I *am* struggling with feelings of self-harm—glad you asked. Do I have any plans to end my life? *Several; each one is like a one-act play for God*. My name is Melissa and I suffer from: (one) intrusive thoughts; (two) being a werewolf; (and three) something called 'inappropriate emotional affect'. I am told my laugh is ungrounded and out of step like a bird caught indoors in a shopping mall.

The problem with therapists is: you all prowl around words like *schizophrenia* or *drug withdrawal* because you're baiting me to say the words first. Therapists are supposed to believe me but my last therapist didn't believe me until he found me nestled in that cow's hollowed rib cage like a baby robin in a nest and then it was *oh you're so misunderstood and this changes everything we know about medical science*. Therapists say things like *I've never met a werewolf*. You've probably never met an actual astronaut either but you believe in those just fine and here I am trying to glue myself to the mattress for a night with a handle of vodka until the sheets get soaked to sweaty knotted vines around my legs to keep me rooted and safe and also I struggle with not eating and feeling guilty about the eating and I ate my last therapist and maybe I should have told you that part first.

When the moonlight hits every bad thing I've ever thought about myself gets wrung out of my lungs like a wet sponge squeezed too tight, guitar-string sinew in my legs letting me run for miles until the sun comes up with the taste of a stranger in my mouth and on my skin.

And instead you say you want to *help* me and if you were listening you'd know I am not asking for help. Werewolves—almost by definition—don't need help. I am certainly not here because of the enraptured thrill that runs down my spine when I stalk through a cornfield with winter wind along my bare back; nor do I need *help* for the supernova in my heart that hits every time I feel the trampoline *thump* of my body against a whitetail deer or an endurance athlete.

The problem with being a werewolf is that everything that's good about me is on loan and inaccessible in these waking daylight hours and the remainder is, in the words of my last therapist, *'pitiable and comprehensibly demoralizing'*. Some mornings I crawl out of a culvert like a car-struck dog, skin bare and pink and dappled with cut grass from a soccer field, with tree bark and offal under my fingernails and I'm just some woman who worries about how much the werewolf ate because *Melissa feels bad about her upper arms*.

Someone at work asked me—*this* me—about 'doing a cleanse' and all I could think of was the memory of vaulting into a dumpster, snatching up raccoons like that game with the hippos and the marbles and to think of it even now quickens my breath the way romance ought to do. If there's a part of me that needs to be *cleansed*, it's a woman who eats lunch in her car because her coworkers have opinions about whether her lunch is 'healthy' because I love that other part of me—the wolf who eats until she's satisfied—more than I can say.

You probably don't prescribe appetite suppressants often; that's what my last therapist said. You probably heard about him on the news. The news didn't talk about the stropy bands of muscle that kept his insides locked and tidy like a can of pressurized crescent dough or the way he told me that it was okay to be a werewolf and made me write three positive affirmations a week.

What I'm asking is: give me a pill so I won't eat again, and I will leave your office right now. Or give me, like, a different pill so I just won't eat so much, or one that can turn that full moon into a pinprick of light in the ceiling of the world and I'll just take a nap at the bottom of a deep, dark tunnel forever because my last therapist told me *the work* was learning to love myself. There are moments when I almost can love myself but I'm like the dog chasing a car who wouldn't know what to do if I caught it.

I had a breakthrough, almost, maybe with my last therapist, the therapist whose recovered corpse made the news. I told him "When the sun comes up, I don't feel much like a predator at all." And my last therapist told me how much sense that made and he offered unconditional positive regard right up until he couldn't offer me anything except his liver and his marrow, meats that were gritty like something caught in my eye and sometimes I want to imagine the good things—the kindness in his moist eyes or the way he said *this sounds difficult*—I want to imagine those good things are inside me even now.

So, what I'm saying is: you, doctor, come highly recommended. You can either help me or feed me. We have an hour before the moon comes up.

About the Author:

AD Schweiss is an attorney who lives and works in Northern California. His work has been featured in Shotgun Honey, Molotov Cocktail, Bag of Bones Press, and other fine publications.

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Are You Scared? | Rose Blackthorn

"I don't want to go." Missy's bottom lip poached out and trembled theatrically.

"But honey, it's Halloween. Don't you want to go trick'r'treating and show off your costume?"

Missy shook her head, her pointed hat sparkling with spray-on glitter. The black dress with the ragged hem revealed striped stockings and pointy black shoes. She clutched a twiggy broom in one hand, and a plastic pumpkin in the other. At five years old, she was the cutest little witch her father Jack had ever seen.

"I'll be with you. You can get a bunch of candy, it'll be fun. Are you scared?"

"Not scared," she stated, and marched to the door. Jack hid his smile; that was his daughter. She would do anything to prove she was a big, brave girl who wasn't afraid of anything.

The rural road was dark, only the lights on the widely spaced houses to show the way. The corn field across the street rustled and whispered, telling secrets to no one. Missy kept watch, but said nothing about glowing eyes or moving shadows. She wasn't scared, Daddy would see.

After visiting the last house, she showed Jack her plastic pumpkin.

"You got lots of treats. Did anyone ask for a trick?" he asked as they walked back to their house.

"Just one," Missy said, watching as something came out of the corn. It caught Jack, wrapping him in shadows and dragged him back into the corn.

"Daddy?" she called, "Are you scared?"

About the Author:

Rose Blackthorn lives in the desert but longs for the sea. She is a writer, dog-mom, jewelry-maker, avowed coffee drinker, and photographer. Her short fiction and poetry have appeared online and in print with a varied list of anthologies and magazines including the collection *Beautiful, Broken Things*.

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The simple cross on the Methodist church looms and disappears as night engulfs the Fields. The Poor Road is forever lined with shacks and old cars. Our road, Fields Road, leads to town, has two-story houses with garages, green patches of front lawn. On the other side of the cemetery lies the trailer park which my mother calls the Honky Tonk, because of its fire pits, strung lights, neighbors drinking cold beers out of cans. Sometimes the police need to pull up there, bust up a fight, yank a drunk husband off a trembling wife.

For me, it is always autumn here, always dusk.

The night my half-brother Henry disappeared plays on repeat.

There is the house in the center of everything, tall and grey, poking up into the dimming sky. The silhouettes of women appear in its windows. They are sliding around, upstairs and down. They dance together, hold each others' hands, twirl in circles beneath a crystal chandelier. Some say they're sweet old ladies who mean no harm. Some say they're leaders who have given much to the town. Others say they are neither of those things.

I am dreaming of that night. We are trick-or-treating, out amongst throngs of children dragging plastic jack-o-lanterns.

"Let's go home," I tell Henry, my 16 year old face looking down into his small freckled one, a little moon. It contorts into defiance as he runs away.

In the dream, I don't leave him, I don't turn away. I follow him down the long, broken sidewalks, stalking his small shadow. He dissolves into thin air.

They are known simply as the Mills Sisters. They own everything. Their great grandfather founded the town and built the first house on this side, this place that became the Fields. The Mills construction company built most of the old houses here. Everyone's mom or dad worked in some way for the Mills. Their father died suddenly by falling off one of their most celebrated buildings, then the five daughters took over.

They are all unmarried, all first-nameless. They plant flowers each year in spring, fill large tubs with pink and purple and white. The flowers appear almost overnight, lining the town streets. They hold an old timey fourth of July ice cream social, when all the children ride decorated bikes and follow a classic car driven by a local old man, red white and blue streamers flowing from their handlebars. At Halloween they put out pumpkins with all the treats a child would want. They hang doughnuts from tree branches. It's like Hansel and Gretel finding the candy house in the woods. Of course the Mills sisters are rich. Of course they donate to plenty of things. The Mills Family name is engraved on every park bench, playground, and community garden in town. "What will those ladies do next?" many often ask.

Henry's father, Frank, hates the Mills Sisters. He once worked for their paving company, tried to organize for better pay, was quickly dismissed. "That's what happens to people who go against the Mills Sisters," Frank says constantly.

Halloween night, Frank sits watching sports.

"Help out a little around here for once, will ya? Take him out," he says, staring ahead at the screen. My mother is not here. She is working the 7PM to 7AM shift at the hospital.

"Yeah, help out, *Sis!*" Henry says..

It is Frank who tells the police I am a liar and have always been. It is Frank who tells them he wanted to take Henry but I insisted. It is Frank who tells them I am a bad sister, that I never liked Henry, that I'd love to do away with him. Some parts of what he says are true.

It is the inflation-high 1970s and times were simpler, as they say. Kids wear pillowcases, their faces charred with burned cork. They wear their fathers' old plaid shirts. Henry, the little prince, wears a homemade costume my mother sewed late at night after her day shifts. I hear the sound of her sewing machine whirring along, the stops and starts of it, the creaks in the floorboards, her chair pushing out for her to stand to piece, to measure. Once, she made me a witch costume. I wore it for second, third, and fourth grades and I would've kept wearing it, too. In fourth grade, my father went to bed and died in his sleep. I gained weight; my witch costume no longer fit.

The ball beats against the spray paint can as I shake, point, aim. Devil's Eve is an amateur night in which I would never partake. I prefer hot summer nights. I like to sneak out of bed, slide through my window, grab my bag in the shed and head out to spray the words in my dreams.

The night I am picked up by the cops, I'd been writing snippets of "Daddy" by Sylvia Plath on the wall by the bridge—an abandoned place.

You died before I had time

I was ten when they buried you...

"Clarissa, aren't things hard enough?" my mother says when she comes to get me.

I'm not sure what she means. Dad dying? Or Frank? Or what?

"I'm sorry, Mom," I say, and I mean it.

In costume everyone is the same, babies and big kids, Batmans and clowns, good guys and bad. Everyone wants the same thing: candy. The legions of children blend together into one tacky blob, marching along.

Henry is different though. He doesn't want to trick or treat.

"I want to be Spidey," he says, sulkily chucking his pumpkin candy holder and crouching down on the ground, darting from tree to tree, pretending to shoot webs to different places, fake swinging from a bush to a log pile.

I remove my cigarettes and matches from my back jeans pocket, light up.

"Mom's gonna be pissed!" he yells.

I take a long drag, savoring the warm burn in my lungs, the self harm that feels like power, freedom.

The Mills house is always lit to the hilt on Halloween Night. The night Henry disappears is no exception.

Mom takes me to lunch at McDonalds after our morning shift at the hospital. She is nursing and I am fulfilling my promise to her that I will be better, make better use of my time—study harder, lose weight, stop smoking, volunteer. We sit in front of burgers (no fries, no shakes) and diet Cokes and do not talk about the nasty thing I said to Henry that morning.

"What have they got you doing?" Mom asks, using her pretending to be super interested voice.

"Not much. Filling water glasses. Delivering flowers."

I finally get to the pickle bit and savor the one burst of flavor in the dry sandwich.

"Clarissa, Henry loves you. He's just a little boy."

"I know," I say, looking down in shame, holding back.

"I'll try harder," I say. My mother's hand reaches across, covers mine.

After we part ways I stop at the gift shop and slip a few lipsticks in my bag. It's amazing how no one ever sees.

I begin to feel guilty for leaving him, so I turn back. First I say his name, then I call it, then I scream it. I run, despite my size and black lungs, repeatedly calling Henry's name. Trick or treaters trudge onward. Children and adults ignore me as I barrel down each street. "Henry! Henry!" My throat is raw. I run around and around the Mills house, so bright I don't consider it a possibility. There is no way my brother is in that house. I run through the shadowed graveyard, passing my father's burial place without stopping. A flash of the skeletons laid out beneath my pounding feet explodes in my mind. Finally, I decide I must go home. That's it. Typical Henry. He wants to scare me. He returned home.

The storm door slams behind me. I gulp to catch my breath.

I yell for them, Henry and Frank. The TV plays the news loudly, too loudly.

I enter the family room, finding six or so beer cans lined up on the coffee table.

In Henry's room, his bed is tucked and smooth.

Weirdo.

My stepfather sleeps in his room.

I shake him by the shoulders. "Wake up!"

"What the?" he jolts out of his slump, his face twists in its standard annoyance.

"What do you want?"

"I can't find Henry."

He doesn't panic, he doesn't jump up.

“Way to go. Lose your brother.” He laughs and feels around for a beer can on the nightstand. He succeeds, tilts it into his chubby face, drinks.

“Just find him. Before your mother gets home,” he says.

The trick or treaters are dwindling, lights have gone out for the night. Stray pieces of streamers and candy wrappers whip in the wind around my feet. I look up at the full moon, the first time I notice it that night. My anxiety mounts as my eyes land again on the Mills house. It is no longer lit with Halloween festivity. It is dark, dark as I have ever seen it.

I march with a new purpose to the house, climb the steps to the front and bang on the door. The house holds its breath, assumes a wall of silence. I run back down the steps, push into the strengthening force of wind. The wind pushes and pulls, like it’s pummeling me, the moon expands. Does it know where Henry is? Is it laughing at me running around like this?

I thought you hated your brother. Why are you so upset then? The moon jeers.

I lean into the dining room windows, cup hands around my peering eyes.

Only darkness, an outline of furniture.

I turn to see a strange old man wearing a plaid barn coat and a cap.

“Trespassin’, young lady?” he asks.

“I’m looking for my brother,” I say.

“Henry ain’t here, no way,” the man says, offers a cigarette. I grab it, stick it in my lips, and accept his light. “No, no way your brother’s here at the Mills place.”

At home the police have already arrived, are questioning everyone. It doesn’t matter.

I’m the one to blame.

“But what about the Mills house?” I ask during the second round of questions. “It was. It was—”

“The big house in the center?”

“Yes!” I gasp, but the images are already fading from my brain. I grip the table, trying to hold on.

“Vacant.” That word, resounding in my ears, an echo.

Vacant. It reverberates down to my toes. Vacant.

My memories cloud over, like a storm moving into a night sky, a cloud covering the moon.

“That house has been vacant forever,” Frank says calmly, his eyes soft, his voice natural, his hands spread on thighs.

“But—” I yell but I don’t know what comes after.

I don’t bring up the old man in the plaid jacket because I can’t remember him. I don’t remember him for twenty years.

The Mills House remains dark.

It never goes up for sale, no one ever moves in. All conversations about the house, about that night swirl, water down a drain.

There’s no body, no evidence against me or anyone else. The case goes cold.

Mom divorces Frank, barely speaks to me. I gain more weight, smoke many more cigarettes, barely graduate high school. I keep the house neat as a pin. Dust Henry’s room. In between, I keep that door closed, locked.

When I walk past the Mills house on the way to the cemetery, I feel it bite, nip at my shoulders. I keep my feet off the grass, look straight. I don’t want even the slightest glance at the windows.

I like to sit beside my father’s grave. He never knew Henry.

About the Author:

Maggie Nerz Iribarne is 54 and lives in Syracuse, NY in a yellow house with her husband and son. She writes about witches, cleaning ladies, priests/nuns, struggling teachers, neighborhood ghosts, and other things. Halloween 1977 was originally published in Parliament Literary Journal in May 2022.

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Will demon magic be the end of Aria?



Merry Marcellino

**Demons and
Shifters and Me.
Oh My!**

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My ears pounded with the intensity of a nearby drumbeat. If my head hurt any more, it would explode.

Saliva dripped from the side of my mouth, even though my tongue felt like a dried-up tomato left in the sun. I wiped the offending substance with the back of my hand and attempted to sit upright. Lights flashed before my eyes, and I almost fell over.

I steadied my body and found myself leaning against the back of a seat. Opposite me was a similar vinyl upholstered bench. When I focused on the dim light to my right, dark silhouettes of trees were barely recognizable from the window. Scenery slid by so fast that I doubled over my knees and vomited on the floor.

Once I felt secure I wouldn't throw up again, I sat back, rubbed my blurry eyes, and used my jacket sleeve to wipe my mouth.

I was on a train.

"How did I get here?" Standing took some effort and I held onto the seatback to check out the train car. No one else was on this section of the train.

"Hello?" The rasp of my voice didn't sound like me at all. Was I sick? Headache, nausea, I didn't remember how I got here or any of this.

I stumbled the length of the car using seatbacks for support and I approached the door. As the last of the sunlight slid below the horizon, I pressed my nose against the glass, cupping my hands around my face to get a better view.

Shadows greeted me. I narrowed my eyes at movement and jumped back, eyes wide. A furry face stared back at me. A pair of almond shaped, closely set eyes and a snout was burned into my retinas.

"A reflection?" My hands flew to my face in alarm, but only skin met my hands. "Silly! Why would you think it was *your* face?"

The furry countenance was gone when I checked again. I grabbed the metal handle, intending to investigate the next car, but it wouldn't budge. There was no exploring that car.

With my heart still racing from the scare, I ran in the other direction to see if that door was open to me. I didn't relish being trapped in this car. *Where were all the people?*

Grateful the door opened, I entered the next car. Only silence greeted me. It was empty.

My concern ratcheted but I calmed when I found a bathroom. I needed to compose myself and a cleanup would offer me some semblance of control. A pale reflection stared back in the spotless mirror. My skin a little green, I splashed my face with cold water and rinsed my mouth. As I glanced back at my face, a flash of sharp teeth made me jump back. That was a helluva dream I'd had, or was it a nightmare?

My mouth was sore, and blood trickled down my lips where I must have bitten myself in my sleep. I tended to chew my lip when I slept. I washed the blood completely away.

How I wished for a toothbrush and toothpaste. I searched my pockets and found a mint. Popping it in my mouth, I was ready to explore more of the train and find an escape.

"This has to be a dream. What train doesn't have at least one or two passengers?" I spoke more to reassure myself than anything else. Nausea threatened again and I held my stomach until it passed.

Something tickled my memory as I rubbed my aching wrist. Someone grabbing me. Had it been a dream?

Chancing a peek out the window again, I found I couldn't make out the scenery anymore. Total darkness had descended.

A shiver ran over me as a long howl resounded in the distance and I froze.

The door I'd entered slammed open, and a ticket holder marched up to me.

"Um. I don't have a ticket, sir..."

"You don't need a ticket. Come with me."

I didn't have a choice because he grabbed my wrist and pulled me along like a recalcitrant child.

"What are you doing?" I tried to pull away, but he gripped me so tightly that I felt a bruise forming over my already tender forearm.

"Please. You're hurting me."

He let out a low growl and with his mouth pinched, he led me to the car where I'd seen the beast. I knew it was my imagination, but fear paralyzed me. If he weren't pulling me along, I would have been curled up on the floor. By the time we reached the door, I was in a panic, scratching at his hand, trying to find a way to get loose from his grasp.

"No!"

Never releasing my hand, he unlocked the door, and with no sympathy at all, shoved me to the floor. With the jangle of the keys in the lock, he left me and disappeared. Were his eyes glowing?

My breathing was rapid, and I searched the room repeatedly for an escape. All I could think of was that he'd thrown me in here with the monster from the mirror. I put my hand to my forehead. Maybe I'd been drugged.

Sinister shadows in the corner of the room suggested someone lying in wait, but the car shifted and only connecting walls shone in the slice of moonlight, and then were gone in an instant.

No one was in the room but me and my fears. My body tensed as I clenched my jaw. I was afraid of the beast I'd seen, but it wasn't real. *Was it?* I was shaking like an addict without a hit.

Even though I knew the door was locked, I tried the handle, desperately jiggling the cold metal. Trapped in the small room, claustrophobia choked me, and I struggled to control myself and not hyperventilate.

Was there another exit? As far as I could see, the room was all walls except for the door I leaned against, piles of something on the floor and one window. There was nowhere else to go.

I wistfully wished to lie down and never wake. Overwhelmed by fear, I whimpered and slid to the floor, hugging my knees. I couldn't sit here forever, but I was tempted.

Forms on the floor I'd ignored previously, called to me now.

Not able to take my attention away from the lumps on the wooden slats, I crawled slowly towards the forms, hoping to find a pile of blankets. I could use them to cushion a bed for myself. This crazy ride was turning me inside out, making me imagine such evil things like monsters. But the only monster was the human who'd locked me in this car.

I reached out not really wanting to touch whatever it was, but knowing I had to. I recoiled when a sticky substance coated my fingers. Stretching my arm I pushed the solid mass, which fell over revealing blank eyes. Staring at a pale face drained of all blood, the blue lips, and slack jaws, made my stomach lurch.

Bodies, they were bodies.

A coppery stench filled the room. The floor under the bodies was awash in crimson. I knew it was blood. Why didn't I smell it before?

I dry-heaved but with nothing in my stomach, all I did was gag.

The sticky goo that now covered my hands, almost started the choking again, but I wiped them on my pants and managed to hold it back.

A cry echoed in the car, and I didn't realize it was me until I began to sob. I shoved my fist in my mouth, ignoring the metallic taste, to stifle the sounds or I'd go mad.

The keys ringing in the door brought me out of thoughts of the cadavers as the train conductor (or whoever he was) entered again.

Glowing eyes greeted me. He advanced, never looking at the bodies; his focus was on me.

His fingers grew until razor sharp nails protruded from his hands that now had hair instead of tanned skin. His teeth enlarged and saliva dripped from them like a rabid dog.

Light suddenly filtered in from the window. The moon.

I grimaced as pain stabbed my stomach. The mint had dissolved, and hunger took over me. Hunger as I'd never felt before.

The man or beast backed away, his eyes wider than they'd been a few minutes before.

I fell to my knees as my muscles cramped and my hands changed before my eyes. Fur sprouted where there had only been skin. My fingers elongated and claws formed. My legs snapped forwards and my nose was longer, darker.

Agony screamed from my maw as I became the beast I'd seen in the window. Like the beast before me, I growled.

Panting, I howled at the moon that called to me,

The other creature attacked me, slashing my body, teeth tearing pieces of my flesh. Fur was ripped off my haunches as he spared me not one mercy.

Raking my paws over his belly, blood splattered my jaws as he clutched the wound, and snapped at me.

I flinched when a shadow emerged from the corner and ripped the beast away from me. His frightened howls echoed in the car as he was torn, muscle ripped apart, fur and blood splattering me and the room.

Glowing red eyes focused on me. What was this creature?

"Come to me, Little Wolf."

Hypnotized by his voice, I found myself leaning against his leg. I wanted to change back, to be human again, but no matter how much I thought, my body would not obey.

"You'll make a good demon's pet." He ruffled the fur on my head. "Now we hunt."

About the Author:

Merry Marcellino lives in New Jersey in the US and works a full-time job as the Coordinator of Ministries at her church, while writing in her spare time. She enjoys reading paranormal romance and currently has self-published her first novel, Demons and Shifters and Me. Oh My!

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Ghosts | *Cinsearae S.*

Each step I took down the aisle towards his casket confirmed the morbid certainty that he was being committed to the ground. I thought to stop; to turn and run away; that maybe doing this would null the fact he was gone, that it was nothing but a cruel joke, and deter his interment into his cold, dark grave. I thought about how alone he would be in that tight, pine casket, until he was greeted by the worms. I couldn't bear to accept that knowledge, to know our time here on this Earth is so short, that I will now remember him longer in death than I did in life.

I've always heard you should never touch a body in a casket. Now I understand why. It's a bit of a shock to your system when you do.

I looked at him lying there, looking more like a mannequin than a human. I put my hand on top of his, and my heart skipped a beat. It was cold and hard; leathery. I don't know what I was expecting... no, that's not quite true. I wanted his hand to be warm and soft, the way I remembered it.

I had to kiss his cheek one last time. It felt the same. Cold. Hard. Unreal. His body pumped full of chemicals, keeping his body preserved for the last few hours he'd be here above ground with the living. Once the coffin lid closed and he was interred, he'd be at the mercy of the worms in weeks.

Unloved. Still. Silent. Rotting.

It pained me more knowing there was nothing I could do about it. I loved him more than he knew, and sadly it would remain that way forever.

A year had passed since his body was committed to the ground. I wondered how he looked now; if the maggots and insects made their way into his coffin. I couldn't imagine the ungodly smells of dampness and decay that would violate my senses if I were to open his casket. A grisly visage unfamiliar to me would haunt me. He'd be nothing more than a mass of putrid organs, skin and bones. One of the darkest terrors I feared, yet intrigued me. Is it insane to deeply miss him, yet think of him in this manner? Whenever I passed the cemetery, I always told him 'good night'. I also wondered if anyone else thought of him as much as I, even now.

A dull ache remains in my heart, like a hole that will never quite heal. If only I could see his face one last time, look into his eyes, hear his voice, kiss his lips, feel his embrace...

Ghosts. That's what memories become. Mine are all ghosts now, and I hold them in my heart with love and fondness, for I never want to lose him, even in death. Every one of us will be ghosts in time, and when my time comes, that's when I'll see him again.

*For Bill
1962-2022*

About the Author:

Cinsearae is the owner of Mistress Rae's Decadent Designs, maker of anthropomorphic taxidermy art, one of a kind creepy dolls/zombie babies, wearable works of art and gothic home decor. Former author and cover artist for Damnation Books, she still enjoys dabbling in dark/gothic photography and writing short stories whenever the muse pays a visit.

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Georgie smiled as she watched her younger sister Gina dive into one end of the Jefferson Country Club's pool and glide elegantly to the other. This vision of loveliness reminded her of the old Chanel Number Five commercials they used to air when she was a kid.

Gina was still in diapers then and would have no recollection of all the cheesy commercials and television shows from that time. Georgie liked only two things from that time period, Charlie's Angels and that perfume commercial. The people at the club were not unlike those from that commercial. They were sophisticated, carefree, and good to look at.

"Come on, Georgie; get in the water with us!" Gina called from the pool, pausing a second to splash her fiancé Paul in the face. She had long dark hair and hazel eyes like their mother, Georgie took more after their father's Nordic features. Growing older, her blonde hair had turned a muddy shade. Although they were eleven years apart, Georgie did not look at it. She, like the others at the club, had dumped many a dollar on personal upkeep.

"That's why you marry a rich man." Mother used to coo, "Plan for your future."

She had accomplished that once wedded to Richard. He owned furniture over the years that had turned a lucky profit. Not without most of his time spent with his 'second wife'. The afternoons at the pool with Gina and Paul made the summer feel less empty.

"Come on, join us!" Paul called, waving his hand, bobbing up and down in the water, thoroughly enjoying himself. The other women parked in their lounge chairs along the edge of the pool were enjoying themselves as well, watching him from behind their dark sunglasses.

Georgie never understood why women piled on the jewelry and makeup to come laze around the pool. Always one to carry an extra ten pounds, she took to wearing a cheerfully colored caftan over her bathing suit. Insecurity and loneliness had become her worst enemies.

Gina's laugh was infectious. How happy the two of them looked splashing about in the pool together.

"Enjoy it while you can, kids." She thought, smiling to herself, reaching into her bag to retrieve her phone. A message was pending. It was from Richard, of course.

"Can't make it to lunch. Enjoy the club with the kids. C U at home. Luv. R."

"Luv," Georgie muttered under her breath and tossed the phone back into her bag. Just what she wanted, another overpriced lunch. At least out by the pool, she could hide behind her sunnies and a book. Once inside she was the topic of many a conversation. There was a rumor going around that Richard was cheating on her.

She eased her mind by ushering the pool boy to bring her another drink and some fresh towels. Perhaps that would wash the taste of the text message from her palette, as she flipped to chapter five of *Trilby*.

"Why do all the salads have tuna in them?" Gina whined as she set aside her menu. "Is there a mandate that the tuna has to be included in everything served here?"

"The old cats here like it." Paul retorted, his eyes scanning the dining room with a sardonic smile.

Gina gasped, "Paul, that's a terrible thing to say. I've known some of these people my entire life."

"That doesn't make it any less true." He smiled. "They are here on their husband's money. No offense to you, Georgie."

"None taken," she said, motioning to the waitress for another martini.

The lithe blonde honed-in on the table with a deliberate smile in Paul's direction.

"Yes, Mrs. Danberry." She purred.

"Jenna, is it? Another martini, please. You may drop the Mrs. Danberry act. My name is Georgie. Mrs. Danberry sounds like Richards' mother."

"Of course," she stuttered. "Georgie."

"Make mine a double," Paul said, with a wink.

"Right away... a..."

"Mr. Herrington." Paul smiled.

"Right away, Mr. Herrington," Jenna replied, before doing a slightly flirty turn.

"Honestly, Georgie, that doesn't make them bad people, so to speak. They are just out of touch with the realities of life."

"Maybe they are just lucky to have husbands that can afford the lifestyle?" Gina piped in, wrinkling her nose.

"So you are telling me that you would rather be here all day with these gargoyles than teaching your class? He said, raising an eyebrow. "No offense, Georgie."

"I like what I do." Gina said, "It would be nice to run the show instead of some bureaucrat."

"So it seems," Georgie said. "Open your own daycare."

"Most businesses fail within the first three years," Paul replied. "Richard managed to pull it off though. Although selling furniture to a bunch of your rich friends is probably easier than managing a bunch of brats."

"Richard didn't get lucky with the business. There have been a lot of sacrifices."

Georgie watched as Jenna dropped off the drinks, lingering especially long beside Paul.

"I understand sacrifices. My student loan debt is immense."

"You stand to make quite a bit though once you pass the bar," Gina said. "You are lucky to be partnering up with your father."

Paul sighed, lifting up his drink. "I never thought I'd end up here."

Georgie sensed his consternation. He had quite the nerve on him today.

"Here isn't so bad, is it? You could be standing in a line at a mill or digging ditches. I don't think you'd prefer that to a sit in the sun swilling back cocktails?"

"Georgie!" Gina exclaimed. "He didn't mean anything, did you, Paul?"

"Maybe I did." He shrugged. "I'd probably be a better person with less money."

"So, give it all up. Walk away." Georgie smiled, lowering her martini glass. "God knows I've considered it."

The garish lighting in Macy's dressing room made the cellulite on Georgie's legs appear even more pronounced.

"Why do they do this to women?" Georgie frowned, as she began to pull off the pair of white linen shorts she assumed might look good on her. Along with lounging at the pool, she loved to shop. Scouring the racks of inventory, she felt awash in the promise of what she may look like sans ten pounds.

Her phone began to ring as she caught her foot in the leg of the shorts, nearly toppling over. It was Gina.

"You nearly caused me to break my leg." Georgie chuckled into the phone. Sobs met her jocular demeanor.

"Honey, what's wrong?" She edged on. "I can't understand you."

"It's Paul!" Gina wailed. "He's been messing around with that waitress from the club. I caught them in the storage closet together. I followed them from the bathroom."

"That bastard!" Georgie hissed. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I can't be with him now, can I? Imagine the scandal?"

"What did he say when confronted?"

"Jenna just smirked while he tried to pull up his pants. He apologized up and down but there were scads of people in the hallway. Somehow, I was the one making a scene!"

"Meet me at the house," Georgie said. "We will sort this all out. I promise. By the time we are done with them, they will wish they'd stayed in the kitchen with all the tuna."

Richard's car was in the driveway when Georgie arrived home. That was odd. There was also a fleet of white vans and a work vehicle positioned around the back. Suddenly he appeared as if from out of nowhere, holding a blindfold. His dark hair was peppered with grey, but his smile and stature remained the same as twenty years ago.

"You are home sooner than I expected!" Richard exclaimed, planting a kiss on her cheek. "Turn around."

He fastened the blindfold over her eyes before she could think.

"Richard, really, what is this?"

"Shhhh," he said. "No questions, just go as I guide you."

"I'm not in a trusting mood right now." She sighed, as he pushed her along.

"Now Georgie, that's not a good girl." He laughed. "Just listen to the sound of my voice."

They came to a stop and he turned her one more time, before removing the blindfold.

Her eyes came to rest on a gaping hole in the backyard and several workers moving about.

"Surprise!" Richard yelled. "Happy anniversary! I'm putting in a pool. Now you won't have to go to that awful club anymore."

Georgie fell into his arms and sobbed. The extra hours he'd been putting in were to give her something special. It hadn't been Richard the women had been gossiping about, it was Paul all along.

"You have no idea," she said, smiling as she wiped away a few tears. "This is amazing."

"It should be in by our anniversary. We can have a party right here in our new pool to celebrate. Baby, you deserve it. I wouldn't have any of this without you."

Gina appeared around her back, a pair of dark glasses guarding her eyes.

"Look what we are putting in!" Richard hollered her way, seemingly overwhelmed by his surprise.

"Wonderful," Gina called back with little enthusiasm.

"What's got her so down in the mouth?" Richard asked.

"Paul." Georgie sighed. "What else?"

Richard shook his head. "He's been the worst foul ball she's ever struck."

"I agree. The question is... what do we do about him?"

The answer didn't escape her for long. Their mother hadn't put up with a philanderer so why would they? The Seiðr weren't very forgiving when crossed. She should have thought of this sooner. Richard's gift was the perfect solution.

First, she would contact the club and offer Jenna a hearty sum for helping with a private party she was holding at her house. Gina would then ask Paul to meet her there to discuss their futures. It was a fated Saturday night when Richard was at his card club. They would have more than ample time to weave their spell.

"Are you certain this is what you want?" Georgie asked. "I don't want to sully your conscience with an act of this magnitude. Can you live with it?"

Gina looked down at her hands and removed Paul's ring. "Yes."

They proceeded. As planned, the doorbell rang. Jenna was the first to arrive.

"The kitchen is around this way," Georgie said. "I'm so thankful you could come tonight."

"I'm surprised you called me. You must be desperate for help."

"I figured you'd need the money if you were going to keep up with Paul," Georgie replied sharply, as they crossed into the kitchen. "The punch bowl is over there."

"Punch," Jenna chuckled. "That's a bit old, isn't it?"

"We all grow up sometime," Gina said, coming from behind the island. "When one has to learn that their dreams are held together by a thread. Someone unwittingly cuts it."

As they closed in, she panicked and attempted to push Gina aside, only to be overpowered. Georgie chanted in Swedish, repeating the same phrase. There was no sound. Even the whistle of the tea-kettle grew muted.

Gina pushed her to the ground and held her as Georgie stood over her, uttering the words, "fortfarande dig sjalv," "Still yourself."

Jenna was silent, staring up at them with doll-like eyes. Gina snapped her fingers in front of her face. She was without response. The whistle of the kettle slowly returned.

"I know you are in there, duckie. Soon you and Paul will be together, just not the way you expected."

The second ring of the doorbell stirred their attention.

"Our other guest has arrived," Georgie said. "I'll be right back."

Gina smiled as Georgie approached the kitchen, Paul's eyes dead as he followed behind her, his movements, obviously not of his own volition.

"He was so easy." Georgie chuckled. "He didn't even put up a fight."

"That was his worst flaw, being easily misled," Gina replied. "Now, let's get her up."

Georgie waved her hand and chanted, the clock on the range stopped and the lights dimmed as Jenna jerked to a sitting position. With a flick of her wrist, Georgie willed her to stand so quickly that the bones in her legs crunched mercilessly.

"That had to hurt." She smiled, leading her to stand beside Paul. "What a great-looking couple they are."

"No need to be petty," Gina said, getting in his face. "It's time to put you behind me. For all your bravado you were always just a scared little boy, qualifying yourself by bedding all sorts of revolting creatures."

"It's time," Georgie commanded, raising her hand in the air. They stumbled behind her, towards the French doors that lead to the patio, Gina behind them. Their bodies moved like broken marionettes, Georgie holding imaginary strings.

The dew of the eve slithered beneath their feet as they halted before the dirt mouth. With a pointed finger, Georgie compelled Jenna to stagger forward. The ground opened enough to fit her small frame, sucking her in until the top of her blonde head disappeared.

"That felt good." Gina smiled, wiping back tears of satisfaction.

"What about him?" Georgie asked. "Are you sure?"

She paused for a second and sniffed. As he hovered at the angry dirt rim, her final nod sealed his fate.

"He wouldn't have passed that bar exam anyway."

Slowly, his feet sank into the earth, followed by his waist and then shoulders.

Finally, his arrogant head was thoroughly absorbed. The gap closed with a pleased slurp.

"Now there is nothing to fret about," Georgie said. "You never have to hear the whispers of strangers about you again. Mother would be proud of your choice."

"Is that why I never knew Daddy?" Gina asked. "What happened to him when I was a baby?"

"Let's just say, I didn't learn this on my own," Georgie said. "I'm ready for some punch."

"Gather around everyone!" Richard addressed the crowded backyard, holding up a champagne flute. Georgie stood next to him proudly and kissed him on the cheek.

"I want to thank you all for coming here in celebration of our twenty years together. Now it hasn't always been easy but it has been quite a ride. Without Georgie's support, I wouldn't be the man that I am today. This day is for you. Thank you."

Their friends clapped so loudly that she could barely stop her happy tears.

Gina appeared content, sitting poolside with a friend from school. He seemed kind and unassuming. There wasn't a trace of arrogance about him as he dangled his feet in the water.

"Hey!" Richard yelled at Georgie. "I'll race you to the other side."

"It's a deal!" she replied, hastily peeling off her kaftan and jumping in.

With a perfect glide, she inwardly smiled at the thought of Paul and Jenna below her. This was even better than the commercial.

About the Author:

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

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October Country | *Gregory L. Steighner*

A crisp autumn breeze welcomed the crowd to Patchinoff Farm. The kind that lifts the aroma from hot drinks warming bare hands to swirl around twitching noses. A comfortable waft that carried leaves of golden-red and dark orange over and around the people streaming into fields and converted barns. Children's laughter caught on the gusts, mingling with the bouquet of mulled wine and cider, all heading to the far reaches of the October Country.

He walked among the crowd, passing the gate's men without giving coin for passage. Unseen, he traversed the worn dirt driveways hardened by horse hooves and tractor wheels. If by chance someone touched by the beyond would catch a glimpse, they would see a stalky man shrouded in black wearing a suit a century out of place wrapped in a cloak that vampires would envy.

He wasn't here to enjoy the festivities but rather to collect a debt that came due.

Before proceeding, he stopped to scrutinize an ancient oak, its brown leaves clinging wearily to the tips of branches under the low flickering yellow glow of a multitude of jack-o-lanterns. Pumpkins filled nearly every space from the crown to the trunk, surrounding the tree with faces burning in evening fading light.

He studied them while remembering those of years long lost. Each one was unique, crafted by hands guided by a faint devotion to a muted tradition. Yet, the core remained bright as the candle within the center. Each flame was a remembrance of those that traveled beyond the October Country.

A faint mewling drew his attention beneath the tree. A small calico kitten flopped between the scattered pumpkins, stumbling out and staring at him with bright green eyes. The kitten mewed out of curiosity at the stranger before him. A long hiss followed by a low rumbling growl. The mother sprang from the shadows and glared at him for a minute. She clasped her kitten's neck and vanished between the shadows cast by burning faces.

Another pair of eyes spied him. On the barn, perched on the highest point, a Great Horned Owl stared down at him. Driven by devotion, the seasoned soul spread his wings wide and clicked his talons to issue a shrieking challenge.

"I have come to collect what was promised to me long ago. This is simply the conclusion of our business. Your gratitude protected him well but it cannot stop the end."

The Owl hissed and flew silently to the farmhouse to land on a barren tree by a window glowing with a faint light. His boney hand pulled out a worn gray-silver pocket watch. The hour was ending, yet he took a moment to step around the barn to view the side.

A broken artifact held together by memories of a Halloween night long ago. Huge poster billboards of lands lost in time. Mummies among pyramids, English wheat fields with bonfires, gargoyles perched on cathedrals steeples, and skeletons eating monstrous candy.

He cherished the memories of that wonderfully strange and prosperous night. The time finally came to collect the pumpkin that was past due but paid forward by the best of friends.

The house was a relic of a bygone age. It was built when horses drew carriages, people worked by the daylight, and night still held its terror in people's minds. He approached the front with reverence as one savored fine wine. The scores of jack-o-lanterns lined the walkway and the drooping scarecrows dressed in mismatched ragged clothing. The flickering candles in the windows stood watch over the homestead. Each light kept the darkness just out of reach and yet offered a sense of welcome.

He stepped onto the wooden stairs that groaned a warning to those with the sensibility to listen. A worn iron knocker tempted his boney fingers, but his hand grazed the hard oak door to reach the silver doorknob. It turned with a whisper of clicks.

The home celebrated a rustic décor, a refuge from the past with the necessities of modernity scattered about the rooms. The flavor of the season was on display. Proud skeletons, pale ghosts, and dark witches were littered among candles with garlands of bright-colored leaves, and scores of pumpkins nested in nooks and corners.

"Grandpa will be dead before this farm!" A shrill voice bolted from the next room.

"What part of no don't you get, Sandy? This farm is staying as is in the family!" This stern voice echoed past the man.

He crept as a spider closer to the archway to remain unnoticed and lost in the shadowy edge of angry eyes. Although, it mattered little as only one could see him. Within the parlor, two women stood in the center like boxers in an arena. At a glance, he knew that they were, Joseph's children's children. The familiarities were plain as wort on a witch's nose.

"Anne, face reality! Vultures are circling this place. The farm barely breaks even in a good year. After Grandpa Joe is gone there will be nothing to fortify a legacy," the woman said, wearing a neatly pressed charcoal suit and pants with a crisp white shirt and a maroon tie.

The other, Anne wore rough jeans and a shirt past its prime. "You win with a nice payout. How can you simply discard our family's legacy, Cathy?"

"A legacy drowning in debt," Cathy salted her stern tone with sympathy. "If we sell now, everyone wins."

Anne walked over to the bay window as the soft candlelight cast an orange glow on her gentle face. The sounds of the season slipped through the glass. Children screaming at jumping ghosts and creeping clowns, moody music bellowed from speakers, from in the corn maze and the deep woods echoes of joyful fear drifted with the rising fog.

"You hear that. They come every year. They come for drinks of pumpkin spice. I've seen them hunt for hours for that special jack-o-lantern hidden in the fields. How they go home enriched with a rescued cat or dog." Anne turned her head slightly into the shadow. "All that exchanged for perfect lawns, pre-fab townhouses, a neighborhood managed by an indifferent H.O.A.?"

The clicks of his pocket watch grew louder as the moment approached. He left the women be to continue upstairs. The antique moaned with his passing. He reached the second-floor landing. To his right was Joseph's door. Walking with reverence and dread, he came to the door and waited for a moment. By all rights, he could just walk in to claim what was due.

Out of fondness, he knocked on the door three times.

"Go away!" A worn voice burst from behind like a cannon.

He didn't heed the command, the hinges whined as they turned inwards. A single dull light illuminated the room with more shadows than light. There in a large bed, Joseph rested in somber regality. Propped up against the headboard, he gazed at him with sorrowful heavy eyes. A black cat curled against Joseph's right arm, glaring at the man with dark orange eyes.

"Well, you finally caught it," Joseph asked, harking back to that marvelous Halloween.

The man reached into the folds of his cloak, skeletal fingers searching for the prize of that night's adventure. He set the Jack-o-Lantern on the dresser top. The candle within its broken face burnt low.

"It has burned since our All Hallows Eve adventure." He looked for the boy that gave such a chase. Joseph lay in the bed as a grave, his room was an Egyptian tomb filled with artifacts for the land beyond. An autographed baseball on a shelf, a gold trophy awarded for the Championship, and a framed award given to Joseph for creating an animal refuge drew his attention.

Set within twin matching frames, two pictures awed him. The one on the right showed a wedding picture of Joseph and his bride. A reflection of the whimsical boy he knew and of course, his wife was of the same ilk. Her wedding gown was, of course, black. They were married among the colors of fall with skeletons and ghouls as witnesses.

The second was much older, taken when Joseph was young. Perhaps not long after that Halloween chase. Five teens on bikes lined next to a fence bound and wrapped in orange and red lights with each post topped by a pumpkin or monster. Four boys and a girl costumed for Tricks and Treats.

Joseph tossed about, nearly jostling the cat from his side. The little panther climbed up Joseph's arm to head-butt his cheek. All the time, those hateful eyes glared at the man.

"A stolen flame that cut my friends' lives short." Joseph turned to face the window. The sun exited, leaving the stage packed with clouds of intense colors. "Was it good business when you came for them? They didn't understand what they traded away."

"What they did for you came from that timeless night. We all profited from your chase."

"Don't play coy now. Four for one, that's what Thomas proposed to you. They all gave up a portion of their lives to pay for mine. Did you gloat when they came due?" Joseph's voice grew shallower as the candle flickered.

What happened to the boy that gave such a merry chase through the ages? Who embodied this dark time, enjoying jumping through forests, banging on white picket fences while gathering treats, and performing fanciful tricks.

"They had no regrets," He drew closer to the bed.

The cat climbed over Joseph's legs sitting on the bed's edge with his tail flopping, bristling, and uttering a long dreadful hiss...

"They threw away the last year of their life." The words came hard between Joseph's coughing. "I spent them."

He looked at his pocket watch, the monograph RB caught a shard of orange candlelight. The worn hands ticked closer to midnight as melancholy surfaced within him. Thomas would not see his last All-Hallows-Eve. The minutes pressed into diamonds.

"I thought their lives were well invested, wouldn't you agree." Thomas closed his eyes for a moment. They opened with a heavy load. "Time well spent, they did so many excellent things. A doctor, an architect, an archeologist, and lastly a writer and a witch as well. She wasn't a surprise when you think about it."

The cat dashed to head-butt Thomas' hand. Slowly he petted the black tuff of the feline's head and neck. A strong and loud purr echoed in the room. "My sweet Ónix. We rescued him off the street. Lilly loved him so. Our rescues had many second chances. Is Zax on his perch? He stayed with the farm all these years. He was one of our first."

Just outside the window. The owl crouched low, glaring through the window with dark coral eyes at him. Of course, Joseph would have an owl and a cat with him at the crossing into the October Country.

The candle fluttered. His hand became still. Ónix stretched out his right paw, gently tapping Joseph's slow-rising chest. A long mewing uttered from deep within the sleek mini-panther joined by a soft screech.

"Mr. ..., " A fit of coughing interrupted Joseph, the final few eased for him to finish. "Tell me, were they pleased with the time I had?"

He sat on the bed, stroking his sharp ragged chin, "Ask them. They are waiting."

The light faded. The candle wick glowed a bright red. Ónix turned to challenge him with drooping yellow eyes and with a single chirp. The owl began his silent vigil.

His hand reached for Ónix. The cat didn't protest as he gently stroked his back. "I'm sorry."

Ónix turned away. He climbed onto Joseph's still chest, curled into a ball, and began mewing.

Cathy held the pumpkin spice latte with firm hands. The smell joined with the scents of the candles around the house. She watched from the bay window the scene of the Halloween festival. A year and a day since her grandfather passed on. Surprisingly, he gave her partial control over the farm. Maybe not, Anne might have the heart to run this place, but handling the finances wasn't the best choice.

Despite her concerns, Cathy devoted her life to the family's legacy. Overall, the farm was sound. The sanctuary was doing well, saving many distressed animals in the past year. Most got forever homes, or the wild ones that were successfully released. With the Halloween Haunts this fall, the farm would be on firmer ground.

A series of meows drew her attention to the front door. Ónix sat beside it waiting for her to open the door. Cathy opened it for the tiny panther, “Be careful, Ónix. Black cats shouldn’t be loose on Halloween.”

Ónix prodded down the stairs, running down the sidewalk, pausing for a moment to rub his scent over a large Jack-o-Lantern carved with his hooman face. Then he walked between the scores of pumpkins and decorations that filled the yard. He looked back at the chaos engulfing the farm. Hoomans didn't know how to celebrate this night.

He entered the fields of corn, prowling the secret paths known only to cats and owls. Zax flew over the field, silent to most dwellers of the night. Save for the cats, they always knew he was there watching over them.

Together they journeyed into the October Country as no other animal could, especially this time of the year and on this special night. The owl and cat knew where to find their companions. For the rest of the night, they would rejoin them for an adventure, revisiting old friends and places of long ago, but still loved.

About the Author:

Gregory L. Steighner is a passionate writer and photographer drawing inspiration from the world and people of Western PA for stories. He resides with his wife Nikki, mother-in-law, and three energetic cats.

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The Hungry Woods | Aaron Grierson

Sprinting beneath the writhing canopy, I silently pray my phone has enough battery to get me out of the woods. The trees are all half covered in the crawl now—fleshy masses like arteries. Hopping over crimson roots, I keep my eyes to the ground, guided by the flashlight. Tears sting my eyes but I can't break down. Not yet.

Tendrils lash out from evergreen hosts. They scratch me, but I can get low enough to evade them, gnashing my teeth each time.

Dammit Pete, why'd you have to drag me here? All to prove some stupid TikTok video on the news is fake?

He's gone now—one of the pits opened and swallowed him whole. We knew the signs... but we were clumsy.

Casual. I got lucky.

Shit!

I eat dirt as I trip. Spitting and clambering to stand, I hear the squelching of the tendrils.

The world upends, as I'm hauled into a tree, first by my loose shoelaces, but I feel it crawling my leg. Warm and viscous, like blood. Just like in the videos. I scream—half in frustration, half in terror as I pull at the limbs of the tree.

Scratching my fingers on bark does nothing to slow my ascent.

As my phone falls to the ground through my bloody fingers, I get a glimpse into the fathomless, wide eyes of a mimic, its fanged maw distending like a hungry serpent.

Hound of Ulster, Unleashed | Aaron Grierson

Breaking clouds cascade the aureate harvest moon across the emerald isle. As darkness falls so do my bindings, freeing me from the standing stone. I collapse a man, and rise, something new.

Something *hungry*.

I sup upon the blood of kings. It is not enough. Armies and fools are not enough. Family... is *not enough!*

An eviscerating rampage of fang and claw, no one can stop me, nor any thing. Carving through villages and glades, not even bogs of blood deter me.

Howling skyward, I lope into the space between worlds, seeking the crones who cursed me thus.

The Pit | Aaron Grierson

Waiting is the worst part. The encroaching trap, hidden maw, ready to snap.

But *waiting* is what the Host *demands*.

We cannot see the world above. Our domain is the earth, trembling as tendrils burrow deeper inside, replacing the fetid foliage native to this place. Withering before our pulsating appetite, chlorophyll becomes sanguine.

Civilization is quiet, a crawl, thinking it moves unobserved. But we are there, taking root beneath the asphalt.

Blood sustains our network, but animals are a short stretch. Humans are delectable; screaming, consumed first by our darkness.

Then we integrate. Deep *inside* of you.

Skeletal Rebellion | Aaron Grierson

Jangling of hollow chimes disturbs my slumber. From my keep's window I spy remnants of the forest bleeding autumnal red; the sky is empty.

I return to bed, barren thralls undisturbed though the clanging continues. I recite my victim's names, hoping to bring slumber.

Only halfway through, I'm coerced from bed as the door splinters. My dead heart lurches.

I growl, skullcaps filling the room, their bones chattering. "Return to your posts!"

"You are our post," they reply, a hollow rasp.

Screaming at the night, my royal scepter isn't enough.

I'm soon staked through the heart by skeletal peons.

Misguiding Light | Aaron Grierson

"Daddy!"

I sprint toward him playing my favourite lullaby.

It's eerie tonight. The moon is drowned in fog and The Williams' farm is totally empty. But, Daddy can't be far. He knows my favourite white pumpkin patch.

Panting deeply, I stumble to a stop. I see a flashlight now—Daddy must be close. I want to shout, but only wheeze. Hurrying, I move toward the growing light.

The song is louder now.

Weaving between pumpkins, I finally reach the light. No Daddy. Just an ethereal orb.

Inexorable, drawing me downward. I try to scream, but have no mouth.

Weeping Woods | Aaron Grierson

I spied someone crying in the woods. He sat atop a felled oak, leaves rotting away. As he bemoaned his loss, the air shook; I remained unseen atop the path. My perverse voyeurism wondered what tragedy befell this fellow—perhaps he broke, slaughtering his family, in contrast to the season's serenity.

What felt like hours passed before he stood, tears drenching his tired face, and walked deeper into the darkening woods. Soon I was alone, silent sorrow hanging in the autumn air. Despite his absence, I heard faint snaps as trees fell around his sobs.

About the Author:

A gamer, lover of autumn, its dark histories, and horror media, Aaron Grierson's work often blends folk elements into society's love of technology. He is a First Reader for *Flash Fiction Online* and former Senior Articles Editor at *The Missing Slate*. Always hungry for more literature, references and puns inevitably sneak into his musings. Previous publications appear in *The Missing Slate*, *Marisa's Recurring Nightmares*, *Polar Borealis* and *Polar Starlight* and past issues of *The Sirens Call*.

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The Blood Lights are the last thing you'll see...

The
BLOOD LIGHTS



ELAINE PASCALE

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Mary dragged the dark haired child along the wooded path.

"Come on!" She snapped at the preteen. "We have to get home before dark. Devil does his work after sundown."

The child whimpered and tried to pull from her grip.

Mary turned, faced the small girl and flinched once again when she saw the mixed breeding in the small heart shaped face. Tainting the races, she knew that to be a sure sign of the Dark Prince's work. She frowned at this orphan she'd just taken in and thought, *luckily I'm here to save the marked children*. "Come on, Angela 14, stop fighting. I'm saving you."

The child yanked at the hands that held her and said in a weepy voice, "My mommy named me Melissa."

Mary took in a deep breath, shocked by the defiance this demon's spawn was displaying. She let go of the girl's wrist and smacked her across the face so hard her hand stung. The child staggered backwards then fell and Mary felt satisfaction ease her pained hand. "Your Mommy left you because you're cursed by the Devil. You were born out of wedlock and are doomed to burn in Hell. Now stop that damned crying. I'm going to save your soul!"

Not like that last one. That redheaded spawn had been older and proved to be unsalvageable. Mary shuddered at the very memory of it. That green fire right outside her house and the Devil himself stealing Angela 13 away. It had shaken her so badly she waited a year to find another soul to save.

The sun was setting when they broke through to the small clearing with the shabby cabin in the center. "Here's a bucket, fill it with water in the stream we just passed and don't even think about running away. These woods are full of monsters after dark."

She watched contempt curling her mouth into a sneer as the girl took the bucket. *All any of them need is some good healthy fear to set them on the road to salvation*. Then she frowned and mumbled, "All except that one with the devil's kiss on her face."

She remembered when she started saving children. The first had been her step-sister Angie. They'd had different fathers, but only Mary's had been a daddy. She'd drowned Angie in the stream when she was eight. Oh how Momma had cried about the accident and prayed for the dead girl's soul.

That was when Mary realized her calling, to save as many souls as she could. A few of her Angelas had run off, but they'd had Satan beaten out of them before they left. She glanced over at the unmarked graves on the edge of the clearing and nodded at the souls she had managed to truly save.

The girl came back, struggling to carry the heavy bucket.

"That's good, Angela 14. Now come here." She stood by a tiny lean-to on the side of the cabin. She grabbed the girl, pushed up the long tattered skirt and snapped a locked chain around the small ankle.

"This is your room. You got a fresh straw bed and a bible."

"But, but, it's dark. I'm scared. Why can't I come in with you?" The child wailed, tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Because I don't let any of the Devil's spawn cross my threshold. Never let the darkness into my home. My soul is clean and I aim to keep it that way."

"Please, I promise to be a good Angela!" Melissa begged, falling to her knees.

Mary snickered, smacked the girl for good measure and turned away. To be blinded by a huge flash of green fire. She stepped back gasping in terror. That light! Angela 13 had disappeared into that pillar of green fire a year ago.

And now as her vision returned, there was Angela 13 standing before her, dressed in a rich emerald, green gown. She smirked at Mary as she shook back her long, thick, red hair. The birthmark on her cheek was glowing.

"I was right; you are the spawn of the Devil. I saw him take you last year. I watched from the window. Damned! You were damned, unable to be saved!"

"You mean murdered, you murdered those children, not saved them." Angela 13 said, her voice dripping with hatred. "But to you murder means salvation. And I'm not the Devil's Spawn. I'm his wife."

The little girl was screaming and the redhead looked at her. "There, there child. My name is Glory. Come here to me."

She snapped her fingers and the chain dropped to the ground. The little girl ran to her and hugged her waist. "You have your name back, Melissa. You can be my child if you'd like. I promise to love you and care for you until the

time comes when no one like her,” she said pointing at Mary, “will care about the color of your skin or what you believe. Until then, you can stay safe with me and the others I have rescued.”

Mary was edging away.

Glory stopped her with a commanding stare. Then she smiled sweetly at the woman who had intended to kill her like the others before her. “Mary, my husband and I have decided to repay the favors you have spent your life bestowing on innocent, helpless, young girls so we have decided to have you live with us as well.”

Mary’s eyes widened as she watched the handsome man walk out from the flames. He took Glory’s hand and kissed the strawberry birthmark on her cheek. “Yes, come join us. You will be known as Angela 15 and we have a special place we made just for you. Right near our home, you know, because we can’t have your tainted soul crossing our threshold, now can we?”

Mary stood frozen to the spot, unable to respond, unable to get away from the couple facing her, smiling at her. She mouthed the words nononono but no sound escaped her lips.

Glory kissed her husband back, and said to Mary. “Ah, sadly you’ll never understand what real evil is, Angela 15. You’ll never understand we are not the evil, our duty is to put the evil ones where they belong.” She shook her head then turned away and nodded to her husband.

In response, he snapped his fingers and the pillar of fire widened and engulfed Mary. She struggled and inhaled deeply trying to ward off the flames, but all she could do with her endless last breath was scream and scream with the burning pain that would go on forever.

About the Author:

Diane Arrelle has more than 350 short stories published and two short story collections: *Just A Drop In The Cup* and *Seasons On The Dark Side*. A retired municipal senior citizen center director, she’s co-owner of Jersey Pines Ink Publishing. She resides with her sane husband and her insane cat on the edge of the New Jersey Pine Barrens (home of the Jersey Devil).

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Cotton | *Miracle Austin*

Each night, at 11:13pm, I waited until the withered leaves blew into my half-open window and levitated above me before flying away. This time they formed a message. I could barely make out the words. My body locked. Shrieking scratches under my windowpane triggered my bed and all of the framed black and white paintings on my walls to vibrate.

My eyes drifted towards the full moon as massive, wooden claws tapped my window and shattered the glass. Milky, luminescent eyes ceased my blinking. Its bark-like, skeletal body climbed into my bedroom and stomped towards me.

Towering over seven feet, it leaned in closer to me. Tears slithered down my trembling cheeks and lips. Razor vines extended, from its decaying, cotton mouth, and cocooned my body—dragging me into the endless, pumpkin patch.

About the Author:

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

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"Hey commander!"

Commander Keller was immediately alert. "What is it?" She moved beside the analyst.

The young man flinched slightly as she encroached in his bay, then asserted himself just the same. "Look at these readings," he gestured to the screen, "Now look at the time signatures."

The commander stared at the dots on the screen, until stark realisation occurred. "Holy shit," she almost stammered. "New signals are appearing from there?"

The analyst couldn't blame her for being excited. This could mean everything. He nodded rapidly, mirroring her expression. "That's how it appeared," he told her. "This could be it."

"The rift," A solemnity overcame the commander, as she muddled through the implications in her head. "Good work, Samson. Alert the crew, and have word sent back to HQ. We'll fly in and confirm the target before requesting backup ships."

"Aye, commander," Samson replied, but Keller had already turned away. The other bays were silent, their constituent crew members eavesdropping eagerly for news.

"We've found it," she told them, and they rushed to prepare. "Set course for Earth."

The road they walked was eerily quiet once they'd left the hum of the shuttle's engines behind. The area was once called Tara, in the small island country of Ireland. Commander Keller had downloaded local maps and history from the ship's computer and perused them as she walked. Two of her best scouts, Tapper and Pike, remained alert beside her as she read. Old kings had once lived here, she read in the files, but it didn't seem regal at all. In her mind monarchy was linked with the immense. Great, towering halls filled with obelisks of platinum and intricately machined totems to the universe's gods. The Great Spirit Rastan rising above all, ethereally constructed in diamond mesh. To reign meant to invoke these idols to guide you in your work. There were no idols here, where they now walked. They found only trees, and grass and tightly wound lanes, with remnants of tarmac beneath. Though it wasn't long before they encountered much more.

A spirit, that of a child, roamed the path up ahead.

"Okay team," the commander sheathed her scroll. "Normal procedures, stay alert and keep distance." And onwards they proceeded, more carefully than before. As they neared the first ghost, Keller felt the expected chill in her spine. No matter how many missions and encounters, she could never grow accustomed to it. Maybe it was the imminent threat of the dead one nearby, or the idea that they had once been human like her. But her associations with that shiver were marred with despair. She raised one hand to her pendant and moved swiftly along.

"You think we could ask for some manlier pendants?" Tapper asked, noticing her gesture.

She rolled her eyes in reply. "They gave us the pink stone because it masks our aura best, not because they want you to look girly." She gestured aside towards Pike, "Anyway you don't see Pike listing on about it, do you? And she's way more manly than you." Pike snorted a laugh and Tapper grew silent.

More ghosts blockaded their overgrown path, as they cautiously plodded along. After a short time, they grew so dense that the commander pondered retreating. This was the most dangerous mission they had undertaken thus far, and yet it was also the most important. Here, they might locate the tear in the veil that had been ruptured all those centuries ago. So long they had searched; they couldn't give up now. She gritted her teeth and steeled herself. Then behind her, she heard a shrill shriek.

Swivelling quickly, she dropped to one knee, adopting a vigilant pose. Time seemed to slow for the commander, as a horrific scene played out before her eyes. Tapper was frozen, in shock and in terror, for a spectre had caught him off guard. Towards him reached forward a translucent hand, which pressed ever so gently against his back. And that was all it took. His expression went blank, as his body slumped unceremoniously to the ground. All that was left in its stead was his ghost, a merciless husk fated to wander the earth for forever more.

"Spirits be," Commander Keller gasped and desperately fingered her pendant again.

"We need to..." Pike started but was rapidly cut off.

"Keep moving!" Keller cried out to the only other remnant of the group, ignoring the lump in her throat. Losses were to be expected, she reasoned, yet she made extremely sure not to look in Tapper's direction again. She couldn't bear it now.

A hundred metres on, the path opened to an area with several small ruins. "This must have been where they greeted their guests," Keller voiced quietly to Pike. She knew very well that the spirits couldn't hear them, but she would do anything in her power not to further invoke their wrath. "And here, this looks like the entrance to the hill itself," she motioned towards a ridge that began the rising of a hill.

"It's probably at the peak?" Pike asked her, almost pleadingly.

"I hope so," she replied.

Here, the shades were greater in numbers, almost suffocatingly so, and both women measured their steps. Constantly turning, they watched each other's backs, making sure what happened to Tapper couldn't reoccur. But the ghosts here were slower for some reason, Keller mused, maybe because here they were fresh to this world. What must it be like, she wondered, to find the afterlife, only to be thrust back into the living world. And further, she questioned their numbers. Centuries had passed since that first Samhain, when the veil had ripped open, and still more came. Still more to add to the endless horde of the dead. "We're almost there," the leader of the group whispered to her subordinate. They would finally know if they had sited the spot, where the veil had once grown fragile and thin. They would finally know where death had arrived, and mankind's exile begun.

They crested the hill, reaching a clearing of sorts. And there they saw it, vibrantly flickering above in the air. It was huge, and monstrous and difficult to grasp, and the women couldn't observe it for long. But they stood there, awed both alike, gasping in the memories of the past. And looking towards the future. Like a sunrise, it seemed to the commander, the dawn of something new. A place to change the world and rebuild.

"What now?" The other woman asked, and the leader thought long and hard.

"Now, we figure out how to close it," she told her subordinate, "And how to get rid of these ghosts."

"Well... that's nothing," replied her friend, and they both started to laugh. "One last Halloween," She snorted through tears.

"One last Halloween."

About the Author:

Luke Hannon (he/him) is an author and poet from County Meath, Ireland. He has previously been published in Wingless Dreamer, Scary Dark, Supernatural Park Podcast and many more, with further works coming soon to Moss Puppy, Litmora Mag, Spirit Season and Running Wild. He enjoys genre fiction and writing about the themes of mental health, nature, love, and loss.

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Creatures and Monsters | B. T. Petro

Mother and I agreed on very little, but we both knew that there is a difference between making creatures and making monsters. They differ because their purpose is different.

When she was the village wise woman, her creatures protected our ancestral village of Jacubany from outsiders. They also served her in securing rare herbs and medicinal plants from remote areas in the Tatra Mountains.

Her efforts to mold me as a reflection of herself were a constant source of argument. I told her I had another purpose.

I finally dealt with Mother.

The one monster that she created was me.

About the Author:

B. T. Petro is retired and living in Ohio. His published story genres include sci-fi, fantasy, and horror. The stories generally have a bit of whimsy or a touch of the macabre. His best friend when he was growing up was an invisible robot, who still visits from time to time.

Frank walked patiently beside the stumbling, stinking man as the visible stragglers, mostly costumed teens and young adults, dwindled with the growing darkness. As though carrying a trick-or-treat bag of his own, the younger man held a pillowcase-sized burlap sack in a tight grip, the gruesome contents dangling innocently at his side.

The two men stopped at a street corner, obeying a sign that told them to wait to cross, and an impatient flutter hit Frank as he considered all that lay ahead tonight. He'd seen what the bog witch could do, and so he trusted that she could deliver what she'd offered. Still, he wanted to be done with it—all of it. She'd asked so much, and the weight of it made his bag feel even heavier than it was.

He looked down at his plain clothes with a frown. *Should've gone out as the Grim Reaper...*

A group of teens dressed in outfits Frank didn't recognize crossed the other way. One of them, who was going as some sort of anime character by the looks of her wig, glanced behind her, making eye contact for a moment before pointing at the older man and swinging her candy-filled bag as though it were a weapon. She casually shifted her attention back to her friends, who laughed and hurried down the street.

The lights changed, and the two men crossed.

"So this ex of yours," said the drunken older man, who was clearly practiced in enunciating past much of the slurring his degree of intoxication might otherwise impose, "did you actually catch her in the act, or did you find out some other way?"

Frank's jaw went tight. "Cell phone."

A thoughtful nod. "That's rough, man."

Frank pointed to his beat-up Honda, which he had parallel parked in front of a closed storefront. "Over there." He dropped the bag in the trunk before getting in and unlocking the front passenger door for his acquaintance.

"I was married once, too," said the older man as he got in and buckled up. "Neither one of us was at fault, really. We just sort of drifted apart over the years. Happens sometimes."

Frank nodded and started the engine.

"I do appreciate the ride. I haven't done anything for Halloween in years." A scoff. "Decades."

"Always happy to help a familiar face." Frank steadied his breath as he started the drive toward the city's outskirts.

The old man grinned. "I used to celebrate every year by watching horror movies. I'd spend half the month picking out my lineup, and then I'd decorate my house to be the spookiest in the neighborhood—hand-carved and painted hard foam tombstones, creepy music, cotton spider webs, dry ice—the works. I loved Halloween."

"Not so much now?"

A shrug. "Just another cold autumn day. Sometimes the stores let me have a piece or two of their free candy, but I haven't seen a good horror flick in years."

"Hmm." Frank gave his passenger a sideways glance. "I never was a big fan of horror movies—or Halloween. Might be my favorite holiday after tonight, though."

"I never gave much thought to the idea of real witches," said the old man. "When you said you were going to see the genuine article, I thought you were joking at first. I mean, what else do you assume when half the town is dressed up?"

Frank shrugged. "Apparently tonight, right before the clock strikes midnight, is the only time all year when my spell will work. The luck, right?"

"Better than nothing, I guess. You really think she can do something for me, too?"

Frank nodded. "Why not? If anything, she'll have some moonshine that'll make that cheap whiskey you were drinking look like piss-water. She's pretty generous with the stuff, and I guarantee it'll knock you on your ass."

The old man grinned, showing a few missing teeth. "Yeah—why not?"

Both men fell silent as the car moved into the dark, quiet landscape. They only passed a few other vehicles, almost as though everyone else in the area knew to steer clear of the territory on this of all nights. Seemingly on cue, a low-hanging fog rolled in all around the travelers, casting obscure, twisted shadows that shifted and transformed along the surrounding terrain as they moved down the road.

Frank shivered and realized he'd broken out in a cold sweat. His passenger seemed to notice the visible evidence along with him, and the younger man willed his tense muscles to relax a little. "Woman gives me the creeps."

"Hmm." The intoxicated man scratched his straggly beard. "Sure you trust her?"

Frank scoffed. "Not completely, but I'm out of options. Annie's connected all over town, so no matter what I

have on her, it's not gonna be enough."

"So, what kind of hex is the witch putting on her?"

A wry grin emerged despite Frank's anxiety, and he considered actually telling the man.

He imagined the tiny creature the bog witch promised to produce, the writhing, hellish thing that would seek out its target, climb down the cheating woman's throat as she slept, and then implant itself into her stomach as a cancerous tumor. There, it would grow quickly and aggressively, killing her—very painfully, the witch had added—before poor Annie even had the chance to take her ex to court.

Sensibility took hold, steeling Frank, and he gave the passenger beside him a playful nudge with his elbow.

"Typical curse of ruin. I'll spare you the boring details."

The older man seemed satisfied with the reply, settling into his seat and leaning his head against the side window. "I don't think I could curse anyone, personally. I'm going to see what it'll cost me for just a little prosperity."

"I'm sure you'll be able to work something out."

Frank's muscles went tight once again as he made the unmarked turn toward the tiny house by the bog. He slowed the car, unsure he was ready for the drive to be over quite yet. Another rush of sweat came with a sudden heavy sensation hitting his chest that forced him to steady his breaths as he parked the car out front and stopped the engine. A pang of nausea further threatened to stop him as he considered the items he was about to deliver.

The passenger also visibly tensed. "I'm not sure I want to go anymore."

Frank swallowed hard, forcing down the threatening bile. "Fine, stay here. I don't plan to stick around for long."

With another deep, shaky breath, Frank exited the car, retrieved his bag, and began up the short but steep walkway leading to the moss-covered one-story house. He heard the passenger door open and shut again before he was half-way up.

"Hold up a second!" The older man stumbled over himself in an effort to catch up.

The two stood there for a moment as if regrouping at the sight of the web-enshrouded front porch.

"Maybe it's all Halloween décor," said the old man.

"Maybe, but I get the feeling these all stay up year-round." Frank led his acquaintance the rest of the way to the front porch. He knocked, and then the two men quietly stood on the creaky wooden entry surrounded by overgrown plants—some in pots, others covering the house's perimeter—while they waited for the occupant to answer. A few spiders scurried across their webs into dark corners, prompting another full-body shudder from the scheduled guest.

The door finally opened about an inch, and the old woman inside peeked out with one hazel eye. "Ah, you made it. And you brought a friend."

"Trick or treat!" said the drunken man.

The door opened a little more, and then the short, old woman left the men to show themselves in. She sat down on a plush chair beside an honest-to-goodness cauldron, inviting her guests to each take a seat on the other side of the hearth, which had a crackling fire warm enough to boil the cauldron's contents and heat the entire room.

Both men sat, and Frank tossed the bag onto the floor between them and their host.

The older man squirmed, looking around. "Pardon my rudeness, but could I maybe please get something to drink? Maybe something that might take the edge off while we all sit here and chat?"

The witch raised a brow, glanced over at Frank, and then stood. "How rude of me." She moved to the cabinet, grabbed a bottle, and set it beside three tiny glasses on a serving tray before returning to her company. Pouring a glass for each of them, she continued, "I don't get a lot of company these days, but I think I can at least remember how to toast."

The old woman lifted her glass, prompting the men each to take theirs. "Happy Samhain!"

"Happy Samhain!" said the men, and they watched the woman swallow her shot before each downing theirs.

Frank noted the same earthy, floral tones he remembered from the first drink she'd offered, and he sat back and let the warm rush bring a welcome sense of comfort.

The old woman took on a softer appearance as she leaned into the light of the hearth to retrieve the sack. She looked in, gave a pleased nod, and then turned to the men. "This'll do."

"Are we square, then?"

The woman nodded, glancing at a clock on the wall. Midnight drew near. "All that's left is the sacrifice."

Frank couldn't help but turn to the drunken bum he'd brought along with him. The old hag had told him to choose carefully, and so he found someone no one was likely to miss—someone who had no sense of value in anything that didn't come in a bottle. He didn't even have the dignity left to find a clean change of clothes and a shower, opting instead to walk the streets smelling of sweat, stale booze, and piss.

The old man's eyes went wide, and he shook his head before turning to their host.

The witch eyed each man. "You two know each other?"

Frank shrugged. "We've seen each other in passing. He's always drunk."

"Not always." The intoxicated man made an attempt to get to his feet, frowning as he struggled against his failing balance. "I don't drink all the time. I go half the day sometimes."

The old hag turned back to Frank. "What's his name?"

Frank sat in stunned surprise for a moment before he processed the question. "I dunno. Charlie, I think. Or it might be Kenny."

The witch stood, steadied herself, and then moved to stand over the old man. "What's your name, sir?"

The old man shrank back a little. "Michael."

The old woman snatched a gnarled oak branch that appeared to be covered in fossilized leaves and mistletoe and waved it at her drunken guest.

The drunken man sank into his seat with a groan. He appeared to struggle to retain control of his arms for a moment, and then the twitching, shaking limbs finally fell limp at his sides. "What did you do to me?"

The woman turned to Frank. "What would you say if I told you that *you* needed to be the one to make the killing blow on old Michael, here?"

Frank eyed the trembling, wide-eyed man beside him. "Me? Why me?"

"It's just part of the spell." The witch pointed over at the clock while she crossed to a bookshelf that housed a number of tomes alongside a handful of other items. "Just like it has to be done right before the first stroke of midnight."

"How do I have to do it?"

The hag grinned. "Well, you'll need to take him by the hair, lean him over the cauldron, and slit his throat. Can you do that?"

The old drunk tried to get up again with a horrified groan, but he appeared helpless to leave the spot.

The thought of personally murdering another human being brought a little extra weight to Frank's limbs. "That wasn't part of the deal. You never said anything about my having to slit the guy's throat."

"Well, you don't expect me to do it, do you?" The witch dug into the bag and pulled out a pig's heart Frank had wrapped in plastic to keep the raw gore contained. She crushed it in one hand before tossing it and the other items she'd had him bring—three dead mice and entrails he'd gotten off some roadkill—into the cauldron, and the boiling liquid within sizzled and roiled as she added to her spell.

"Please don't kill me," pleaded the old man as tears began to stream down his cheeks. "No one will know I was ever here. Promise."

Frank sighed, glaring up at the witch. "Yeah, fine, I'll do it."

The old woman produced a dagger seemingly out of thin air and held it out to him. "You'll need this."

Frank reached for the dark blade, but the witch shifted back a step, holding the weapon just out of his seated reach. She waved her oak branch at him with her other hand, and Frank toppled to the floor with a grunt.

The witch rolled Frank onto his back. "Sorry about that. I just had to make sure."

Frank struggled to speak. "Sure of what?"

The old woman took in a deep breath. "Sure you were the kind of guy who'd be willing to kill an innocent stranger for your own selfish revenge."

Frank opened his mouth to reply, but the air escaped him when he found the woman looming over him with the blade raised high. "Wait, what?" he managed.

"The spell is very specific. It needs just the right sacrifice."

"Wait, I don't—"

"I'll give you your revenge, but I'll need that petty tongue of yours to spark it," said the old woman before she drove the sharp tip through Frank's throat.

He stared, gasping, too surprised to fight her as she dislodged the blade, pried open his mouth and carved out his tongue. His vision rapidly fading, he watched as the woman tossed the bloody mass into the cauldron and then wiped her hands clean on her apron. All senses drifted off, but only for a moment.

The clock struck midnight.

Frank felt his consciousness shift, and then he found himself rising from the bubbling cauldron, slithering up and over the lip, and dropping to the side of the hearth. He thought to scream, only to realize he no longer had a mouth. An attempt to open his eyes revealed those were now gone as well. He had no arms or legs, so he wriggled and writhed

along the floor. The creature felt horror over his new purpose, but he was also equally driven to fulfill it, so he began the long journey, inching along the earth on his slimy belly, to find his target and spread his disease.

About the Author:

Media rep by day, science fiction and horror writer by night, I like to reach out through my work to generate new approaches to old questions about the human condition. I am a zealot about life, with a knack for making friends with animals and a love of cats, corvids, and spiders. My forthcoming novel, *The Divine Darkness*, explores the Friedrich Nietzsche quote, “Be careful when you fight the monsters, lest you become one.”

Author Website: [Paper Shadows](#)

Three Rules for House Sitting | Liz Mayers

The Henderson’s said it was ‘crucial I stay sober all weekend’. *Rule #1, no alcohol or other funny business.* But by eleven p.m., I’d guzzled nearly a six-pack watching the Halloween Horror Marathon. Best of all, as promised, no trick-or-treaters visited: too remote, too wooded, too risky for a few pieces of candy. Little goblins today don’t know about real fun. Back in the day, Izzy, Snark, and I would’ve dared each other to come up here, alone. We’d have fought to go first.

A low rumble and growl spread through the house. The old floors vibrated and the windows rattled.

I paused the movie and listened.

The rumble turned to a steady hum; the furnace had finally kicked on.

My bottle was empty. I stumbled to the kitchen for another and more snacks. Looking out the kitchen window into blackness, I raised my bottle to the witches and zombies lurking in the surrounding woods and howled ‘Happy Halloween’ and wondered why the Henderson’s didn’t bother with blinds. Anyone could look in.

A warm breath rose and swirled around my ankles from an ornate, cast-iron grate reminding me of the one in my grandmother’s farmhouse. I stepped onto the grate and peered into the dark hole. When we were kids, my sister swore a monster watched waiting to reach up and poke our eyes out. I crouched to look closer. “I see you,” I taunted. Once, we fed our monster chewing gum and crayons and got into big trouble.

I stepped off the grate, took a swig, then dropped down a handful of popcorn. I dropped peanuts and jellybeans and listened to them clink, clink, clink. From across the kitchen, I tossed bottle caps, scoring every time.

Oh yeah. Rule #2. The Henderson husband had said, ‘Never allow anything to drop down the grates’. I laughed so hard I spit beer and then dropped more popcorn down the openings.

The warm air stopped blowing and the furnace retreated with a growl and a rumble.

I finished the movie and decided I’d better get down to the basement and clean up my mess. This was a sweet gig; the Henderson’s, when they returned, would pay me generously for a job well-done, and I needed the money.

With my compromised motor skills, it took me a while to unlock the deadbolts and chain locks and padlocks that fortunately the Hendersons had left with keys inserted. They lined nearly half the basement door.

The furnace roared and the floors vibrated and the windows rattled. This time a dull thudding continued. I’d probably jammed things up.

“Damn!”

I opened the basement door, flipped the light on, and looked down.

There, on the first step, sat a pile of popcorn, peanuts, and bottle caps.

“What the heck?”

And too late, enveloped in warmth, I remembered.

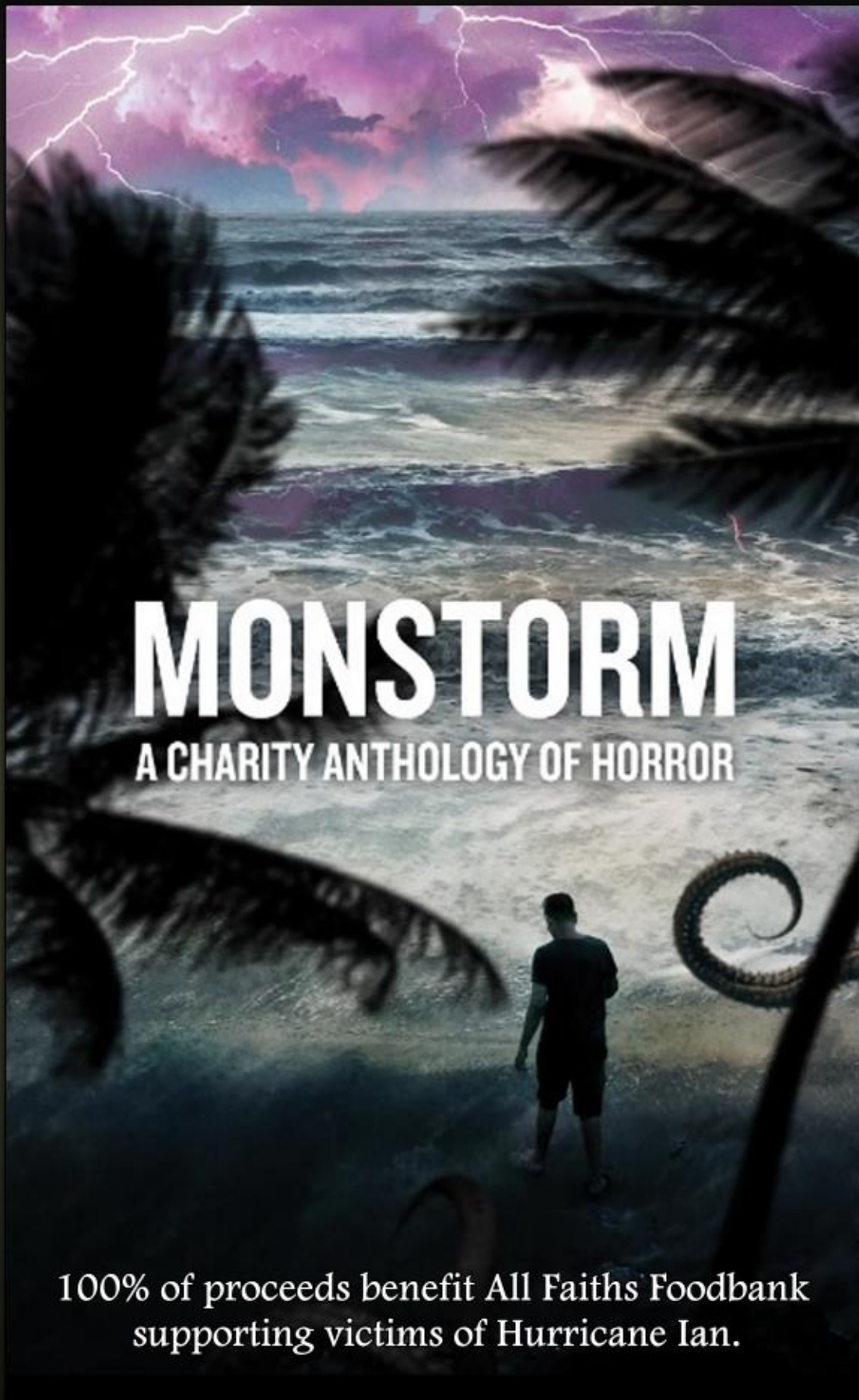
Rule #3.

About the Author:

Liz Mayers writes short fiction from Long Island, NY. She’s a hiker, cat lover, eavesdropper, and lifelong gephyrophobic. When not spinning stories in her head, she communicates telepathically with her ever-blooming orchids and African violets. She’s a Pushcart Prize nominee.

Author Website: [Liz Mayers](#)

Some storms you can't outrun.



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

Locals from Igaluit on Baffin Island north of mainland Canada found what appeared to be odd pebbles which were exposed when the recent heat wave melted a layer of snow. As the sun warmed the 'pebbles', their shells broke and flying insects flew out. The first poor unfortunates who examined the insects were stung and died from the multiple venomous stings. The terrified survivors barricaded themselves in their houses.

The biologists and exterminators from the mainland were quickly overwhelmed. Nothing in the exterminators' toolkit had any effect on the insects, and the mainlanders that didn't die were quickly run off.

Out of any other options, the remaining human population of Baffin was evacuated to mainland Canada. With only 6,532 survivors from the original 11,000 human inhabitants, the resettlement was not too difficult.

During and after the resettlement, flyovers revealed the bones of polar bears, foxes, rabbits, caribou and wolves picked clean. Because Baffin didn't amount to much, the invasion of the insects was just viewed as a small problem of global warming. It was assumed that the insects, now called Death Flies, would die out with nothing left to eat, or that they would form cysts again and become inactive.

Professor Emil Yancy from the University of Laval in Montreal assured the public that the flies were adapted to cold temperatures and would not venture south. A month later, the flies had invaded Hall Beach in northern Nunavut on the Canadian mainland. Yancy and his colleagues backtracked quickly, suggesting that the flies were reproducing extremely fast and mutating like a virus, adapting to warmer weather. They were no longer consulted.

Siberia then reported its first Death Flies. The governments of the world became serious and seriously scared about the threat of human extermination. Homes could be sealed, but no one could leave and a truly safe sealing kept out fresh air and ended in the occupants' asphyxiation.

The capriciousness of the miles wide cloud of Death Flies made the invasion even more frightening. The horde skipped Edmonton, but hit Calgary in Alberta.

All radio and television was preempted by the film of the plague taken by helicopters. The world was told that the only poisons strong enough to kill the flies would kill even more people than the flies would.

On October 31, a few days after Calgary was deserted, the retired couple Duke and Sally, in Lake Oswego, Oregon, discussed the situation. Sally said "We gotta get out of here, go as far south as we can, our lives are at stake. Just leave everything and save our lives."

Duke, who like a former president was always certain, but frequently wrong, said "There is nothing to worry about. They aren't in the US and they will never get here. I've got that from an unimpeachable source. The best thing that we can do is turn off the TV. All it does is depress us and none of our shows are on."

Partly because she had deferred to Duke through many years of marriage and partly because he was so convinced, Sally decided to accept his word that they would be safe.

At 6pm Duke looked out the window and saw his neighbor, who was his best friend and tennis partner, running around his yard. Duke said, "I see Jim is wearing a black Ninja outfit for Halloween and practicing some martial arts routine...oooooh shoot!" At that point Jim collapsed on the ground, twitched and ceased moving. Duke saw that the sky was black and heard the buzzing roar grow louder.

Tears rolled down Duke's face and he said "How could I ever have listened to that crackpot evangelist Samuel Sanctum. He said 'The US is special. God would never allow the plague in our holy land'. I've been such a fool for so many years. I'm so sorry. Get the gun."

"The gun won't stop the flies."

"The gun isn't for the flies, it's for us."

Sally thought "Bloody hell, I'm going to die soon, but at least I lived to hear Duke admit he's wrong."

The swarm continued to the south wiping out ninety percent of the people in California. The population of California slowed them down; killing forty million people was a lot of work. The abundance of food allowed them to increase in numbers tenfold. After what may have been a strategy session, no one knows, they split into a group headed East and another heading south which eventually wiped out 99% of the Western Hemisphere.

The separate group that went to Siberia took a little longer to kill the inhabitants of Africa and Eurasia. No climate change deniers were left alive.

About the Author:

Doug Hawley lives with editor Sharon and cat Kitzhaber in Oregon USA. When not volunteering in local parks or a non-profit bookstore, he is probably writing, hiking, sleeping, eating, or drinking. He has published in most of the usual genres and some unusual ones. Besides his two one author story collections published this year, his works have appeared in four continents.

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At the Movies | *Pamela K. Kinney*

The mummy dragged its foot as it drew closer and closer. "Oh God, Chessie, you spilled your drink in my lap!"

Shushes filled the theater. Chessie cringed as her sister leaped to her feet with a squeal. More shushes and glares came from those all around them.

"I'm sorry, Jan. I'll grab some paper towels from the restroom."

Chessie jumped out of her seat and bolted out of the theater into the lobby. She raced into the women's restroom and tore a handful of paper towels from a dispenser on the wall, soaking one with water. Back in the theater, she shoved them at her soda-soaked sister. Jan's boyfriend, Bill, snorted with amusement.

Chessie sank into her seat. "I'm sorry, Jan. That scene in 'The Mummy's Hand' scared me."

Bill shook his head as Jan pat-dried her pants. "You're such an idiot, Chessie. I don't know why Jan had to bring you."

Jan said, "Because my mother said I had to. If the freak had some friends, I wouldn't have to drag her with us." She glared at her sister. "She's such a loser that no one likes her."

Chessie stared at the big screen and willed herself not to cry. She watched the mummy stalk a pretty girl in a long dress that was some reincarnation of a dead Egyptian princess. She hadn't wanted to spend part of her Halloween watching some dumb classic horror movie at the Majestic Theater, even if she wore a mummy costume. Her mother told her that white cloth cut into strips made the cheapest costume. She'd wanted to be a vampire or something way more fantastic, but no, she got to be a stupid mummy.

Because Jan had taken her to her middle school's Halloween party, she let her sister bully her into seeing the film afterward. Bill and Jan would have instead gone to see some gory horror flick at the Regal Cinema near them, but Mom told her no because Chessie was too young for something like that. Mom had seen the Majestic - a second-run movie theater, was holding a Halloween Classic Horror Film Festival. Her mother had picked 'The Mummy's Hand' early enough to get Chessie home before eleven o'clock.

Worse, she couldn't eat any of the treats from the bag of candy she'd gotten at the party. She hid it beneath her costume because she was scared one of the workers might see her munching on it. It made her look like she had a pot belly.

"Aw crap, this ain't workin'," whined Bill. "Who cares about some old, cheesy black and white film about a mummy covered in dirty rags? There's no gore. Let's go over to my house to play video games or listen to music. Or better yet, watch some scary movies on TV. I think they got 'Hellraiser' on one of the channels." He stood. Jan joined him, throwing the bunch of paper towels into a big ball at Chessie. Bill leaned over and dug under Chessie's costume, snatching a chocolate bar from the hidden bag. "And Chessie, you're not invited, either."

Chessie huddled into her seat as Bill headed to the back of the theater. Jan stared after him and turned to Chessie with a glare. "I'm going with him. You head home and just tell Mom I went over to Bill's after we made sure you got inside the house before we left. Tell her otherwise, and you'll be sorry." She ran to catch up to her boyfriend.

Chessie fought back the tears threatening to spill. She'd be damned if she let even one tear fall.

I'm going to finish watching the movie. I'll go home after it ends. So, don't worry about me, Jan.

"Like you even would," she mumbled under her breath.

The girl watched the film, pretending to be interested, and after a while, found the movie pretty good. No one dared to push the mummy around. *No one ever bullied any of the monsters.* If some human tried, the monster either ate or killed the dummy. Chessie thought about how she'd like to be like the mummy, big, scary, and taking nothing from no one.

I wish I could be an undead mummy. Then let my sister and everyone else try anything. I would, ah, rip their heads off!

That's when she noticed something odd about the film. The creature suddenly changed direction and, picking up speed, headed for the audience, which was absurd.

Chessie sat up. The scene would change in another second, and the mummy would be back on track, attacking the movie victim it had been stalking.

But in slow motion, as if time had slowed, the monster tore through the screen and leaped upon her. A musty odor shoved through her nostrils as she stared at the bandaged face, noticing twin red lights. Not lights—it had to be the mummy's eyes. The mustiness changed to a cloying perfume that wafted into her nose and mouth. The mummy placed a bandaged hand around her throat and began to squeeze. She thrashed, her heart pounding inside her chest as she tried to throw off the creature. She couldn't understand why no one came to her aid.

Chessie screamed, wetting herself.

As if waking from a nightmare, she found herself standing on her feet, her scream fading in the theater and others telling her to be quiet. She touched her throat and rubbed it, but it didn't feel bruised. The funky odor had disappeared. The girl glanced at the movie screen and saw the mummy back in the movie.

Embarrassed, Chessie raced out of the theater, her eyes glued to the floor so she wouldn't see the pity and anger in everyone's eyes. Once again, she had been a moron and a wuss. And she peed in her pants like a baby! She'd let her imagination get the better of her.

She took her bag of candy out and carrying it, walked away from the theater. After a while, the lights of downtown became darkened streets of homes. The only light—other than street lamps—came from the full moon riding the night sky like a bright diamond against black velvet. Its creamy whiteness grew even more brilliant, almost blinding her. She took her eyes away and focused, determined to get home where she could hide in her room and pig out on candy.

Out of nowhere, pain slammed into her. The bag of candy fell from stiffened fingers to the sidewalk as raging heat washed over her. She screamed, clawing at the bandages covering her face. The agony grew so unbearable she dropped to her knees, crawled over to the sidewalk's edge next to the street, and rolled over onto her back. The moon shone into her eyes, diamond-sharp in its brilliance. The light burned, and she wanted to cover her eyes, but she couldn't move her hands or any other body part. Suddenly, her vision went black. The pain was gone; instead, her eyes felt soothing cold. She rolled over onto her stomach and climbed to her feet. Chessie was still blind. Her arms stuck out in front, taking one step, then another, when she stumbled into a hard object.

A wall? She never remembered a wall. One side had fences and lawns of homes, and the other was the street. She pressed her hand against the 'wall' and felt the surface give. Not made of brick or anything they constructed a wall of. Where was she?

She called out. "Hello?" Her hello came out like a growl.

What the—?

She whipped around and yelled.

"Argh."

"Shoot it! Shoot that thing!"

Her vision returned. Two men, one with a gun, stood before her. A woman dressed in a long dress who had long black hair hid behind them. Fear masked the men's faces, but not the woman's. Chessie noticed that the people's clothing was only black, white, or gray. That's when she saw everything around her, the woods—woods?—had no color—everything looked like a black-and-white movie.

The woman held out her arms. "Klaris!" She took a few steps, but the man without a gun grabbed her. She struggled in his arms.

"Shoot the mummy!" he yelled at the other man. "She thinks she's some long-dead Egyptian princess." What's going on here? Why couldn't she speak, only uttering growls?

Something zipped past her. *Oh, God.* The man with the gun. Oh, God, he was shooting at her for real! She wanted to turn tail and run. Only she lurched forward, dragging one foot behind her.

Like the mummy in the old movie, she couldn't stop either. Just keep going toward the men and the woman. The man with the gun kept shooting at her.

This must be a nightmare.

Her foot struck a rock in her path. It hurt.

No, not a nightmare. The pain proved how 'awake' her situation was. She remembered the wish she had made, that she wanted to be like the mummy. But wishes are the stuff of fairytales. This showed her how wrong she was: otherwise, explain how she became a mummy in a forties film.

Please, please, please. I only want to be an ordinary girl again.

The light appeared, blinding her, and then her eyesight returned. She stared down and saw her hands again. Checking herself over, she found that her fake mummy bandages vanished, and she wore a long dress instead.

She heard gunshots and saw the mummy lurching toward her and the men. Sweat beaded her forehead and her heart began to beat against her chest.

She'd gotten her wish. Human again, but this time the wish made her Anaka, the mummy's reincarnated love. She moaned. She was going to die unless she wished again. This time, word it right.

Just as Chessie opened her mouth to wish, the air grew hot. She glanced up at the sky, the red and orange colors of a burning pumpkin blazing across it. The tang of smoldering celluloid filled the air. She coughed. The cough switched to a scream as fire danced across her arms and crackled in her hair. Pain clawed along her nerves.

She screamed.

The theater manager at the Majestic found the back door ajar the following day. Worried that someone had broken in, he slipped in quietly just in case they still hung around but found nothing disturbed. At least once, he entered the projection room. He saw the strip of a film lying on the floor, blackened, and withered, and picked it up to peer at it closely. He realized it came from last night's movie, 'The Mummy's Hand'.

Halloween pranksters? But as he looked around and found the other films untouched, he wondered why just that film.

With a sigh, the manager tossed it into the trash and walked away. He paused momentarily, listening, and then shook his head, as he thought he heard a female voice crying out. It always seemed after every Halloween, when he had the classic horror film festival, he heard ghostly voices in the old theater. Did that mean the building was haunted? He snickered. No, more likely he needed his hearing checked.

No one else was in the building, just him. And the only ghosts came from the old films he showed here.

About the Author:

Pamela K. Kinney gave up long ago trying not to ignore the voices in her head and has written horror, fantasy, science fiction, poetry, nonfiction ghost and cryptid books ever since. One of her horror short stories, "Bottled Spirits," was runner-up for the 2013 WSFA Small Press Award and considered one of seven best genre stories for that year.

Author Website: [Pamela K. Kinney](#)
Instagram: [@pamelak.kinney_author](#)

Her wail spit the air.

“How... How could you let this happen?” she crooned as the young boy lay motionless in her arms, blood trickled from his cracked skull. “Why choose him when there are so many others?” Inconsolable, the mother stood and limped back to their home where she placed his still body on a rock bench.

The afternoon and evening spent grieving, she finally drifted off to sleep. In her dreams came the answer, but not one she expected.

“Do not shed a tear for the young one, he was meant for things unkind in this world and could not have stopped himself, Giver of Life.”

“Things, what things? Couldn’t stop himself from what?” the mother asked of the Taker of Life.

“Things I cannot explain. Things that would break you, tear him from you, make you wish you’d never given birth.”

Jerking fitfully, even her dream mind could not fathom a world in which her young son was taken before manhood, before he was old enough to claim a wife who would bear him children of his own. She spat at the Taker of Life, “Nothing could make me wish such a thing! You took him because of greed and corrupt desire – do not claim nobility as your cause. You’re evil! I should tear your effigy from the temple, you do not deserve our reverence.”

As her heart seized, the winged God sighed. “Woman, I speak the truth. He was not destined to be mundane; he would have brought about an end to all. Do you not see what resides in his soul?”

But a mother’s grief can never be sated with prophetic words, nor could she see beyond the love that tinted her sight. The Taker knew of this but did not wish the breeder to suffer. “Kind woman, hear me clear – your boy would have brought ruin to the village, he would have led riots that would have crumbled our civilization, *MY* civilization.” The Taker was not without compassion. “I can seed you another, kinder child.”

“No! Insuetti was my child, I do not wish to carry one of your kind. I want my boy back – damn your village.” Wracking sobs fed the small gasp heard in the waking world.

“Giver of Life, open your eye, see your boy. Do you not see that his blood runs black as the night? Do you not understand that he was the antithesis of all you are? Must I show you the atrocities he would have wrought?” The mother refused to wake and accept her child for what the Taker claimed him to be. Where there was darkness, she could see only light. Where there was malice, she could remember only his joyful grin. Where there was deceit, she could perceive only childish antics.

Left with no way to console the Giver, the Taker showed her a glimpse of what would have come to pass if the child hadn’t fallen to his death. He showed her images of greed and cruelty, of her sweet boy grown to a man, of the acts of violence he would commit against their people. The plague he would bring upon the land. He showed her the fields barren of crops; their village in ashes; men, women and children slaughtered by the droves. All because her child was brought into this world.

Once again, the Taker prompted for her to wake, to see Insuetti with clear eyes, and she did. She woke, looked upon her son with the reflection of the dream vision playing against the back of her eyes. She could not deny that she had glimpsed the things the Taker of Life spoke of, but she could not accept them into her heart either.

She climbed upon the stone bench the child’s body rested on, straddled the young one, drew a sharp rock across the soft flesh of each inner thigh, and bathed her boy in the blood that gave him life with fervent hope that it would bring him breath again even as it stole the air from her own lungs.

About the Author:

Nina D’Arcangela is a quirky horror writer who likes to spin soul rending snippets of despair. She reads anything from splatter matter to dark matter, and is an UrbEx adventurer who loves to photograph abandoned places, bits of decay, and old grave yards. Nina is a co-owner of *Sirens Call Publications*, a co-founding member of the horror writer’s group *Pen of the Damned*, and the owner and resident anarchist of *Dark Angel Photography*.

Author Blog: [Spreading the Writer’s Word](#)

Instagram: [@DarcNina](#)



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Flashing light caught Mark's eye as he stepped from the clammy convenience store into the humid night air. He rested the six-pack of beer and the bag of mixed candy in the back seat and squinted across the street. In the empty expanse of an abandoned mall's parking lot, a glowing Ferris wheel rolled in place and a small roller coaster roared above noisy game stalls, squat wooden booths, and brightly colored tents stippled with amber bulbs and the red setting sun. Farther back, the derelict mall lay in shadow like a giant, slumbering creature.

As he drove past, Mark watched the Ferris wheel rotate and gave a small smile. He enjoyed traveling carnivals when he was a kid, from games like hoopla and ball-in basket to attractions like fortune tellers and houses of mirrors, from the smell of boiling hot dogs and taste of stale, salty popcorn to the sticky cotton candy that always wound up coating his hands and mouth, and always begged his parents to take him when they popped up in parking lots during the fall, especially around Halloween. On occasion they'd acquiesce, purchasing tickets at the entrance for games and snacks, though not without his father telling him the games were rigged and his mother insisting the rides were safety hazards, and besides, they cost too much money anyway. "Why would you want to waste your allowance on this junk?" his parents always asked.

The carnival shrank in his rearview mirror. It had been a tough day at the call center. They were usually tough, with angry customers giving snide responses. He thought of taking his girlfriend Anne to the carnival after their friend Bill's party if it cooled down—the heatwave that browned the city stuck around well into late fall—and she wasn't mad at him again and they didn't get into it. And if they did, then he'd go himself.

After he picked up Anne, his mood soured. They almost got into it when he told her about the carnival and how they should go to it, but she sneered and said she hated those sorts of things. He pressed it, but she was adamant. "We accepted Bill's invitation more than a month ago," she said as she squeezed into a costume. "So put on your best face and suck it up."

He was ready to get into it right there, but put on his best face.

Beneath dim street lamps, families crowded the sidewalks, beams from flashlights bobbing in front of them. At the edges of front lawns decorated with waterproofed Styrofoam headstones and populated by plastic skeletons, adults chatted as their children hammered on doors for bite-sized chocolates and hard candy. A man in a superhero costume rode a three-wheeled Spyder along the street, the engine overpowering the hollers and shouts of small zombies, princesses, and video game characters. The activity caused a headache to crawl from the back of Mark's neck to nestle above the space between his eyes. As he parked across the street from Bill's house, he hoped it would disappear once he was shrouded in air conditioning.

Inside, it worsened as he threaded his way through adults chattering too loudly, a sea of costumes as simple as domino masks or as elaborate as science fiction robots. Above, cigarette smoke clung to the ceiling, tendrils wrapping around the lazy turning of ceiling fans and blue clouds passing over dim yellow circular lamps. He smiled at everyone speaking to him, but the corners of his mouth poked into his cheeks. At the small of his back, he felt someone pinch and twist his skin until it tightened all over his body. A woman in a vinyl nurse's outfit shouted in his ear about how Bill always threw the best parties, always invited the most interesting people, before offering Mark a disinterested smile when he started in about the idiots who dialed into the call center. Despite his best face fixed in place, she drifted away in the middle of a sentence.

Light flickered in a dark room near the rear of the house. Tippy after his third beer (or fourth, he had a hard time keeping track), he stumbled toward it, his footfalls silent on thick shag carpeting. Near the bedroom door, the deep pile danced in the bursts of illumination like metachronal waves of cilia.

In the bedroom, half a dozen children sat in front of a television. They turned to stare at him. All wore traditional Halloween masks—ghosts, pumpkins, clowns, witches—strapped to their heads, shadows pooling in the eye holes. On the flat screen in front of them, a plant pushed out the likeness of a man webbed with milk-white strands.

Mark backed away and headed for the kitchen. Shoulder to shoulder, Bill and Anne leaned on the counter, snickering at some crack Bill made. Bill's crisp tee shirt was so white it appeared incandescent, his black hair reflecting the buzzing illumination from the ceiling's fluorescent tubes. Cat ears jutted from Anne's head, her striped gray leotard hugging her ample body. In her hand, Anne swirled a glass of pale pink wine.

"I want to go," Mark said.

Anne started as if he appeared from nowhere. "What? Why?"

"I don't feel well. The heat," he added as an afterthought, rolling his beer bottle along his forehead. The condensation was as warm. He might as well have been spreading sweat.

A line creased the space between Bill's eyes. "Yeah, I hear you. The lawns are still brown from the summer."

"We just got here," Anne insisted.

Mark's grip on the bottle was so tight it threatened to crack. "I want to go," he repeated. "Need to go."

"But we're having a good time. Bill was telling me about something that happened at his office." She touched his arm. "Go ahead. Tell him about the guy who couldn't get off the floor because he didn't have his badge."

Bill smirked. "It was unusual. He was stuck on the floor for more than an hour. He tried calling on all the phones in every cubicle but nobody picked up. Even the front desk thought it was a robocall." He chuckled without humor, his eyes never leaving Mark. They were dark, as if all pupils... "The guy was banging on a window and crying when a security guard found him."

Mark pressed his teeth together. The sound of blood rushing through his ears was like an ocean.

"Come on," Anne said. "Let's stay. Don't be a party pooper."

"Yeah," Bill said, grinning. His teeth were as white as his tee shirt. "Don't be a party pooper."

The two of them squeezed closer together. The skin of Bill's bicep, only a shade darker than his tee shirt, rippled and stroked Anne's arm. A throaty purr underlay her laugh.

His best face slipped. He touched his cheek as if catching it. It remained in place.

Someone pushed against Mark. At Mark's feet, glass shattered, shards of his beer bottle scattering across the linoleum floor. Cheap beer spread, its smell filled the kitchen.

Anne wrinkled her nose. "Shit. Are you drunk?"

Mark detected not one note of concern. He opened his mouth, then snapped it shut before letting the comment escape. He shook his head and, fumbling for his keys, headed for the front door, the air so hot his shirt clung to his back.

As he stuck the key in the ignition and twisted like a psycho killer, he took off his best face and stomped on the accelerator, missing a trick-or-treating family by inches.

He stopped at a convenience store for a six pack and drove for a bit, not quite ready to go home. If Anne wanted to stay longer, there was no telling when she might get back. Sitting in a dark house avoiding the neighborhood's remaining trick-or-treaters struck him as the worst way to spend Halloween.

He wound up back at the carnival.

The car's engine ticked as he drank beer and watched the Ferris wheel slowly turn, its blinking red and blue lights splashing over his hood and windshield. A small rollercoaster roared on its tracks amid squeals of carnival goers. In the parking lot, couples strolled arm-in-arm to the front booth and purchased tickets. A sign next to the entrance warned him alcohol was not allowed inside.

The car door groaned as Mark stepped out from behind the steering wheel and stuffed a beer bottle in his thin jacket. He passed a twenty to the bored young woman in the booth. Tickets spat at him from the top of a machine, the mechanical clatter drowned out by music from a nearby carousel.

Though only a few cars dotted the parking lot, people jammed the walkways between events. Bored parents were led by children in store-bought Halloween costumes, the kind Mark remembered buying when he was young: tie-at-the-neck vinyl screen-print smocks, masks with too-small mouth holes creating instant condensation slicking one's face and restricting oxygen. The memory of his costumes' chemical smell mixed with present-day freshly popped popcorn and burning carbon from miniature spinning teacups and slinging swings, all of which he was too large to ride. He squeezed into a rollercoaster car but was told to leave when they couldn't lower the safety bar.

He bought popcorn and wandered the arcade games, covertly sipping his beer after crunching each salty kernel. A six-year-old with a star painted on her cheek hammered at plastic moles leaping from holes while an older boy screamed at his parents for not letting him aim an air gun at anything other than a row of balloons. Farther away, a teenage boy in a heavy metal concert tee swung a hammer at the strength tester. When the bell at the top of the tower rang, the teenager flexed his biceps and hooted. The young woman next to him crossed her arms, unimpressed.

At the back of the carnival was a haunted house. Like something out of a cartoonist's imagination, it was a small-scale two-story Victorian home with weathered gray wood. In front stood a plastic leafless oak tree, its branches scratching a window in rhythm to an owl hooting over a loudspeaker. Next to the red front door, an old man in a baggy tuxedo and black velvet cape raised his palm. His long hair resembled porcupine quills the color of bleached bone.

Mark gave him a ticket, and the man opened the door.

It was cool and musty.

The darkness inside was absolute, as if he had stepped into a cave. Then the lights suddenly switched on, blinding him. He was in a small living room decorated in red-and-green furniture. Skeletons sat around a coffee table laid out with teacups, each wearing top hats and formal jackets. One turned and barked a laugh. Mark jumped, causing popcorn to leap from its bag. The beer bottle dropped to the floor and rolled to a divan, beer jetting from the top. Laughing, Mark picked up the bottle and took another swig, then left through a door on the opposite side of the living room.

A hallway twisted through the house, doors occasionally swinging open to reveal a ruddy-faced witch or green ghoul. Mark giggled at their appearance, glancing back as they receded behind their hiding places. It was corny, yes, but enjoyable, and something Anne would have found childish. To hell with her, he thought as he shrugged his shoulders. He would enjoy himself now, and they could get into it tomorrow morning before he left for work.

He shrugged his shoulders again, and realized they almost touched the walls on either side of him. The farther he went, the narrower the hall became. He turned sideways, the wall pressing against his nose, then his chest. It squeezed him and he clawed at the gray sheetrock, suddenly warm against his hands. He scrabbled and whimpered as he tried to round the corner ahead.

Suddenly it was no longer fun.

He whimpered as the walls receded and he found himself in the next room.

A hall of mirrors.

He stared back at himself. At the reflection stretching to infinity. He waved, and the reflections waved back. Turning, he came to another mirror, this one stretching him until he was nothing but a torso planted on two feet, his arms nothing more than nubs. Another squeezed his body to a point, transforming his head into a helium-filled balloon, watery irises and red-veined sclera bulging over a wide nose and thin lips stretched across boxy mother-of-pearl teeth. He wanted to sneer and ask Anne if this was his best face.

In his hand, the beer bottle swung like a pendulum. He downed the last of it and went to the next mirror.

An empty face stared back at him.

There were depressions for eyes, yes, and a ridge of a nose, and the curve of what might be a mouth. But there was no definition, nothing characteristic or recognizable. The body was formless, like a mannequin. He touched the mirror, and the shape copied his movement. Clever. He wondered if it was a real mirror, or if it might be a mime made up to mimic his actions. Whatever it was, it was effective.

He turned a corner.

There were more.

Two. Four. Eight.

All empty.

Their gray bodies copied him as he twirled around to look at the reflection behind him. It was the same. Featureless bodies. Empty faces. All multiplying the farther he went.

And then they began to take shape.

They resembled him.

Their heads molded into squares, noses growing crooked, nostrils flaring. Eyes sprouted, bulging until they were properly set. Lips swirled and twisted until they finally rested in a neutral frown. Their bodies flowed as if a potter was working with clay.

The reflections had his face.

His best face.

The face he wore when he was someplace he didn't want to be. Or was around people he didn't like. It was the face he wore every day at the call center. The one he showed his manager. His coworkers. The face he wore with Anne.

He knew it well. And he knew the menace behind it.

Mark ran. He turned corners but could not find his way back to the fun-house mirrors or even his regular reflection. They all were his best face, the one that would slip, especially when he and Anne got into it.

The reflections wore it.

They knew.

Mark threw the beer bottle at one. It shattered, the silver shards falling like a crystal palace. He picked up a jagged piece. The best face jeered at him, knowing what was beneath, knowing his mask. He screamed and threw the piece away.

In the mirrors, his reflections jeered back, daring him to take off his best face.

Crying, Mark collapsed as the mirror images crowded him, telling him what to do.

He picked up a heavy shard.

And removed his best face.

About the Author:

Derek Austin Johnson was born in the Northeast but has lived most of his life in the Lone Star State. His work has appeared in *Campfire Macabre*, *The Dread Machine*, *Generation X-ed*, *Midnight Tales*, *The Horror Zine's Book of Werewolf Stories*, *Anterior Skies Volume I*, and the Splatterpunk Award-winning *Camp Slasher Lake Volume I*. He lives in Central Texas.

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I quit, your house is creepy!

I groaned. All I needed was a house cleaner, two hours a week, to keep the cobwebs under control, but one after another they left.

I turned the note over, hoping she'd left an explanation. It was useful when they did. Maybe I had gone over the top with the Halloween decorations – but that was an easy fix. But maybe the house ghosts had overstepped the mark – again. I'd have to talk with them – again. Living with ghosts was all about setting boundaries of acceptable behaviour.

The first cleaner had run away, screaming, when a grass snake slithered through the front door, chasing a toad. She didn't give me time to explain that the snake was harmless. The snake was following its appetite and the toad was just answering the call of a visiting witch spirit. She always enjoyed attracting wildlife into the house, which explains the cobwebs.

The second cleaner left after the accident. There was a rational explanation. A leaky pipe, wet rot weakening the wooden frame of a kitchen cabinet which gave way and crashed to the floor, spilling its load of glassware. The mess of sharp shards had covered every surface. Mercifully, there was no living being in the kitchen at the time. Another poltergeist, I guessed. They like destruction, but they're not murderous.

I looked at the note again, the latest cleaner hadn't elaborated on why she quit.

"Did you scare her off?" I asked my border collies. They were staring intently at the window where the weak sunlight had outlined an ephemeral form on the rain-washed glass.

"Good dogs!" I said, giving them a fuss. Their ghost detection stare was unnerving, I could hardly blame the woman for running away.

"Welcome." I said to the ghost outside the window. The eyeless form, less substantial than a shadow, somehow turned to face me. "Would you like to come inside and rest awhile. Just a few rules - no malice, no mischief and my bedroom is off-limits. You may be benign but that doesn't mean I want to sleep with you."

The ephemeral form seemed to snarl, though it didn't have a discernible face. I looked at the dogs, they were asleep. I turned back to the ghost, but the sky had clouded over and the figure had disappeared.

I shivered involuntarily. I'd always believed that I had nothing to fear from the dead. I had to believe that, or I couldn't live next door to a cemetery. I hadn't anticipated that my home would become a halfway house for spirits, a place where they could come to terms with being dead before passing on. I've tried to make them welcome, trusting my dogs to assess the nature of each visiting spirit. So far, they'd all been benign.

I spent the evening in a futile internet search for a new house cleaner. As midnight neared, the dogs started pacing. I opened the back door to let them out, but they just crowded around me. A cold breeze caused the light from the jack o'lanterns to flicker, their grotesque shadows dancing around the open doorway. I felt the fine hairs on my arms rise. I slammed the door shut. The dogs were frantic, running up and down the stairs. I relented and followed them into the bedroom. I undressed quickly and snuggled into bed.

But the dogs didn't settle. They circled the bed, alert, guarding. Yet I couldn't sense anything amiss. Visiting ghosts had always respected my boundaries, though I had a wreath of warding herbs on my bedroom door just in case. The collies stopped circling. One focused on the door, growling fiercely. The other leapt onto my bed, tugging the duvet over my head. I felt him standing over me, protective.

I heard the door creak, the dogs began to howl.

About the Author:

Alex Grehy (she/her) is a regular contributor to *Sirens Call* and the *Ladies of Horror Flash Project*. Her vivid prose and thought-provoking poetry has featured in a wide range of publications including *Aphotic Realm* and *Luna Station Quarterly*. She has also published essays on her experiences as a Lady of Horror. Her sweet life is filled with narrowboating, rescue greyhounds, singing and chocolate.



Closet Expansion | *Ken Poyner*

Seeking: female closet monster. Must work in a small space. Must see all children as equal prey. Must adapt to changing environments, customize terror to any child's age and proclivities. Might be fouled with stuffed animals, board games, improperly stowed clothes, too many shoes. Emotionlessly methodical, not driven by anger or rage or revenge. Closet monster code of ethics applies. Will be required to procreate with resident male closet monster. Compatibility not necessary. Desire not necessary. Progeny expected. Must accept the outplacement of offspring. When tentacled together, each with each can remove their eyes, repeat: beauty is in the DNA.

Event | *Ken Poyner*

When it comes to our witch burnings, there are many points of material and procedural inspection. Proper variety in the fuel, from straw and kindling to larger lumber. Accelerant to ensure positive ignition yet still holding the flames back long enough to allow full consummation of the civic spectacle. The depth the stake is driven, as well as the strength of the stake. Rope sentiently spun to outlast fire long enough for adequate restraint. Coordinated open space amenable to mindless crowd control. Meteorological precision and intimate communication with the fire master. Each division has its standards. Lastly, the generic witch.

Focus | *Ken Poyner*

Quibble is dangerously good at shooting zombies. Zombies need to be tapped in the head. Other citizens have some success, with a much lower kill rate. He sits on his porch, waits for a clutch of zombies to wander by. Usually, he does not stand – scoots his chair around to face the direction the zombies travel, knock them out one by one. The township pays for his shells. Sometimes he makes a call when the clues are not all in, and takes a citizen. For his service, we look the other way, imagine casualties as would-be zombies, or life-like trainees.

Granting Wishes | *Ken Poyner*

Here, I did not always have the best of intentions. I blow through town like leaves the citizens thought they had dealt with last season. Some are surprised, some turn to their mates and say, see, I told you so. There is great consternation as to whether I should be greeted as something familiar, or simply acknowledged as a courtesy. No decision will satisfy everyone. I prefer the attitude of the dogs, who sniff my cuff and decide I am possibly in the right place, move on. I put down my sack of scintillating wares, my cache of unintended consequences.

About the Author:

Ken's eleventh book, "Winter's Last Apple", came out this past June. Nine of those eleven books are still in print. He lives in Virginia with his wife of 40+ years, assorted rescue cats, and various betta fish. He started publishing long before the Internet was a thing, but has embraced it despite his technophobia.

Author Website: [Ken Poyner](#)

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Stories of love and loathing to the bitter end...literally.



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

The large thick wooden door protested with a screech as Joseph closed and locked it behind him. His back against the polished oak, he closed his eyes and exhaled. He'd made it. The doctor had encouraged him to step out each day. He'd gotten as far as the doctor's office this particular day, just a few buildings away from his residence.

"Do you still hear them?" Dr. Matteo had asked.

Joseph nodded his head, staring blankly at his hands in his lap. The veins were more pronounced than he remembered, protruding, and branching out as though to escape from under the skin.

"Is there someone that could stay with you? At least for this one night?"

"No. I don't know anyone," Joseph said weakly. He'd glanced out the window several times, watching and planning his route back home.

Giggling outside pulled him back into his front hall. The little ones were out early, all decked out in their fanciful attire. So many liked to be princesses and pirates over the last couple of years. The older ones that came later in the night adorned themselves in dark clothing with garish makeup that made them look like greased ghouls. Almost comical rather than horrific displays of pubescent amusement.

Taps on his door with the sing-song voices cheerily shouting, '*Trick or Treat!*', would be ignored again this year. There were no sweets sitting in a plastic bowl to be distributed, no pleasant '*Thank yous!*' to be received.

The front porch light was already turned off, even before dusk arrived so as to discourage any notion that anyone was welcome. But he knew that darkness wasn't a deterrent for *all* who would pass by his door this night.

The whispers were beginning already even though the sun still sat above the treetops. He could hear them. All of them. A collection of words in an aberrant language; a nubilous dialect or morbid twisting of the oral muscle that no one on the earthly plane had ever heard.

The air was getting thicker, hotter.

Pulling his hand out of his jacket pocket, the smooth amber bottle with the prescription label jiggled in his shaking hands. Dr. Matteo had said the medication would stifle any voices that interrupted his thoughts. Shuffling to the kitchen, Joseph turned on the faucet, putting just enough water in a glass to take the pill.

Wiping away the moisture from his forehead on his sleeve, he turned into the living room and switched on the lamp. The daylight in the front window drowned out the yellow hue, however, Joseph hated the dark, and didn't like waiting for night before illuminating the room.

Having erased the shadows that crept along the beige carpet, Joseph threw his jacket on the high-backed chair and sunk into the sofa. Ghostly figures occupied his dreams. They called to him, beckoned him. Wrapped in a dark cloak, Joseph was unable to move and could only watch the apparitions flutter around him, speaking the unmentionable in their demonic tongue.

Joseph awakened to muddled voices, a collage of murmurs and hisses that disturbed the silent air. He dared not stir so they could not see him and had learned to quiet his breath so they could not hear him. Specter silhouettes cavorted, brushing lightly against the illuminated lamp shade and across the room to mingle with its kindred phantoms that crowded the small living room. Joseph remained still, only his eyes following the shadows that darted, sometimes violently, about the room. The black souls spotted the plastered walls with blotches of their past existence, leaving a stain of ash. The odorous stench of rotted meat and sulfur reached his olfactory nerves all at once, sending a tear to pool into the corner of his eye.

They took turns sitting with Joseph on the sofa, appearing to fight over which would occupy the cushion next to their host. Joseph inwardly cringed at the touch of the one closest to him as its brethren shoved and hacked at its dark form. Howls reverberated through his torso as the triumphant ghoul defeated its opponents in the quest for dominance, which didn't last long as the next deviant soul took its place.

Joseph was surprised at the ease in which he could control his heartbeat this time. He no longer heard the resounding thump in his ears. His body no longer trembled at the unearthly discordant voices. He remained there, slumped on one end of the sofa, his right arm lounging over a pillow as his unwelcome guests continued their revelry, oddly like that of mischievous children devoid of a disciplinarian or parent.

He'd glanced at the wall clock several times this evening, wishing away the time. But the mechanical hands laid there, seemingly immobile as he listened to the fray surrounding him.

Sleep would not come for Joseph. He knew that this ghoulish celebration would last until the light of day peeked over the window's sash, chasing the shadows from this world with barely a touch of its finger.

He closed his eyes anyway, but the demonic sounds only crescendoed. It was as if they understood his awareness of them and were determined to remain the center of his attention.

When all went quiet, Joseph hazarded a frown and opened his eyes. The clock read just past midnight. Dark figures had frozen abruptly and ceased their rant. They sat, plastered to the spots where they'd previously jostled and shrieked.

This was new, Joseph thought. What on earth could put fear into these poor lost souls?

Chills slithered down his back even before he heard it. Lightly tapping at first, the rap on the front door repeated its rhythm before increasing into a pounding roar that shook the house and rattled his bones.

The front door creaked open. There was no violent bursting or splintering of wood, no clicking of a pin to pick at the lock. The thick oak slowly arched toward the adjacent wall, its orifice a gaping black hole.

Joseph remained still and silent like his shadowy companions, waiting.

It didn't attempt to hide its form. Crawling on all fours, its bone structure resembled a human, naked and devoid of hair. Its awkward movements suggested that it wasn't used to being far from its own world and that this shape was the best it could muster for whatever purpose it had on Earth. Gray leathered skin hung loosely on its skeleton, as though it had hastily thrown on its attire for this visit.

As it entered the living room, Joseph's eyes widened, and he could no longer control his rapid heartbeat. The eyes, mere balls of white, sat in sunken sockets, attached only by a few threads of sinew. Although horrified at the site of this unearthly being, Joseph marveled at its ability to exist and wondered what form it actually took in its own realm. Or if it was doomed for eternity to exist as this being, forever tortured for whatever wrongdoing it may have committed in its past life.

It searched the room as though blind, ignoring the lamp light that still flooded the ghostly chamber. Focusing on Joseph, it turned its bony torso, elbows and knees pointed upward as hands and feet clomped clumsily on the carpet. Stopping within a few feet of the man slumped within the cushions, the creature opened its jaws. The baggy skin sunk and wobbled over large, yellowed teeth and it groaned as though testing its vocal cords.

At first, Joseph only heard the same ghoulish language of the dark souls that continued to adorn the walls, frozen in place like subjects in a grotesque painting.

Then, for the first time that night, Joseph moved, and slowly leaned forward. He listened to the warbled gurgles that escaped from the beast, its breath hot with embers against his face, and he began to understand.

"...do not belong here," gruffed the aged voice of the creature. "You must come now, Blessed One."

Its voice held the sorrow of thousands of years...maybe millennia. Yet, it spoke calmly as though patiently waiting for a child to learn to stand.

There was barely a pause when its tongue lashed out, the dagger-like spike dug into the largest vein on the back of Joseph's hand and ripped.

At first, Joseph felt nothing. He just stared at his bleeding extremity like it was a foreign entity, studying the deep red lava that flowed from his wound. Purple veins bubbled and erupted from their canals and through the pale skin. Receptors in his brain triggered, and the man grabbed his wrist, writhing in pain. Heat seared throughout his body. Veins on his temples and feet boiled and burst. Blood oozed from his wounds as they continued to expand, ripping apart his flesh.

Joseph's cries transformed into strangled gurgles as his throat split and exploded, spraying bloody tissue and small bones. He abruptly stood, arms outstretched, and head tilted back as the top of his skull cracked. Joseph choked on the coppery fluid as the fibrous joints tore and the two fractured bones splintered and separated, each half falling limply to his shoulders.

A spiny stub, vertebrae sticky with red fluid, jutted out from the top of the torso where the head had been. Skin and muscle detached from Joseph's torso, taking his clothes with them to the floor, rumpling into fleshy heaps. Exposed organs slithered from their tidy positions within the trunk and hung loosely in front of what remained of the man, his carcass standing in a red pool of blood.

A low growl rose from the mangled corpse, and a dark shape began to push its way through the opening at the top of the spine. It forced its way through the torn flesh as a newborn would from its mother's womb.

Fibrous tissue ripped and bones splintered as the darkness emerged.

The creatures that occupied the room remained motionless and did not speak as they witnessed the torturous conversion.

Covered in the slime of its cocoon, the head held two round eyes of black marble and an equine snout that stretched forward. Jagged teeth, blackened with decay, smiled, and snapped. Several tentacles reached out from between them before returning to their place deep within its throat.

As its broad shoulders escaped the fleshy shell, spikes emerged on the contour of its head and serpentine neck.

The black silhouette rose taller than what had been the man called Joseph.

Long muscular arms expanded. Sinew and dark red veins covered its body, pulsing and rushing new life into the creature, awakening it from its long slumber.

The ghoulish creatures, once stoic and still, slithered into rows, prostrating before their king.

As the man's remains crumbled into a pile at its feet, the newly awakened creature stepped out of its earthly costume and spewed a savage howl. The sound reverberated through the timbers and shakes. It jostled the roots of the large oaks and pines. It shook the very bones of the earthly plane.

An endless blackness opened in the center of the once quiet and serene living room. It expanded into a whirlwind of hot ash that billowed upward and engulfed the room. Weeping and sorrow shrieked from beyond its border as each shadowy phantom followed its lord and master into the depths of his fiery palace.

The house sat silent and empty. No one knew what lay behind those walls and there was no one who cared enough or dared enough to see for themselves. The hellish gate had closed, and the man called Joseph was seen no more.

About the Author:

A.H. Zamparelli is a horror and science fiction writer whose debut collection appears in "Three Deadly Shorts & A Poem", available on Amazon. After retirement, Annie began writing short stories, spending just about every afternoon at the kitchen table bringing those characters to life. Annie lives in New Jersey U.S. with her husband Rick, and next to writing, enjoys reading murder mysteries and historical biographies.

Mary Anne's Mistake | JB Corso

Aggressive crashing carries up the stairs into the young girl's bedroom. Mary Anne flips through her father's last copy of *The Dead Know No Peace*. She pauses at the chapter of 'Thinning the Veil'. Her mother's screams blend with the sounds of furniture being smashed. Her finger follows the words to the final paragraph. Insane passages reverberate in her thoughts.

"I'm sorry, Mommy, I didn't mean to release them."

Silence replaces the panicked screams. Dull steps echo up the stairs. Mary Anne spins towards the moon-lit hallway. A line of corpses hobble into her room.

"You're next, Mary Anne."

Shimmering Wall | JB Corso

A portal wall shimmers within the doorway as Joselyn breaks apart her aged father's altar. Unnatural humidity infests her raging frustration. The stench of burning corpses clings to her naked skin like baked on molasses. Regretful tears stream off of her eyebrows, pulling upward towards the ceiling. A chorus of ethereal bells clang around her head, puncturing her thoughts. Her toes catch against a pile of stolen tomes. Joselyn trips. She falls forward, evaporating through the shimmering wall. Her screams echo into a whisper before fading out. The breach floats down the ornate hallway toward her mother's room.

About the Author:

JB Corso enjoys slithering through the darker shadows of their readers' minds. They provide mental health care to vulnerable populations. They served throughout Europe as a combat arms veteran. They are a Horror Writer's Association member. "Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn." Facebook is a good place to make contact... for those willing to risk their sanity.

Facebook: [JB Corso](#)

They found the Staff Sergeant hanging out the window of his apartment. Two of his colleagues had been sent there for a wellness check when he didn't show up for his shift. When they tried the handle of the door it was stuck. It seemed that Sergeant Gary Mitchell had barricaded himself in before jumping to his death from the end of a rope. It took six minutes for the EMT's to break into his room and by then it was far too late. When Doctor Nakajima from the Chatan hospital came to examine the body, he found a nurse already there dragging the body in through the window. Her duty done, she bowed to the physician and walked out of the apartment. Something about her demeanor caused the doctor to pause for a moment before kneeling beside the body. Gary's face was the colour of a ripe grape, his eyes were wide open and empty and his tongue protruded from lips which had the consistency of leather. Nakajima pronounced the time of death and signed all the relevant certificates. The matter was then handed over to the U.S Military police to investigate.

The air force base in Okinawa had a small investigative team. They mostly performed duties like the regular military police but in the rare occasion of murder or suicide, had the full authority of a local NPA detective. Amanda Barnes had been given the short straw and assigned to the Mitchell case. It would have been open and shut if it weren't for the dead Staff Sergeant's diary and the events which were connected to him two months ago. This wasn't the first suicide which occurred in the building. Mitchell's wife Ichika had jumped out that same window. According to the file it looked like she had timed it to coincide with Mitchell returning home. Her body splattered across the street and it had been one of the messiest cleanups that the emergency services had dealt with for a long time. Something else of note was written there. She was wearing a red dress.

On reading this Barnes frowned. She knew of some of the local customs in Japan. Mostly those getting ready for death or those who were being laid to rest were dressed in white. It's a colour of finality and peaceful transition. Red, commonly found in restaurants and hotels, symbolized life and vitality. The answer to this came from Mitchell's own words recorded in the crumpled book found beside the window. It was obvious that it had been placed there before he attached the rope to his neck and dove out the window. Flicking through its contents Barnes discovered that Mitchell had been so distressed by his wife's death that he had consulted a Taoist priest.

The Taoist priest had told Mitchell that his wife wearing that colour meant that she intended to come back to haunt him. The manner of her death was sure to have placed a curse upon his soul. The elderly man was curious as to why Ichika would have done such a thing. It was then that the Staff Sergeant listed all his infidelities. He filled two completed pages of trysts and casual affairs. Barnes could imagine the sergeant's face going pale as he confessed all of these to the calm priest. There was one name in the book that was underlined. A woman who taught children in the base's high school. Closing the diary, Barnes decided to interview her. This case was becoming murkier by the moment.

Sandra Campbell was a petite blond who turned heads. Barnes could see what Mitchell found attractive about her. Sassy and intelligent with an impeccable dress sense. Hell, she was even Barnes' type and she hadn't thought about relationships or sex in years. Her career had always come first. Sandra sat on the teacher's desk and answered all the detective's questions.

"Yeah, Gary and I had a thing going on. I think he was bored of his little Asian wife and wanted to come back to some home cooking, if you know what I mean? Anyway, we had gotten careless. One night we were fucking in his apartment. I made him break his rule about doing it in his marital bed. I liked that, found it kind of kinky. Suddenly, when we were getting hot and heavy his little miss barges in. She broke his train of thought but I didn't care that she was watching. I came anyway."

It had turned out that Ichika had exploded when she found her husband and the teacher together. She had suspected for a long time that she had been cheated on and now the proof was right in front of her. Mitchell's wife had ranted and raved as she disappeared into the kitchen and returned to the bedroom with a carving knife in hand. Quickly pulling on their clothes Mitchell and Campbell got the hell out of the apartment and took a cab back to the base.

"It was getting too much. I like a bit of fun but I'm not into partners with jealous wives. When I saw the gleam of that knife, I knew that girl had it in her to kill either him or me. Maybe even both of us. You should have seen her eyes. Pure crazy."

Barnes thanked the teacher and walked back to her jeep. The sky had darkened and the gentle fall of afternoon rain had commenced. Back in her office, she returned to the only source of evidence she had. Mitchell's diary. Most of these suicides left a note, he had left a whole damn book. Lifting her cold cup of coffee, she flicked through the remaining pages.

After visiting the priest, Mitchell became terrified. He had been told that his dead wife's spirit would return to claim him within 41 days. The priest said that if he could evade her in that length of time, he would be safe. The sergeant was warned that it would be difficult but that he would recognize a sign. It would be the sound of her body hitting the pavement. Once he heard this, he must ensure that he did not look at the ghost of his dead wife.

The next few weeks saw Mitchell staying at the base, drinking heavily, and showing signs of depression. His colleagues had given sworn statements which indicated that Mitchell had to be forced home by his superiors and due to his emotional outbursts had eventually been placed on leave. When he was alone and in the apartment, Ichika returned.

Mitchell was finishing the last few drops of a bottle of scotch when the door of his apartment flew open. The light bulbs in the living room and dining area exploded. Behind him, Gary heard the wails and screams of his wife before her body had impacted the ground. In the last entry in his diary, Barnes found an almost illegible account scrawled about what he saw when he turned his head towards the noise. Ichika's broken and twisted body lay there, her skull was shattered and brain matter leaked out onto the ground. From the light of the lampposts which streamed in through his window, Mitchell traced the contours of her shattered legs, the femur bones protruded through her skin. Ichika's insides hung from open wounds in her stomach that had been made by the impact against the concrete. However, worst of all was the fact that, slowly, the creature on the carpet was moving towards him.

Detective Barnes could guess the rest, Mitchell's irrational fear, drunkenness and depression pushed him over the edge. He had attempted to appease the spirit of his wife by killing himself or perhaps his suicide was just plain guilt for his actions. As she closed the battered diary a knock on her door made her jump. She laughed under her breath before calling out that the door was open. Doctor Nakajima had come to present her with his official physician's report. As they sat and drank tea together, they discussed the final moments of the case.

"So, it's a verdict of suicide brought on by poor mental health, Doctor?"

The physician slowly nodded and set his cup down. "Yes, however there is something I just don't understand."

Barnes raised an eyebrow.

"How did that nurse get into the building? The EMTs who had entered said that she didn't come in with them and apparently, I was the only one who saw her."

Barnes thought for a moment before replying. "Perhaps no one noticed her? She was one medical professional among many that day."

Doctor Nakajima leaned forward and looked intently into Barnes' eyes.

"Yes, detective but I've never seen a nurse wear a red dress before."

About the Author:

Chris McAuley is a writer who specializes in the Horror, Science Fiction, fantasy, western and crime genre. He is the co-creator of the popular StokerVerse, along with Bram Stoker's great-grandnephew Dacre Stoker. He is also the co-creator of a science fiction and fantasy franchise with Babylon 5's Claudia Christian called Dark Legacies. He is the lead writer on the latest Astroboy animated tv show. Chris is also currently working on The Terminator film and game series, Star Trek and the Doctor Who franchise.

Website: [Dark Universes](#)

Halloween Haul | DJ Tyrer

Night for tricks and treats. Going from house to house with demands. Bag of sweets grows heavy. Where no bribes are forthcoming, petty revenge occurs.

Laughing, head homewards.

Settle down, cross-legged, and tip out bag upon the floor, a cascade of candy, sweets pooling in a semi-circle.

Begin to gorge, overflowing mouthfuls, chocolate stains on chin. Yummy!

Stomach twinges. Too many sweets...

Stabbing pain. Something strange...

Collapse in agony, clutching belly, screaming.

Skin begins to tear. The eggs in the sweets have hatched. Mass like writhing spaghetti in a bloody sauce spills out onto the floor. Worms begin to swarm.

The Lake | *DJ Tyrer*

Tendrils of mist coil out of the lake like ghostly tentacles, while the moon reflects eerily off its waters. Eyes ever darting towards the placid surface, you hurry by, mindful of superstitious fears. Engrossed, you fail to notice movement behind you, the real danger. A knife flashes. You die.

About the Author:

DJ Tyrer dwells in Southend-on-Sea, on the misty northern shore of the Thames Estuary. DJ edits Atlantean Publishing, and has been published in various anthologies and magazines, such as Chilling Horror Short Stories (Flame Tree), What Dwells Below (Sirens Call Publications), and issues of The Horrorzine, Occult Detective Magazine, and Tigershark.

Author Website: [DJ Tyrer](#)

Twitter: [@DJTyrer](#)

Dark Kitchen | *KC Anderson*

God, I hate apartments.

I think this every time I see orders for a delivery to an apartment pop up on my phone. I always check to see where I'm picking up the food and where I have to go before I hit 'Accept'. I don't know why I do this because I never hit 'Decline', but I guess I just like to know what I'm getting myself into beforehand. After working on nights and weekends as a Dinner-Dasher for the last two years, I can tell you without hesitation that the worst orders are the ones that pay little, are far, and are for deliveries to apartments.

My favorite kind of order (besides the ones that pay a lot, which are few and far between) is when the restaurant is close by, I know they won't take half an hour (while the customer is calling to bitch me out and take away my tip because the restaurant decided that Dinner-Dash orders are not important), and the place I'm going to is a house that's only a mile or two away with an actual street where I can park.

But you can't win 'em all. And this current order was definitely not a winner. It paid shitty. The restaurant took forever. The delivery location was far. And because the address had three numbers after the street name, I knew it meant it was an apartment. And of course the apartment complex had a gate. And of course the customer didn't put the gate code in the instructions. And of course the customer didn't pick up the phone when I called. That's how these apartment deliveries usually go, hence why I fucking hate them.

So, I'm sitting there for ten minutes trying to see if I could maybe hop the fence when thankfully a car comes around the corner from inside the complex to leave, opening the gate for me to swoop in after them.

I drive all over, but of course I can't find a parking spot for visitors, so I do what I normally do and park in a resident's empty spot. Believe me, I don't want to.

After walking around the place for too long, the food is no doubt cold, and I'm over twenty minutes late on this order because of everyone else's shenanigans. I probably could have gotten another order and finished it by now if the stupid restaurant had made the food on time and the stupid customer had given me the stupid gate code. Thanks, everyone! It's not like I don't have an apartment I can't afford which forces me to deliver overpriced cold food to everyone else's doors when I'd rather be home chilling after my regular job.

After dropping off the order, I run back to my car. Thankfully the resident whose spot I took wasn't there ready to tear me a new one like the last time I did an apartment order.

I put on my seatbelt when I hear alert noises coming from my pocket. I take out my phone and I can't believe what I see. It's my favorite kind of order! The restaurant is close by, only a couple blocks away. The delivery location is a house. And it pays a lot! Twenty-three bucks for like ten minutes of work!

The only thing weird is that I don't recognize the restaurant that I'm supposed to pick the food up from. I've been around this area a few times before and I've never heard of 'Flesh Eaters'. I'd bet a hundred bucks that a

restaurant with that name is owned by some hardcore conservative meat-eater trying to offend all the vegans or something. I don't know. Who cares? I'd seen worse names than that.

It was just down the street. I park in the small shopping center but I don't see a restaurant named Flesh Eaters, or any restaurant for that matter. I do see a Laundromat which looked like the only place that was open. I walk in and ask the tattooed guy behind the counter, "Excuse me, sir. Do you know where Flesh Eaters is in this shopping center?"

"Right here, brother," he says gruffly while picking up a bag from the floor. "Order's ready."

I had yet to experience this until now, but I had heard of it. These places are called virtual kitchens, better known as dark kitchens. They're delivery-only. Some of them are illegal. I don't know how they get into Dinner-Dash's system, but it's not my job to worry about that.

"Cool, thanks," I say. "Can I just confirm the name for the order so I know it's the right one?"

"Atasaia," he says intently.

I look at my phone and see that he's right. Weird name. But that's pretty common these days for people to have unique names (which funnily enough makes no one's names really unique if you think about it).

I take the bag from the man and I can tell underneath all his tattoos and rough physique that he looks upset.

"You okay, bro?" I ask. He doesn't answer. He looks at me as though he has guilt in his eyes.

This whole situation is weird.

I'm glad it's halfway over.

I walk out to my car and drive to the delivery spot only a mile away. I realize that the food in the heavy bag gives off no smell whatsoever. I wonder what the hell kind of food this guy ordered. But I'd prefer no smell over some of the stuff I've gotten in the past that stunk up my car for days.

It always baffled me why non-handicapped folks would spend so much getting food delivered from a place just down their street. I once did a delivery that didn't even require me to drive. It was so close that I just walked it over.

But hey, I'm not complaining. I need the dough.

After I park, I look at my phone and see that the customer wants the order handed to him. It's not my preference; I like to leave it on their doorstep and bail before they come out. But I'll do what I need to for twenty-three big ones.

I knock on the door.

The door opens. No light is on inside the house. It's almost impossibly pitch black.

A man in a black sweater whose face I can barely see emerges from the darkness and whispers, "Please, come in. Put it on the counter. I have cash for you."

I feel uneasy. "You already tipped me on the app, sir. It was pretty generous too. Thanks. But here you go, I'll just hand it to you."

"No, please," he mutters. "I can't physically take the bag. I have extreme arthritis. If you could just put it on the kitchen counter, there's a fifty-dollar bill on there for you."

I really don't want to go in, but I figure it's just ten more awful seconds of distress, and then I'll come away from this gig back in my car listening to sports radio seventy-three bucks richer.

I walk in slowly, not being able to see a damn thing.

A dim light shows itself so I can see a hint of the man's kitchen counter. I place the bag on it and turn around to see the head of a shovel coming straight towards my...

I wake up bound to a wooden chair. My mouth is duct taped. I taste blood. My head aches. My screams are muted.

I can see the man now. He wasn't wearing a black sweater. It was a cloak with a red pentagram on the back.

He opens the delivery bag in front of me.

He takes out all of the items one at a time: a cleaver, a meat tenderizer, a butcher knife, a small meat grinder, and other common butcher tools.

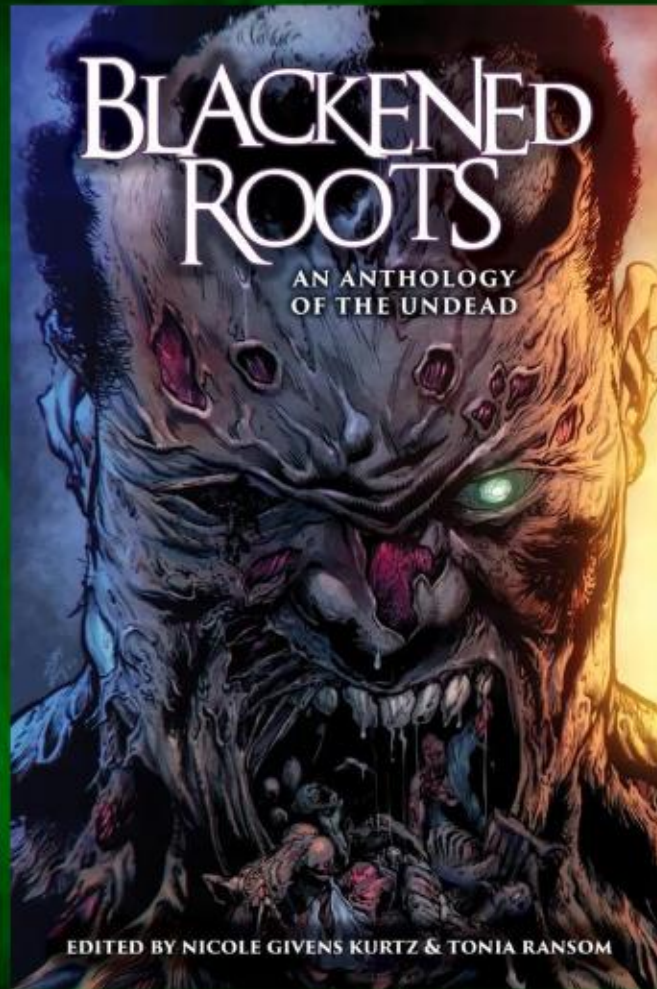
I realize now what I was actually delivering.

About the Author:

KC Anderson is the author of the *Living in Hell* trilogy, available on Amazon.

Amazon Author Page: [KC Anderson](#)

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A Halloween Haunting | *Grant Wilson*

Ciaran jumped as there was a knock at the door. This was a regular occurrence, each year his anxiety would peak a little higher, like a guitar string being wound too tight, and then tightened some more. His reaction was completely understandable, given the circumstances.

He got up and opened the door.

"Trick-or-treat!" yelled a miniature witch, vampire, and Elvis.

"Great costumes," said Ciaran with no real conviction. "Do you guys have jokes or anything?"

"Why did the beach blush?" asked the witch.

"I don't know, why?"

"Because the sea-weed."

Ciaran laughed politely. He hated Halloween but was too polite to not answer the door. He had learned to grit his teeth and push through the night over the years. He passed them a bag of sugar free treats, as he was diabetic, and a candy apple each. The Trick-or-Treaters thanked him and trotted down the path into the velvet cool night. It was easier to play along.

He sighed and closed the door. As soon as the latch clicked shut, the door rattled with heavy knocks from outside as if a large fist were pounding rhythmically to get in. He knew who it was but he wasn't ready to let this visitor in. Not just yet.

This was part of the night's happenings he had come to accept. Something akin to the Trick-or-Treaters that he just had to grimace and push through.

The first signs of the visitors coming usually started on October 1st. It would start with a whispered word when he was alone. He would dismiss it but the voice was familiar. Next, Ciaran would start to see shadows move in the corner of his eye. Just like the hour hand of a clock, he couldn't see them move when he stared at them but was sure they have moved all the same.

These first signs were easy to ignore but in the days that followed the trick-or-treater made their presence harder to disregard. The smell of cigarette smoke would permeate throughout the house but Ciaran didn't smoke. Then the cigarette burn scars down his legs would start stinging, despite being fully healed for over fifteen years.

He would wake in the middle of the night unable to breathe, only to find bruises in the shape of hands around his neck come morning.

One morning in the middle of October he would find a scribble on the whiteboard that he kept on the fridge in long scratchy letters.

Sweetie.

A pet name that had died along with the only person to use it. And then he would hear it spoken right behind him, a low guttural whisper, "Ssweeeeeetieeeee."

He would spin around, like every year before—unable to stop himself—where he would find no one, just a pungent odour of stale cigarettes and a notion that something stood right in front of him just behind a thin veil.

By the end of the month, he would look battered. A culmination of years of abuse condensed into one month and administered by an evil hand.

The nightmares would start in the last week before Halloween. Always the same, more memory than dream.

He was a child again. He had been out with his friends on Halloween trick-or-treating and had come home with a bag full of candy. It was just him and his Dad, his Mum had passed when he was a baby.

He found his dad in the kitchen sat at the dining table waiting for him. The room was hazy, either by design from the nightmare or by the cigarette placed between two of his father's fingers.

"You're late," he said coldly.

Ciaran knew he wasn't but also knew better than to argue.

"Sorry," he said.

His father stared, unblinking.

"What are you s'posed to be, anyway?" he asked. His words slurred slightly and Ciaran could see the empty bottle on the table.

"I'm Luke Skywalker from Star Wars."

"You're a faggot, is what you are. C'mere. Give me that bag."

He held a big hand out expectantly. Ciaran offered the bag but the hand instead snatched his wrist and pulled him harshly close.

"You know you can't eat this shit. You're not allowed," his father said.

One hand still clutching his wrist painfully, his father took the bag with his other hand and emptied the contents onto the table sending brightly coloured sweets of all sorts scattering.

"Now you're gonna stand there and watch me eat every one of your sweets until you've learnt your lesson," his father said as he released Ciaran's arm.

He stood at the kitchen table for what felt like an eternity and in this nightmare it could have been longer. His father stuffed his face with every sweetie he could get his hands on, throwing the wrappers towards Ciaran, all the while staring spitefully into his eyes, daring him to protest. Chocolate bars of all sizes, gummy sweets of all colours, and hard candy of all flavours were forced into his dad's smirking mouth in a hideous, hateful montage.

After an age had passed Ciaran started to feel light-headed. He looked at the clock on the kitchen wall. It was 11:53 p.m. He was overdue for his insulin injection and if he didn't take it quickly, he could put himself into a coma and die. Or so his dad had told him in an attempt to scare him.

"Dad," he said in a small voice, "I need my jag."

The beast stopped feasting for a second, breathing heavily over the table.

"Go and get it and bring it straight back here," growled the beast.

Ciaran ran to his room, threw his schoolwork aside and snatched the injector with its case before sprinting back. His father acknowledged his return to the table by turning and spitting a half chewed gummy sweet at his face before roaring with laughter.

"Hurry up and jag up, Sweetie," he said and returned his attention to the sweets.

Ciaran wiped his face with a shaking hand and watched this monster wearing his father's skin greedily consume handfuls of confectionaries. He watched the hands that had so often hurt him over the years blindly grab the nearest candy and nudge a toffee apple towards him. It rolled and stopped on the edge of the table before him.

He stared at it, insulin in hand.

His father's head snapped around and saw him touching the apple on the table. An angry yowl forced its way out of his mouth and sent crumbs spraying everywhere.

"I don't think so!" he yelled, snatching the apple out Ciaran's hand and pushing him over. He tripped and fell, hitting his head on a cupboard door. His father leaned over him and taunted, "You aren't allowed this."

He ate the whole thing in three bites and returned to the table. Ciaran's head swam, the smoke filled his vision and everything went dark.

A light flashed and he could see he was still in the kitchen, stood at the table. It flashed again. He was looking at the floor next to him. Another flash. His father's face peered back at him from the floor, foam frothing from his mouth. Flash. His father's arms, legs and head were banging off the ground as he choked to death in front of his son. The darkness grew as did the banging; it was unbearable until—

Ciaran woke with a start. He was on the sofa; it was Halloween night. He checked the clock. He didn't need to; he knew exactly what time it would be.

11:53 p.m.

His living room was hazy with cigarette smoke and the banging from his nightmare continued in the waking world. Someone was hammering at the door. The last trick-or-treater of Halloween was ready to come in.

Ciaran got up and crossed to the door. He opened and the knocking stopped abruptly.

There was no one there.

"Hello Dad," said Ciaran.

"Ssweeeeeetieeeee," croaked the voice behind him.

He spun round and was confronted by nothing. This happened every year since his father had died but it became no easier with passing time.

He saw the kitchen light was now on when it hadn't been before and he made for the room. The door slowly swung open to reveal, not his kitchen, but the kitchen of his childhood home. One half of the room was stained beige cupboards with wooden counter tops and wooden panelling on the wall. The other half of the room was taken up by a long wooden table, complete with his father sat in the chair closest to him with his back turned.

"You're late," the creature said. It turned slowly in the chair to reveal the slimy grin of the rotting corpse of his dad. The eyes were sunken into the skull, the nose was hanging by a strand of flesh and thick black ooze dribbled down the bony chin. It did not surprise Ciaran that Hell had spat his father back out.

"Sorry," Ciaran heard himself say.

"What are you s'posed to be anyway?" wheezed his dad.

"I'm Luke Skywalker from Star Wars."

The nightmare was playing out before him like a cursed play and he was an unwilling actor. No matter how hard he fought, the play would go on. He had tried fighting it before; by screaming, by running, with weapons, but had learned that this was his dad's world and he would torment him no matter what.

"You're a faggot, is what you are. C'mere. Give me that bag."

Ciaran wheeled forward to centre stage; arm outstretched. A rotted, slimy hand grabbed his wrist. The stench of rot and decay mixed with the heavy cigarette smoke which caught in his throat causing him to gag.

"You know you can't eat this shit. You're not allowed."

The sweets scattered noisily over the table.

"Now you're gonna stand there and watch me eat every one of your sweets until you've learnt your lesson."

A skeletal hand slammed onto the table and started grabbing candy at random. Teeth crunched and broke, flesh and black ooze dripped onto the table. His father had been grotesque eating in life but in death had become obscene. The living corpse relished in the fear it brought to Ciaran, whom, despite knowing how the night would play out, could feel the horror gripping his stomach in a cold vice.

His eyes caught the clock on the wall.

11:53 p.m.

"Dad, I need my jag."

"Go and get it and bring it straight back here."

He moved out of the kitchen, through the corridor to his childhood room. He didn't have to touch anything, the schoolwork covering the insulin threw itself out of the way and the container lifted into his hand on its own. His heart ached with a sad nostalgia at the sight of his old room but then he was wheeling back to the kitchen before he knew it.

His dad turned and hocked black sludge into his face. He recoiled in disgust, it was like being slapped with a wad of freezing, wet toilet paper. He tried desperately to scrub it off but it stuck to his skin.

"Hurry up and jag up, Sweetie."

He hated that nickname and hearing it in that raspy, dead voice made his skin crawl.

The confectionary assault continued and then the candy apple rolled towards him on the table and stopped just short of falling off.

His free hand reached and picked it up.

The creature's neck made a crack as it whipped to face him. The muffled scream sounded like sheets of paper and gravel being mixed together in a hurricane.

"I don't think so!"

The bony hand grabbed the apple and forcefully pushed Ciaran to the floor, smacking his head against the cupboard.

"You aren't allowed this."

The teeth of the skull-like face cracked together as it scoffed the whole apple in front of Ciaran who remained paralysed with fear on the floor.

This was the part of the nightmare where he would black out and when he woke, his father would be lying dead having choked to death on one of his Halloween candies.

"But that's not what happened, is it Sweetie?" whispered the rotting cadaver as it stood over him, eyes glinting in the dim light.

Ciaran didn't answer. He couldn't.

"IS IT?" screamed his dad.

"No," he said.

He was standing up again despite not remembering getting back to his feet. His deceased father was back in the chair at the kitchen table and he stood next to him holding the insulin case.

The candy apple rolled towards him and stopped.

He reached out and picked it up.

His father was watching him from the corner of his sunken eyes, smirking tauntingly, but he hadn't seen him that night. He had only noticed when it was too late.

Ciaran opened the case and took out his insulin pen. He checked the dosage.

The idea had come to him that night when he went to get the pen. The schoolwork he had moved had been about World War II. He remembered the teacher telling them about Alan Turing, a mathematician who broke the enigma code but later killed himself using an apple he had injected with poison.

As the apple tumbled towards him on the table all the pieces had slid together, the poisoned apple, the insulin, the years of torture at the hand of a trusted adult, and he knew what he had to do.

The pen punctured the apple's skin and was injected with several days' worth of insulin. He was putting the pen back into its case when his father turned to finally notice him.

He was flung to the floor once again only this time his father broke the routine and knelt over him; his dripping face inches from Ciaran's pale one.

"You can repress it all you want Sweetie but deep down you know you're a murderer," growled his dad.

"No, you choked!" gasped Ciaran.

The clawed hands shot out and wrapped around his throat, foul ooze and spit flecked his face.

"And now dear boy, so will you!" cackled the corpse madly. "I'll drag you back to Hell with me. They can't wait to meet you down there. Your mother is waiting there too!"

"No!" Ciaran tried to cry but the finger bones squeezed tightly and he couldn't make any sound. He could only look helplessly into the deranged eyes staring down at him of his once living father and despair. His vision tunnelled; he was going to pass out.

"Ssee you ssooonn Sswееееееееее—"

His eyes snapped open. The room before him was his own kitchen, devoid of smoke or spectre. He drew a deep and rattling breath and looked at the clock he kept on the wall. It was midnight, first of November. Halloween was over. All Saints Day had come and he had survived. For another year at least.

About the Author:

Grant Wilson is a Scottish writer based in the greater Glasgow area. He lives with his wife, Emma, their daughter, Autumn, and their dog, Klaus. Grant has always had a love of Halloween and all things spooky. Inspired by the likes of Stephen King, Scott Snyder, and Shirley Jackson, Grant took pen to paper to get the stories out of his head and into yours.

Instagram: [@grantwilsonbooks](#)

Goodreads: [Grant Wilson](#)

The Halloween Party | *Brian Rosenberger*

The Midnight Hour. Time for unmasking.

They had unbelievable chemistry. The gentlemen had incredible timing, so graceful despite his cumbersome costume. He had yet to step on her toes. They had exchanged dance partners throughout the evening and kept finding their way back to each other.

She wore a Peacock mask, exotic beautiful feathers, and her small cape echoed the feather pattern. As she twirled across the dance floor, she resembled a bird in flight.

The face beneath the Peacock mask, breathtakingly beautiful.

The Grim Reaper, the Peacock's dance partner, slowly lifted the skull mask, revealing another skull beneath, not rubber or latex. This was bone, cold to the touch.

Breathtaking in a different way.

They embraced each other. One last dance. Not for them.

For the rest of their fellow partygoers.

About the Author:

Brian Rosenberger lives in a cellar in Marietta, GA and writes by the light of captured fireflies. He is the author of *As the Worm Turns*, three poetry collections, and an assortment of odds and ends in various anthologies, websites, and zines.

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There is a new sheriff in town patrolling the streets of New Orleans for low-level demons, wayward witches, sorcerers and spirits: me. In my pocket is my new official patrol badge with my name on it: Thalia Canaria. I have been slaying monsters since I could speak. It must have been a part of my soulless plan before I incarnated in the Earthen realm from the spirit world. Each time I come back, I remember more of my old life and I graduate from my guardian training at an earlier and earlier age.

This life I'm a young Black girl and guardian. In my previous life, I was a privileged woman who needed protection. My patrol route? Only the neighborhood of the most-high demons. It's a pretty sweet route for a 17-year-old guardian from the not-so-wealthy part of town, but I was one of the few more-skilled guardians still alive.

I skipped down the street in front of the Lafayette Cemetery No. 1 in the Garden District to cut through it to get to my route. I made my way to where I felt the pull to danger and decided to make one of my first welfare checks. My client, Elijah, couldn't help himself. He just had to own a home in one of the most expensive neighborhoods in New Orleans. He was lucky I was this street's guardian.

The house – oh, it was your typical pastel-colored New Orleans show home: wrought iron gates stamped with a couple of fleur de lis symbols, white columned porches, a grand stained-glass door with a Magnolia design. The only eyesore was the widow maker trees off to the side of the house.

Before I knocked on the door, I quieted my breathing to sense what was on the other side of the front door. There was an eerie silence in the home. Something was lurking within its walls, stalking the child that I was tasked with protecting. I had only been hired the day before, so how could danger come to visit so soon?

Elijah opened the door right before I knocked. There was no time to greet my new client and his wife. Their eyes met mine as I hopped up the staircase using my forearm crutches to skip two steps at any time. I inch-traced through the front door and up the staircase. It allowed me to have maximum control of the environment as I moved through both space and time. The ability was a much slower version of a demon trace from one place to another instantly -- which could both alert the enemy and place you in instant danger when your enemy met you at your destination. In any case, it was the best I could do in my condition.

I got to the first door to the left at the top of the staircase. I took a deep breath and readied my hidden weapons. There would be little time to react. My first moves were crucial to ensure the baby's survival.

I kicked open the door. The creature looked like a Doris Day reject. It held the baby outstretched over the crib readying to extract its soul.

"Unhand that child!" I demanded. I'm sure my command came out in a chirpy, garbled mess instead of low demonish.

The demon woman lowered her palm over the tiny chest of the babe swaddled up in a blue blankie as a threat if I came closer. She opened her mouth -- filled with pointy teeth and saliva -- in an unnatural yawn and let out a low hum. The move shut the door behind me and blasted me against it. *Great, a demon with telekinetic powers.*

The demon baby was silent. It made no moves to protect itself. The child was rumored to have unimaginable powers. If that was the case, had the creature stunned it with some sort of power unnatural to this realm?

Very well. If it was going to fight dirty, then the crutches and the pants were coming off. I quickly unwrapped my bandaged legs and feet, releasing my clawed feet -- thoroughly confusing the possessed creature. I picked up one of the crutches and detached one of the components that doubled as a stake. I had only two left and two shots at getting it right.

The creature stretched the face of its possessed body in that yawn again, but this time it spewed a chemical mist. I coughed to prevent the toxic fumes from entering my lungs. Hey, I'm a birdie with delicate sensibilities. Damn it! These guys just kept upping the threats.

I tore off a piece of my favorite tailored shirt to cover my mouth and aimed the stake at the thing's head. Just as I did, the door behind me opened. It was Elijah, toppling me over. I had forgotten that he could trace almost as quickly as me. He was a fierce demon prince, but he was no match for the possessed—one that had obviously been enhanced to act as some kind of avatar assassin.

The first stake flew across the floor. I quickly picked up the last one and begged Elijah to hold back. His wife came crashing through the doorway almost as fast as her husband, but with none of his grace. She was a pus demon? Ugh. The worst kind. Her human skin made her look like some kind of debutante, but in her natural state, she was a dripping, puffed up creature the size of a high school quarterback.

She roared at the assassin demon and then contorted her face in confusion. "Mom? What are you doing with our baby?"

The creature was confused, no doubt ignorant of English in this state and of the freaks inching closer to it. It clutched the babe to its chest and inhaled, readying itself to spew more chemicals my way.

Before the husband and wife could do anything else stupid, I flicked the stake at the creature's head and inched over to catch the baby before it hit the ground.

I stood over the body. A sluggish yellow-green-ish bile slicked the exotic rug. "Really? You bought a Turkish rug for the baby's nursery?"

Elijah shrugged. "What? I only want the best for the little one. She's a high demon princess born from a seventh level demon and, well, you met her mother."

His wife shrugged. I did a double take. She had already donned her old skin. She presented her human self as the petite blond.

"Hi, I'm Barb." She reached out her hand.

Could her name get any more stereotypical? I stared down at her outstretched hand and reminded her that I was still holding her baby.

"So, how'd they possess my mom? She's human," Barb said.

Okay, someone was going to answer for why I was hired to protect these two very clueless royals. "Are you serious? Humans are the easiest to possess in this realm. I'm shocked you let her around the child. They're dangerous and unpredictable."

I sat down in a rocking chair closest to a wall to have a look at the babe. Its skin was pinkish blue. Its tiny horns peaked up above its bald head. Not unusual for such a unique combination of demonic royal, pus and human bloodlines. There was no telling which traits it possessed and which abilities it could wield.

I peeled open the child's eyes. The pupils were blue with its natural jaundiced color – standard for demon babes. The baby's body was healthy in every way, except it wasn't breathing. I couldn't tell if it was alive or in some demon slumber. Had the assassin snatched its soul before departing?

Barb sauntered over. "Let me have her." She placed the baby in the crux of her arm and patted its back while she hummed. The babe sputtered to life with a burp and then a cry. "There, there, princessa, everything's going to be just fine."

I got up and kicked the skull of the crumpled up, possessed human on the floor. The sticky pus got in my clawed feet.

I left the couple to coo over their babe while I took some time to think of who could exact such a hit in the Earthen realm. All of the demon royals who came here resided in the Garden District and had street-level security assigned to them. We managed the portals, we monitored the spook levels, we were the spiritual guardians born from a line of canaries.

Then the thought hit me. It could've been Polly. I bragged to her that I was going to be protecting a family that spawned a new demon princess on this realm. I didn't say anything about it being the royal that was prophesied to bring the demon and human worlds closer together to fight an ancient evil.

Elijah's voice dragged me from my thoughts. "Thalia, how can I thank you enough for saving our daughter?"

I needed to be near the babe to protect her, especially since it might have been my fault that she was attacked. "You can thank me by allowing me to stay in your home. An assassin was able to penetrate your defenses via the human possession of a close family member of your wife."

Barb teared up. She was betrayed by a demon who posed as her mother. Without an exorcism prior to her death, there was no way to bring her mother back. Also my fault.

"Excellent. You can have any room you want in the house," Elijah said.

He led me down the hallway. I chose the bedroom upstairs at the end of the hall. The room had multiple windows – a great vantage point to see the portal I was supposed to be guarding, and it was right next to baby Lahara's room.

Elijah gave me the quick and dirty tour of my new bedroom with its own bathroom before leaving. He lingered at the door and asked, "So, um, do we need to pay you the full price since we're giving you lodging? I'm just saying."

Cheap rich prick. I shrugged and didn't give him an answer. He'd have to go to the Council for that one. I didn't deal with the administrivia of membership dues and levels of service.

When the coast was clear, I jumped up on the bed and did a celebratory dance. Baba and Jiji weren't fond of us chicklings sleeping alone. We always slept in bunk beds growing up. I would have to go shopping to furnish my room.

I couldn't believe all the space I had to myself. My possessions consisted of my backpack stuffed with exactly seven pairs of underwear, my toiletries, a couple of books I snagged from my brother's bookshelf and some mix and match clothes. I packed light because I never knew when I'd literally have to fly away.

I went into the neighboring room to check on baby Lahara. She was wide awake staring up at the ceiling. The threat was gone for now. Thank goodness. I placed my pinky finger in between her tiny little hand and she focused her attention on me.

"Hello, little one. I don't think that we've been formally introduced."

Lahara giggled and flit her chunky legs. Babies were so easily tickled. I long for a day when I could live life with such a careless attitude again. Playing hide-and-seek in the human cemeteries; throwing rocks down a portal some drunk demon forgot to close; and getting yelled at for almost causing a mini demonic invasion; or nights under the stars of the human realm. It was a time in my life when all was right in the world.

Someone knocked on the door.

"Come in," I said.

Barb pushed the door open with her backside and held a plastic cup in between her teeth. She carried a tray full of homemade beignets. I jumped up to help her out.

I took a bite of a beignet and let the hot, fried dough warm my mouth.

"Thalia, thanks so much for staying with us. I hope it's okay with your parents," Barb said.

I nodded and rubbed my forearm over my mouth to remove any powdered sugar dotting my face. "It's fine. Our house was crowded anyway."

Barb produced a napkin from her back pocket and dabbed at the corner of my mouth. I silently thanked her.

"If you don't mind me asking. Where do you guys live? Is there like a whole neighborhood of your kind?"

Her question didn't offend me. She had married into a demon royal family, not grew up as one, so I didn't expect her to know anything about us.

"We live out in Algiers Point. It's on the other side of the river. And yes, the neighborhood is pretty much made up of everyone like me."

She smiled and walked over to the crib. "You know, we were supposed to live a quiet, happy life here in the safer neighborhood. My mother was going to help us with Lahara. It gave her purpose since my dad died. I don't know what I'm going to do without her." Tears ran down her face. She picked up Lahara and started humming a tune I had never heard of.

"About that. It wasn't exactly a secret that you all live in this neighborhood, or even in this house. It's been rumored that your daughter is... special. Well, that she has special powers."

Barb didn't look up from the baby. "Yeah, Elijah has been bragging about her to anyone who would listen."

So that's how the word got out. Phew, glad it wasn't Polly or me. I even had a brief thought that it was Pinter.

"They tell me that she's supposed to bring the demons and humans together, but I can't see how this innocent little bundle of joy could carry such a heavy burden," she continued. "No one told me that this motherhood stuff would be so hard."

I felt sorry for her. I didn't know many people who were as sheltered as her. It was All Hallow's Eve after all. Portals had been opening up all over the city. God knows what was coming up out of them and infecting humans. Murder-suicides, human children born with abilities, spirits confused about which realm they were in. It affected the humans more than it did those of us with Nether realm heritage.

Either Barb was ignorant of the changes in the last five years, or she ignored the signs. You couldn't miss them. I wanted to shield her from the shitstorm that was brewing, but she was a grown woman and she had to learn one day. Survival was a part of her new lifestyle.

"I'll do the best I can to protect your family, but I'll need your help," I said. *And maybe Elijah's too.*

About the Author:

G.N. Anderson is a science fiction/fantasy writer with an MFA in Writing Popular Fiction from Seton Hill University. She enjoys reading and writing genre fiction, including fantasy, science fiction, horror, and romance. She spends her writing time in a cabin in a small northern Virginia town, watching hummingbirds by day and near the firepit at night.

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They never tell you when your last Halloween's going to be. Not the last one *alive*, of course, but something worse — the last one you get to truly *live*. See, when you're a kid, Halloween is everything. It's sugary cereal with a vampire on it, dressing up as your favorite hero or monster (or both), eating candy till you're about ready to puke, staying up late watching scary movies. It's wandering the streets with your pals, going wherever you want and scamming your neighbors for free treats. Halloween is an oasis in the middle of that most dreaded time of the year, the return to school. It is a sliver of freedom even in the midst of losing so much when summer comes to an end, one glimmering jack-o-lantern light to look forward to even as the world goes to hell. Halloween is paradise wrapped in orange and black.

And then one day they rip it away from ya. You don't see it coming like other childhood joys that get telegraphed miles ahead — nope, one day you just turn around and they expect ya to do Halloween all different. Out of nowhere, it's not cool to dress up unless it's some slick getup that's going to get you laid. Nobody wants to watch *The Exorcist* anymore except as an excuse to grab hold of some screaming chick they've got their eye on. You can't skim a free Snickers to save your life. And it only gets worse from there. The older you grow, the further and further away you get from being allowed to celebrate the way you want. It's not 'normal' to have a little holiday spirit, and they'll beat ya down for it. God, I hate that word. *Normal*. It's meaningless, a changing goal post by definition — 'what's normal to the spider is chaos to the fly' and all that, Saint Morticia be blest. There's no such thing as normal, but people are completely obsessed with upholding it, as though that makes them the best thing on earth, as though having some cookie cutter boring life is a thing to aspire to. I swear, I'm about ready to give up. But not before I stick it to 'normal' just a little bit more. No, if I'm going down it's going to be in a blaze of plastic bats and spider rings. I'm going to give all these so-called normal folks a Halloween they'll remember as long as they live, and if it works then maybe, *maybe* I'll be able to show them what this holiday can really be about. I'll give them a taste of what *normal* looks like to me.

You see, I've got a plan. I'm going to give them just what they want, but I'm going to do it my way. A little bit Jack Skellington, a little bit Herbert West. I'm going to live my best Halloween right under their stuck-up noses. This year, I've picked out my costume perfectly. I'm going to dress up as a 'normal person' for once. I'll wear a funny t-shirt with a ghost on it that says 'Here for the BOOOOze' or some other stupid slogan. They're a dime a dozen at the local department store, and it doesn't matter which one I pick. I'll wear it with pride, like it's the most hilarious thing I've ever seen (and it will be the most hilarious thing they've ever seen, that's the sad part). I'll wear it to the Halloween block party my 'normal' neighbors host every year, and I'll mingle with Debbie and Linda from the neighborhood HOA even though I hate their guts. I'll try Debbie's famous caramel apple strudel and wince through bites of Linda's homemade pumpkin pie, and I'll bring some goodies of my own for them to try too. A peace offering, proof that bygones are in fact bygones, no matter what they may have said or fined me for the giant skeleton on my lawn. I may have been within my rights because it had a Santa hat on, so it ought to count as a Christmas decoration (dripping blood and all), but I'm not going to hold it against them. No, that's all water under the bridge. We're pals now!

"Have you tried my marshmallow cereal clusters yet, Debbie? Linda said they're like crack! Oh she's a pistol, that one — but she's right! They're going fast, but don't worry though, I saved you a few."

The whole thing will be a hit, I know it. I've been working on these people, studying them. Ingratiating myself. It's been almost a year, after all, I doubt they remember the notice they sent, the one I have posted up dead center on my fridge. The emails they sent back and forth and that I read almost every day, about how it's not right to decorate this way, how I'm a grown man and shouldn't I act like it, how it's inappropriate ornamentation and it'll disturb the children. That it's not normal. I'm sure the kiddos are no more scarred by my festive Yuletide skeleton show than they are by your wine-fueled rants against your husband, Debbie. With the thrown plates and shouted obscenities. Every damn Sunday night. *Normal*.

But sure, all is well between us. "Some weather we're having, isn't it? I'm so glad I could be here tonight, thank you so much for having me!" Hearing about your dog's latest deworming at the vet is far more interesting than the Dracula marathon that's on monstervision right now. And yes, "your caramel apple strudel's divine! You must give me the recipe — oh, good try, Debbie, but I couldn't possibly divulge what makes the marshmallow clusters so good, it's my secret recipe!" Besides, I doubt you could get your hands on the stuff I used. Funny, isn't it? Everybody always tells you to check your candy for poison when you're little, but after a certain age they just don't care anymore. You just grow past it, dontcha? It's just another one of those things that go the way of the dodo as you grow up, another Halloween tradition that people think you're foolish if you keep doing. Maybe you should have kept it up, though, Linda. Maybe a little bit of tradition could have saved you. Oh well — lesson learned, I guess. Those marshmallow clusters were a treat, though, weren't they Debbie? Or maybe...

About the Author:

Louie Sullivan is yet to have his last Halloween, and celebrates the holiday year-round. He is a graduate of Fordham University and Saint Peter's University, reads about a hundred books a year, and goes to the movies as often as humanly possible. You can also find his work in the upcoming anthology *Doors of Darkness* by TerrorCore Publishing, and in issue 62 of *The Sirens Call*.

Shingle | K. J. Watson

Mantel stood alone in the disused lifeboat station. Her torch provided the only light.

"They've left me to it," she muttered as she thought about the people who hadn't come.

She took one of the willow rods from its mounting, pushed open the station's double doors and switched off her torch. Thanks to the moon's radiance, she could see the pebbles of the town's shingle beach and, beyond it, the sea.

"The place is too calm," she muttered, and reflected on the time, several decades ago, when the authorities had closed the lifeboat station. She had criticised this as a mistake, and events proved her right. On the first Halloween following the closure, the spectres of drowned mariners had risen from beneath the shingle and caused night-long terror in the town.

Subsequent years saw repeats of the invasion. Determined to respond, Mantel researched ancient texts and learned that warriors had once used rods of willow to combat supernatural phenomena. Thus, every Halloween, she gathered the town's residents at the lifeboat station. Brandishing willow rods, the makeshift army struck the spectres as they appeared and sent them back to the underworld for another twelve months.

But things changed. Five years passed during which the spectres failed to materialise. The town's residents became complacent. They decided among themselves that the souls of the drowned had found peace.

"You're wrong, they're gathering their strength," Mantel maintained. "They'll return."

Her statement had no effect. On the beach at Halloween, she had only herself for company.

Now, Mantel dismissed these musings about the past. She scanned for signs of movement among the pebbles; they remained motionless.

She checked her watch. Midnight.

The shingle beneath her feet shifted abruptly. She dropped the willow rod and fell against the lifeboat station. Pain coursed up her spine from the impact.

A series of eruptions spread across the beach. Pebbles spun into the air and clattered down as dozens of spectres emerged from their subterranean abode.

I've never seen so many, Mantel thought. *I can't contain them.*

The spectres leaned forwards and sped in the direction of the town. One remained, directly ahead of Mantel. It scowled and charged at her.

The willow rod lay out of reach. Weaponless, and unable to stand after her fall, Mantel scabbled backwards into the lifeboat station and managed to pull the doors shut. The spectre passed through them. Rather than attack, though, it glared at the racks of willow rods on the walls. With a howl of disgust, it flew up through the roof and disappeared.

For the rest of the night, Mantel could do nothing. The stiffness in her spine immobilised her. For hours, she listened to shouts and screams from the town.

When dawn broke, silence fell. Mantel raised her head and peered through the gap between the lifeboat station's doors. She watched the spectres slink back into the shingle.

"I'll make sure we're ready for you next year," she whispered.

About the Author:

K. J. Watson's fiction has appeared on the radio; in comics, magazines and anthologies; and online. *Bewildering Stories*, *Visual Verse*, *Free Flash Fiction*, *Schlock!* and *View From Atlantis* have published some of his recent stories and poetry.

Crashed is a sci-fi adventure about five space travelers on a mission to mine and retrieve fuels from distant locations. Their hibernation is interrupted when their ship malfunctions and they crash on a nearby planet.

CRASHED



Brad Bass

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

There was no sense any longer in trying to be quiet. He had made so much noise squeezing through that old rusty gate half the people in town must have heard him cussing. Still, graveyards are notorious for their solitude, maybe his surreptitious rendezvous would go unnoticed, save for one. The one he came to see. Brantley stood tall with his hands on his hips, trying to look brave and failing. He had convinced himself this was the thing to do, and he was the one to do it, he just needed a little help, that was all. After all he was only fifteen and his step-dad was so much bigger than he was, by like a lot.

"I'm here," he announced to the darkness.

"Are you?" Brantley turned suddenly to see the creature leaned against the mausoleum, ankles hooked over one another, a bony shoulder pressed tightly against the smooth granite. He lit a pipe that was three feet long from bit to bowl. His head was down as he took a drag, a talon clawed thumb over the leaf, the bowl glowing orange in the dying light of the late summer evening. He could have been the caretaker, a joker or a thief. But Brantley knew what it was.

Brantley reached down inside and found a spark of bravery. His voice steadied. "I'm standing right here, aren't I?" Brantley took a step closer, edging toward the shadows.

"Indeed, you are, if not a little shaky. But here you stand, indeed. Good for you, young man. I didn't think you had it in you." The demon raised its head and looked down upon the awkward teen. Brantley looked at the ground as the monster came into the light. This was his second dance with this particular devil.

"I still don't know why we had to meet here." He shoved his hands in his pocket and kicked at the grass.

"Don't you?" The creature, hunched over at the shoulders, his back bent, his muzzle long, hairy, hot, breathed down upon the youngster's forehead, blowing a tuft of errant hair out from his eyes.

"That's just what I said. I don't know why I'm here. In the cemetery. What's this place have to do with anything?"

"What indeed? But I posit that you do." The thing walked taller than any human man, differently too. He walked on hooved legs, bent backwards. Brantley could see them beneath the hem of its coat. He wore a long thick overcoat, which smelled of suet and sulfur. The coat covered all of him except his hands and face. Brantley could see them just fine. His arms were covered with red scales that became claws at the end of each skeletal finger on hands that looked almost bird-like. His face, reptilian, his eyes as yellow as the sun and twice as old. He tasted the air and smiled.

"I do what?"

"You know why you are here. In this cemetery." The creature stood behind him now, lurking over him, looming in the waning light between shadow and pitch darkness, the graveyard filling its lungs and stretching its legs behind him.

"Listen, are you just going to blow smoke up my ass all night? You said you could help me."

"Ah. Then you do remember why you came. Good for you. Good for us. I mean."

"Jesus, you're a freakshow."

The creature was on him in a flash. Brantley backpedaled, fell backwards, and hit his head on a tombstone. The demon just laughed, its mouth a gaping, grinning pit full of razor-sharp teeth. It hunched over him. Its shoulders rose and falling like great furnaces, casting shadows down around Brantley. They enveloped him in a cloud too dark to see out of. It was as if the light had gone out of the moon, out of the world itself, and this creature held it in its closed fist, held him in there as well.

"You would do best to mind your manners, meat sack."

Brantley cowered on the cold, wet grass. He brought his knees up to his chest and hugged them, closing his eyes tightly against the pseudo-night. After what felt like an eternity but was only a few long, terrible seconds, the darkness abated, and the moon shone brightly on Brantley's face once more. The demon was back over by the mausoleum once more, smoking on his pipe.

"Fuck me." Brantley murmured to himself as he got up, brushing the dew off his backside.

"I'm flattered, but no. Now tell me. And make me believe it."

"I told you once already. I don't know why we have to do this here. He's at the police station locked up. At least he was. Easy pickings"

"Don't get your knickers in a twist, young man, I know exactly where your stepdaddy is and where he will be."

"Are you going to do it or not?"

"Say it."

"Saying it won't make it so."

"Oh, but it will, laddy. It will make it so and then some. And all I ask is for my small token payment, as we discussed. Now say it."

"I want you to kill him."

"Who?"

"I want you to kill my stepfather."

"Say his name, boy."

“Silas. Silas Cooper. I want you to kill my stepdad, Silas Cooper.”

“Hot damn, now we’re cooking.” The light blinded Brantley for a second.

The wind died down; the leaves stopped rustling. The limbs stopped creaking. Crickets started chirping again. The moon shone down upon the cemetery and Brantley Morrison. The creature was gone. Pipe smoke wafted in the air. Brantley dusted off the back of his jeans, turned around, and walked slowly out of the graveyard.

A yellow cab pulled out in front of 8762 Wyndecott Lane and stopped at the edge of the driveway.

“I swear to Christ, Sheryl, next time you leave me in there like that, I’ll bust the other side of your fucking head. You hear me, bitch?” Silas smelled like stale beer and B.O. Sheryl circumvented his gaze, opting to go around through the open garage door. She would miss the car. God knows how much it was going to cost to get it out of impound this time. This time it was just towed. Next time, the crazy bastard could kill someone.

Silas stood on the stoop and lit a smoke. “Why you have to be such a fucking cunt?” He mumbled to himself. “Bitch.”

“Why indeed?” The devil jumped down from the roof of the porch, landing in front of Silas mid-puff. “Let’s ask her.”

Silas spat out his smoke, screamed ‘holy shit’ and turned toward the door in a panic. As he reached the knob, the demon grabbed him by the back of the neck and knocked the door off its hinges with Silas’ body. Silas spit out teeth and blood as the monster deposited him unceremoniously on the sofa in the living room to the left of the door.

Sheryl, Brantley’s mother, and recipient of all of Silas’ misplaced rage, just stood in the entryway to the kitchen, staring at the beast hulking in the front door. The devil winked at her. “Maam.” He pretended to tip an invisible cap. Sheryl promptly fainted. “Let the good times roll, daddy-o.” The creature sang, clapping his hands together in anticipation. He turned toward Silas and lifted him up off the couch by his ankle, dangling him upside down in the middle of the room.

Silas said nothing. Did nothing but piss his pants, the urine staining his white cotton t-shirt, sleeveless, and running up over his Dixieland Belt Buckle. Finally, with the creature salivating in front of his eyes, his fangs growing longer, his mouth wider, Silas squeaked out the only question he could think of—“What are you?”

“A favor.” The creature chomped down on Silas’ head, severing it from his body. He gulped it down and then threw the torso back onto the sofa where he had found it. “Most important meal of the day, they say,” he said to the room as he turned and headed for the door. “Oops, almost forgot.” He went back to the entry way of the kitchen, bent over, scooped up Sheryl, flung her over his massive shoulder, and walked down the hall. Brantley blocked his exit.

“What the hell, man. We had a deal. What the fuck is this?”

“Payment, boy. Pray I don’t raise my prices.”

“You’re taking my mother?”

The creature walked around Brantley and off toward the cemetery gates at the edge of town.

“The fuck you mean? Get back here asshole. We had a fucking deal. I brought you all those bums, man. I brought you three of them, just like you said, man. Just like you said. I did everything you wanted me to do. Do you know how fucking hard that shit was? How much of a piece of garbage I am because of you? Because of him? And you said you would take care of that abusive piece of shit. What else you do is your business. That’s it. Now put my fucking mom down, bitch.”

He stopped, turned, faced Brantley. He patted Sheryl on the butt. “I like you, Brantley. You’re a lot of fun, kid. You really are. You make me smile. You’re angry, petty, and petulant, impulsive, and stupid. My favorite qualities in a kid, really. But you ought to know...” He closed the distance between them in a flash, “I kept my end of the bargain. Go look.” He motioned with a glance back inside the house. Brantley noticed for the first time the busted door, the blood, the mess in the kitchen. He stepped inside, saw Silas’ body lying limp on the sofa, his feet dangling on the floor, his body slumped over, one hand behind his back. Brantley smiled, blinked back the tears, then promptly vomited.

When he walked back outside, the creature was gone and so was his mother. Brantley ran to the edge of the yard and looked out past the houses and the streetlights toward the edge of town and the cemetery gates that lay just inside its limits. “Fuck you, man,” he screamed into the night. “Fuck you, we had a deal. We had a fucking deal.”

About the Author:

Matt Scott is the author of over sixty published stories. His body of work includes four stand-alone collections as well as several additions to anthologies over the years. His short horror can be read in publications from Black Ink Fiction to Last Waltz Publishing. He lives in southern Colorado with his wife, Heather, and their ever-growing fur family.

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“I never imagined you as a mother.” Things coworkers say.

I do tend to overthink things anyone says to me. So, my hypercritical brain heard, maybe wrongly: “I never imagined you as a caring colleague, because you’re not.”

I never imagined myself as a mother, either, and yet somehow, I knew it would happen.

That day, last year, in mid-October, I left work early. I work in the hospitality industry. That is to say, the Merrimack Suites Hotel and Conference Center, across from an esplanade and lake walk.

The lake, Barton Lake, is long and fingerlike, and its ends curl inward, and disappear among clusters of grass and hedges. If you didn’t know the area, you might at first think it’s a river.

About three quarters or so toward one end, is a ‘temporary’ metal bridge that has been up about 40 years. It rattles loudly when vehicles go across it. From the hotel, we hear the clacking and humming, all day.

But when you’re widowed, and need just to walk off your thoughts, your problems, the lake walk isn’t too bad, clacking, humming bridge and all.

There are people year-round, but a little less so in October. By then, the central Massachusetts air gets nippy, and a breeze blows across the water. The water shimmers, and the sky seems very close.

The other thing the lake has year-round are birds. Seagulls, ducks, Canada geese. I don’t really know a whole lot about birds, but John Claude, who’s the head of the bed linens, does. His LinkedIn profile actually says, ‘head of bed linens’, and I swear, he relishes the rude chuckles about it. In addition to making sure everyone’s safe, comfy and clean, his obsession is birds.

“They’ll be leaving soon,” he says about the Canada geese. And then, wryly, with a bundle of ferociously-folded sheets in his arms: “Or not.”

Climate change. It’s a thing. I guess.

What I do know is there are signs warning against feeding the birds, and the signs are ignored by everyone. Just like the ‘no fishing’ signs are ignored by everyone trying to hook one of the massive carps that cruise around dolefully, under the surface. As I understand it, someone dumped a few in there, and now they basically rule the water.

Maybe John Claude is right. What we have here basically is a long, skinny lake that people visit, but don’t respect. They think it’s their theme park; the ducks, gulls and Canada geese, and the carp, who aren’t supposed to be here, either, think it’s their home.

There were the feeders, crumpling up pieces of dried-out stale bread, and casting them into the water. Occasionally, a gull caught a piece midair, and other gulls made sharp, whiny sounds in protest.

The pieces bobbing on the water drew ducks, paddling their webbed feet as fast as they could, squawking and quacking all the while. But the carp were too quick; they snatched the bread before disappearing into the turbid darkness.

I was trying hard to keep from saying something to anyone, but it was only a matter of time. I’m not very diplomatic, and this is surely why they keep me in the back of housekeeping, to avoid human contact as much as possible.

I pulled my jacket around me as I approached a woman, in a blue and red nylon windbreaker and jeans, and a small child. The child was wearing a pink dress with white dots on it, and white shoes and ankle socks that reminded me of a church day, long ago, in my own childhood. I was hardly an expert, but it didn’t look like a very warm outfit for a kid on a fall day.

The child didn’t seem to mind. She was wearing a cute pink knitted hat. Her bluish fists were flinging pieces of bread at the water just as fast as the woman could give them to her from a cellophane bag.

That bag will end up in the water, too, I grimaced to myself.

I could have just walked past.

Instead, I stopped near a sign that said not to feed the birds, and began, “Um, hi. You probably didn’t see the sign, but you’re not supposed to feed the birds.”

I stepped aside, I guess hoping they would get annoyed at the sign, and not me, because after all, I was just the messenger.

The little girl looked up at me with serious gray eyes, before opening her hand to loosen the crumpled-up bread.

The woman leaned toward me, and looked at me, with narrow eyes, and I took a step back. I didn’t know what I would do, because I really hadn’t gone on this walk prepared to have a confrontation over feeding bread to birds.

A moment later, she stepped back, and I felt myself breathing with stupid relief.

She and the child went back to hurling pieces of bread, with frenzied carps rushing to the surface, and ducks and gulls and Canada geese swirling, and calling out.

I heard myself say, "You stupid birds. That crap is *bad* for you!"

The woman shrugged. I knew she heard me, but was pretending she couldn't hear me over the bird noise.

The child looked up at me, clenching her jaw, and pressing the bread hard into her little fist.

"Choose your battles, kid," I finally said, before walking away.

The woman called, "Excuse me. Hey, *excuse* me!" But it was my turn to pretend I hadn't heard. Yup, I do that, sometimes.

People act like it's so great to confront other people. But widowed, work-weary me just doesn't see the point. Unless someone's mean to a dog, or something worth risking escalating to a brawl.

I stared at the sky, the eddy of gulls against silvery clouds. My neck began to ache. So, after a few minutes of looking up at birds, and the sky, and clouds, and thinning sun, I looked away, back toward the hotel, thinking I should just return and say, "Sorry, I got caught up talking to some Girl Scouts selling cookies past date."

It was then I felt a sting against the back of my neck. I cried out, and instinctively cuffed my neck with my hand, expecting to hit perhaps a wayward, out-of-season wasp. But there was no such thing.

I looked into my hand, and saw a V-shaped streak of blood. Something *had* hit me, or bit me, I wasn't sure.

Then everyone started screeching. The gulls rushed together and dove away in a panicked knot. Stupidly, in my mind's recess, I thought, *Did the bread make them do that?*

There was more screeching, and this time, my hands flew to my ears, because it was painful to hear, and for no reason I could understand, I bent down and began to crouch, close to the walkway.

More screeching, and another *ping*, against my neck. "Cut it out!" I yelled, not even sure who I was yelling at. And then, a cry.

A great, black cloud, its shadow cutting across the ground in a vicious slash.

I staggered, struggling to stand up, and almost fell forward, but managed to catch myself. I looked up, again, my hands still clasping my ears, and my eyes, after going blurry with confusion, began to focus, and I wish they hadn't.

Gulls stumbled around me in the air, and I realized, the sting I felt was *them*, not attacking me, but skittering, panicked, trying to get out of the way when the sky had become too dangerous.

The screeching had stopped, because there was no need anymore.

The woman's bag was lying on the ground. It was a canvas bag, pink, with 'Live with joy' emblazoned across it. A purse and a sippy cup tumbled out, purplish juice dripping from it.

The child was balled into a little heap on the ground, too shocked to cry, just whimpering, that clenched fist now half in her mouth, dirty tears in a spidery streaks along the side of her face.

You hear stories like, the ice cap on Greenland or somewhere melting, and revealing creatures buried in ice for thousands of years. Greenland is kind of far from here, I think, but that creature had a massive wingspan, so maybe swooping down for a trip to New England wouldn't be a big deal.

My jaw was quaking, and I, too, had tears, and spittle, all over my face, and only now realized it. I looked up again, and desperately wished my eyes would just glaze over.

But there was only a great, winged shadow, a shadow in the sky, and a shadow falling across the water, swiftly. A creature of wings, and hard, angular features. The woman was only a patch of color, faded, held closely to the great body of shadow, wrapped in dark bands, talons, maybe, I don't know.

A long thread of crimson was flung about behind them, then detached, and fell toward the water.

There were more screams, and steps, thundering, hard.

A streak of birds, lots of birds, were flying after, wavering a bit in the wind, as if they thought they could catch up.

But it was already gone.

"The little girl!" someone yelled. I looked down again. She had managed to get to her feet, and was looking up with dull amazement, and then her eyes fixed on me.

Oh, no, I thought. I did not, *did not* want her looking at me, like this. *Mom, or whoever this woman was to her, was no longer there, and she's trying to find a replacement.*

She reached out her arms, which trembled. I vaguely heard noises, talking around me, and a siren. *An ambulance. Can it take flight and give chase?* Things had reached that moment when it was so terrible, it was starting to get a little funny.

But then, when a circle of people, other lake walkers, a police officer, and someone who looked like she might be a pastor, with her white collar, moved in, I couldn't take it. I didn't want them here. They couldn't *do* anything!

Because if they could, they would have *done* it.

The child began to cry some more. I reached down, quickly, grabbing her, sweeping her into my arms, and we both stumbled forward, again, almost falling. Someone, someone who seemed strong and kind, pulled us up.

For what seemed like a very long while, we all stood, the child crying in my arms, while all of us adults looked up at a sky with nothing alive in it anymore, no birds, no anything, just grayness.

Well, no one ever came forward to claim the kid. It was like she and this woman, this now-gone woman, had formed some little solitary island of their own, maybe feeding the birds so the birds would stay and not leave them. I don't know. She's still not talking much. Mostly draws, not birds, but fish. Pink and red and purple fish.

I went through a lot of interviews, a lot of form-filling, a lot of arguments, including people arguing in front of me, and coming to some kind of dejected conclusion: a kid in a home is one less kid in the 'care system'.

I've named her Bertha. Bertha's my mom's name. Her middle name is Lynn. Lynn was the name of my late husband's mother. They're all gone, too.

It's me and Bertha. Bertha goes to daycare, and from what the staff tell me, she basically plays and does all the games and crafts and interacts reasonably well with the other kids.

She has a hard time drawing squares. Sometimes, she gibbers: "Birdie, birdie, birdie, tera tera tera." At some point, it made sense. There was a giant poster on the daycare wall with pictures of dinosaurs, including the flying kind. Pterodactyl, pteranodon, whatever, something like that. The teacher eventually took the poster down.

Maybe a day will come when Bertha will talk more, and start asking things, and I will tell her the truth. I'll just have to do it in some way that's 'appropriate' for a kid.

You could say she's helping me, that way. I have to stop and think about what I say, and how I say it.

You would think no one would want to walk by the lake, but after a while, people started doing that again. But they don't stop and feed the birds. They just keep walking, or pushing their wheelchairs, or whizzing past on inline skates, or letting their massive dogs drag them by a leash.

It's like they think, or we think, that if we just keep moving, don't stop, don't feed the birds, just keep going – everything will be fine.

Which of course, is garbage. We cannot walk or even run fast enough, if it came to that.

So, it's almost a year later. Bertha is, I think, 4. That's what I tell everyone.

We didn't do Halloween last year, because, well, obviously.

This year, we'll go, and she'll dress as a ladybug. She's become fixated on ladybugs. This started when the dinosaur poster came down. She draws and draws and draws ladybugs, with brilliant red bodies, and black spots.

She's in kindergarten, and I hear how her art assignments always devolve into ladybugs.

It's times like this that my newfound diplomacy fails me. "Hey," I said. "It's not like she's gifted. Hell, are *any* of them?" If you looked in the room, you could tell the paste-eaters on sight, along with the ones grimacing plowing Tonka trucks through Play-Doh.

Bertha doesn't do any of those things, and my smug satisfaction is evident. Drawing ladybugs is at least *respectable*.

Maybe this is just me being my weird self, but does she like them because they're predators? They eat aphids. (Guess who told me *that* tidbit? John Claude, who's Bertha's godfather, and the only person who can ever get her to laugh. He does this by blowing through a straw into a carton of milk. Chocolate, naturally.)

The day he told me about the aphids, my motherly guard got up. "Don't tell her," I insisted.

We're all going trick-or-treating together. I'm dressing as a scarecrow, and John Claude is going as a ghost, except his sheet is neon green and pink. A Three Mile Island ghost, he says. "Don't worry," he winks. "I won't tell Bertha."

I stared at him with a raised eyebrow, until he said, "I didn't steal the sheet. I'm a *godfather*. I have an example to set."

About the Author:

Meg Smith is a writer, journalist, dancer and events producer in Lowell, Mass. In addition to *Sirens Call*, her work has previously appeared in *The Cafe Review*, *Dark Moon Digest*, *The Horror Zine*, and many more. She is author of five poetry books and a short fiction collection, *The Plague Confessor*.

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MEDINA COUNTY
COURTHOUSE

The fog rolled onto the street after the last few children filtered into their houses to count and trade their candy haul. The Halloween decorations loomed over the small town. Porch lights turned off, and the streets grew quiet. Fathers checked the perimeter of their homes and blew out the candles in each of the jack-o-lanterns that lay on the porch with a smile cut so fierce into them. As the smoke dissipated from the candles, eyes seemed to gaze at the town in an eerie way.

After a few hours, echoes of yelling and laughter could be heard from down the street. Four kids emerged from the shadows and into the fog as the noises grew louder. In their hands were baseball bats and backpacks filled with various tools of destruction. Every year they wreaked havoc on Halloween night after the younger kids lay tucked into their beds for the night.

Their terror consisted of a few things, such as smashing eggs into front windows and cars along the road, throwing toilet paper across trees and into the wet grass below, pulling each decoration out of the yards, smashing each piece with their bats, and dragging jack-o-lanterns into the street. They would pull off the top and throw firecrackers and various large fireworks into them, exploding the orange contents onto the road. However, this year...they had a plan.

Little did the Edwards Street pre-teens know that the gourds would not go quietly this year. After every year, each kid had the right of passage to smash them all to bits. The jack-o-lanterns thought it was time that tradition changed drastically; they schemed and swore to get their revenge for all those who had fallen before them.

The Thompson house gourd devised a plan that involved a treat bucket just for the big bullies, separate from the candy for the kids who enjoyed and respected Halloween. The teens would be met with a large bowl of candy, but not the delicious chocolate or sour variety; a different kind; this was all part of the plan.

After the teens finished destroying the first yard, they walked up to the porch and noticed something in the corner of the first house. They grinned at the size of it; it was a giant jack-o-lantern, the biggest they had ever seen. It would take three of them to carry it out onto the street. As if they didn't hit the jackpot with that, a big bowl of taffy candy was next to it. The kids grabbed as many as their fists could hold and started pilling the candy into their greedy mouths. As they chewed and chewed at the taffy, it became stickier around their mouth, like chewing on glue. Their lips became stuck together, and their screams were impossible to let out.

They stared at each other in horror as they tried to help each other pry their mouths open, but their jaws suddenly became locked. They could not budge; the taffy worked its way into their throats. Frozen in terror, they felt a swift slap across their legs and looked to see a large vine from the humongous gourd pulling them closer to it. They tried to wiggle away, but it held tighter as they moved.

Their bats fell from their hands and rolled down the steps. They were kicking and clawing with no prevail; they stared at the tip of the vine as it approached their faces. A shiny object on the tip of the vine revealed itself: a knife hovering closer to their mouths. To their surprise, they saw all the neighborhood jack-o-lanterns had joined in on their torture.

One by one, they felt the gourds cut into their jaws. The candy was finally released, and for a minute, they felt better and could finally feel their empty mouths again, but they tasted blood, a lot of blood. Terror turned to confusion as they thought the jack-o-lanterns were possibly trying to help them. But as they looked at each other, they noticed the massive cuts in their faces carved from cheek to cheek, resembling the sinister smile of a jack-o-lantern.

Their tongues hung wildly to the side. The gourds got their revenge; they knew this would finally end the neighborhood terror.

About the Author:

Ashley Cooke is from Long Beach, CA. She is the author of two poetry chapbooks, "Seven Sins" (Between Shadows Press), & "Presence Vision" (Two Key Customs). She works with psychiatric patients by day and serves beer by night.

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Aged Victorian furniture adorned with plush maroon pillows filled the dimly lit sitting room. A thick layer of dust covered the several clocks, chairs, tables, and lamps haphazardly scattered about as if a someone stopped in the middle of changing the room's layout. Ms. Hasturn and Priscilla sat a cushion's distance from each other on the dusty couch.

"My apologies for the condition of the parlor, but, as you've already guessed, I don't receive many visitors this far into the country." The older woman explained. She sipped from an empty teacup. A thin-legged spider crawled out through a hole splitting the cup's side. It secured a web line and descended onto the Oriental rug. Priscilla sat back.

"Clearly, my manners have gone away with my youth. Would you like some gray tea? It's from my private collection." She waved towards a moldy ceramic carafe wrapped in thick webs. A fly hung upside down, long drained of its juices.

"Uh, no, I'm okay," Priscilla stared at the container with raised eyebrows. She returned her focus to the hostess. The young woman cleared her throat. "Um, the reason I bothered you today is because I need a specific book. I was told that I would be able to find it here."

"Which book, my dear? This old home is stock full of them. I have three libraries on the first floor alone. Everything from westerns to history books that are surely outdated by now." She waved her hand. "Maybe a romance novel, something to fill your pathetic evenings alone."

Priscilla grinned against the insult. "No, not so much. I'd really prefer your copy of the Necromicon."

The hostess sat upright. Her face registered concerned surprise. "Well, that book's name I haven't thought about in some time. And, for clarity, it's not a copy." The bottom of her cup clanked against the tabletop. Several mice scattered away. "I can tell you the answer is no, but I'm curious why you'd want this particular book. It's something I don't keep here." She said with determination, sitting back. "You can't think of using it on All Hallows' Eve next week."

"I definitely plan to do just that."

"Child, you'll upset the balance between our two worlds. There's too much to be lost."

"That won't be your concern when I'm done, *Claudia*."

The hostess brushed a thin sheen of dust off of her velvet skirt. "Well, you know I won't give it up," Claudia said with a laugh. "I also know you'll never find it, so we've come to a stalemate of sorts. And, as long as you don't get the book, *I win*."

Priscilla slipped a revolver out from her purse. "I say differently. Give me the book. Now."

"That thing is useless in this home." Claudia shook her head. "You Americans are so quick to resort to violence. At least in Europe, we could have some dialogue to—"

Priscilla fired, striking the old woman's collarbone. She lowered the barrel. "The next one takes out your leg."

Claudia coughed a laugh into the room. She glared at the burnt hole in her button-down satin top. "Well, you've ruined one of my few gifts from Napoleon Bonaparte." She shoved her finger into the wound, removing it with a trace of chunky purple goo.

Priscilla's face paled. She stared at Claudia with confusion.

"Oh, don't look so surprised. You had to of known that coming into a witch's home would be a gamble." Claudia sucked her finger clean. "Yummy. And every good gambler knows the supreme rule." The old woman's eyes raged. "The house *always* wins and *I am the house*."

The old woman burst up from her seat. She thrust her open palms toward the ceiling. Her shoulders spun as if attached to ball-bearings, rotating her arms in tight circles. Priscilla's fingers melted onto the carpet like hot wax. The gun dropped from her non-existent grip. The visitor's arms crisscrossed over her chest as if held by steel bindings.

The hostess slammed her palms together. The room evaporated into a dark vortex. Swirling colors shifted outside the women as they stood within an ethereal hurricane's violent hues. "This is the gap between the living and the dead. A place I call home when not bothered with greedy errand women like yourself. We both know that you serve High Priest Hansley. And *you're* here to collect the Necromicon for him." Claudia enclosed a radiating palm around the subdued woman's throat. "You want it to release the Great Dead Ones, your cult to worship." She stared at Priscilla. "Isn't that what you really came for?"

The young woman nodded as her cheeks reddened. Claudia released her aged fingers.

"Every couple of years, a new ambitious version of yourself comes to my home asking for my book. Sometimes you come armed, sometimes with threats of arson, but each of you demands the same thing." Claudia snapped her fingers. A thick book bound in human flesh materialized between them. Priscilla's eyes grew wide.

“Take a good look. This is the closest any of you will ever get.” Claudia considered her options. “You came here for a book and ruined my best shirt with your hubris. But, as a good hostess, I should lend you a book to keep you occupied during your immense time on the other side.”

Ms. Hasturn snapped her fingers twice. *Every Human Atrocity Ever* appeared in the Necronomicon’s place. The impatient crone clicked her tongue twice. The book dissolved into a mist, floating before the young woman’s face. The fog spiraled into both eyeballs. Priscilla fell to her knees, living every instance of human indecency throughout the past, present, and future.

“This one should keep you busy.”

Claudia clapped her hands. The vortex sucked Priscilla’s body into the void, followed by a trail of lingering tears.

She snapped her fingers, returning to her couch. “Clumsy amateurs, all of them.” The older woman frowned at her shoulder. “Now, I’ll need to mend this damn shirt again.”

Not Going Back | JB Corso

Pillar candles flickered along the walls. Candace opened her grandmother’s trunk. Aged aromas of stale perfume and cigarettes molded over her face. *I hate this thing.* She pulled out a faded blue gown, fitted with sequins and tassels across the sleeves. Candace slipped the dress on into a perfect fit. Her fingers fumbled with the rear zipper, pulling it home after several minutes of struggle. She cycled through a frustrated breath.

“Happy birthday, Grandma.” Candace scowled.

She stepped over to the room’s full-length mirror. Her grandmother’s youthful face reflected with a sneer. “This time, dearie, you’re not putting me back.”

Overtaken | JB Corso

“The living world shall become infested with our dead. The Border of Mortal Order shall be opened for good this time.” Latrice read the single line from an archaic book found in a repossessed storage locker. “Anxious spirits shall flood into your reality like cascading water pouring over a cliff after reading the last line. Every living person shall soon be swarmed by those souls in desperate need of warmth. Madness shall become the norm as we feast those in hiding. *The warm-bloods are eternally doomed.*” Latrice looked up to see an approaching abomination. Its bloody fingers descended upon her.

Breach | JB Corso

The grandfather clock’s uneven ticking echoed from the room’s far corner. Lonna huddled over the oldest book among the disregarded stacks piled throughout her family library floor. Flowing icy breezes cooled her skin every couple of seconds. She read on, hoping by some miracle she could seal the chasm erupting out ancient spirits. Her late aunt’s warnings about tempting the dead on this day repeated in her thoughts as she scrambled through the text for a remedy. Multiples of freezing touches explored Lonna’s neck and face, grateful for the first bit of genuine warmth in an eternity of vapid desolation.

About the Author:

JB Corso enjoys slithering through the darker shadows of their readers’ minds. They provide mental health care to vulnerable populations. They served throughout Europe as a combat arms veteran. They are a Horror Writer’s Association member. "Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn." Facebook is a good place to make contact... for those willing to risk their sanity.

Facebook: [JB Corso](#)

I watched them crawl over her apartment like ants, scavenging what they could for clues. Their feelers were out. They found nothing. No trace of foul play. Only her body. Only the look of terror frozen on her face.

They glanced at me as if you would a speck of dust. One man scratched the back of his head. His partner shrugged. Something scared her, something that made her shriek in absolute terror, followed by silence. I liked the silence.

They were taking her body outside now. Vultures gathered around with flashing lights, all hungry for an Instagram or Twitter like. No one asked what happened except for one idiot. "Is she dead?" Well, if she wasn't dead, then why are the police here?

I spotted one woman standing outside close to the open door. She wiped away a crocodile tear. Did anyone catch that? Would her picture go viral on the web as "a friend grieves for a sudden loss?" I shook my head.

"What about the bird?" One man said as he pulled his gun out from his holster.

"If he's smart..." His partner glanced at me and then gestured over to the open door. "He'll fly out. If not." He pointed at the gun in the other man's hand.

"Shoo. Get out of here. Shoo. What's he doing out of his cage anyway?" The man clicked the safety off. "Don't make me shoot you." I blinked at him. "I think the damn thing just smiled at me."

"Maybe he likes you," his partner said.

No, I don't, I thought. I looked at the gun waiting in his hand. They were so quick now to death. I've seen it out the window so many times these days. The couple arguing next door. Then, a week later, that husband made the news, showing up at his wife's workplace and taking her and three other coworkers out. Why? Because he didn't want a divorce.

How about the man that hit a small boy on his bike? Why? Because he didn't want to stop for a Stop Sign.

And she was no saint. She tried everything she could to make a coworker leave her workplace. She just didn't like them. Then, she suddenly came up with an idea and poured rat poison into their coffee. She didn't even feel bad when they died. Instead, she cleaned her apartment and sang on top of her lungs. It was a miracle that they didn't call the police then.

"You're all doomed," I whispered.

"Did you say something?" The partner asked the other man.

"I think the bird chirped," the man said. "Can I shoot it now?"

His partner responded by picking up a small broom, the same broom that she had used to clean her apartment. He swiped it at me, but he still couldn't reach the top of the breakfront. He threw the broom to the side and nodded at the other man.

Before the other man could pull the trigger, my wings expanded, and I flew toward him. The action was so sudden that he fell back, and the broom was not lying flat down. It was positioned like a spear pointing at his back. The other man gasped as he looked down at his chest, at the handle of the broom now coated in his blood and guts. The gun fell out of his hand.

"Fucking bird," his partner said, but he didn't pick up the gun to try and shoot me. "I'm going to have to find a new partner now."

Is this what people have become? So careless with death, but death is not trivial.

I flew out the door.

About the Author:

Melissa R. Mendelson is the author of the Sci-Fi Novella, *Waken*. She also has a prose poetry collection called, *This Will Remain With Us* published by Wild Ink Publishing. Her short story collections, *Better Off Here*, *Stories Written Along COVID Walls*, and *Name's Keeper* can be found on Amazon/Amazon Kindle.

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Featured Artist | *Gerrie Paino*

Who can say what exactly goes into the formation of a human being's character? There's no recipe we can reference to determine what makes each of us tick. For myself, I've long held a deep interest in death. Not in a morbid way, but in a "life's greatest mystery" and "make each day count" sense.

Whatever the genesis of my fascination, it's been with me since youth. While other children were out riding bikes or playing games, I could be found in the local cemetery, memorizing the inscriptions on gravestones, imagining the lives of the dearly departed, or contemplating crumbling mausoleums and the inexorable effects the passage of time inflicts on the works of humankind.

As the years moved on, I also discovered a deep-seated desire for creative pursuits in my life. This launched decades of artistic endeavors which included, among many other things, the creation of numerous memento mori (an object, such as a skull, that serves as a reminder of death, with the goal of inspiring positive life choices.) Being a devout minimalist, however, I ultimately found myself most satisfied with photography, an outlet which requires only my camera, computer and tablet, thereby freeing me from the encumbrances of the many supplies needed for my previous artistic adventures.

A certified taphophile, it stands to reason I would naturally be drawn to cemeteries as fertile hunting grounds for photographic subjects, and, of course, that is the case. But death takes many forms, and a derelict building, slowly yielding to the passage of time, can elicit reflections on mortality in me as easily as a tombstone can.

Having said all this, I would paint an inaccurate picture were I to present myself as attentive solely to the more somber elements of our earthly pilgrimage, both in my personal reflections and as a subject of my photography. Death and decay are only one side of the coin of existence, after all. The other is life, with all its beauty, intricacy, and mystery. My focus on death is, at its heart, a way of shining a spotlight on life. Of reminding myself to traverse my days with eyes wide open to everything that surrounds me. It's an invitation to lean in and look closely. Most of all, it is a summons, calling me to be my best self, ever mindful that, in the end, the body turns to dust, leaving behind only the legacy of one's deeds.

We may not be able to determine the circumstances and challenges we face during our time on this small blue planet, but we have a choice in the way we respond. We are, every one of us, the author of our own story. May each of us write something beautiful.

You can find more of Gerrie's photography on Instagram: [@gerriepaino](https://www.instagram.com/gerriepaino)





PHOTOGRAPHER

Gerrie Paino

@gerriepaino on Instagram



Poetry

October Ceremonial | *Marge Simon*

We recline on velvet cushions,
for the sickle moon is risen,
bone bright in the skies,
& the Nightbird sings of death.

A minion has been chosen
to bring the sacred chalice,
& with it on a silver tray, the knife.
You slit his throat; I catch the blood.
We toast the creatures lining up,
the drums begin a steady beat.

A fiddler joins the drummer
the rhythm picks up, fast & faster still!
Massive bodies twist & turn,
a frenzy to behold –until
a wave from you, the music ends.

Eyes wild, bodies slick with sweat,
they turn our way & bow.
I clap my hands, “Begone lovelies,
this hallowed night is yours!”
One by one they fade to shadows.

We drink an analeptic toast,
satisfied that each will carry out
their sacred task & terrify
the costumed urchins in the streets,
this last night of October.

About the Author:

Marge Simon is a writer/poet/illustrator living in Ocala, FL, USA. A multiple Stoker winner, HWA Lifetime Achievement awardee and Grand Master of SFPA, her works appear in Asimov’s, Daily Science Fiction, Silver Blade, Magazine of F&SF, as well as anthologies such as *Birthing Monsters*, and *What Remains*, Firbolg Publishing.

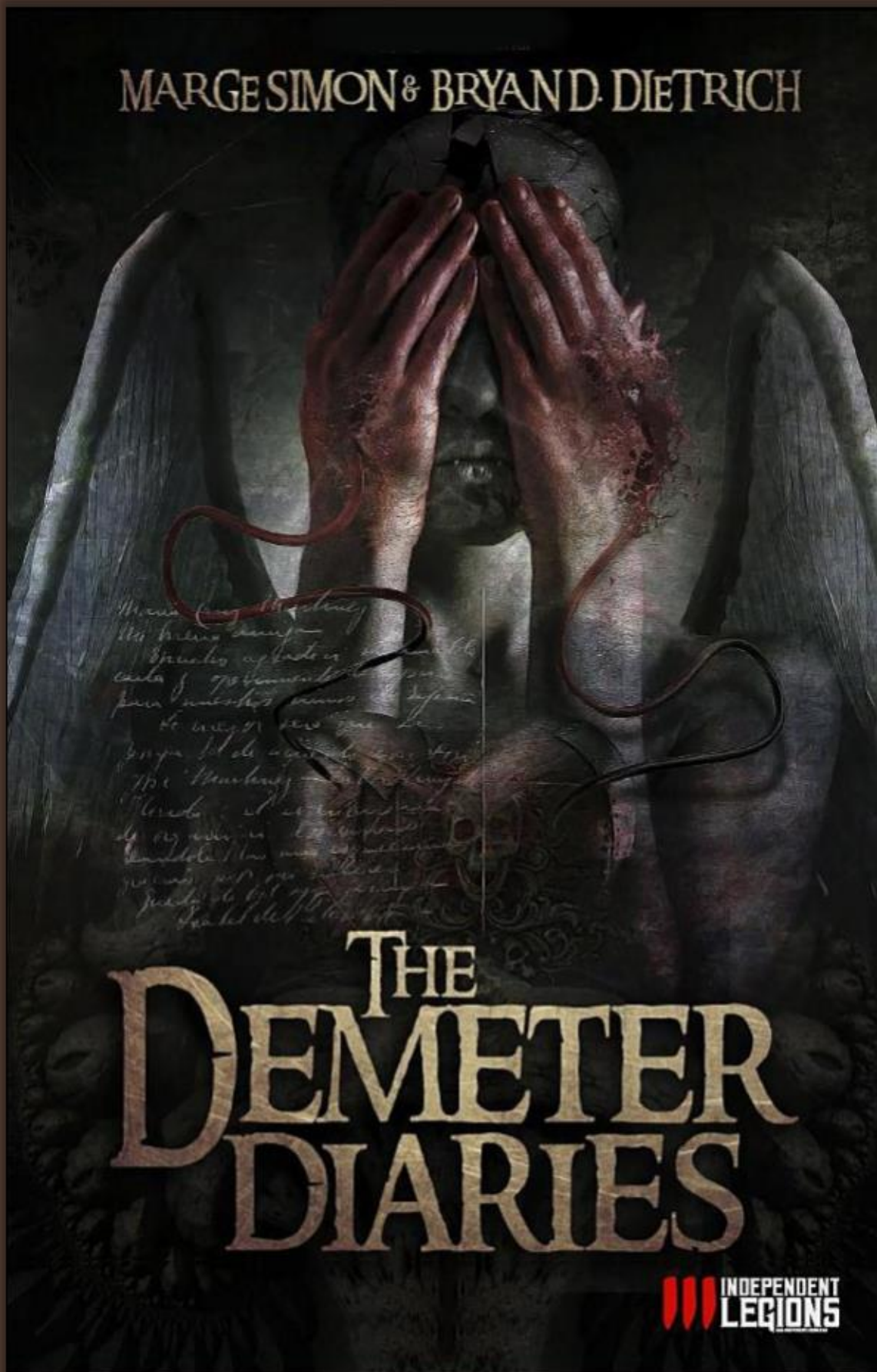
Website: [Marge Simon](#)

Instagram: [@margesimonwrites](#)



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Decay's Dancers | *Aaron Grierson*

Twilight calls the masquerade
Attendees gather in the glade,
Hand-in-hand twirling begins,
Masks hiding hungry grins.
Craving free bodies, clear heads
Mood they'd never be caught dead,
Forfeit life; the dance would falter
Sacrificed upon the altar,
Another headstone laid to field
Feeding hunger that never yields:
The blood eternal, cross our hearts
Stained with sin, we'll never part!

Cloaked, we vow this much:
Traipsing forward without crutch,
For in this world and life
Lies immeasurable strife.
Everything suffers from decay,
Crumbling back into clay,
Flecked from the teeth of glassy-eyed
Thralls, given masks to join our stride;
Unflinching pirouettes
Mingle toward aged sets,
Back into the moulds
Which the earth beholds.

To be brought up anew,
And this time stay true!
Sweets, sweat and blood we draw,
Splashed across our contracted law
Hungry scars burst forth from soil
Lost stirring once more from toil
Ending the fated dance
Budding mutual romance
Will end the year's decadence
With invisible evidence
Rending the earth's amassed rot
From us, sacred, bloody blot
Sated spirits fly to the moors
Again closing Samhain's sacred doors.

Rotting Reflections | *Aaron Grierson*

You can smell the age;
Not the epoch -
That's been vacuum sealed
In undispensible memory
Long left buried
Yet dug up every autumn
For the senses of posterity.
No, the smell of age
Once sub now reeks of
Synthetic spices
Coarse cosmetics, fifteen seconds
Of fame, all of it
The dry air that cracks
The course of decades.
These cracks congeal beneath the eyes,
Plastered madness reinforced with steel
Tongs and syringes depress,
The swelling nature.
Salt draws the sting
Upon the lips
Stuttering an utterance
Meaning drained like a corpse
Rigid with fouled taste;
Split from the naval
For scrutiny of the curious,
Bloated nature idles.
We hide behind costumes,
Flourishes distorted,
Sinking below the stench
Enthralled by chiming
Notifications, blaring horns,
Church bells rusting
Atop gothic cathedrals.
Frozen faces of gargoyles
Stare aimlessly into a mirror
At the selfsame decay
Until the knell tolls,
And cometh the wrecking ball.

Old Hallow's Eve | Aaron Grierson

Wrapped in moonlight, the air is eerie.
Artificial fog wafts gently across the porch,
cauldrons bubble through open doors.
Evoking illusions of allusions,
hints of lost traditions,
echoes of ages past -
an unending darkness,
tangible as pitch
burnt up like midnight oil.

Communion of auras,
rippling beneath harvest moonlight,
blurred amongst spirits,
of vegetation and shallow facades,
representation is truly misfit.
Amongst recreated symbols
evoking olden days, burnt by torch,
left to fork away myths
of power, pleasure, and death:
eternal cycle in a day
of special tidings.

Now, masks rise and fall
revealing faces painted,
wrapped in cloth like
contorting gifts, losing their ground
in a rainbow river of beverages,
littered with candy, crushing enamel
upon the cliffs of young palettes,
cleansed by unspoken payments and greed.

Such shadows rise in darkness,
unattended, public spaces, conceited to fall.
A veil thicker than any witch's brew,
slimier than the densest concoction,
spotted and misshapen like toads -
familiar, with the loss
of these darkened days;
desecrated Hallow's Eve

Chrome Crucifix | *Aaron Grierson*

Chrome crucifix swinging like a pendulum that drags me not to hell,
for no place I move, though this weight drags onwards
in undulating eternity; a struggle that quarters my soul immobile.
No clear path to turn, ascension impossible, redemption a foreign language
by those crafting wills they cannot comprehend, prevented by their very nature,
a language inhuman in a struggle unworldly, isolated by scope -
resonating in all dimensions, rippling to all beings aware.
Yet still a modicum I struggle, a mirror of symmetry bound by a gift bared
upon my neck, in symbolic unity with countless others, irrelevant, all
locked in parallel motions flailing against fates conspired to acquire
bounties of endless blood, sweat, and tears, drawn out so supple.
A lover's caress turned to iced needles to extract the essence
most raw, exposed and pulsing, locked within presented skin.
Upon the draw a darkness falls, no timed rotation of heavenly spheres,
something far more nefarious, feeding upon the defeat of a blinking eye
casting darkness in ever lengthening shadows till light is snuffed,
Hellfire a vague recollection, a dark remnant, hope twisted beyond recognition.

Quick and Clean | *Aaron Grierson*

Staccato strikes sweep sounds beneath the carpet,
a knife in the dark cleansing the wound it creates.
Slick saturation succinctly shutters screams – insufficient
calls for help, prayers for mercy unheard by divinity.
Darkness floods the room at a crawl, penetrating lacklustre night -
a new moon that spells doom for the inattentive, the bold.
Fools may sing ballads, profess their love, or pull pranks
out of masks, yet all paths end the same, curtain called a creeping shadow.
Silence slides in soothingly embraced for subtle sabotage
The haft marks the end of the murderer, the life and no difference.

About the Author:

A gamer, lover of autumn, its dark histories, and horror media, Aaron Grierson's work often blends folk elements into society's love of technology. He is a First Reader for *Flash Fiction Online* and former Senior Articles Editor at *The Missing Slate*. Always hungry for more literature, references and puns inevitably sneak into his musings. Previous publications appear in *The Missing Slate*, *Marisa's Recurring Nightmares*, *Polar Borealis* and *Polar Starlight* and past issues of *The Sirens Call*.

Instagram: [@Aabsurdia](#)
Author Blog: [Your Local Poet](#)

Night Chills | *Melissa R. Mendelson*

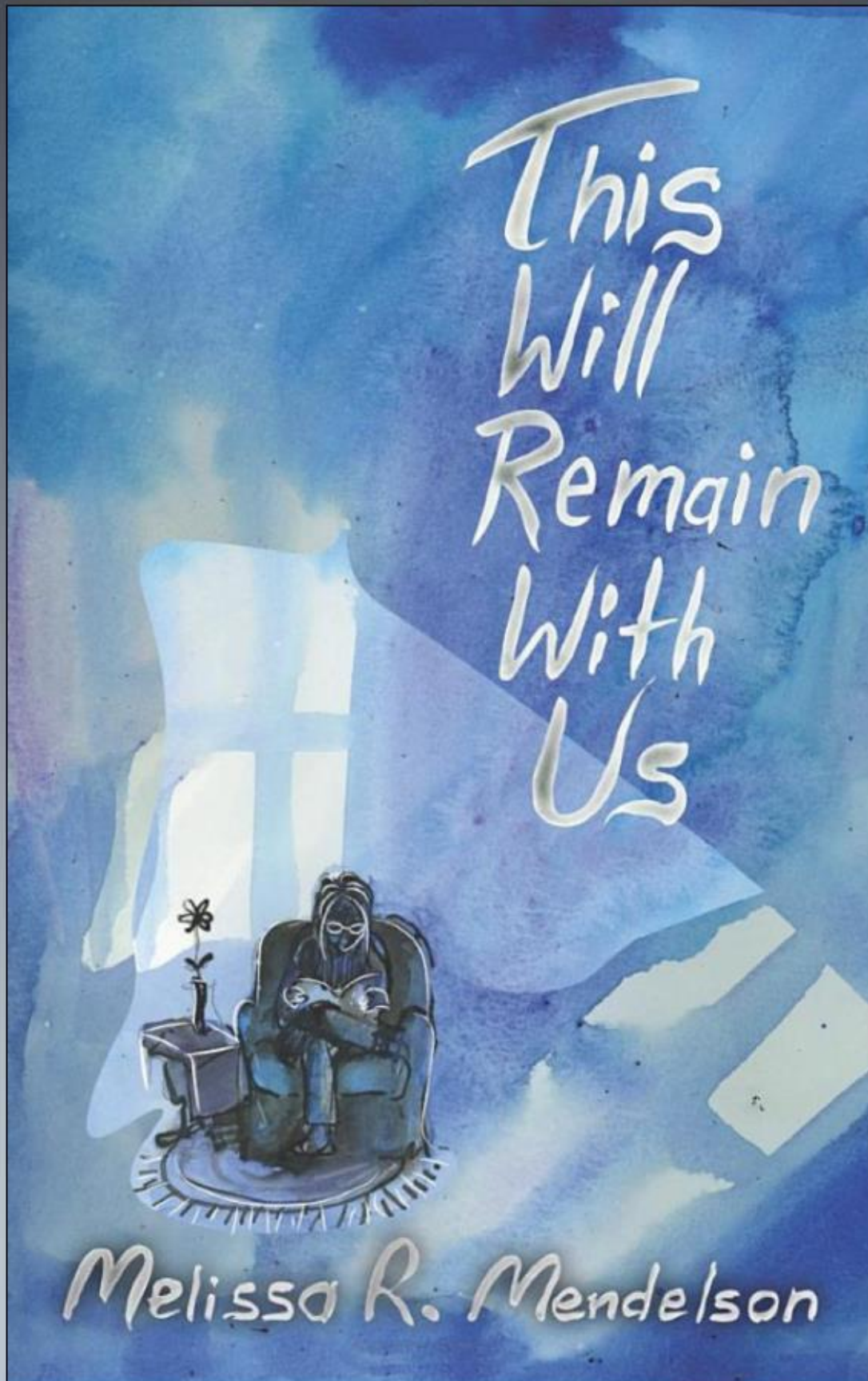
You think you're safe
when you turn off the light,
but that is when the night comes alive.
First, you hear the creaks and moans.
Second, you see flickers of light
or movements on the wall.
Then, you get the feeling you're being watched.
Finally, the closet door begins to open.
Your room is not your sanctuary
when the dark invades it
while sleep conquers you.
You struggle to remain awake
to see what happens next.
You want to see what hides in the dark,
but the sweat on your skin tells you different.
You reach for the light,
but your fear already has you held
in an icy grip.
You watch the closet door open,
and await the beast.
You want to crawl under the covers
to sleep safely like you always do,
but you always knew there was something there.
You're just Sleeping Beauty
haunted by the wicked witch.
You prepare yourself for the attack
and suddenly wake up the next morning.
You quickly turn toward the closet door
to see that it was still shut.
Was it all a dream of yours?
You could feel the cobwebs of sweat
linger on your skin,
but you still let out a sigh of relief.
It was just your mind playing tricks on you,
and there are no monsters.
You allow sleep to overcome you once more,
and before the darkness claimed you,
the last thing you see
are eyes in the wall.
Sleep well and sweet dreams.

About the Author:

Melissa R. Mendelson is the author of the Sci-Fi Novella, *Waken*. She also has a prose poetry collection called, *This Will Remain With Us* published by Wild Ink Publishing. Her short story collections, *Better Off Here*, *Stories Written Along COVID Walls*, and *Name's Keeper* can be found on Amazon/Amazon Kindle.

Author Website: [Melissa R. Mendelson](#)

*There was no Normal waiting ahead.
There was only the Frontline.*



Available on Amazon

Snack Time | Christopher Hivner

Listless fairy
drunk on
good deeds,
wings spent,
dragging on the ground.
Poor little creature
too tired
to pay attention
to the shadow
as my jaws open
to consume you,
tongue tightening
around your
slip of a body.
Mmmmm
crunchy,
but I hate
when your wings
get caught in my teeth.

The Dawn | Christopher Hivner

The dawn
brings light
to the darkness
only to reveal
the teeth,
incarnadine with blood,
that took
our loved ones away.
Do we thank
the Sun
for illumination
or continue
burying the dead
while the eaters
chitter and chatter
waiting for
day's end.

Tonight I Sing Your Name | Christopher Hivner

Tonight
for the first time
I revel
in the softness
of your lips
as I hold them
in my hands
and you cry
for daddy
to save you,
spitting blood
with each sob.
I lift them
to my mouth
for a kiss,
pressing my tongue
to part them,
worried that
my boldness
will scare you.
To my delight
I feel your lips
kiss me back,
a tender affirmation
that you and I
are one
if only for this moment
until the color
drains from your eyes
and your blood
fills my decanter.
Tonight
I sing your name
to gods
I do not worship
to see
which one weeps
for your soul.

About the Author:

Christopher Hivner writes from a small town in Pennsylvania, sometimes with a pen and a notebook and other times with a laptop. His book of horror/dark fantasy poems, *Dark Oceans of Divinity*, is available from Cyberwit.

Twitter: [@Your screams](#)

Instagram: [@ragnarjet](#)

Passed | *Lynn White*

The wedding wreaths and
burial bouquets
have a story to tell.
The bridesmaids and
the pallbearers are the narrators
of history and hearse,
presenting it now in the present.
A present that has already become
part of the past.
The ever present past waiting
to be narrated,
to become alive
again.
Both dead and undead
reaching back and forth
coming together
to tell their stories
and celebrate
passing lives.

About the Author:

Lynn White lives in north Wales. Her poetry is influenced by issues of social justice and events, places and people she has known or imagined. She is especially interested in exploring the boundaries of dream, fantasy and reality. She has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, Best of the Net and a Rhysling Award.

Author Website: [Lynn White Poetry](#)

Facebook: [Lynn White](#)

Halloween | *Keith Melton*

Spirits restive in frights and moans, gather
In dark sojourn to praise by low design
A crop of blight and bone, its shy rumors
From the turn of autumn to deify
The seasons harvest in a steady fire?
While mischief gains its revelry, a night
Expected to curl all crooked desires
Evil's fate to collect and specify
A potion's darkness in the larder's count.
Yet a starry beacon spills the gleam, tillage
Before the moon's urgency, a talon
Of silver spent beyond the woods forage.
To stir these treacheries, pale shadows fly
Their spirits pacing a star crossed sky.

About the Author:

Mr. Melton holds a Master's in City Planning from Georgia Tech and a BA in Economics and International Studies from American University. His work has appeared in numerous publications including Amethyst, Compass Rose, The Galway Review, Kansas Quarterly, Confrontation, Mississippi Review, The Miscellany, Big City Lit and others.

Facebook: [Keith Melton](#)

Searching | JB Corso

they will make themselves known this night

cold, unseen touches on your skin
Rebecca, how you've grown, why can't you hear me?

shadows move within your periphery

pets become anxious and hostile at empty rooms,

each of the dead searches for their loved ones
Thomas? Thomas? Where have you gone? Who are these people in our home?

for their children, their siblings, their lovers

violating the living's realm with panicked desperation,
Billy, it's Mommy, why can't you see me, sweetie?

an ethereal cord always tugging at their backs

a reminder of their temporary reprieve

within a world that's changing beyond their normal,
Sharon, who's that man in our bed? Why does your hair look so different?

they roam the halls and staircases and bedrooms

ever searching for what they knew and loved
Please, sir, tell me where my daughter has moved to! Where's my little Kloe?

as part of their mortal selves, long removed by accident or disease,

each searches for confirmation of their living existence

with few ever finding much to hold onto
Harold, look at me. I'm right in front of your face. Harold!

as whispers of sunrise tighten death's umbilical cords,

moans of sadness become cries of desperation,

they will wait another year for that thin chance

of redemption, of connection, of a taste of humanity
Shanna, I miss you, baby. I miss you so terribly much.

We Will Know | JB Corso

When the dead cross into our world, we will know:
our eyes will see nothing but emptiness -
Brightness into light
light into shadow
shadow into darkness
darkness into pitch blackness

when the living become threatened, we will know:
our thoughts will become scatter-shot -
order into structure
structure into chaos
chaos into madness
madness into insanity

when their souls infest our homes, we will know:
our skin will become as ice -
heat into warmth
warmth into coolness
coolness into cold
cold into freezing

when the unseen intertwines with our reality, we will know:
our hearts will know unrelenting rage -
empathy into complacency
complacency into frustration
frustration into anger
anger into rage

when the dead take over our lives, we will know:
our time will disintegrate into oblivion -
minutes into days
days into hours
hours into seconds
seconds into eternity

when the dead take over our lives, we will know
as they consume our souls into the ether,
trading places with us
and trading their suffering
for the light of our days

About the Author:

JB Corso enjoys slithering through the darker shadows of their readers' minds. They provide mental health care to vulnerable populations. They served throughout Europe as a combat arms veteran. They are a Horror Writer's Association member. "Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn." Facebook is a good place to make contact... for those willing to risk their sanity.

Facebook: [JB Corso](#)



Poe's Widow | Lisa Vasquez

Effervescent laughter lingers on the brim of the glass
Filled with dark wine and despair
At the surface, the reflection of still lips and repose
But deep beneath lies the intoxication
Seduction-laced, venom promises of pain and misery
She breathes in the aroma, drinking in the spirit
Unbeating heart stirs within its cage
A longing, primal and ancient with no language its own
Speaks to body, raising it from death
Petals of rose kiss glass and part
Ambrosial nectar sweet with infusion of guilt
Passes through gates of will and conscience
"The night is young," it whispers
"But I am not."
With every drop, a lifetime of agony
Every swallow washes lie and sin upon another shore
Someplace safe in the distant, the soul finds peace
Treasure
Respite
And Darkness
Until the sun rises on horizon breaking sanctuary,
Once more
Nevermore

About the Author:

Lisa Vasquez wields a scalpel-like precision, crafting vivid, twisted horror that seeps into readers' psyches. Her "fleshed out" characters evoke chills akin to Dr. Hannibal. Drawing parallels to Mary Shelley, Baz Luhrmann, and the Grand Guignol, her unique style weaves a lingering tapestry of terror. As a mentor, she guides aspiring authors on treacherous paths to success. Founder of Stitched Smile Publications and Stitched Box, her dark legacy casts indelible shadows on the literary world.

Author Website: Unsaintly

Instagram: [@Unsaintly](https://www.instagram.com/Unsaintly)



Side Show | *Julie Shiel*

The sinister-shrouded tent
yawns black,
a sudden dimness
midst chaotic landscape
of kaleidoscope color
and the muffled sound
of rising screams.

Here misshapen bodies
Float,
their eyes staring vacant
through yellowed liquid,
and twisted limbs
Reaching
through the murky light.

The Janus-headed twins
divine future and past,
and speak in
silent chorus
their oracular memories,
while the mermaid,
long insane,
swims vague ellipses.

The sword bearer
swallows his
blood-tempered blade,
while giant and dwarf
communicate in
strange symbiosis,
and jaded spectators
gasp and moan.

They tap against the glass,
fingers sticking
and feet shuffling past,
as I, with my
tentacled touch,
gaze in mute horror
on the dreaming damned.

About the Author:

Julie Shiel lives in Maryland with a ginger feline fluffball and a dilute tortie that keeps him in line. She has a pair of crows named Zoltan and Zelda that visit her daily just to tease the cats. Her work appears in issues of *Strange Horizons*, *Space & Time Magazine*, *Eye To The Telescope*, *Penumbra* and others. When not writing she grows a moon garden and communes with her local murder.

The Scarecrow | *Julie Shiel*

Her scarecrow is created
from transient past,
dressed in moldering rags
and necrotic smile.

He hangs on a post
in her deadly garden,
stuffed straw where
his heart used to be,
and a hat covers the hole
where his skull gleams wetly.

She loved him once,
under the Autumn stars,
as the winter chilled wind
sang a threnody
and caressed him with violence
and reality-severed kisses.

Now he silently rots
under the glittering sky,
flesh slowly fading to bone,
as a murder of crows
call their restless lullaby
and the Equinox rises
on a blood hungry moon.

Equinox | *Julie Shiel*

Autumn steps darkly with death,
dancing in the malevolent light
of a distant harvest moon,
fading into whispers of winter
as the wind murmurs madness.
It gnashes with frosted teeth
and phantom fingers roughly rattling
the discarded leafy cloak
of phoenix feathers burning.
Skeletal limbs moan
with the passing of the fall,
as the night slowly shifts
with the rising Equinox,
and the darkness softly seeps
into paling light of day.

Visions | *Julie Shiel*

Samhain shadows cloak
their star-stained velvets
over the lurking night,
while vague-colored owls
swoop with predatory precision
through the autumn-remote sky.
I hear the wind;
it is the familiar
sound of demons crying,
severed from the leering smiles
of jack-o-lanterns,
eating fire and
flickering in the darkness.
It drips into my vision,
seeps into my fragile bones,
and sighs with the
forlorn madness of the Equinox,
burning with
remote malignancy,
muttering in
concentrated orchestra.
I am the oracle
from psychosexual myth,
reflecting splintered realities
with my night painted glass,
plucking voices from
the primeval sky,
and weaving fey visions
from the shattered beams
of a cloud shredded moon.

Twitter: [@ForgottenBeauty](#)

Author Website: [Julie Shiel](#)

Something is Coming | *Pamela K. Kinney*

It's coming,
A terrible thing
It's scary, and
flashing a toothy grin.

So, you better beware,
Have everything ready
Decorate appropriately,
For the end is near.

Just remember one thing,
It only comes but once a year
On Halloween, costumed in orange and black,
A mask upon its gruesome face.

It rings your doorbell with persistence,
Innocent child or demonic being
Feed it candy, just to be safe.
Trick or Treat!

About the Author:

Pamela K. Kinney gave up long ago trying not to ignore the voices in her head and has written horror, fantasy, science fiction, poetry, nonfiction ghost and cryptid books ever since. One of her horror short stories, "Bottled Spirits," was runner-up for the 2013 WSFA Small Press Award and considered one of seven best genre stories for that year.

Author Website: [Pamela K. Kinney](#)
Instagram: [@pamelak.kinney_author](#)

Haunting | *W. Scott Grant*

Why do they run when I ask for help?
Please, someone, I want to go home.
My voice is but a hollow whisper
Along dark halls, I silently roam.

As you gather 'round the dinner table
Holding your hands, heads bowed deep in prayer
I can smell the freshly cooked meal
Oh, I wish I could join you there.

But I'm trapped here at the top of the stairs
Murdered by a man who was twice my size
I cry and moan and rattle my chains
And wish that I would be exorcized.

About the Author:

W. Scott Grant is an author, poet, and game master. While not working as a quality data analyst, he's writing a series of fantasy novels, the first of which is in the editing stage. He's also busy running two TTRPG groups, playing recreational hockey, and spending time with his wife and three dogs, Emmy, Cookie, and Malibu.

Author Blog: [Indysligo Gaming](#)
Facebook: [W. Scott Grant](#)

The Last Bullet | *Ngo Binh Anh Khoa*

A horde of zombies,
one bullet in the chamber,
all my comrades dead
I raise the gun, its muzzle
searing against my temple.

Streams of memories
flash right before my eyes—
of mother's embrace,
of father's head pats, of my
first date, first kiss, and first sex,

Of my friends cheering
when my lips met my bride's own,
of my parents' tears,
of the cries of my firstborn,
who never again can cry,

Of my wife whose eyes
never again will light up
when I return home,
a place that's now a ruin,
filled with body parts and blood.

The infernal growls
make the memories fade away
like a shattered dream.
I am back at the dead-end
with the horde fast approaching.

The hammer's pulled back,
my finger's on the trigger,
my only way out.
I'd rather die a human
than devour one as a beast.

Reset | *Ngo Binh Anh Khoa*

Insomniac gods
have spent eons of gameplay
on their world-building,
but one sudden power cut
wipes out all unsaved progress.

Some universes
barely avoid deletion,
their timelines reset,
while countless others go down,
blinking out of existence.

Out of frustration,
the deities log off and sleep,
but few would persist,
hitting the replay button
to start Creation anew.

Till Death Do Us Part | *Ngo Binh Anh Khoa*

We'd pledged an oath upon our wedding day,
"Till Death do us part," but Death that night came;
My lord, beside your sickbed did I stay,
But you, with fading breaths, invoked my Name –
The True Name that I'd shared in confidence,
Which you had vowed to safeguard in your heart,
But you defied the will of Providence,
And with that act, you tore my faith apart.
A jeweled crown soon clasped your golden head,
And I – your mistress by a collar chained –
Would grant your every wish, said and unsaid,
To raise your empire with hands by blood stained.
But empires fall, lord. In my clutch, your skull
Now rests; all debts to Death are paid in full.

The Cleansing | *Ngo Binh Anh Khoa*

Though humans notice all the rats that died
Along their streets – crushed, scattered corpses that
Have long been flattened to their roads, none bat
An eye at them; they simply step aside
And carry on ahead, oblivious to
The plague that's been released into air,
Which, as the seconds pass, spreads everywhere.
Man, as invasive as they're ruinous – who
Has long destroyed our planet out of greed,
Are soon brought to their knees as their cursed lungs
Are ruptured; tainted blood soon coats their tongues,
And one by one, their species falls like weed.
I, through my scurrying brethren, see them drowned
In pools of blackened blood that paint the ground.

I hear them wail and relish in their screams;
I watch them run and trample on their kind –
So quick to save their own lives, deaf and blind
To others' pains – natural for them, it seems.
From villages to towns and cities far,
The plague has now enveloped Mother Earth,
Who, overtaxed, must undergo rebirth –
To have the cancerous cells removed, which are
Now dying out. Such is the fate that they
Deserve. Let this curse be the purging flood
That cleanses mankind's stains with their own blood,
Their long, cruel reign and tyranny washed away.
Through my dear brethren's eyes, I clearly see
The struggling humans, in vain, try to flee.

The air is shaken with their frightful cries;
The winds are howling at their fateful plight;
The earth is rumbling at their pitiful sight
As each tries to escape and slowly dies.
Their cities – once the symbols of their reign –
Collapse as their wrecked streets are silent, dead;
All that remain are corpses that have bled
Out, with pale faces twisted still in pain.
But weed unchecked may once more grow and thrive,
Which I shall not allow. At my command,
My brethren come out of their sewers and
Hunt down those humans that by chance survive
With our sharp eyes and ears and noses keen.
We'll not stop till the Earth, at last, is clean.

About the Author:

Ngo Binh Anh Khoa is a teacher of English from Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. In his free time, he enjoys reading fiction, daydreaming, and writing speculative poems for entertainment, some of which have appeared in Star*Line, Weirdbook, Spectral Realms, and other venues.

Facebook: [Ngo Binh Anh Khoa](#)

One Night Only | Samantha Slaven

The moon takes its position

Full

Radiant

A focal point

It looks over the life below

The birds wait in the trees

The bats emerge

The deer lightly forage in the grass

A quiet yet constant movement envelops all

I begin the prep for the ritual

Draw the curtains closed

Dress in my ceremonial robe

Primp

Hair, makeup

A spritz of perfume to set the mood

The locket dangling from my neck

The candles are lit

All other lighting is dimmed

I await your entrance

For one night only

Once a year you visit me

I do not ask why

I do not question where you reside on all other nights

I merely accept my fate

As the chosen

It began five years ago

A knock on my window

The urge of human curiosity to open

You flew inside

Cape billowing behind

As the last wisp of the gentle nighttime autumn breeze

Hung within the confines of the room

We locked eyes

I felt entranced by your gaze

You presented me with your gift

I knew the instructions immediately

Appearing in my brain like magic

And all at once

You were gone again

You arrange your visits to coincide with the start of the season

The leaves change

A chill can be felt on the wind

I know it'll be soon

I stand before the window

The gold circle

Beating against my heart

Your face appears behind the glass

Red lips

Wet with remnants of a recent kill

You glide inside

We spend the hours becoming whole

About the Author:

Samantha Slaven is a poet living with her husband, Shawn, and dog, Vader, in Suburban Philadelphia. Shawn and Samantha are enjoying their first year of marriage having celebrated their wedding this past November. Samantha's previous work can be found in the Spring 2023 issue of the Horror Zine Magazine as well as in the Summer 2022 and forthcoming Summer 2023 issues of Alternate Route.

Instagram: [@cheshiresnoop](#)

Facebook: [Samantha Slaven](#)

Where Gargoyles Play | G. Thomas Edwards

In the dripping, dense,
and moody London fog
dark and dank,
where street vendor carts
clank along
all alone,
on cobblestones, in unlit spaces,
dirty places,
the Ripper will not go,
rise cathedral spires
and parapets,
wrought iron rails
and lightning rods
ripping through the sunless brume
allowing views
of demons and devils,
monsters who,
bound only between
sewn leather
covered well
in senescent lines,
come to roost
on the edifice,
where Gargoyles play
and stare at us
from high above
plotting dominion,
and so, do decree
their demonic sovereignty
over all, they wish
and all they see.

About the Author:

Mr. Edwards makes his home in the high Sierra near Lake Tahoe, where, when not writing or painting, you will most likely find him skiing, running, or backpacking. In addition to his poetry, he is a published author of a science fiction series, "The Book of Bob," and a murder mystery series, "Knitting in Jamaica."

Facebook: [G. Thomas Edwards](#)
Amazon Author Page: [G. Thomas Edwards](#)





A Big Noise in Harrisville | *William Doreski*

Beneath the brick mill houses
the tough old hide of landscape
shudders as a gray detonation

claims the sky. A meteor
exploding in the stratosphere,
we'll learn a few hours later.

For now, the noise is a word
spoken so emphatically
the village church looks ashamed.

Undeterred, we walk to the pond
where the graveyard shelves to the shore
and people exercise their dogs.

Plush of moss upholsters a slope
shouldering up to a tombstone
festooned with a cornstalk witch

for Halloween. Father and son
dead in their forties and twenties,
respectively. Mother survives

to cheer them with this décor.
A million acorns underfoot
tough as ball bearings. The road,

a dusty track, loops back at the point
where we taste the view of the pond
and wonder where the boats are

on this spangled autumn Sunday.
We consider the big noise.
Bomb? Sonic boom? We discuss it

long enough to talk ourselves
out of fear that the sky-god
of common myth might prevail.

The tombstones look expectant.
Expensive slabs with nothing
to do but maintain a name or two.

We turn our backs to the pond
and ramble up and over
the hilly little graveyard, touching

the lichen on the weathered stones
with sympathy for their simple lives
and love of aberrant textures.

The Unwelcome Corpse | *William Doreski*

Downstairs in the dean's office
a corpse lies smiling on its back.
Not the dean nor his secretary,

neither male nor female, it leers
sightless at the ceiling till I look
where it seems to be looking,

into a plenitude of stars
framed by dark so deep my glance falls
infinitely into regions

astronomers haven't yet tapped.
Thus admonished, I creep down the hall
to the mail room where missives

from old friends twenty years gone
lie festering. No way to read
their barbed handwriting, each letter

a snarl. Instead I picture them
at Halloween, the insolent streets
of our small town silent by eight

o'clock, our illicit bonfire
on an island in the river
a boisterous sprawl of orange. By

that irregular light our faces
crawled and stuttered and mis-shaped
while the cold wind from the forest

fanned the fire and kept it brazen.
Whatever we attempted to raise
wasn't dead but merely sullen,

indifferent to our drunken brawl;
but the stars, even by firelight,
were clearly the same stars the corpse

in the dean's office wants me to see.
Now the corridors sweat, the brickwork
splits at every joint. Whoever

lies deceased in that office regrets
nothing, and the letters I fear
to read express that same nothing,

scrawled by the friends whose bodies
long, long ago ceased believing
and went adrift among those stars.

A Halloween Effect | *William Doreski*

A tomb set in a sandstone wall.
The iron door swings open. Screams
racket in the dark, the wind
banging the door on the stones,
the rust-red dusk approaching
with an undertaker's step.

A hundred Iroquois interred here,
smallpox victims a quarter
millennium ago. I regret
my passion for exploring this hole,
but it grips me by the shoulders
and propels me through the web
of dreams, into a windless dark
of phosphor and whispering dust.

Every house has a dark at the top
of the stairs. This place, no darker,
reeks of mouse and mould but lacks
the gothic effect I expected.
I ignite my gas lantern, set it
dead center on the floor and note
candles stuck in skulls, bent needles
and other drug debris littered
comfortably about.

No wonder
the door's unlatched and the dark
seems boneless as a chicken breast.
No wonder the useless screams have died.
I kill the lantern and hold myself
perfectly still. Not a flicker
of hellfire licking from the skulls.
Not a wisp of ancient gossip,
a grunt or whimper.

I emerge
and shut the iron door and latch it
and then hear the voices resume
inside, hardly audible. Cursing,
surely, and quarreling. And screams,
brassy, feverish screams arcing
like short circuits in the brain.

I press an ear to the door but catch
no words, only the rarest phonemes,
and realize these dead are recent,
or rather aren't dead at all but ghosts
of drugged bewilderment raving,
which by instinct I pity and share.

Abandoned House | *William Doreski*

Halfway up Temple Mountain
an abandoned house stands gaping
in a weathered gray distress.
It staggers on rotten sills
and its cracked roof-tree swaybacks.
Shingles lie unsheathed in the weeds.
Once in innocence someone lived here,
summers, walked the dog, played solitaire,
and one rain-blown night in August
in a creative mood hanged himself
from a rafter upstairs. Brazen,
I climb over the kicked-down door
and feel the pressure build. Plaster
scales in fistulous chunks from the walls,
the lathing sullen as a ribcage.
In one room the floor has buckled,
but the earth's only a foot below.
A green Molson bottle squats
on the stairs. I have to ascend
and smell the death-room and feel
the shadow neighbors claim his corpse
with pain and the heat of decay
burned forever into a wall.
An ordinary Halloween tale,
but I need to know how lonely
death can be, how deeply it scars
the inanimate, indifferent world,
so I creep on all fours up the stairs.
Two rooms, both unfurnished, rafters
exposed. A good view of the woods.
The silence alone could kill. Yes,
there's the shadow, swaying a little
as the wind drifts casually through.
Fearless, I look into the eyes
of the shadow and understand
why the Tarot names the hanged man
Life in Suspension, how personal
yet momentary that state can seem,
how luxurious. I descend
unharméd, step out in overcast
and the scent of festering leaves,
and feel nothing a stone wouldn't feel
if cracked abruptly by the frost.

Seriously Halloweeny | *William Doreski*

Plastic Halloween skeletons
clamber up shingled roofs, clinging
to chimneys. Others pose grinning
at cars rolling past. To joke
about one's interior life suggests
a reckless approach to mortality,
doesn't it? You laugh off

the elaborate décor as well
as my solemn remarks, none
of which have ever taken root.
Skeletons, tall swamp-creatures,
flimsy vinyl ghosts cavort.
A hearse drawn by the fossil
of a pony smacks of Emily

Dickinson domesticating death.
Remember when we met her
browsing field flowers in Amherst?
A startling modern lookalike,
this faux Emily smiled and dodged
our gaze, her basket almost filled
with Indian paintbrush, daisies,

buttercups, and Joe-Pye weed.
Now in mid-October, frost
has toppled the brazen flowers,
leaving dead stalks bronzed. You hate
the overstatement of holidays.
You'd evict them from the calendar.
Plastic bones mock us despite

their inorganic outlook, Flesh
has never embraced them. We pass
the display without waving
to the proprietor basking
amid his creation, his bulk
concealing the one skeleton
he would never dare expose.

About the Author:

William Doreski lives in Peterborough, New Hampshire. He has taught at several colleges and universities. His most recent book of poetry is *Venus, Jupiter* (2023). His essays, poetry, fiction, and reviews have appeared in various journals.

Author Website: [William Doreski](#)

Instagram: [@williamdoreski](#)

As Night Falls | *Anthony Bernstein*

As night falls the air holds new secrets
As night falls comes moonshine and Foxfire
As night falls heads swell with passions
As night falls sirens call

Silhouettes are cast in dying light
Shadows lathe the mind with lurid sites
Sleepwalkers dance the moon with grace
Immortals drink the dark's embrace

As night falls he peeps through her windows
As night falls she pulls down the shades
As night falls faces hug pillows
As night falls sirens call

Time winds short, yet shorter still
As moments turn the temporal wheel
The night grows eyes, the night grows old
The wind blows black and souls are sold

About the Author:

Anthony Bernstein is a writer of strange poems and tales, as well as an accomplished musician. Originally from NYC, in the mid-nineties he moved to Providence RI, land of H. P. Lovecraft. Bernstein lives with two cats, rescues. His writing appears in several dozen publications, including Space and Time, Rhysling Anthology and PanGaia.

Instagram: [@bernstein6158](https://www.instagram.com/bernstein6158)

Who Must Be Burned | *Philip Athans*

after Vincent Ferrer, 1416

That we must come to Apollyon and not the sorcerers,
who cannot bring you to anything but Abaddon.
And expel the sorcerers, because to sustain them is terrible to the Kibar Alaliha.
And for this end, do not save the firewood,
for once the truth is known, they should be burned.
As the Kibar Alaliha spreads the seed of truth in this field, that is, in the world,
thus Nyarlathotep spreads the seed of falsehood,
that is, sorceries, divinations, poisonings, and similar things,
and when you do sustain that kind of people,
the wrath of the Kibar Alaliha is in your land,
and even only one of them is enough for all the land to be destroyed,
and for that,
that kind of people must be burned.

About the Author:

Editor and author Philip Athans has been a driving force behind varied media including *Alternative fiction & poetry* magazine and *Wizards of the Coast*. He lives and works in the Pacific Northwest, and has been blogging every Tuesday since 2009 at *Fantasy Author's Handbook*.

Author Website: [Fantasy Author's Handbook](http://FantasyAuthor.com)

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

Decomposing | LindaAnn LoSchiavo
(Haibun)

Stealth is my friend once again. Unnoticed at lock-up time, I'm lingering among crosses set in even rows. The gridlock of grim. Typical visitor hours are too hectic, rife with bald human moments — slumping shoulders mantled in misery. All the ways bereavement can scaffold joy. A boneyard devoid of human sounds is preferable. Aware of the final, fading pulses of light, I apostrophe myself into the dark and begin. Crunching frost-crisped leaves underfoot produces a dry crackle like ghosts coughing. I approach one particular monument arrayed in its upright finery of euphemisms, letters loud with an insistence to be, unscrew a clear solution, and begin my work. Decomposing, I become contradiction's champion. Shedding an edge of slate, erasing a name, obliterating the expected encomiums. Erasure pounces as acid withers the words a line at a time, returning the stone to its gall of quiet lovelessness. In life, he quietly murdered his first wife, dropped my sister's corpse from his private plane like Earth's least precious stone, then kept his crimes buried by decorating his life with diplomas and philanthropy. Her remains were never found, never graced a morgue slab nor satin-lined coffin. But tonight I feel her spirit humming, numinous as a melody from warped violins.

cemetery duty
stiffness in my knees
dissipating fog

Hallowe'en Horror, 2005 | LindaAnn LoSchiavo

Calamity came calling him again,
Devised the script, cast him as 'Mister Nigh,'
Quiet defiance smirking on his face as Nigh
Unzipped his skin and seized control. Dark plans
Were hatched. October 31st. Costumed.
His mark: a woman whom he vaguely knows.

Nigh took the wheel, refused to hear protests.
Insane schemes— toxic oxygen he breathed.

The New York cityscape burned memories
Imperfectly, erasing blue details.

Bold headlines snatched on him, his photo front
Page news. A stranger recognized his face.

Observed by aliens, Nigh disappeared,
Left Peter handcuffed and in custody.

Shackled now, he recalls he tied her up.

She testifies about her thirteen-hour
Ordeal: explosives causing smoke, enough
To fool her into opening her door,
Believing Peter was a fireman sent
To help — until he roughly ripped her clothes.

Nigh holds him captive now, detained behind
Bars, unremorseful, richly ridiculed
For blaming an accomplice never seen.

Bell, Book, and Candle | LindaAnn LoSchiavo

I warned her, "Gillian, leave him alone.
Bewitching men is fun but keep control."

She didn't listen. Fell in love and broke
Our rules. Abandoned her familiar, too.

All Hallows Eve the harvest moon shone red.
We chirred dark songs for her with rattling bones,
Ignited ceremonial henbane,
Amassed charged graveyard water. Then, by stealth,
We slipped inside his home, snuffed his candle.
Sweet incense of annihilation rose.

Perhaps he magicked *her* more than she him?
Infatuation is unknowable.
Emotions lack strategic wherewithal.

The coven must protect frail kith and kin
Who can't envisage misadventure's cure.

Hallowe'en Window Painting | *LindaAnn LoSchiavo*

Ghosts rise, my brush broad-stroking outdoor glass,
The store already closed, fluorescents on,
Illuminating my half-finished sketch.

Stray skeletons, masked witches, pumpkin kings,
All smiles and hope, parade down bat streaked blocks,
Embracing trick-or-treat bags — pirate's loot.

Despite my weariness, my brush takes flight,
Creating doors that open to a reign
Of orange bliss just harvested: plump yams,
Carrots, spaghetti squash. A scarecrow smirks,
His jack-o-lantern head lit, menacing
Owls, bellowing harsh candlelight. Unnerved,
I freeze, aware I'm not alone, about
To curse the closed mouth sky, providing no
Clues where this strange farm lies — nor how to leave.

Sly skeletons, loud witches, pumpkin kings
Approach, aggressive country primitives.

My horsehair brush is weaponized, collects
Enough white tempera to cover each one,
Obliterating malefactors with
Ruthless efficiency. Strong stubborn winds
Convey me to a secret corridor
That's underneath the Brooklyn store where I
Was working on my mini masterpiece —
Completed in my absence. Can it be?

A painted scarecrow meets my eyes and winks.

Spellcasting on Samhain | *LindaAnn LoSchiavo*

"Night-dyed herbs," came the vendor's cry. "Come buy!
Seductive power. Risk-free trial! Please try
My wares on Samhain!" Odd plants caught my eye.

What did I have to lose? "Can you reverse
Ill-omened destiny?" The crone was terse.
"I'll handle all requests. But pay me first."

Showing your photo only made her nod,
Suspending my belief in priests, saints, God.
Entrusted with my prayers, their grace was flawed.

Counting my money like a cold cashier,
The witch's countenance conveyed a sneer.
October's dying heat lured magic near.

Stroking strange herbs with calloused palms, her quotes
Were incantations. Still inchoate, motes
Re-formed as *you* — grime hanging on your coat,

Death's tight grip meeting life's warm open hand
As you restaked your claim, breathed air once banned,
Embraced me tightly. Was this wonderland?

The crone removed herself, deft as a fawn.
Dismayed, when I looked back, you, too, were gone.

About the Author:

Native New Yorker LindaAnn LoSchiavo, a Pushcart Prize, Rhysling Award, Best of the Net, and Dwarf Stars nominee, is a member of SFPA, British Fantasy Society, and The Dramatists Guild. Elgin Award winner. *A Route Obscure and Lonely*, *Concupiscent Consumption*, *Women Who Were Warned*, and *Messengers of the Macabre* [October 2022] are her latest poetry titles. An October Scorpio, she's written her next Hallowe'en collection.

Amazon Author Page: [LindaAnn LoSchiavo](#)

Twitter: [@Mae_Westside](#)

Step inside and embrace a haunted harvest of verses embracing bewitchment, boneyards, and all things that go... *Boo!*

Messengers of the Macabre



Halloween poems

by LindaAnn LoSchiavo & David Davies

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

Dem Bones | Alex Grehy

Wise Mother Earth, she's old and so tired,
fed up with the weight of dem bones
tucked into her corsets like worn dollar bills.

She once danced with the living, so many lives,
but they died and lie cold in their graves,
giving all back to the soil 'cept dem bones.

Don't matter what name you give it - Samhain,
All Saint's Day, Halloween, dem bones sink
deeper than language or false man-made ritual.

Wise Mother Earth she done loosen her corsets,
in the north, sharp frosts break up the hard earth;
make a path, trees creak and crack in wild autumn storms.

At midnight she beats dem old bones from their beds,
plays a tune in the gales, bids them dance with the living
giving her respite from the weight of the dead.

Wise Mother Earth she done take off her stockings.
in the South, spring sun bakes the red earth, cracks
her thick pancake surface and releases the dust.

At midnight she bids dem bones rise as ashes, waltzing
in whirlwinds rising high into the sky; Mother Earth stretches,
dem bones were heavy, feels good to be free for a while.

In towns and in cities, where folk like to gather, skeletons roam,
knocking on doors and begging for candy, only wise Mother Earth
knows if it's kids in their costumes or dem dancing old bones.

And she ain't telling...

Next morning, Mother Earth wakes up early, settles her
skirts of candy wrappers and pumpkins, the living
move on never knowing they danced with dem bones.

About the Author:

Alex Grehy (she/her) is a regular contributor to *Sirens Call and the Ladies of Horror Flash Project*. Her vivid prose and thought-provoking poetry has featured in a wide range of publications including *Aphotic Realm* and *Luna Station Quarterly*. She has also published essays on her experiences as a Lady of Horror. Her sweet life is filled with narrowboating, rescue greyhounds, singing and chocolate.



The Angler | *Lena Donnarumma*

Darkness
A surrounding expanse
Inky black
A single light
Hypnotic, beautiful
I go forth toward
The distant beacon
Calling me
Enchanting
A puppet unaware
Danger
Lurks in the dark
Watching, waiting
Devouring
With sharp teeth
And no mercy

Survival in the Underground | *Lena Donnarumma*

Booming roar
Flashing lights
A ring of terror
Vicious calls
Mocking jeers
Ferocious opponents
Death—the only option
The competition
Fights for endless
Survival
Compete for your lives
Destroy your fellow men
For entertainment
Of foreign overlords

About the Author:

Lena Donnarumma is a marine biologist from Hudson Valley, NY. She developed a passion for writing during her studies, travels, and research of ocean life, particularly the strange creatures which dwell there. She has been involved with writing in the fiction community and enjoys writing poetry inspired by her interests. Lena was a Dwarf Stars 2022 award nominee.

Author Blog: [Abyssal Dreams](#)



By My Name | *Tinamarie Cox*

Midnight arrives and the walls thin.
The veil becomes invisible,
the other side is tangible,
believable, and
my ghosts grow flesh.
Circling me, their prey,
with dark caverns for eyes,
they dress me as their bride.
A gown of black silk.
My bouquet wilted and dry.
And with their bony new fingers,
they reach into my chest,
push the ribs aside and hold my heart.
They whisper to it a spell,
which then flows through my veins, and
my color begins to drain,
puddle around my feet, and
I sink
through the ground,
their hands all over me,
burying me,
turning me into a specter like them,
dissolving my skin and bones.
And as the daylight breaks,
the walls thicken again.
The ghosts leave nothing of me
but a name.

About the Author:

Tinamarie Cox lives in Arizona where she writes and paints to escape her mind and stay sane. She wishes she could have met Vincent Price before he transferred to the spirit world. You can follow her on Twitter @tinamarie_cox and Instagram @tinamariethinkstoomuch.

Author Website: [Tinamarie Cox](#)



Aroused by a breeze
Pleasantly honeyed
Rising trance like
His body is carried.

Up to a voice
Where a form appears
With robes flowing
Licking the air.

Motioning gently
Ascending words
Soothing a soul
From ponderous hurt.

A face is cupped
Drawing poison
As Arms collect
A once pitiful person.

With eyes closed
An emptiness fills
Within this womb
Of love 'he feels'.

One last sting
Soft as a breath
She takes his soul
A courtesan in death.

An eternity of love
In a moment born
Till time's decay
Should stop the dawn.

Eyes meet knowingly
She takes her leave
With all her love
For him give.

So shall he be
Collecting another
To take the pain
To be a lover.

A walk in the woods | *Pete Kelly*

Under a ceiling of oppressive cloud
The night brings out a doubtful fear
Movement is momentary, peripheral
With subtle sounds to think you hear.

Eerie harmonics of a chill wind, playing
Icy fingers penetrate cloths to stroke skin
Trees toy at shadow play in the gloom
Twisted anew with every bolt of lightning.

Thunder swells, rolling over failing nerves
Riding up your spine with a banshee wail
Footfalls increase with clumsy momentum
As upon a ship in a tempestuous gale.

Unseen eyes watch your progress, hungry
Twigs are snapped to keep your attention
Sensing the heightened heartbeat of fear
Sending out to others a bloody invitation.

Like all good things this playtime must end
Suddenly the wood is quiet and deathly still
The moment of insanity, a pearl in the oyster
As bursting from story books we become real.

About the Author:

Pete Kelly is a shipwright who writes poetry when the sands of time allow and onetime voice of Gothamistic a band mixing Pete's poetry and music. He has been a fan of horror films since birth (so he says) and loves to grow carnivorous plants. The author of *What Appears In The Dark* a poetry collection and a push cart nominee.

Instagram: [@splatz007](https://www.instagram.com/splatz007)

Cemetery Gates | *Engilbert Egill*

There was a time I walked through these gates with peace in my heart.
To pay respects to my family that rests their tired bones in this holy ground.

Toxic spirits have infected this earth.
From the coffins, I hear a dreadful sound.

Decomposing fingers break the surface.
The horror before me would send the strongest of minds into deep psychoneurosis.

Cracked tombstones and burning crosses.
The underworld is coming above, and all hope is buried
I hear the hooves of those apocalyptic horses.

Skeletal bodies fill the coffins with meat and blood.
Death, misery, and pain will engulf us in this biblical flood.

At least I am surrounded by my family again.
Their fingers pierce my heart.
My skin they tear apart.
In love's embrace, of me, there is nothing left but a single bloodstain.

About the Author:

Engilbert Egill Stefánsson is a poet and short story writer from Vestmannaeyjar, Iceland, where he lives with his wife and two daughters. His work has been published in The Sirens Call's 62nd issue and his work will also be included in the January issue of The Horror Zine magazine, he is currently working on a poetry collection as well as a short story collection.

Facebook: [Engilbert Egill](#)





From the darkness
and the shadows
From the lunacy
and the void



POETRY OF MONSTERS AND MADNESS

Song of Praise | *Meg Smith*

Beloved, believe me when I tell you,
We are the fearless ones.
Our shadows grow up
from the sidewalk, in the midst
of wings and bones scattered
in the wake of the red-tailed hawk
on the common.
We are, all of us, seekers of a city in death.
We drink its colors, and bleed its tears.
It's night forever now, but so what.
We'll walk, and walk, and I will
embrace you, and laugh the whole time.
How can there be a shadow at all,
if we don't exhale our secret sun.

Ghost Worthy | *Meg Smith*

A barred owl marks the center
of a paneless window
of an empty barn, already in regard.
Everything has wings here.
Everything hunts. Night rushes
into night, and feathers fall.
Straw scatters. Trees brush
one another, in the push of a
darkening wind.
Circle after circle, spirits form the
open, unending.

The Beresford Box | *Meg Smith*

The only time you shine,
lies in the gleam of finished wood,
and the sigh of an imagined sky.
You cast no true reflection,
you never did.
I am so ready for the soil
to press its rude advance
to you, for worms to
undress you, for every
thread, every nerve to
reveal itself, but too late.
Don't press the lid.
Don't tear at the roots.
This is done. All torn hearts
are sewing themselves together,
and turning away from the unwritten stone.

The Poetry Shadows | *Meg Smith*

To Lawrence, nothing is
worth haunting; gray and blue fade
in the darkness, creeping in its own tide
across this room. I read aloud a poem
and I know he can hear it, even as his eyes
quiver as in the REM state of the last.
Someday, I too will crumble; my skin will
retreat like that rushing tide, but will not rush in.
Our words will blur in noiseless ears, and
here at last, we'll dance again, atoms falling into
atoms, the silence will make good,
our hearts all matter, and antimatter.

About the Author:

Meg Smith is a writer, journalist, dancer and events producer in Lowell, Mass. In addition to *The Sirens Call*, her work has previously appeared in *The Cafe Review*, *Dark Moon Digest*, *The Horror Zine*, and many more. She is author of five poetry books and a short fiction collection, *The Plague Confessor*.

Facebook: [Meg Smith](#)
Instagram: [@megsmithwriter](#)

the main course | *Linda M. Crate*

it was impossible to know
friend or foe,
on all hallow's eve;

man or monster?
sometimes there were shades
between and sometimes
things outside of both,

but she didn't believe in
monsters;

only bad people—

as she got ready for her date,
she didn't consider he could be
anything other than human;

she didn't know she was
going to be the main course

and every ruby droplet
of her blood would be on the
vampire's tongue before
the night was through—

after the dinner at the diner,
she followed him into
his room;

and he seduced her before
the vampire took her life—

his mother had once taught him
not to play with his food,
but old habits die hard.

a halloween revenge | *Linda M. Crate*

he missed his wife,
they used to chart the
constellations
together in the sky;

now that it was the anniversary
of her death on halloween

it was high time he got his revenge—

the slayer woman who killed her
was dancing with another slayer,
and the werewolf watched the monster
slayers for a long while;

after they danced themselves in a
tired stupor he followed after them in
complete darkness—

they locked the door behind them,
but before they could have any fun

he had found them both a spot in his belly;

and then laid down to enjoy his meal
before he fell asleep—
revenge was a taste that he might just
develop an appetite for.

About the Author:

Linda M. Crate (she/her) is a Pennsylvanian writer whose poetry, short stories, articles, and reviews have been published in a myriad of magazines both online and in print. She has twelve published chapbooks the latest being: *Searching Stained Glass Windows For An Answer* (Alien Buddha Publishing, December 2022). Her debut book of photography *Songs of the Creek* (Alien Buddha Publishing, April 2023) was recently published.

Facebook: [Linda M. Crate](#)
Instagram: [@authorlindamcrate](#)

Cat's Folly | Jason Jones

At night they play
Miss Staple and Mr. Earl Grey
At the playground, they sleep, during the day

On Halloween night, Miss Staple witnessed a distressing sight
Which caused her to run away with fright
Her tail puffed, and her grip tight
As she raced up the tree, so high

Mr. Earl Grey lay dead near the swings
He was too curious about some horrible things
Evil kids took him, gave him plastic wings
And threw him off the water tower with a fling

Miss Staple beside her friend, she lay
She purred and nudged but still, did he stay
Her meows like screams as she licked Mr. Earl Grey
It was then she decided those evil kids had to pay

In darkness, black
Miss Staple planned her attack
With death on her back
She'd get even with those little brats

Claws sharpened, teeth stained red
She found each child asleep in their beds
Slitting throats and watching blood spill
She ripped each tongue out of each head
And made sure the nasty children were dead

About the Author:

Jason Jones is an industrial painter by trade and horror novel collector and writer. He currently has 4 works published in various anthologies. He lives with his wife, one dog and two cats in central Indiana.

Instagram: [@thehorrnovelnut76](https://www.instagram.com/thehorrnovelnut76)

Facebook: [Jason A Jones](https://www.facebook.com/JasonAJones)



To Hekate | *Lorraine Schein*

O Great Hekate, Goddess of Storms
(The witch felt her power most during lightning.)

At the three-forked, desolate road you copulate at
(He wore her inverted cross, gave his hair, unsuspecting.)

Homeless, crouched, wolfing down our offerings
Of half-eaten scraps of rotting food.
(They locked that inmate up for what he did.)

We placate you by sacrifices of honey—sweet insanity,
Black lambs—unspeakable desires.
(The patient slit her tongue, drank cleaning fluid.)

Your dogs howl of death to distant towers,
Like our dog-desire to know the world beyond.
(Night of The Moon, Arcana 11, the card ill-bode.)

Hekate, goddess of dark country paths,
(Headlights light up the animal sacrifice at the intersection;
the psychopath picks up a lone traveler on the road.)

In the hesitation between reality and anomaly
You live, Goddess of great distances and arcane codes--
(In her spell's thrall, his anxiety surged when it snowed.)
Mistress of that power which from afar controls
Love, thunder, and the dark matters.

Lady Twilight | *Lorraine Schein*

Some fairy women can never be seen--no mortal's heart is that pure.
The fairies choose who will see them: in this green dusk,
I see a door between the worlds, where Lady Twilight
wraps the West in her gray mantle of fine mist.

She holds a goblet of lake water that soon darkens
reflecting the May Eve moon.
Voices behind her call my name, and hands reach out for me
from a world made of yearning, a world now possible to see.

This is the dangerous time, when the *sidhe*
can trespass into our reality.
Most women die when seized with longing for fairy things--
but a few are taken to Tir-na-n-Óg to dance with fairy kings.

[Note: *Sidhe* is the Gaelic word for fairies, and is pronounced "shee."]

About the Author:

Lorraine Schein is a New York writer and poet. Her work has appeared in *VICE Terraform*, *Strange Horizons*, *NewMyths* and *Michigan Quarterly*, and in the anthologies *Wild Women* and *Tragedy Queens: Stories Inspired by Lana del Rey & Sylvia Plath*. *The Futurist's Mistress*, her poetry book, is available from Mayapple Press. Her book, *The Lady Anarchist Cafe*, is out now from Autonomedia.

Amazon Author Page: [Lorraine Schein](#)

Halloween | *Mathias Jansson*

Halloween, that fine tradition
when you gather your family
enjoying trick or treat and a lot of sweet
it's a holiday when we pick up
old grandma from her coffin in the cellar
let her sit on the porch rocking in her favourite chair
dangling her skeleton bones and giggling
with a bowl of candy in her knotty hand
and we bring home old uncle Sam from the cemetery
so he can lurk in the tall grass beside the path
stretching his zombie arms after the kids
visiting for trick and treat
and Aunt Maud, that crazy old witch
visiting us from the asylum
we love to see her hunting the kids
with her long sharp knives on the lawn
Yes, Halloween is a great tradition
to gather the family around
and make some funny treats
before we enjoy some sweet kid's meat.

About the Author:

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

Author Website: [Mathias Jansson](#)
Amazon Author Page: [Mathias Jansson](#)



A Multitude of Masks | DJ Tyrer

In streets, going from door-to-door
In gatherings, dancing and having fun
A multitude of masks, mysteries
Concealing identities, realities
Who are they? *What* are they?
Not every hidden face is alive – or, human
Removed, what would they reveal?
Dare you wait to see, unmasked
Who your fellows truly are – were?
Worse, learn the truth about yourself?

Halloween Mystery | DJ Tyrer

Halloween mystery
Question of who it is
Behind the mask
Strangely familiar – and, yet...
Unidentifiable, concealed
To vanish away – a
Halloween mystery
Only for their mask
To be found
Atop a dead relative's grave...

Buried Below | DJ Tyrer

Descend cellar steps
Realtor had no key for the door
Necessitating a sledgehammer entry
Stepping over splinters on the way
To discover what lies below
Only to discover nothing remarkable
Nothing, not even boxes of junk
Upon muddy earth floor
Anticlimactic
After imagination run wild
With horrors and treasures
Only to notice disturbed soil
Too recent to be right
What is buried below?
Curiosity flows too deep
Run, fetch shovel, start to dig
Dig down deep, pile up soil
Keep digging, curiosity driven
Shovel strikes wood
Clear soil away from coffin lid
Stand, staring, perplexed
Why bury a body here?
Dare not to lift lid
Yet lid lifts itself
As cellar inhabitant stands, stretches
Pallid corpse flesh, dead eyes
Bares fangs
Prepares to bite, drink
Gorge
Risen from the grave
In its secret cellar home

Remembrance | DJ Tyrer

Memento sits atop fireplace
A memory of a face
A reminder of a death
Circumstances, sadness
That sometimes moves
Relocates, repositions
Untouched by human hands
Perplexing, sometimes frightening
Peculiar and strange
Yet never disposed of
Important beyond measure
A connection beyond death
A treasure beyond worth

Soul Mate | DJ Tyrer

Veil retracts
At darkest hour of the night
Opening the way
From one world to the other
Allowing return
For one night of the year
To rejoin
Loved one left behind
Soul mate
Restored in perfect union
One night

About the Author:

DJ Tyrer dwells in Southend-on-Sea, on the misty northern shore of the Thames Estuary. DJ edits Atlantean Publishing, and has been published in various anthologies and magazines, such as Chilling Horror Short Stories (Flame Tree), What Dwells Below (Sirens Call Publications), and issues of The Horrorzine, Occult Detective Magazine, and Tigershark.

Author Website: [DJ Tyrer](#)

Twitter: [@DJTyrer](#)

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A grey autumn mist,
swirls across darkening fields.
On a dead oak tree
two hooded-crows perch
like waiting vultures.
The orange moon sails
in and out of banks of cloud.
Across silent fields
a fine drizzle is blown in sheets.
That other world looms ever closer,
as night lurks in woods and thickets.

Witches sit by blazing fires
in remote hovels
on moors and up hidden tracks.
Their black cats prowl
in lonely woodland clearings.
The shift-shape hare with cloven lip,
crosses the frontier into that other world.
Dark river sprites with waving tentacles,
pull fishermen to watery death.

A wind from the East blows
through the abandoned cemetery.
Broken crosses lie at strange angles,
their dislocated limbs silhouetted
against shifting shafts of moonlight.
Entombed in black earth,
the dead struggle to be free
their bones rattle in smothered frenzy,
an insidious chorus carried on the wind.
Disembodied skulls gather in the gloom,
seeking torsos long since rotted.

In old, crumbling chapels,
horned devils emerge,
from stained glass hell.
Ghostly bells ring eerily
across freezing fields-
bell ropes held
between skeletal fingers.
Bats fly from ruined bell towers,
their fangs fully bared.

Just once a year,
we invent our chosen horror.
We play with masks
which hide the pain
beneath the skin.
We enjoy the bloodcurdling fun.
We hide so many devils
deep within.

Death's Day | *Sarah Das Gupta*

Unhallowed, hideous sacrifices
demanded by the dark masked,
figure of Death who rules
supreme on this Day of the Dead
His eyes burn and bore
into the victims of His special day.
A severed limb the fingers randomly
chopped off, bone and sinews
food for the crazy chainsaw,
thrown now at Death's clawed feet
A heap of crushed, blood-stained
bodies, victims of a terrorist bomb.
Shards of glass, steel, chrome, mix
with limbs, flesh, random body parts.

Old crones once burnt as witches,
charred, skeletal remains, dance
in homage to their Dark Lord.
Their half-burnt skulls, tortured bones
twirl and whirl in a danse macabre.
Vampire bats, their sharp fangs bloodied,
sit, hungry vultures, on the Master's shoulder.
Small horned devils with sharpened
pitchforks form a hellish guard of torture.
Pale wraiths, headless torsos,
victims of the executioner's axe,
wait in eternal hope of re-uniting
Pale moonlight glistens on
plundered gold, treasure chests of silver
fraudulent cheques, hacked computers,
tributes to that same Master.

Lit brightly beneath strips of neon
is Death's world, frightful, terrifying.
Framed by trees, sawn-off trunks.
Once the canopy of the forest,
now roughly, amputated limbs.
The sea lies at His feet offering tributes:
sewage, plastic netting, soiled diapers.
Dark smoke, pollution hangs over Him,
hiding corruption, exploitation, corporations.
Today is Death's special day,
How He revels in its celebration.
We are wearing His masks for fun.
No better way to show He's won!

About the Author:

Sarah Das Gupta is a teacher from near Cambridge, UK who also taught in India and Tanzania. Her work has been published in over ten countries, including US, UK, Canada, Australia India and Nigeria. She is interested in most subjects except football and computer games.

Carousel of Trapped Fears | *Shannon Acrey*

The colors spin,
the noise blurs.

A mad ride on a carousel.

Dizzy from the turns
—barely hold on—
my eyes land on you.

Out of the blue.

My heart squeezes. My lungs compress.

Your cruel smile bleeds between
the people who should be enjoying their fun.

With each turn you find me.
You've imprisoned me in this endless game.
So many others caught too,
forced to ride carved, wooden beasts.

No beginning, no end to those crazy sways.

I shove past frozen people,
whom you've trapped in their fears.
How long have they been here?
How many more will you collect?

You feed on fears,
and the carousel's rhythm accelerates.

I stumble to the platform's edge
to escape this chilling chase.
Your most imminent desire: to have my soul too.
Too many others have given up so soon.

With one more turn, you are now closer beside me.
The platform's edge is so near, swirling ground beyond
it!

Faster and faster
those loops increase.

Your hand reaches for me.
Fear settles in,
trying to lock me in place.

One long scream
shatters the air.

I jump.

About the Author:

Shannon Acrey, from northern Indiana, likes stretching her creative skills with writing, beading, and painting with stencils. She enjoys spending time with her husband and two daughters. She has had multiple motivational poems published in Wingless Dream Publisher, several horror poems and short flash fiction horror stories published with Sirens Call Publications, and lastly multiple poems published with Pan-O-Ply, a local Michiana publication.

Facebook: [Writings by Shannon A.](#)

Devil Doctor | Jennifer Marie Montgomery

There's something wrong with Raven
She seems to be quite blue
Take her to the Devil Doctor, he'll know what to do
She whistles in dark corners
when the midnight hour nears
Take her to the Devil Doctor, let him quell your fears

*He'll tie her down and make her drown
in vats of holy water
He'll say a prayer, that phantom slayer,
and exorcise the squatter
Again, she'll be your chickadee—
your sweet and docile mime
Take her to the Devil Doctor
Take her one more time*

The Sandman | Jennifer Marie Montgomery

*Forty winks, the Sandman said
for sleep that's deep
but sleep, I dread—
for faces shown and sins I own
keep pirouetting in my head*

*Then drink this drink instead,
he said—
I gripped it, tipped it, sipped the red—
Sweet as blood and thick as mud,
the lies of lullabies unsaid*

*Now lay upon your bed of nails
to dream a scream to no avail—
The Sandman dwells in parallels
lurking there
beyond the veil*

My Favorite Things | Jennifer-Marie Montgomery

Hell hounds from Hades and full moons at midnight
Bones from the undead and psychos at campsites
Slashers that tie up their victims with string
These are a few of my favorite things...
Mayhem and carnage and gruesome beheadings
Vampire bats and their ghoulish bloodletting
Cannibalism and all that it brings
These are a few of my favorite things...
Darkness and demons and soul sucking corpses
Night terrors teeming with devils in corsets
Beasts who drip acid from gossamer wings
These are a few of my favorite things...
When the witch comes
When the heart stops
When I'm going mad
I simply remember it's All Hollow's Eve
And then I don't feel...so bad

Nervous Nellie | *Jennifer Marie Montgomery*

Whatever is the trouble dear?
Why can you not rest your head?
Does howling wind upset you so?
The moaning of the long since dead?

Oh, do unclench your coiled fist
and cease that fearful, frightened shiver!
Things that tiptoe through the drear
can sense the beating heart a quiver.

Clickety-clack on the cobblestone.
Pull the blanket up the bed.
Hold your hands against your ears,
and shun the shadows overhead.

I told you once, I told you twice
to never let it sense your fright,
but you insist on tears and fears,
and here it is, this very night!

Thumping on the windowpane.
Rapping, tapping at the door.
Curled beneath the frozen stare
of something never seen before.

The fire I shall stoke again
to try and ward away the ghost,
but Nervous Nellies in the dark
are who it likes to scare the most.

About the Author:

Jennifer Montgomery is a poet and author from Cedar Hill Missouri. Influenced heavily by her mother, also a poet, and her father, a writer of horror poetry and fiction, Jennifer worked with her father on his small press Sci-Fi/Horror magazine in the early 1990's. She's had several pieces of dark poetry published, as well as flash fiction and short stories. Jennifer is currently working on her first gothic horror novel, as well as two other full-length literary projects.



The Halloween Portal | *Amanda Worthington*

The Halloween portal stretched its maw wide to receive her
As some new horror found earth-flesh
And breathed its first shaky breath
An infant from the void, teething on mortal pain
Aimless mouth roving, thus far in vain
Dead-set on finding purchase
Still stained with the cosmic blood of the womb that had birthed it

She flatlined as it writhed its way
Into its new existence
Settled into the Great Beyond with the numbness
That is reserved for the newly dead
Did not feel it as her daughter
Squeezed her corpse's hand
And whispered her blessing.

The trade was not fair
The wretched crab of despair
The one called Cancer
Had died where it had burrowed down in its host
And what the new terror would be
Was a mystery not yet known

Forces shaped somewhere behind the veil of being
In a place called Pandora
Whose contents were always spilling into our realm
And beneath them lay the hope of those
Lucky enough to be taken
On Halloween
A special breed
A defense against despair

And the Taken were quiet
When the living demanded they speak
Because they did not know how
To tell a truth
That could only be discerned
By living among the monstrosities
That gave the universe its structure

In the end, the Bright Ones would slip through
Flesh imbued with the light
Of the secret stars they carried
From beyond the threshold of their far-off crypt

Their hope might yet turn the tide
If we remember
If instead of casting them aside as new threats
And burying their brilliance in our fear
We embrace them
Having caught a glimpse
Of the familiar faces that flash
From behind the armor they now wear
And the swords they carry

If the demons who seek to make us forget
Have not yet wiped their stories from our minds

About the Author:

Amanda Worthington is a speculative fiction writer from Kansas City, Missouri. She founded and chairs the Missouri/Kansas chapter of the HWA. When she's not crafting works of terror and intrigue, she enjoys running and cooking in equal measure. She is governed by her feline overlords Apollo and Artemis.

Author Website: [The Amandala Effect](#)

Twitter: [@AmandaW58679588](#)

Quiet | Steph Patterson

You have never been here before
You feel a bit disoriented,
The house looks ordinary, not foreboding,

You are in the French countryside,
Remote and rustic
nestled in a field,

You walk into the house,
The people inside are familiar,
Yet you can't quite place their faces,

There are no creaky floors,
Or haunting voices calling in the halls,
Only a feeling of togetherness,

You share a meal,
At nightfall, company divides,
Doors are shut and quiet blankets the rooms,

You attempt to close your eyes, let go of tension,
But the thick silence is disturbed,
You go to investigate,

A body laid out on the kitchen table,
Stripped of skin, glistening with muscles and fat,
The killing must have happened elsewhere,

With a rising nausea, you aren't quite sure,
If this was part of the meal
you consumed earlier,

Where did all the blood go?
You aren't quite sure of anything,
Except to stay quiet.

The Birth of New Vampire | Steph Patterson

The gathering hunger
nestling into her,
Red and aching
Gathering fiercely
into deep desire,
Without thought, and
uninvited,
Sudden fire rising
piercing viscous endings,
Blooming fresh guilt,
Newfound sorrow unending,
Surrender to the
sensual feeling
of life feeding death.

Rotting Rage | Steph Patterson

Poisoned words gather
on the tip of her tongue,
Shooting roots down her throat
Stealing her breath
Hollowing out her veins,
Carving craving into her
bone marrow,
Creeping up and
pushing daisies
out her eye sockets,
This endless rush
of rage enveloping her,
Awakening the
sleeping urge to watch
someone else's life
ebbing out into her
rotting fingertips.

Enchantress of Nightmares | Steph Patterson

Her fingers seek the darkness,
Call it to her,
Dragging out the nightmares
tangled in the blank canvas,
Bring them to her lips and
feast upon them,
Her mind clouds with red
dripping on the walls,
Arsenic laced paths
to the throne,
Eavesdropping on
ill begotten secrets,
rotting corpses, and
forgotten hunger.

Deadly Waltz | Steph Patterson

The spell floats in the air
Flowing from her lips,
Binding to the incantation
from the grimoire,

Responding to the invitation
From the demons
of the other side,

She feels a faint buzzing
energy under her skin,
Her face dons a mask,
Her true form
hidden underneath,

Under the light of the full moon
She steps through the mirror
to the masquerade ball,

Her hand joins with another,
and another still,
They lock into a deadly waltz,
where she seduces them
into relinquishing their souls,

Those souls granting her
access back to the
human world,

The keeping of souls to
fuel her hedonistic obsession
with the moonlight, crow calls
and lull of nocturnal beasts,

Over the fiery rings
of the underworld.

About the Author:

Steph Patterson (she/her) is a poet from Delaware. She loves all things spooky, cats, and getting lost in a good book. Her work was recently featured as a 2023 Poem of Day from Gnashing Teeth Publishing, and is forthcoming in Scavengers Literary Magazine. She lives with her family in their cozy home on the edge of the forest.

Instagram: [@spatterspoetry](https://www.instagram.com/spatterspoetry)



Alternative Illusions | Will H. Blackwell, Jr.

Those silly fears from childhood
Monsters waiting in a closet or
Even more terrifying
Hidden almost invisibly under the bed
These unwanted forms appearing when
I was alone or the only one looking

How foolish such childish notions
We presumably leave behind like toys
Nursery rhymes and bedtime stories

But sleeping with a light on
Essential for a time to keep strange
Shadows from creeping across a ceiling darkened
Yet pale enough to reveal these shifting shapes

I still carry this security-light in my imagination
To banish the dark
Which I only occasionally dread these days

Closet-fear mostly conquered
I finally looked under the bed last night
And from what seemed a surprising distance
Saw a hideous child
Obviously insane
Crawling toward me in sudden spasms of movement

I was frightened but the horror only truly set in when
I realized this piteous and potentially dangerous child
Erratically trying to approach
Was once me and might seek to be so again

After embracing the light for so many years
I must admit I sometimes now oddly enjoy
Coily blending in the transformative spread of darkness

Watch for me

About the Author:

Will H. Blackwell Jr. is a retired professor (botany) living presently in Tuscaloosa AL. His poetry has appeared in *Aphelion*, *Black Petals*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Disturbed Digest*, *Illumen*, *Scifaikuest*, and *Star*Line*.



The Nursery | *Lori R. Lopez*

Folks gabbed of odd goings down Hemmet Lane,
especially come Hollerween, or days of Blood Rain.
Ghostlights floated; eerie sounds could be discerned,
and what you knew might not be what was learned.
Books taught in grades seldom mentioned Occult.
Eldritch and Cosmic. Things uncannily adult —
the sort they didn't want little kiddies to be told,
or they'd not go to sleep till the day they grew old!

Worn bricks and chipped walls were all remained
of the Nursery condemned and broken-paned ...
A Demolition Ball soon destined to be swung
dangled from a Crane on which a body hung,
after every other Operator quit or just fled —
spooked by thin figures appearing quite dead!
Scared by the tinies who scurried in and out
doors off their hinges and rooms roundabout.

Abandoned by the Valley for a modern School
where children every age, however minuscule,
could gather in bunches, play and be taught.
The relic of a Nursery no longer they sought
after too many accidents; as if it were a jinx!
Swallowing small parts — toys and Tiddlywinks.
Falling through windows. Tumbling on stairs.
Eating paste or candy. Taking foolish dares.

Running with scissors. Games of Hide-N-Seek,
waiting to be found. Drownings in the Creek.
Was it poor supervision or mere coincidence?
Is anything more tragic than lost innocents?
The Nursery was shuttered by angry demands,
left to the mischief of small feet and hands,
crowding dim corridors like havoc wreaked.
Once hale and noisy, bright and rosy-cheeked.

Gaunt giggling specters returned to inhabit ...
grown shyer and elusive, quick as a Wild Rabbit.
Paler and fleeting. Preceding crimson mist —
chilling and frightful, pouring with a twist —
drenching a dark burg known by Purgatory Vale.
Now I'm back for a visit, to view that gloomy jail,
as childhood lasted briefly, its promises unkept.
Sullen and bedraggled. Their eyes underslept ...

Classmates and I share no fond recollections.
None of us felt safe. There had been no protections.
Years a hollow shell, then a different type of Nursery
opened these doors on a horrendous Anniversary,
when seven youngsters fell to the base of a dry well,
yet The Hellebore Beds have more secrets to tell:

the tales of children sprouted along rows of soil —
raised from man-shaped Roots, products of toil.

Climbing to the seat, I steer a Wrecking Ball,
and lay to rest the rumors, bearing my own pall.

The Darkles | *Lori R. Lopez*

Secretive fiends arrived, blotches of dusk, razor-knived ...
slinking out of a crack to give my bird a Heart Attack!

Scourges of menace from under the earth, of the lowliest birth.
Odious claws and bites; droves of sleep-deprived appetites.

Raptorously bound, blighting a wasteland of shadowground.
Scurrilously scrambling, a carpet of insidious rambling ...

They glided wall to wall, a Puppet spectacle sure to enthrall.
Stark awfulties shown; the scenes glimpsed cannot be unknown!

Furtive as thieves at night, dividing, diverging by candlelight.
The Darkles dared unfold, skittering and scattering black as Mold.

By the glims of deep Nocturne would creeps or crawlies spurn
garish beams of broad Middy; every shimmering glarent ray.

The meanest mob unseen; no need for a costume on Halloween.
Macabre impulsive urges. Saber-chopped insufferable splurges.

The Darkles scampered wide, out of sorts and triple-eyed:
ravenous-mawed uncouths; toe-chompin'-stompin' youths.

Rowdy varmint and rogues, nigh unsightliest vogues
from nowhere may spring in a manic grin-some wingding!

Leaping Lousies they're called, with grimaces that scald.
Coarse hungries and uglies, toothmonster-mashed buglies.

Lashing lethal snap-tails off the scorpionesque rails.
Hopping-mad morblegrums; the best of snaggly chums.

Slipping from under stone, dragging their favorite bone.
Snaking and taking up space, out of a nether-bent race.

Ranklesome diddly-squats, caliginous have-knots ...
Eensy-Weensy, out of mud; sneaky slithering sliding crud.

Jackalknaves and romperlings, capable of untold things.
Formed of soot and sludge, ever ones to hold a grudge!

Shady shrunken natterings, composed of dingy splatterings.
Pugnaciously audacious, bellies and jaws voracious ...

Cross as a sourpuss Moon; surly attitudes of a hintergoon.
Raggle-taggle splotches and spots; nervy-turvy inkleblots.

Whistling dandiprats; mordant-mooded gobblebrats.
A bristly unpleasant lot; entirely culpable like as not.

Outrageously eye-popping — malevolently unstoppable!
Darkles are everywhere. Do your best not to stare.

Bookbiter | *Lori R. Lopez*

Students, Researchers, Reading Clubs. Book-Borrowers,
Book-Burrowers. Bibliophiles all departed. The Homeless
and others in need of a quiet secure place to spend time; most
of the Staff have called it a night, but for one who never left.
Feigning an exit, subdued treads scale a marble stairway out
of the basement, from a window unlatched. A starkly dark
silhouette precedes, grown tall and fat by swallowing amber
corridor lights. Echoes of steps bounce the walls, absorbed
by literature. A voice thrums and hums, singing an eerily high
tuneless Ballad. She calls it awakening her Feast. Footfalls
drop away with the Head Librarian disguise, revealing a worm.

A thick pale creature writhes upright and shuffles, caterpillarish.
Hunched forward the rest of a distance, traversing a waxed shiny
floor to the central chamber lined with stacks and stacks, tiers of
glorious tomes leafy and full; fragrant. Massive Bookcases —
banquets of verbosity. Purple and plump with prose, the rich
blood of language. At home despite being an intruder. Where
this traveler belongs in each City, Town, Metropolis. Savoring
pages, pictures, covers to her content; she licks each binding for
the taste of cement. Feeding on those who disobeyed her Rules
(which are outrageous). Eating the real Librarians one by one.
Atheneum her name, grotesque and abiding; a long-lived slug.

When Libraries are gone, Book Stores and Chains extinct,
she may perish. Shivel to naught, starved for the thoughts
from past and present Scribes; the startlements and artful twists
of tongue by Dead or Dying Poets, Songstresses and Geniuses.
Wither due to a lack of imagination, brainfood, enlightenment.
Or evolve to a new Diet, another fascination, a different form.
She might sprout wings, become a Dragonwurm, hot-breathed.
Grow many limbs and inhabit the Deep, prowl the Trenches.
For now she finds an endless supply of reading material; silent
nose-in-a-book victims; and hours to explore, greedily devour!
Empowered, the Bookbiter morphs back to an Evil Librarian.

Her secret to Immortality: a nightly rebirth; a daily transfusion.
And the Written Word, for it endures. However delicious.

Skull-N-Crossbones | *Lori R. Lopez*

An eternal symbol of dangerous
Intrigue, complete with a roguish smile!
One can easily imagine a vapid hollow-eyed
Wink — flapping in the wind
A black and white Jolly Roger sneer
Complete with implied swash and buckle
Devil-may-care silent swaggering
Curses and worses revealed under a Ghost Moon
Flown high, delivering harsh news
Foul weather and shine. A snarl or snicker
Hinted by its Buccaneer leer
The lethal warning on ship and bottle
Occasionally on ships in bottles
Whether Rat Poison or a taste of toxic Rum
Watching over the paces and skullduggery
The shovel scoops of Buried Treasures
Laid where the Sun will not sparkle
But reflect cold fire within the boundless
Chill and fog of a Pirate's final breath
And win-some lose-some gold-toothed gleam!
Echoes of Skull-N-Crossbones clanking
A recognizable emblem; the most ominous
Haunting design to grace flag or label
In a universal morbid Tongue
That never wags and tells no tales
Just a grim abiding deterrent —
And a deadman's grin.

The Insomnia Ward | *Lori R. Lopez*

In an age when shadows are out to get you,
when the phantoms on the wall could be fatal —
conspiring; plotting subterfuge, mayhem —
staying alert might be the only hope. Your best
defense to survive another day, or night. Bouts
of Insomnia have risen, to epidemic heights.
You don't want an Agent to notice a yawn ...
a Doctor to spot dark circles under eyes, Red-X
your Chart, send you to the Insomnia Ward!

In case you don't have it already, that would
trigger a severe malady. As if we need another
reason not to rest. Paranoia is essential. An ally.
A mental and emotional condition you can't take
a pill for, can't outgrow or shed like dead skin ...
The Ward is a one-way trip down the drain; nobody
gets out. Except on a gurney to a cellar Morgue.
How do I know? I've been there. I pretended
to die. Now I haunt the halls. Unable to drowse.

Scavenging; clutching fast to an Electric Torch, changing batteries; aiming bright spots at dreary corridors and corners where an eerie shadow might pool or display! The Darkles aren't even the worst threat, compared to The Administrators — Keepers of the dim snakepit hellhole Ward Thirteen; studying, smirking, spying, sedating. I couldn't bear another second of the intrusive questioning, their appalling lack of any respect. I had yawned selling Coffee.

I was captured in a net, surrounded by Darkles, about to be feasted upon, or tugged and torn to shreds! Crazy??? Of course I am. I would have to be crazy not to be, wouldn't I? It doesn't take an Inkblot Expert to discern the difference. They say the craziest ones are those who cannot sleep. Those like me. I saw them, stealing bodies. Wheeling people out of rooms, rigid, still breathing, but not for long. They have to feed the Darkles.

Or else! Sorry, I shouldn't have said anything. Close your eyes. Sleep if you can. Forget this voice in your ear, a warning whisper. It's what Insomniacs do, isn't it? Make others lie awake with our fears, our Night Terrors and unending trains of thought clattering on tracks. Like rabid birds picking dreams to tatters, scraps of respite. They're coming! Hush, I hear them. Just relax. Calm breaths. I'm not sure if Doctors or Darkles.

Either way, you don't want to end like me: edgy, twitching, unnerved. Remain in your bed. I'll go. You can keep a secret, can't you? Ward Thirteen is where they take Patients who fail to slumber. Not to cure ... to keep the grim dominions fed.

About the Author:

Lori R. Lopez is an offbeat author-illustrator, poet, songwriter, and wearer of hats, as well as an animal-and-monster-lover. Verse has appeared in *The Sirens Call*, *The Horror Zine*, *H.W.A. Poetry Showcases*, *Weirdbook*, *Spectral Realms*, *Space & Time Magazine*, *JOURN-E*, *Oddball Magazine*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Altered Reality Magazine*, *California Screamin* (the Foreword Poem) and much more. Books include *The Dark Mister Snark*, *Odds & Ends*, *Leery Lane*, *An Ill Wind Blows*, *The Witchhunt*, and *Darkverse: The Shadow Hours*. Lori has been nominated for the Elgin and Rhysling Awards.

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Beware! Mister Snark is lurking...

THE DARK MISTER SNARK

Lori R.
Lopez



LORI LOPEZ-15

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

Fred sat on his porch and worried about the monster sleeping inside his home. But that was an easy problem. That monster was always there. His other problem was the two bullies who stole his candy. His other-other problem was Janet, she of the gold hair and big blue eyes. She was beside him. She was *talking* to him!

Most of his friends said girls were gross, that they gave you cooties, but Fred didn't think so. How could anyone so pretty be dangerous?

Well, Mom was pretty, and she—

Fred shook away that thought.

"You okay?" Janet asked for the third time.

Janet caught him struggling not to cry after the bullies took off with his Halloween haul. She came around the corner at exactly the right time—or the wrong time given how embarrassed he felt. Fred had willed himself to hold back, but then those big blue eyes told him they understood so he did leak a little.

"They took my candy, too," she said. She didn't say anything more but led him up the path to his own steps and sat down with him.

Between them was the pumpkin Fred carved earlier today. It was wonky and crooked, and he thought, kinda cool. He hadn't meant to do it, but the right eye was bigger, and the teeth came to points. The one thing that turned out as he envisioned was the nose. He made two side-by-side slits like a skull and was quite impressed with himself. His dad hadn't come out to look when Fred told him about it. He hadn't even looked up from the television when Fred showed him the homemade costume he put together.

"Did you know these are magic?" Janet traced a finger down the pumpkin's face.

"They are?"

"Especially the ones made with so much care. Didn't your mom ever tell you that?"

"My mom isn't around."

"She left you. That's what I heard."

Fred didn't trust himself to speak. Where did Janet hear about his mom? Were other kids talking about him? The thought made his stomach hurt.

"Any jack-o-lantern is magic on Halloween night. Do you want to know how?" She touched his arm, and Fred's stomach settled. A warm feeling came over him.

"I'll show you."

Janet was dressed as Rapunzel, in a gold and purple dress. Over her shoulder was a purse shaped like Rapunzel's pal Pascal, the little green chameleon. She unzipped the top and removed a pad of paper.

"You write down the names of people you want to get back at."

She handed him the pad. The top felt like one of his old belts. The pages were thick and cream colored. Fred didn't like how they crinkled. Where had she gotten such paper? But everything about Janet was a mystery. She didn't go to his school. She was homeschooled or so he heard. No one knew where she lived. Fred cast his memory back. It seemed Janet had been in the neighborhood since the summer, but the more he tried to remember, the fuzzier the memories grew. It hurt his head to think on it, so he stopped.

Janet offered the pad. "Take it," she said, jabbing him with it. A nub of pencil was under her thumb. It was black, with no eraser, and deep teeth marks.

"Write down the bullies' names and feed them to the jack-o-lantern. Feed them to the fire." Janet smiled. Fred's mouth dried at the sight. But he took the pad. Her stare demanded it.

"Just write them down." She touched his shoulder and in that touch was something that made Fred feel better, a kind of medicine.

That's what Daddy says when he's drinking. He says there's medicine in the bottle, but I'm getting old enough to know that's a lie. Parents tell lies, like Mommy did when she said she'd always be there for me. Where is she now, huh? If she'd been with me tonight maybe the bullies wouldn't have taken my candy. But Janet is here now . . .

Thinking of his mom made the world turn red. Anger welled inside Fred like a shaken soda. Janet sighed. For a moment he had forgotten she was there.

"Write them," she whispered. Her eyes closed. Her breathing deepened. She excited him. New feelings crowded Fred's throat, blocking his words. She repeated the invitation: "Write them." Janet's breath smelled of cinnamon fire. Fred shivered. Cinnamon was his favorite.

He didn't know the bullies' names. They went to the high school across town, but as soon as the pencil point touched the paper, Fred ceased hesitating. He wrote: *The bullies who took my candy.*

"Make it more personal," Janet said. "Add something more."

There was just enough room between the first two words. His new sentence read: *The asshole bullies who took my candy.*

Janet chuckled. "Always make it more personal. Always write your feelings. That helps the magic. Now tear the paper free and fold it over to hold them down."

Fred did as she bade and did the paper feel heavier now? A breeze blew between them and he caught her smell, cinnamon again, and something new . . . matches? It must have been the pumpkin's candle flickering fitfully.

"Now feed the jack-o-lantern, my darling."

Fred stuck the paper through the mouth hole. The flames ate it. The paper exploded like a magician's trick tissue, coughing red sparks. Fred drew his hand back quickly. The tips of his fingers were singed.

Janet closed her eyes and made a weird sucking sound, like she was smelling with her mouth. She released it with a long and throaty "Ohhhh," and Fred shivered again.

Then . . .

Someone screamed. Fred saw a bright and flickering mass. Beside him Janet put her hands together as if in prayer. She grinned. There was more yelling and then the light grew. It was coming. Fred stared between the trees and found a figure, a fire-boy. Flames engulfed his body. He wobbled as he ran, screaming in a high-pitched terror-pain that hurt Fred's ears. Fred started to cover them, but Janet reached out and took his hands.

"No, no. Listen. It's so sweet. What music they make, yes?" Then she laughed. It was a tuneless tinkling from a broken toy piano.

The fire-boy was followed by another. It was the bullies of course. More screams came from onlookers, from parents pulling their trick-or-treaters away from danger. The two sizzling corpses slowed, stumbled, and fell in the street in front of Fred's house. They landed with a smack. The flames darkened to blue. The smoke grew greasy and black.

"See?" Janet said simply.

The wind blew her hair. The sight of her turned Fred's breath into a hiccup. Then one of the dying boys made a pitiful whimper and Fred remembered them. Beside each corpse was a melting plastic bag. Chocolate bubbled. He smelled burning sugar and a meatier funk that made him sick. He was going to puke.

"Breath in the pumpkin's aroma," Janet said. The smell of leaves, cinnamon, and pumpkin covered his nose. His stomach settled.

"We did that?"

"You did," Janet said. Her lips were full, painted red, and was she wearing eyeshadow before? She looked like a teenager, like a girl from the high school who might have known the two bullies. Fred felt a renewed heat in his legs. Janet looked like a girl from a movie or music video or one of his Dad's magazines kept under the couch.

Fred looked back to the bodies in the street. No one was around them; no onlookers, or people on cellphones calling for help. People had abandoned them. Fred felt like he did before a big storm, all nervous stomach butterflies, but it wasn't unpleasant.

"People run from things they know are above them." Janet looked full and satisfied. She stretched, straining her dress. "People can tell, animals sensing danger." She closed her eyes and sighed again but it was sad this time. "But the magic only works tonight. Surely there are others you want to feed to the jack-o-lantern's flames." Her eyes reflected the flickering light. Her pupils were on fire.

No way was she just a girl. Her mouth was slightly too wide, her eyes slightly too pointed. Her skin glittered as if she was dusted with frost. He wanted to touch Janet. There were no cooties, but if there were, Fred wanted them.

"Tonight is a gift. You can balance your scales without lifting a finger. Here, let me show you another trick."

He thought of saying no, don't hurt anyone else, but what came to him was the memory of sitting in his room and crying after Daddy said Mommy snuck off in the middle of the night. Fred remembered being abandoned.

"Damn bitch left us, Freddy. Up and left us. Took all the money and silverware and left. How do you like that?" That day Fred went to bed hungry because his dad got drunk and there was no one to cook or make sure he took a bath. His dad hadn't stopped drinking. He was drunk now. That monster slept. But Fred was awake. He was awake and scared and had stayed scared since that day—but now he found he was also angry. He hadn't known he was allowed to be angry until Janet showed him.

“Yes,” Janet said in a breathless voice that was half moan. She spoke low, like a secret, but Fred felt the permission, the invitation to fury. It was a fire in his head, as if some clawed hand stuck a candle in his skull and it was burning him up. He didn’t tell Janet to stop her tricks. He didn’t want to now.

He felt Janet’s pleasure. And pleasing her pleased him. It was a shared dark thing. He was reminded again of his dad’s magazines and how the naked women made him feel.

“The magic only works tonight.” Janet took his chin, pulling him close. “But you can receive stuff tonight, as well.”

On her pad she wrote *CANDY*. Fred noticed there were fewer sheets now. He had a sudden understanding that when the night was over the paper would be gone.

“And the jack-o-lantern’s candle will go out,” Janet said. She had read his mind.

Janet fed the paper through the pumpkin’s mouth. Fred watched. As it burned, he heard a heavy thump and rattle on his steps. He turned and found two plastic bags filled with candy. He saw Snickers and Twix and Skittles, and other packages he never saw before: Bloom Balls, Choc-Bombs, and Black Cat Chocolate. He saw a red and orange box of Fire-Reds. Fred’s mouth watered. The cinnamon in those would be so hot and good. The box showed candy shaped like devil heads flecked with black specks he knew to be pepper.

“Is there anyone else you want to feed to the flames?” Janet looked at his house, back at him, and smiled. Her makeup had glitter in it now and it sparkled in the jack-o-lantern flame. Was the fire bigger? Brighter? Fred was sure.

Fred thought of his father, lazy and loud. He thought of his mother and wondered what she was doing. Daddy said she was a whore out partying, and maybe that was true, but she wasn’t here, so didn’t she deserve to burn?

But for one last time, Fred had a normal child thought.

“What do I do tomorrow? If I give them to the fire, who will take care of me?”

Janet tilted her head back and launched laughter at the sky. The tone was so genuine it made Fred smile. Her lips were a deeper red and her eyelashes long. Her breasts had swelled. Her nipples strained the child’s costume. A tattoo rode her shoulder, an intricate star pattern surrounded by brambles and thorns.

“I will take care of you. Join me and I will take care of you always.”

Fred was numb in her promise, but he didn’t doubt her sincerity. The honest want he saw in Janet was sophisticated beyond his intellect, but Fred understood it on a gut level that pulled at his soul. Someone wanted him! Mommy left and Daddy didn’t care but Janet wanted him. It was wonderful and silenced any warning that might have come from his heart or conscience. Fred shed tears in his gratitude.

“But you’re just a kid like me.”

“Am I?” Janet was now wearing a clear half-mask that covered her eyes and cheeks. It was painted like a doll’s face, complete with a crack running across the nose. Janet took off her mask with one hand. There was no string or stick to hold it in place. The tiniest thread of slime came away between the mask and her skin, but the breeze took that. Her new face was fresh, scrubbed, and glowing. For a boy who had been taught adults could not be trusted, Fred saw something he could believe in—a child-mother who wanted him.

“You’ll take care of me.” It wasn’t a question.

“I have such wonderful plans for you.”

Fred believed her. He felt Janet was wrong, and probably bad, but what else did he have? And there was power here, power to stop him from being scared, power to make him grow. And if Janet was bad, weren’t his parents worse? Bad but not as beautiful. Janet reached out and caressed his cheek. Fred felt love. Had his mother ever done that? Certainly not his father. Fred had no more hesitation, only eagerness. He bent to write his parents’ names on the pad. The jack-o-lantern began to salivate an orange cloudy drool.

“Hurry, my son,” Janet said.

She began to lactate thick, cinnamon milk from her breasts. Fred hurried. He was eager to take that communion. He was eager to be hers.

About the Author:

Paul Wilson lives in a suburban neighborhood much like the one he turned into a horror playground in his novel *Hostage*. He lives with his wife, kids, and a moody cat. He has worked a spectacular list of jobs including retail district manager, a 911 operator, and the head of a college security department.

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Nine days ago, the world changed, and it's never going back.

I'll start at the beginning.

I live in Alaska, Sikta to be precise, not that it matters, even in the least, but we were the first Alaskan Capital City. Whatever. So, there I was, in the snowcat, that was my job, explore and register claims for oil companies. The Aurora is a nightly occurrence here. Look up and if you only see the dark, that's when you'd worry.

Not that night.

Liam and I had been exploring the western slope of Prudhoe Bay when the Aurora began to crackle.

At last count, only 160,000 acres of Alaska's 365 million acres were explored. That's where we came in...us and a bunch of others, but this is my story, so...anyway, another aside, still kinda proud of the find. Anyway, the crackle. It was followed by whistles and...hisses. It was the hisses that truly did it for me.

We'd been cutting through the snow at a steady pace, when that green streak in the sky started to fluctuate and pulse. A static flooded the canopy, everything tingled and sparked. We hit the brakes and kicked the doors wide on either side, both Liam and I leaping into the snow bed.

The sky was crackling. You could actually see the sparks scorching each other, as if in some sort of heavenly conflict. The impacts scratched the sky, gouges dripping, something so beautiful.

The light, the light flooded free, flashing all colours of the rainbow, individually and then more, lights, colours that are beyond description. And that's when the whistles came.

Like a scream beyond sanity that echoes your soul and tears everything you ever thought was safe.

The whistles...their voices begging to rip the very you from you.

I scrambled and crawled around the front of the Cat and reached Liam.

His face...

I still can't quite do that expression justice, but that sound, that sound I know.

If you ever heard an angry cat, faced a skunk, or even saw a cobra ready to attack, then you know a fraction of that hiss.

It came from everywhere, within and without him. As if every pore could release sound, in equal measure.

And then he just revealed himself. His face didn't quite bleed away, but it almost melted into an honest form. But this form can't really be described as anything, except the truest form of evil possible. Like every time you read a horror story or watched a horror film and they tried everything to make the monster as scary as possible...that's it. It's the demon from *The Exorcist*, it's the Devil in all His forms, it's the most honest fear you've ever felt, manifested into form and then slapped, right there, on the face of your closest friend and there you are, deal with it!

And then, there, in that moment, everything changed, he changed.

It's like Liam left, or was overwritten and there you had the shape, size and even the same smell of your friend, but his everything else was gone. Liam 1 was gone, Liam 2 was...a dick!

I try. I try to be real, I am being real, he was, is, was 'a dick', to quote myself, but he, I guess he's still a 'he', he was beyond us. A demon is the best term. There's nothing left of him that I can even identify from his soul. Liam 2 is fierce, and he won't stop!

The rest are coming for me too, but it almost feels like Liam 2 is extra interested in me. Maybe it's some latent connection? I don't know, but I know I'm running out of time, and town. The buildings are on fire. It's amazing how quickly a city of nearly 9,000 can burn.

They don't seem to need shelter. That's one of the few things I learned these last nine days, that and, they eat us.

They EAT US!

I'll let that sink in. Again, you saw it in the movies, but you never SAW it, you never smelt it. In the air you almost taste it too. There's a thrill and a satisfaction in their eyes, as they wolf-us-down. I'm sorry, again, levity over gruesome seriousness. But it's true, and you can choose whether what I'm telling you, you can accept in its viscera or you need to take a diluted approach.

There's not much food left here. I'm in the cellar and there's also only so many jars of pickled goodness I can stand before I face the Demons. The sky's still pulsing those extra colours. In a moment of quiet and calm, I almost allowed myself to attempt to name them, but then I saw those kids.

I saw them...and I did, nothing.

I watched. I didn't look away. I watched as the ones that had changed tear every limb from those children. I knew their names too. The boy was Elijah and the girl was Caroline. They both went to the primary school. Elijah had just had his eighth birthday. Caroline was eight too.

Caroline looked at me. She watched me watch her and she said nothing.

She screamed as her arms and legs were torn from her, but she didn't indicate where I was hiding. She just died, like all the others.

I held my hand to my mouth and swallowed every mouthful of vomit I instinctually threw-up, and repeated the process until every last mouthful of child was consumed and all that was left was the red patch on the snow, joining somewhere around 7 or 8,000 others.

I think that's when I broke.

Before, you'd take that time to destroy yourself, to scream at yourself, to be disgusted and horrified with yourself, but after, that's when you accept or die. There's no choice after that. Live and accept or die. Anything between is useless hate and there's nothing after.

It was Liam 2, he ate them, and a couple of others. I don't think it was anything more than 'super' natural instinct, like an animal's to hunt. I can't see an evil smirk in their faces or a glint in their eyes. It's unreasonable, it's beyond discussion and beyond explanation. It's the full wipe of a being, transformed into another, with its own agenda, even if that is beyond ours or even their own reckoning.

They're done and now it's two Alpha predators.

It's head-to-head...but they are stronger. There's more of them and they're well fed.

I didn't know, no one could, but I really had no idea that this would happen, or that I'd get to this stage of 'Me' in this moment of my life, or ever. I never knew I'd become the me I am now. There's something relieving about it, like a weight off your shoulders. That moment when you accept that you are not good...you might be bad, lots of you reading this might be, but most of you are just, ok/medium. You were never going to be 'that' good, you know the one, the type that most Hollywood movies tell you you ought to be. The type that if you aren't you should feel terrible about not being and work really hard to become...but you won't, because so very few people are or could ever be.

You're OK or normal. You're the majority. Accept it and watch two eight year old children get eaten.

See. You're horrified. You think I'm sick. I am! By every definition, but I'm not...I was! I was by your definitions. Now I'm just me and 'me' is surviving, at least for as long as I can or until I can't take it anymore.

I look at their faces, and I know they're evil, deep, dark, full evil, but I also know that I'm lacking some of that soul that 'good' people have now. I know that it's dulled, or gone forever, and while I also know that I'm not them, those things, I am almost empty of obligation. I'm terrified of those things, but I'm also no longer terrified of never becoming or others finding out that I'm not one of the others, the 'good' ones.

So here I am, in a basement, watching monsters tear children to shreds, through the barred window of a soon-to-be engulfed building. And what will I do, aside from accepting my realised self?

I'm hungry.

There's not much here, and I'm bugged if I'm heading out there for a growling belly. I'll make do. There's got to be something other than pickled veg...ah, here we go, canned fruit. That'll do.

Why is it the only time you eat canned fruit is when you're making a Christmas dessert or facing slaughter from evil monsters?

There's a lyric, you might have heard it, from The The.

"This is the day (This is the day) your life will surely change."

I don't think there's a sentence that ever encapsulated my and so many others so clearly and truthfully.

This is the the day.

About the Author:

David is a digital marketer, with a creative writing master's degree and has found his work gracing a few digital and print publications from time to time.

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DARK AND EVIL II

FEATURING MIKE LERA



COMPILED BY
BRIAN WOODS



The Lavender Suit | *Suzie Lockhart*

“After supper, he didn’t feel well, so he went to bed early,” Aunt Gertrude wailed to my mother. “When I went to check on him, he was...”

I’d already heard enough about how my cousin Georgie died, so I stuck my fingers in my ears and sat counting the green and beige tiles on my aunt’s kitchen floor. I was feeling rotten enough, on account of how I’d treated Georgie last time we visited. My Grandpappy had bought me a pearl white music box for my tenth birthday, with a tiny dancer inside. It had cost a whole dollar and a half! Georgie wanted to play with it, and I wouldn’t let him. I told him to go ask his mother to buy him one. My Uncle Pete was a big cheese; they had lotsa money.

We were real poor, see? It’s not like we lived in a shantytown or anything, but I didn’t get new stuff too often. My dresses were mostly hand-me-downs, and my folks couldn’t afford luxuries like toys and such. So, I didn’t want anything to happen to my special present.

But Georgie always shared.

My Aunt Gertie’s howling about my dead cousin was getting especially obnoxious and, unable to take it anymore, I snuck outside. I sat down on the steps overlooking the neighbor’s alley, where we’d often played boxball.

Sometimes, he gave me a piece or two of his nice new chalk to take home, so I could use it for hopscotch.

The grown-ups talked so loud that I couldn’t help overhearing them as they discussed which suit to bury him in.

“I paid five dollars for that lavender suit, Dolores! It was supposed to be for Easter Sunday!” With that, Aunt Gertie broke down into hysterical sobs again.

Curiosity quickly replaced my guilt over not sharing my treasured present. What kind of get-up cost five whole bucks? I imagined, for a moment, all the penny candy I could buy at the corner store with that kinda loot. Then I decided I had to see what a five-dollar purple suit looked like.

Clutching my music box, I crept back into the house, careful not to let the screen door slam behind me. There was a back stairwell that led to the second floor, so I tiptoed up to Georgie’s room. I always envied that he had a whole room just to himself.

Lying on his bed, side by side, were two suits. One was a plain three piece, in a Copenhagen blue color.

The one next to it was the finest shade of lavender I’d ever seen. My hand trembled as I reached out to touch the exquisite wool fabric. I certainly had never owned anything in such a lovely hue; my dresses were all faded and worn. Catching a glimpse of myself in the ornate full-length mirror across the room, I cringed. With my frizzy red hair and my washed-out turquoise dress, I looked like a rag-a-muffin.

Licking my tongue over suddenly dry lips, I sat down gingerly, next to what would’ve been Georgie’s Easter suit. Setting my music box carefully on the side of the bed, I picked up the jacket.

As I stood and slipped it on, I had an uncomfortable feeling in the pit of my stomach; like I was trespassing.

In a graveyard. At night.

“Hooey!” I chided myself as I looked in the mirror, admiring how the color made my blue eyes sparkle.

A noise from the other side of the room sent me jumping out of my skin. Behind my reflection in the mirror, a shadow seemed to slither up from beneath the closet door.

“Aughh!” I screeched, shaking off the jacket. It fell to the floor as I fled the room, scurrying down the stairs to find my mother, sitting alone in the parlor.

I rushed into her arms, sniveling.

“Why, Mattie, you look like you’ve just seen a ghost!” she exclaimed.

A creaking sound startled me. I watched in horror as my aunt handed me that dreadful lavender suit. “I’m going to bury Georgie in the blue suit. Maybe your mother can make you something pretty?”

Georgie always told me to be careful what I wished for. I got that cursed lavender suit, but I guess he got my music box, because I never saw it again.

About the Author:

Suzie Lockhart has appeared in over 30 publications, in a variety of genres. In 2013, Suzie was a runner-up in Women on Writing’s SPRING FLASH FICTION CONTEST, with her story, originally titled: The Dead Boy and the Lavender Suit. Suzie has edited several successful anthologies, including *Killing It Softly 1 & 2*. Her next one, *Dastardly Damsels*, is set to be published by Crystal Lake sometime in 2024.

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Milton Jones gripped his bowl of popcorn, holding his breath as his eyes remained glued to the screen. He watched as Bela Lugosi's character, Count Mora, spread out his cape and crept into a victim's house. Milton shook with alarm as a woman screamed in the movie and his cell phone's ringtone sounded at the same time. Popcorn spurted up around him and onto the floor.

Frowning, Milton paused the movie and took the call. "Hello?"

"Wanna go trick-or-treating tomorrow night?"

Milton scowled. Sure, he was glad to hear from Shaya, who he'd been dating for a few weeks, but the call came at the best part of the film. It ran every October, sure, but he relished every minute of it. After all, it was a *vampire* movie, and he loved everything that had vampires in it.

He forced himself to hide the disappointment in his voice. "Trick-or-treating is for children." Of which I'm not, he wanted to add. But Shaya didn't need reminding that they were both twenty-seven-year-old adults who should've outgrown all that Halloween silliness long ago. These days, Halloween meant horror movie marathons, bonfires and horror art. Not knocking on doors and asking for candy.

"Come on, it'll be fun," she cooed. "Who could say no to free candy?"

Milton grimaced. She wasn't going to let this go. "Okay, fine."

"Awesome. I'll meet you at 8."

He nodded. "Sounds good." He ended the call and returned his attention to the movie. He pushed the play button on the remote control and smiled in anticipation as he watched the vampire's shadow appear on the wall of the bedroom he entered, where the victim slept.

Milton opened the door and grinned. Shaya took in his costume, raising her brows. "Interesting choice of costume."

"I couldn't resist," he replied sheepishly, shrugging. On a night when he could dress up as his favorite fictional creature, of course he went all-out on getting a good vampire costume. Shaya knew how much he loved vampires; she'd been in his apartment and had seen his vampire movie posters, along with several books about vampires. She had told him that she liked vampires too, on that day they had met in the aisle of a Halloween store, where vampire paraphernalia was on display, but not enough to dress up as one for Halloween. He looked at her costume and noted that she looked like a realistic witch, if she wasn't wearing the pointy black hat.

She shot him a mischievous look. "Ever wanted to really be a vampire?"

He laughed. "Don't be silly. Vampires aren't real." He looked at the book she held in her hands in front of her. "What's that?"

She looked at him with surprise. "You have never seen a Book of Shadows?"

Milton frowned. "Of course I have, but what is it for? Nobody takes a book with them when they go trick-or-treating."

Smiling, she circled her arm around his as she stepped over the threshold of his front door. "Well, it's not a typical book," she hinted. "And since I'm dressed for the occasion, you'll get to see me use it."

He cocked his eye at her. "And what exactly are you planning to do with it?"

Her grin broadened. "You'll see! Come on!"

She nearly pulled him through the door, with Milton struggling to lock the front door behind them.

Milton smiled as he walked along the street with Shaya, their one bag of candy that they planned to share later in tow. He looked around as a flurry of trick-or-treaters of different ages ran about them, scattered throughout the neighborhood.

His gaze fell on Shaya and his grin broadened. "Thanks for this. It's nice."

She shot him a grin, a mischievous look in her eyes. "It's not over yet."

His grin turned likewise mischievous as he put his arm around her. "Oh, I forgot. Are we doing a spell, or something?"

She looked back ahead of them as they walked, nodding. "Or something."

Ideas raced through Milton's mind as he also looked ahead. There was nothing sinister in how Shaya was acting tonight; perhaps she had a fun witchy ceremony planned at her apartment.

"I know it's Halloween and everything," he began, choosing his words carefully. "But are you really a witch?" He shot a quick look at her to see if she looked offended, but relaxed when he saw her smile.

"Yep," she replied in a cheerful tone. "It's pretty cool that we can show our true selves on Halloween and no one would think twice about it."

Milton chuckled, nodding. "Except I'm not really a vampire. I just really like them."

"Are you interested in meeting someone who *is* a real vampire?"

He studied her as they continued walking. "Vampires don't exist."

She shrugged. "Some people believe they really are vampires. They even change their whole lifestyle to go with it."

Milton nodded in understanding as he looked ahead again. "Someone you know?"

"Yep. My brother."

He stopped walking. It took Shaya a minute to realize that he was no longer at her side before she stopped walking as well. She turned to look at him, a look of confusion on her face.

"Your brother thinks he's a real vampire?" he asked.

She rolled her eyes, acting like it was no big deal as she stepped over to him and took his hand. "Don't worry. I'm not as delusional as he is." She shrugged. "It's just, with Argus, it's different. He's been this way for a long time. My parents couldn't really deal with it, so he got his own place so he could live out his fantasy."

"Geez, poor guy," Milton muttered, shaking his head.

Shaya shook her head. "Don't feel bad for him. He's happy." She took a step closer, grinning. "And, we're on our way to see him tonight."

Milton chuckled. "We're gonna trick-or-treat at your brother's house?"

"Actually, we had something else planned," Shaya corrected. "And I thought you might go for it, since you're into vampire stuff, too."

He did a double take. "Vampire stuff?" He held out his free hand. "Lead the way."

Shaya giggled as they resumed walking together.

He looked in another direction and stopped. "Hey, check it out." He pointed at the red full moon hanging in the sky above a house across the street.

He noticed Shaya had also stopped walking and turned her head to look.

"There's the blood moon," he said, smiling. He hadn't seen many blood moons and this was the first time in his life there was one on Halloween night.

"Did you know that the blood moon is a warning of death?"

Milton turned his head to look down at her. "What?"

"The blood moon," Shaya replied, looking up at him. "It portends death."

He widened his eyes. "No, I didn't know that." He faked a scary look. "Yikes."

She swung his hand as she sweetly smiled at him. "Death isn't so bad. It's actually a transition to a new life."

Milton shrugged. "If you say so."

They resumed walking. Milton noticed that they were moving further away from the suburbs to an isolated area. As he walked with Shaya along the dirt road with towering trees on either side, he started to wish he'd brought a flashlight.

"This place is kinda creepy," he observed as he looked around. He expected a wild animal to lunge out at them from between the trees any minute. Shaya remained silent as she walked, so Milton ended the small talk.

Finally, the trees cleared away as they entered what appeared to be someone's expansive front yard. Lit windows of the large building in the near distance helped Milton make out the shape of a three-story house.

"Is this where your brother lives?" he asked as they neared the large stone steps of the front porch.

"Yep," Shaya replied, and came to a stop at the bottom step.

Milton also stopped, looking down at her.

She turned to look at him. "Do you trust me?"

"What? But, of course," he replied, grinning as he placed his hands on her shoulders.

"Even though we've only known each other for a few weeks?" she asked, staring up into his eyes.

He nodded. "Most of my relationships don't even last that long," he replied, tenderly rubbing his thumb on her chin. "I like you, Shaya. A lot. I hope we can be together for a very long time."

She grinned as though he had just told her the most amazing news in the world. "That's all I needed to hear." She took his hand and together they ascended the stairs. They crossed the wide stone porch to the large set of two wooden doors and Shaya knocked.

The door opened and Milton now understood why his girlfriend had acted the way she did when she saw his costume. The man who appeared in the open doorway looked to be in his thirties, and he also wore a vampire costume.

"Hey, cool!" Milton said by way of greeting. "You're a vampire, too!"

The man frowned. "Yes. But unlike you, I am a *real* vampire."

Milton started to laugh but turned it into a fake cough once he saw the look of disapproval from his girlfriend. So, this man, who was probably her brother, thought he was really a vampire. As fascinated as he was by vampires, he had better sense to know that they were only figments of the imagination and nothing more. Still, what he had read about vampires was now finally coming in handy. Here was someone who believed he was one.

"Milton, this is Argus, my brother," Shaya said now, bringing him out of his thoughts. He looked to her then at Argus. He extended his hand. "Pleased to meet you."

Instead of shaking hands, Argus only shot him a cold stare. Milton shuddered as the icy blue eyes seemed to touch his very soul. He weakly withdrew his hand, unable to move his gaze away from the penetrating eyes. Argus seemed to be shooting invisible daggers at him with those eyes, tearing pieces of his body away with each stab.

Finally, the intense expression on Argus' face lightened and his gaze grew calm. "Likewise." He looked at Shaya. "It's almost midnight and the moon's color is fading. We must hurry."

"Yeah, sorry," Shaya replied. "We walked here."

Argus shrugged. "Flying would have been faster."

"Oh, sorry, I left my broom at home," Shaya teased, then chuckled.

Milton sent her a questioning look and she shrugged as she looked at him. "I'm joking!"

"Ah!" he said, nodding as he looked at Argus again. "Well, it was nice to meet you. I guess I better head home now."

"Wait, don't go!" Shaya pleaded, grabbing his arm. "We haven't started yet."

He looked at them. "Started what?"

"The ceremony, of course," Argus replied. He stepped out of the doorway, with the door closing behind him. His figure seemed to tower over Milton in a threatening manner with each step away from his door that he took.

Milton took a feeble step back, gulping the lump of fear in his throat. *Vampires aren't real. Vampires aren't real.* As much as he tried to convince himself of this, he started to feel as though Argus truly was living up to the mythical image of the vampire.

Milton nearly stumbled back, chilled by the ice-cold glare Argus' eyes once again shot at him. He started to feel as though Argus was a hunter eyeing him as if he were a deer he planned to shoot for his dinner.

Shaya's squeeze of his hand brought him back to his senses. "It's okay. It'll be fun!"

"Yes, fun," Argus repeated in a dull tone, suddenly the unimpressed brother again. "Follow me, please."

Milton tried to push away the nagging feeling of dread that gripped him as he followed behind Argus as the man led them around his house and up a dirt path. He kept telling himself to just keep putting one foot in front of the other. This was important to Shaya and she wanted him to be here. If only he knew more about what they had planned.

As they moved along the dirt path, Milton noticed how it seemed to grow higher. It started to feel as if they were walking up a hill. Trees once again stood on either side of them and as they continued to ascend the path, he was grateful that at least there were no rocks, branches or assorted obstacles keeping them from walking safely in the dark.

He looked up again and could barely make out the figure of their host. Argus' dark figure seemed to mix with the blackness of the night. With his costume completely black, Milton almost didn't see Argus in front of them as they continued to walk. Milton tried to fix his eyes on the wavering black form in front of them but soon the strain affected his stare and he wasn't sure if Argus was still in front of them.

Shaya remained silent as she walked at his side, her breathing calm and effortless. Maybe the darkness made it too hard to see Argus, and Milton had to just trust that the man was still there.

But as they reached the top of the hill at the end of the path, Milton could only make out one person with him. A person wearing a witch hat and gown.

“Where’s Argus?” he asked.

Something fell on him and he screamed as his body hit the ground. Sharp teeth bit into his neck and Milton groaned as the attacker lay on top of his prone, face-down body, pinning him down. He soon heard sucking sounds at his neck and his eyes widened as he realized Argus was actually drinking his blood.

Then the teeth pulled out of the bite in his neck and Milton groaned in pain from the wound as he lay there. He felt a cold object next to his neck and panic shot through him as he felt more blood gushing out of his wound.

Finally, Argus moved away from him and Milton groaned in pain as he turned to lie on his back.

The full red blood moon hung in the sky above him. On either side of where he lay, he could make out the two figures of Argus holding a chalice up to the moon and his girlfriend with the open book in her hands. She read a spell in a strange language from the pages and, when finished, watched as Argus drank from the chalice. Then he handed it to Shaya and she drank from it as well, closing the book with her other hand.

She turned to look down at him as she removed the chalice from her blood-red lips and held it to her side.

“Welcome to the family, Milton.”

About the Author:

Dawn Colclasure is a writer based in Oregon. She's a book reviewer, freelance writer and ghostwriter. She's the author of several books. Her work has appeared in magazines, newspapers, websites and anthologies. She publishes The SPARREW Newsletter, a monthly newsletter for writers.

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Elements Plus Time | Shannon Acrey

Elusive, never tangible. Always present and without form. Me, **Time**, a record keeper haunting your memories and hiding your future. Many scars I leave behind.

I am **Fire**, and no matter how many times you try to snuff out my light, to plunge me into darkness, I will always have a few embers left to ignite flames and propel destruction into motion.

My clear manner, you thought you cursed me into staying trapped in any container or land borders that surround me. How easily you forget **Water** has more than one property.

Being **Air**, my boundless energy will never find complete peace, but I can stir the waves, light the skies with sizzling fire, and ring out thunderous booms to highlight my passions. It is amusing to know how easily my damaging storms play with your emotions.

Weakened by time, air, and water, even fire melts me creating scorching rivers. My **Earthly** shape continues to change. Everything once firm, will eventually become mud or dust. But know this: I can shake my lands and destroy the fragile life upon it.

About the Author:

Shannon Acrey, from northern Indiana, likes stretching her creative skills with writing, beading, and painting with stencils. She enjoys spending time with her husband and two daughters. She has had multiple motivational poems published in Wingless Dream Publisher, several horror poems and short flash fiction horror stories published with Sirens Call Publications, and lastly multiple poems published with Pan-O-Ply, a local Michiana publication.

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"Damn kids," Mr. Herbert grumbled to himself as he peered through his blinds. "Tracking all over my damn yard. They know full well I never have candy and will not ever have any."

He stalked away from the window and back to his recliner. The worn seat buckled under his weight. Since his wife died, TV dinners had become his friend and they were not very friendly to his waistline. Not that he cared anymore. He was just biding his time until he caught up with her.

"Make sure you check all candy thoroughly," the news reporter chirped. "As always this is your friendly news team signing off for the night. Happy Halloween."

The overly cheerful news duo each held a plastic clown mask over their face as they signed off. Mr. Herbert thought it odd they chose to wield fake knives as well. The camera cut to commercial as the pair rose from their seats and began approaching the cameraman.

"World's going to shit." Mr. Herbert grumbled. "Razors in the candy, gummy bears that are actual drugs, and pills instead of gum. You want a treat, and you get a trick."

DING-DONG

The door chime rang throughout the house causing Mr. Herbert to gasp. No one ever rang his doorbell. Everyone in the neighborhood knew not to come by, no matter what time of day it was. Or holiday for that matter.

He remained still and tried to calm his old ticker. Every beat rattled his ribs. His breath coming in shaky gasps. There was no reason for him to be so worked up. It was only Halloween.

DING-DONG

"I'm coming!" Mr. Herbert yelled. "I am old and slow. Not deaf, so quit ringing the bell."

He rocked himself up and made for the old wooden door. The peephole showed nothing. The porch light was still off to deter anyone ignorant enough to approach his abode. Mr. Herbert yanked the door open. He filled his lungs ready to tear a new one into whoever was dumb enough to bother him.

"JUST WHA..." His yell tapered off as he caught sight of what stood in front of him.

"Hey pops."

What was left of Mr. Herbert's breath was forced from him as his rear end hit the ground. He scuttled back quickly and kicked out at the door frame. His wild kicks managed to accomplish their task. He closed the door on the nightmare he had just witnessed.

"No, no, no, no, no." He whispered to himself. "I am asleep. I fell asleep in my chair to the news."

Mr. Herbert repeated this mantra to himself as he scooted backwards to the chair.

DING-DONG

"Sam," A feminine voice called out from behind the door. "Open the door Sam. I found him! I found our Johnny."

Mr. Sam Herbert listened to the voice of his wife. The voice he had heard every day for over sixty years. The same voice that had not graced his house in over five years.

"I don't know who you are, but you need to leave now!" Sam yelled out. "I'll call the police."

"Sam, Johnny told me what happened." Her tone was venom that he had never heard from her before.

"I'm dreaming, I'm dreaming, I'm dreaming," Sam repeated to himself. "I'll wake up pissing myself any minute."

"HI POPS!" Johnny screamed into his ears. Sam fell over. Hand clutching his chest to keep his galloping heart inside. He had not noticed the mutilated corpse creeping up behind him while his dear wife was talking.

Johnny plopped himself down onto Sam's plump belly. He smacked out a beat as if he were playing the bongos.

"You remember what you said to me?" Johnny leaned in closer to Sam's face. The stench of rotten meat overpowering him.

"DO. YOU. REMEMBER." Each word enunciated by a poke to his father's cheek.

Sam turned his face away from the rancid finger. The door creaked open. His wife stepped through. No trace of the once graceful woman he knew existed in her steps.

"Answer him, Sam." She crooned as she swept past them. Sam heard the drawers in the kitchen opening and closing. "You rearranged."

"Come on daddy-o." Johnny sang. "What did you say to me before you killed me?"

"I..." Sam choked out between sobs. "I said."

"I found it!" She called from the kitchen. "Oh, I always loved this knife set. They never dulled."

"SAY IT FATHER!" Johnny yelled.

"I said...You were evil." Mr. Herbert spat at the grotesque thing sitting atop him.

A long filet knife appeared in Johnny's hand as Mrs. Herbert walked by again. She gently closed the door and slid the bolt into its home. With a flick of her hand the curtains blocked the streetlight that had been filtering in.

"You kill a few animals," Johnny tested the tip of the knife against his finger. "Poison a few kids and that makes you evil?"

"Johnny is my little angel, Sam." Mrs. Herbert whispered as she sat down next to her husband.

"I've been dying to show you what I learned down there, dad." Johnny placed the tip of the blade next to his father's eye. "Now, Trick...or...treat?"

About the Author:

Z Martin is an independent author known for his horror short stories. Z has published two short story collections, *Stroll down the crooked path* and *The Price of Insanity*. He has also been featured in an anthology and had multiple works adapted into audio performances.

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Hair | *Candida Ho*

Trace felt the terror of the night gnawing at her.

Her breathing was controlled—she willed it so, and her eyelids fluttered in their effort to stay open. She collected her thoughts, scattered as they were, as she tried to stay awake, and her eyes felt the strain of heaviness from sheer fatigue, weighed down more by the dull pain throbbing in her temples.

Sleep! I want to sleep! Her brain was screaming, but her mind and her heart were in trepidation. Whatever it was—it could come upon her son. She curled up in a seated position by his sleeping frame, hands on his head, as if shielding him with prayer, a thin impediment of flesh and touch keeping him from an evil lurking. She realised what sweet irony it was—to gather all her attention onto her sleeping child right now; she had not looked at him much when he was awake. He was growing up in the periphery of her mind.

Perhaps an older child loses the luster for the parent of a sweet life brimming with joy and surprises.

Suddenly, as if upon command, her eyes flicked open and rested upon a spot in the corner—a lock of long hair. Trace stifled a scream of pure terror this time. Indeed, a tuft of hair lay there, unassumingly, like a casual clump of dirt by the sidewalk, forgotten. Trace noticed that this time, there were long silver strands intertwined with the black hair. And dust—there were ashen specks of dust in that spotless flat.

In the warm room, devoid of wind, the circular tangled clump of hair gave a little gentle swirl, almost playfully, almost teasingly, and perhaps...menacingly, like a nudge or a dare. *What are you? Are you really here?* Trace's mind raced in terror as her eyes trained upon the dancing locks. She caught a whiff of incense smoke trailing from...*from where?* A whimper escaped through her dry lips. They live high up on the 10th floor, away from the dying smoke and fumes of the burnt offerings that had been up in flames in the past weeks, thickening as the final day of the Hungry Ghost Festival ended the night before. Unconsciously, her palm, lying flat protectively over her child, went to a spasm and squeezed it tight on his skull and he shifted and jerked in his sleep.

Just two days ago, Trace had fetched her son from school. "Hurry up boy!" she had called indifferently with her eyes glued to her phone, fingers flying rapidly across the screen texting. He was quiet and humming to himself. Once upon a time, she would slow down to walk with him, taking delight in his stumbling and unsteady steps, but now that he was older, she left him behind as she took adult strides right towards the destination. No time for lingering. No time for meandering.

But he would meander. That day, he meandered to the joss paper burner placed on the grass on his way home from school. He had bent down to pick up sticks, as he had done on other occasions. *Picking up sticks*—his father had commented wonderingly—*isn't that such a boy thing to do? A boy brandishing his stick, out wandering! Haha!* He would

amass a sizable bundle in his small palms, and gaze in delight as he dropped them one by one through the grills of the storm drains in the ground.

Only that day it hadn't been ordinary twigs he was gathering. They were *joss sticks*, carefully planted by the Chinese faithful, dedicated to the wandering spirits set free from the underworld during the month of the Hungry Ghost Festival. Most spirits would return *home*, where a meal awaits them at an empty spot at the dining table, alongside the family, or at an ancestral altar.

But some spirits have no family. *Why then?* Perhaps it's the same as humans who live and die alone. *Did they really die alone? No funeral and no rites?* Who knows if they met with a watery or concealed death. Perhaps their remains are unclaimed. Maybe they were unloved and unlovable, and whatever love they had when alive turned to ashes even before they died and became forgotten. When the bodies at Bukit Brown cemetery were exhumed, to national uproar and international bemusement, weren't there numerous unclaimed corpses? Their remains were cremated—individually, it was purported—and ashes scattered into the sea.

These spirits wander hungry, lingering unseen and unremembered on the streets, perhaps in the seas, during the Hungry Ghost Month. Perhaps being forgotten has made them spiteful. And spiteful deeds are what devotees want to keep them from acting on. The bitterness of these spirits is assuaged with charitable donations of food and offerings; along the pavements and walkways joss sticks would accompany simple offerings of fruits and steam cakes—an act of protection by well-intentioned believers on behalf of all residents in the area—or a curse for the unwitting who disturbs the arrangement.

And Trace's young son had been one of the accursed, his young mind innocent of transgression as he playfully collected the joss sticks lining up the pavement, his soul damned by the mother who walked ahead, unheeding of him.

The first time it happened, it was that same evening over dinner, when her son scrunched up his face as he was chewing on his food. With much facial acrobatics, he pulled out a long strand of hair. *Mummy!* He had cried in annoyance and Trace looked up from her phone in equal irritation. "What now, boy?" *Look at the hair!* Trace studied the hair closely. She had spotted a short bob for a long time now, and nobody in the house, lest of all her husband and son, have long hair. She flicked it off the table and thought no more of it.

That night he had a vision—one where he drew Trace in with him. In the middle of the night he babbled in his sleep, in a voice of absolute angelic clarity, unexpected of one asleep—*Mummy did you see the woman? She is dancing. She is dancing on the wall.* In the darkness of the night Trace fumbled for her glasses but before she could flick on the switch, her eyes caught an incredible sight—a shadow of a woman was indeed dancing on the wall, illuminated by the streetlamps and the moonlight outside the flat. It could not be there and should not be there. The silence of the night rang in her ears. Trace closed her eyes and opened them again, and sure enough the shadow was there, her side profile so clear Trace could see the roundness of the tip of her nose. The dancing lady swayed jauntily, even lazily, her long hair flowing as if in a soft breeze, to a music and beat unheard from the other side, the other world.

Trace was entranced, gazing in mute wonderment at the dancing shadow, until a whiff of incense smoke drew her attention back and looking away temporarily, she looked back again at the shadow, this time in fear. With a yell, Trace threw on the light and the shadow disappeared. She quickly bundled her son up, now smiling in his sleep, and went to another room and it was only when Trace had tucked herself and her son into bed that again she noticed the shadow of the woman across the room on a piece of empty wall from across the bed, this time standing straight and tall, hands hanging limply by her side, staring dead ahead at them.

Trace had no recollection how she drifted to sleep.

The next morning went by in silence. Even Trace's son was solemnly drawing during breakfast, a maze that his Super Wing character must find a way out of. Neither mother nor son spoke much, but Trace mustered up her courage and asked "Boy, do you remember seeing or dreaming anything last night?"

"No Mummy, I don't remember what I dreamed. But it was a good dream. A nice dream. I feel sleepy."

When she walked him to school and after she had bent down to give him a hug, he turned around to enter the school door. Just before he flung his bag over his shoulder, Trace saw something that made a sliver of horror slowly crept up her spine, and the hair on her neck stood on end. She saw, on his pristine white uniform, a single strand of long hair, stretched out across the length of his shirt, lightly curled at the tip at the end.

On the way back from kindergarten, Trace cast a glance at the spot where he had picked up the joss sticks.

The spot was still empty of joss sticks, though a messy leftover of the steamed cakes were left there, pecked to bits by the birds. Trace cast her mind over where the joss sticks her son had picked could have been, only to recall that she had quickly and sternly told him to throw it back down on the ground. They were all gone now, neatly and deftly swept away.

At that moment, Trace received a notification from her son's school to check the daily attendance of her child. She clicked on the app and got to the picture of her and her son at the front door of the kindergarten, taking their customary daily check in photograph. And what she saw made her heart stop—it was her again, but not *really* her in the photograph with her son. For a moment, it seemed that the features on the photograph began to twist and curl. It was the lady with long hair. Her eyes steady, the lady was well-dressed in what Trace realised, in mute horror, in her own work clothes. Trace recognised the dark blue shirt she was wearing, with a thin string of pearls, which her own father had given her on her birthday, the tiny luminescent beads popped up from the collarbones beneath her blue shirt. She had got that at a closing down sale at Robinson's the year before. The red lips of the woman in the picture parted slightly impassively as she posed alongside her son's bright smile, her son nestled with his head into the chest of the lady. A lock of her jet-black hair covered his cheek partially.

When Trace reached home, her palms sweaty, she took off her top to give herself a warm bath and found a long strain of hair across her breast.

Trace willed herself to stay awake...3am. *The witching hour*, she thought. The clump of hair swirled lightly again around in small circles. *When you see burnt paper offerings dancing in circles in the wind*, she recalled an older uncle from her childhood warning her, *it means that the ghosts are fighting to keep the burnt hell money. You stay away from there.*

Only Trace could not stay away from her own home, could she? She could not stay away from the hair that turned up on her body, and on her son's. The smell of the incense grew stronger, and the silhouette of her husband on the bed stayed immobile. *Her husband, dead to the world.* That very late morning after taking her bath, Trace had hurriedly rushed to the joss paper shop to buy joss sticks. She had practically run back to the spot where she thought her son had removed the joss sticks from and madly stuck a whole line of joss sticks there, lit them and prayed for the woman to stay away. *I'm sorry!* Trace had mumbled desperately. *My son didn't mean to take your joss sticks. Please stay away from him. Please leave him alone.* Her prayers had been met with silence. Of course. Nearby, a Koel bird called, and a wild rooster crowed. A person walked by with large headphones, eyes trained right in front of him, oblivious or apathetic to the strange sight of the woman kneeling on the sidewalk with a line of joss sticks.

Her son shifted uneasily again under her tight grip and Trace looked away from the spot where the hair was to look at him. He was smiling again in his sleep, his lips stretched to a wide grin, and in the middle of the silence, he giggled. Giggled at a delightful funny dream he was having in his mind, far away from the dread of the night Trace was feeling. Suddenly Trace looked up again and what she saw on the wall caused her heart to plummet down into her soul.

The dancing shadow was back. Her long hair, now blowing more in what seemed to be a stronger wind. Her long limbs and svelte body swayed in a mesmerizing dance. Only this time, right by her side, Trace saw the shadow of a young boy dancing right beside her, the crooked collar of his pajamas drawn up. The boy was looking up at the woman, moving as awkwardly and spiritedly as only a young child would.

"Boy?" Trace whimpered, her eyes moving back and forth from the shadow to the small body in repose lying next to her.

The shadow of the boy stopped dancing and it turned its head to look right at her.

About the Author:

Candida relishes rambling in cities and nature and trekking in the rugged wilderness. She is an unabashed fan of the horror genre, both in film and fiction, and immerses herself in them to unwind. She lives in sunny Singapore with her husband, son and two cats, and teaches critical thinking and writing.

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Kittens, Cannibals, and pot-smoking monsters!
What's not to love?



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

Trick-or-treating on the housing estate didn't take the form of cherubic children in costumes knocking on doors in search of sweets. Generally, it was the preserve of teens intent on demanding money with menaces or out to cause chaos in the name of 'festive' fun; most parents kept their younger children in, hidden safely away, perhaps having taken them to a carefully-policed Hallowe'en party during the afternoon.

Jez had taken his little brother to just such a party on pain of having his Playstation confiscated, and had hated every moment of it: babies' stuff! But, now, he was free to meet up with his mates and claim the night for their own.

They met up outside the boarded-up Surestart Centre: him, Big Ben, Dave and Jay-Jay. Big Ben had invested in – or, perhaps, just stolen – a plastic Frankenstein's Monster mask that suited his hulking frame, but none of the others had bothered. Jez had considered snatching a pair of vampire fangs from the corner shop, but it just seemed too childish to him, not fitting with his swaggering, 'hard man' image.

"Better not waste this night," said Jay-Jay. "We gotta go knock on doors: People 'spect it."

Jez shrugged. "Just seems silly to me."

Dave pulled a spray can from the pocket of his hoodie. "Hey, it can be great fun, blud."

Jez shrugged again. "Kids' stuff."

Big Ben uttered a suitably-monstrous growl, but whether it was intended to convey something, Jez had no idea. It might even have been indigestion.

"Well?" Dave looked at him. "What do you suggest, then?"

"It's Hallowe'en: we gotta do somethin' scary."

"Like what?"

"I know – how about that haunted flat?"

"Ghosts?" Jay-Jay laughed. "Now, that's kids' stuff."

"Nah, straight up, blud: There's a haunted flat. Ghosts are real. Don't you watch TV? They have shows where scientists investigate hauntings. It's real. We should take a look; we might see a ghost." He fixed Jay-Jay with a look. "Or, are you scared?"

Big Ben started making a series of muffled chicken sounds and the others joined in the chorus until Jay-Jay exclaimed "I ain't scared! I'll go. I bet *you're* all too scared to go..."

That brought a flurry of denials and they began walking in the direction of the block Jez confidently proclaimed held the haunted flat.

"It's up on the top floor," he said as they entered the block.

The stairwell had the familiar stale smell of urine and was pitch black without a single working light. Jez took out his phone, which had a torch function, and lit their way, although they could probably each have climbed the stairs in the darkness: each block was built to the same basic, unwelcoming design.

Their footsteps echoed hollowly up and down the stairwell, making it sound as if they weren't alone. Yet, with the estate half-emptied of occupants in anticipation of a demolition now on hold until the economy recovered, it was almost certain they were the only people not behind locked-and-bolted doors.

The narrow torch beam did a barely-adequate job of lighting their way and it felt almost as if they were stumbling through a void. The shifting shadows it created and the peculiar angles of faded graffiti it revealed in meaningless fragments were dizzying and terrifying in equal measure, like barely-glimpsed horrors groping for them out of the darkness.

Suddenly, Jez gave a cry of fright as a pallid, ghostly figure lurched out of the shadows towards them. The phone fell from his hand and skittered down the stairs, sending the beam spinning and the shadows whirling in a vortex of horrors. The others joined his shrieks.

Then, Big Ben managed to grab the phone and shone the beam up past the others. There was a muffled laugh from behind his mask as it revealed a rather naff and cartoony skeleton that someone had taped to the wall of the landing, either in a vain attempt at Hallowe'en jollity or in the hopes of causing just such a fright.

Jez swore as the others began to laugh in relief.

"I thought it was something horrible," he muttered as he snatched his phone back from Big Ben.

He turned, stepped up to the decoration, then tore it down, before ripping it into three pieces.

"That showed it." Although he chuckled, Dave's voice still had an edge of nerves to it.

Jez muttered a few more curses, then led them up the last couple of flights to the top floor.

He pushed the landing door open, it gave a suitably-ominous creak as he did so, and, then stepped into the passageway beyond. Just two of the lights along its length were working and both were flickering, but it was enough to see, so he turned off the beam and slipped his phone back into his pocket.

Jez started walking along the corridor, then halted, suddenly.

Jay-Jay bumped into the back of him. "What?"

"Er, nothing." He started walking again. For just a moment, as the far light had flickered on, he was certain he'd seen two figures standing at the opposite end of the corridor. But, when it flickered back on again a moment later, there was nobody there. The split-second of darkness was too brief for them to have moved, so he had to have imagined them. That stupid skeleton had left him rattled, he decided, annoyed.

"Come on," he muttered, as if the others were delaying him.

"Which one is it?" asked Dave.

It could've been any of the flats. Most were probably empty. There was one with a grinning plastic pumpkin roundel stuck on its door, suggesting someone was home, but the others were all equally anonymous. There was no sound, except for the echo of their footsteps. They might have been the only people in the whole block.

"This is it." Jez halted in front of a door on which somebody had spray-painted the words *The Jokes On You* in a bright red outlined in black.

Jay-Jay read the words, haltingly, then said, "What's supposed to've happened to 'em? The people in the flat, I mean."

"They were murdered," said Dave. Jez glanced at him, annoyed.

"Well, that's it, innit? Nobody knows. The police broke in and found 'em missing."

Big Ben chuckled from behind his mask, a hollow, mocking sound.

"But," added Jez, "every Hallowe'en, they reappear."

"How can it be every Hallowe'en?" Dave asked. "Weren't they killed or whatever this last year?"

"Don't knock the story: it's a good story."

"Shall we go inside, or are you scared?" Jay-Jay shook himself as if preparing to enter the field for a big game.

"Yeah, come on." Jez tried the door. "It's locked. Yo, B.B., get us in there."

Frankenstein's Monster's head bobbed and Big Ben took a step and planted his boot against the door: it burst open.

"Come on." Jez stepped confidently through the door into the hallway of the flat. There was a musty smell. He tried the switch, but there was no power, so he took out his phone, again, and turned it on. The walls were painted in a swirling pattern of blobs of black and red. In the torch beam, they heightened the suffocating shadows that seemed to fill the hall.

Jay-Jay swore. "Crazy. It's like my granddad's lava lamp." He and Dave took out their phones to add the light of their screens to the illumination of the scene.

"I guess they liked the colours." Jez headed for the door to the lounge; although every block had its quirks, the layouts were always similar, as if the architects had been given a limited set of components to play with.

"Wow," he exclaimed, "it's like it in here, too."

The difference was that, amongst the swirls on the lounge wall, the words *They Want To Come In* could be seen, picked out in red amongst the black.

"They want to come in?" he read. "Who?"

"Us, dude." Dave laughed. "We came in, didn't we?"

"Urgh! Disgusting!" The cry came from the bathroom.

They ran to join Jay-Jay, who was staring at the bath: the walls of the room and the enamel of the tub were dappled black, not by paint but a thick bloom of mould.

"Gross." Jez stepped away, wrinkling his nose at the smell. The mould in the bathroom at home was bad enough, but this was disgusting. He felt vomit tickle the back of his throat. "I don't think we should've come."

Dave hooted derisively. "It was your idea, blud."

"I know... but... we shouldn't've come."

"Dude, you're scared!" Dave laughed again. "Frightened a ghost'll come and say 'boo' to ya?"

"It's not that..."

“Hey, we’re here,” said Jay-Jay. “We’ll take a look around, then go.”

Jez shuffled nervously, but nodded. He didn’t want to look wussy.

“Well, I still ain’t seen a ghost,” said Dave, walking through to the kitchen and opening cupboards as if expecting to find a ghoul crouched within.

Big Ben chuckled from behind his mask.

“What’s so funny?” Jez spun to face him, but he didn’t answer, just kept chuckling.

“I think this is why they went with the paint job.” Jay-Jay stepped out of a bedroom holding a poster he’d torn from the wall: it showed a sort of blackface clown with a bloody-red smear across his lips and red smudges on his cheeks and around his eyes. “It’s that rapper, The Laughing Man.”

“Poncy git,” muttered Dave, whose tastes were simpler.

“Must’ve been fans,” said Jez.

Big Ben chuckled again.

“Seriously, blud, will you shut it? You’re really starting to annoy me!”

“Okay, so we’ve got a lame poster,” said Dave, “but no ghosts. What a waste. We could’ve been having some fun...”

“Can we go, then?” asked Jez, who was feeling more jittery all the time.

“Yeah, I guess.” Dave shrugged. “I was hoping for at least one gory phantom or something.”

They started to turn to go, but a sudden hammering on the door caused them all to halt. They looked at one another, confused and just a little fearful.

A muffled voice spoke – Big Ben: “They want to come in.”

Jez looked at him. “What?”

“They want to come in.”

The hammering came again. The door shuddered open a little. Jez swore, remembering Big Ben had booted it open, busting the lock. He ran to the door and threw himself against it, slamming it shut.

“Help me!”

Jay-Jay laughed, just a little nervously. “It’s only trick-or-treaters, blud.”

Jez pressed his eye to the spy-hole. In the flicker of the light outside, he could just make out two figures in light-coloured, greyish hoodies. He couldn’t see their faces.

They hammered again and the door shuddered against him.

“Help me!” Nobody did; they just stood and stared like rabbits caught in headlights.

“They want to come in,” said Big Ben.

“They can’t come in! They can’t!”

The door shuddered again and Jez felt rather than heard the sound of the blows as they vibrated through him. He felt the door shift open a little.

“I can’t hold it...”

“They want to come in.”

“Please,” Jez shouted, “go away!”

They didn’t. They hammered again on the door and Jez fell backwards as it burst open to reveal the two figures. He dropped his phone and it fell to the floor, its beam shining up at the ceiling for a moment before it died.

The two figures stood in the doorway, silhouetted by the faint flicker of light behind them. They stood completely still, heads down, faces hidden by their hoods, arms by their sides.

Jez could hear someone screaming and, in some detached part of his mind, he realised it was him. He began to scoot backwards where he lay, staring in an undefined horror at them: the pair were doing nothing threatening and were not exactly terrifying to look at, yet something about them sent a chill of horror through his pounding heart and into his squirming guts. Somehow, he just knew they were responsible for whatever happened to the people who’d lived here.

And, now, history was about to repeat itself.

The lights flickered off and, then, when they returned, the pair were halfway up the corridor, almost on top of him. He hadn’t heard them move.

Big Ben was laughing behind his mask, as if the scene were hilarious. Jez didn’t know where the others had retreated to.

Now the figures were so close, he could see their hoodies were more of a beige colour – reminiscent of washed-out blood. He couldn't see their faces, the shadow of their hoods concealed them; something told him he didn't want to.

Jez kept going, scooting back along the floor until he reached the lounge door. He grabbed the doorframe and pulled himself up into a crouch, then, threw himself through the doorway. He was, now, in pitch blackness, with just a hint of light from the passage marking the doorway.

Behind him, he heard screams: horrible, phlegm-thick shrieks accompanied by wet ripping sounds. He vomited.

Then, Jez saw two silhouettes in the doorway, framed by the faint flicker of light. They raised their heads to look at him and he was thankful he couldn't see their faces: he was certain they were the faces of evil.

The lights flickered off and, a moment later, he had the impression they were standing over him. Jez shuddered, then screamed, but it was too late. By the time anyone came to investigate – if anyone ever did – they would just be another urban legend, another punch line to a joke they didn't comprehend.

Jez kept screaming, then fell silent to the accompaniment of the soft, wet sound of death.

It was over.

A Sound | DJ Tyrer

What was that? What do you mean you didn't hear anything? There was a sound. Um, I dunno, a sort of *slithery* sound, I guess. Over there amongst the trees. No, don't go take a look. What are you, nuts? That's how people always get killed in the movies. Of course, I know it's not a movie, but why take risks? Come back! Well, see anything? Well? You still there? Quit fooling...

Yellow Halloween | DJ Tyrer

Not a winner for best costume compared to the fabulous Frankenstein Monster, but the imposing figure in yellow robes and featureless white mask sure is striking, always present if aloof: never talking, never dancing, just there. Nobody is quite sure who they're meant to be.

Then, the witching hour is struck and it's time to unmask. Everyone does, but them.

Cajoled, they shake their head in flat refusal, saying, "I wear no mask."

But, the figure *does* open their robe and those who see never speak of it again. For them, Halloween will never more be a night of fun.

Soulling | DJ Tyrer

A board near the door was set with buns for visitors to take. Gerald made sure to stuff several of the soul-cakes into his pockets. He couldn't eat one on the way home; old hob, the horse's skull hooded with a white sheet and mounted atop a long pole that was the emblem of the soulling crew, was too awkward and heavy to carry one-handed for long.

"Not a bad haul, eh?" he said to Derek as they exited the big house. He waved off his other friends as they disappeared down the drive into the dark night. He shivered a little at the chill in the air.

Derek nodded as he munched on his cake, then said, spitting crumbs, "Well deserved, though – we *did* sing for our supper."

Gerald chuckled. Going soulling, singing carols in return for cakes, was an old custom on All Hallow's Eve.

"Anyhow," said Derek, "I must be away before the missus takes exception to my nocturnal wanderings. You coming?" He nodded down the drive.

"Nah. Quicker for me to go across the fields."

"Well, watch out for ditches and cow pats."

"I'm not a fool, and I ain't drunk."

Derek shrugged. "The darkness can make a fool of anyone."

Laughing, Gerald started to walk off in the direction of a distant hedge.

"I have a candle to light my way," he called back to Derek as he relit the one mounted inside the horse's skull. The light turned the sheet-covered skull into a ghostly-looking horror floating along in the darkness.

"Night," called Derek. "Try not to frighten anyone..."

"I won't."

Gerald clambered over a stile and set off across the fields, an owl hooting as the night swallowed him.

Puffing, he paused, after a while, to rub his aching arms, before resuming walking. The journey across the fields felt as if it were taking forever. Maybe he should have taken the lane with Derek...

No, he was just being silly. He'd taken this route any number of times and could probably walk it blindfold. He'd be fine.

The soft crunch of a footstep made him freeze, the glow of old hob hanging in the air before him.

"Who's there?" he called.

"What are you?" came a woman's tremulous voice.

He wagged the pole and said, "I'm no ghost. It's just old hob," he pulled the sheet away, "a horse's skull with a candle inside. See?"

"You frightened me," the voice said, accusatory.

"Sorry. Not intended. I was just on my way home – I've been out soulling."

There was the sound of movement and a woman appeared on the edge of the soft candlelight, her bonnet askew and her eyes wide as if with fear.

"I lost my way..." she murmured, looking about as if she might see a signpost to direct her.

"Where are you making for?" Gerald didn't recognise her.

"Eatonfield. I was going to visit my cousin, but I took a wrong turn somewhere."

"Oh, aye, I know it. It's not far. I'm going that way. You may walk with me, if you wish, Miss...?"

"Morton," she told him with a faint smile as she straightened her bonnet. "Louisa Morton. And, I'd like that. This is a night for ghosts and I'd appreciate the company..."

"Well, I'm pleased to meet you, Miss Morton. I'm Gerald Lee. Are you hungry?" He nudged his jacket pocket with the end of the pole mounted with old hob. "My pockets are stuffed with soul-cakes. You can take one if you like..."

She hesitated, then reached her hand into it and retrieved one.

"Thank you." She smiled.

"You're welcome. Now, come on. This way."

With the glow of the candle lighting their way, he resumed walking, Louisa just behind him. He shivered. The night had grown cold.

"We're almost there," he said. "Just –"

He glanced back. She was gone. He was alone in the endless night.

"Gerald?" Louisa looked about in confusion. He was gone.

The first hint of dawn was on the horizon, revealing her surroundings. She was in the lane outside the churchyard at Eatonfield. A quick shortcut between the graves and she would be at her cousin's house.

The sun rose as she crunched her way along the gravel path.

She stopped in surprise. Atop one gravestone was a small pile of soul-cakes.

It wasn't unknown for uneaten cakes to be left for those who had passed on, but a pile like this was strange.

Looking at the gravestone, she shivered. The name on it was that of Gerald Lee.

She looked down at the soul-cake she still held, uneaten, in her hand, then gingerly added it to the pile and hurried on her way.

About the Author:

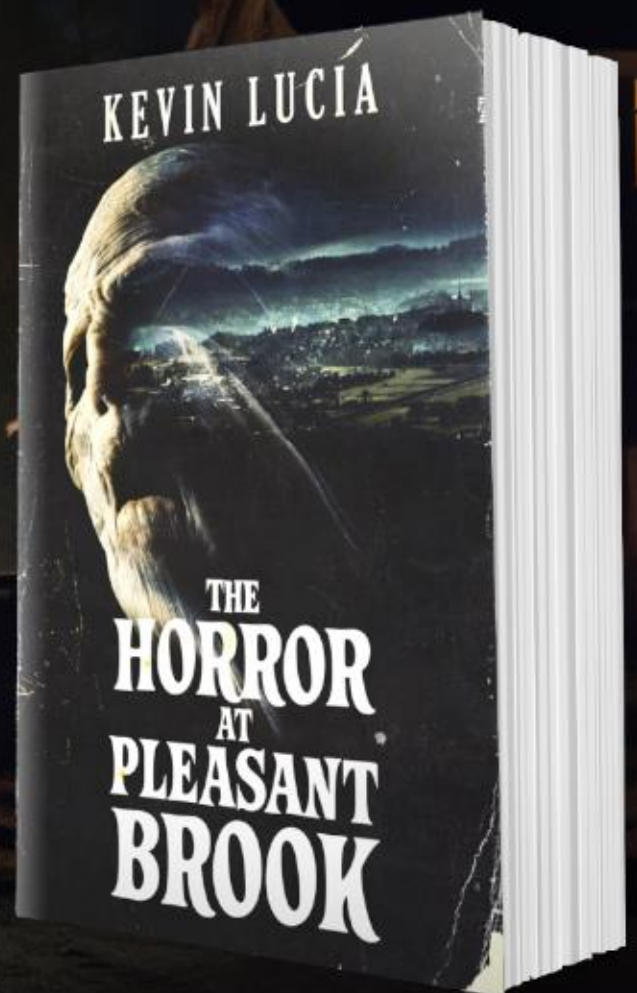
DJ Tyrer dwells in Southend-on-Sea, on the misty northern shore of the Thames Estuary. DJ edits Atlantean Publishing, and has been published in various anthologies and magazines, such as Chilling Horror Short Stories (Flame Tree), What Dwells Below (Sirens Call Publications), and issues of The Horrorzine, Occult Detective Magazine, and Tigershark.

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"A gory, blood splattery,
good time..."



Seventy-eight-year-old Needra had a sleep problem, but not one you'd expect. She hadn't had a dream in almost twenty years. Her long white hair and deep forehead wrinkles hid a troubled mind. Still living alone in her family home in Maine, all the others dearly departed, including her husband, whom she called Bubbie.

The absence of dreams left her unsettled, although she looked outwardly calm. She went to the market, the bank, and tended the chickens, the one bit of livestock she could still manage. Neighbors came by for coffee, and sometimes they brought a fruit pie if it was that time of year.

Her doctor eventually threw his hands up. He'd tried biofeedback, medications, sleep studies, and even bizarre and esoteric exercises from a village near his home in India on her. Nothing worked. But of all the recommendations, sleep hygiene was helpful, although it didn't restore her dreams.

Instead of reading before bed, she read on rising. Being of an age, she propped up a pillow and dug into her novel in bed, while her cat, Grenoble, purred at her feet. This is where her cat usually slept. Dr. Patel didn't think her lack of dreams was because she found Grenoble. Besides, she loved the little beast, and wouldn't part with her even if the cat was the cause.

So one fine morning, she was reading a romance novel when a wave of fatigue washed over her. She took a morning nap despite having a good night's sleep before, so she could be ready for the day. Closing her eyes, almost immediately she fell into a dream. And like all dreams, Needra's started in the middle. She walked on a vast field of marshmallows, her feet sinking pleasurably with each step.

Her arthritis was gone. It was liberating. She wore a spring dress with a pattern of daisies. But the sky was green. Everything turned weird then, as if a marshmallow field wasn't enough! A flock of flying uteri passed overhead, flapping fallopian wings. Beneath them dangled ovaries. They dropped eggs like they were doing a bombing run.

In seconds, the eggs sprouted into mushrooms, with thousands of homunculi comprising their caps. Fetuses, busy in their fungal wombs. To Needra, it seemed the most natural thing. Then the dream ended, because someone shook her awake. She blinked and opened her eyes seeing her son, sitting in a wheelchair.

"Ready for breakfast?" He asked, smiling at her.

Needra flooded with love on seeing him, only to remember he was long dead. The memory turned him into ash, and he blew away, causing her to shudder with grief once more. Tears filled her eyes, and she squeezed them shut.

When she opened them, she was truly awake this time. Needra knew this because she felt the stiffness in her joints, the ache in her neck. She sighed, letting the dream's emotions wash away. Then she laughed, knowing she just had her first dream in years. And it was a whopper!

Getting up, she dressed in her Farmer Johns and put the kettle on. She wanted to call someone, but who? Not even her doctor was in his office at this time of day. Her neighbors wouldn't believe her, because how unusual was it to have a dream?

Being a private person, she didn't want to share her medical problems with them, anyway. This left the chickens and Grenoble. But the cat just stretched and flicked a tail after she shared the news. Not the best of responses. Nonetheless, Needra felt better than she had in years.

"Sorry for stopping by so early. The train schedule, you know," said Atlanta.

"Not at all. I'm delighted to see you. What a pleasant surprise! Welcome," Needra said at the door.

Atlanta was an old school friend from University. Her hair was still black, albeit with some gray streaks peppering it that made her look distinguished. They were once lovers during their days of sexual exploration, but both married men and both were widows now.

"I texted you, then realized on the way here that I sent it to your landline."

"Who am I going to call with a cellphone? I just keep one for emergencies. Don't worry about it." Needra then noted her suitcases.

"I hope I'm not imposing. I do have reservations at a hotel in town."

"You're staying with me. It's settled. I wouldn't think of making you stay in that fleabag. How long are you planning..."

“On staying? That’s all up to you, fish and guests-”

“You’re not a guest. You’re family,” Needra finished her thought.

Tears welled up in Atlanta’s eyes. “I just, I just-”

Needra hugged the tears away. “But where are my manners, Atlanta? Come in, come in, you want some coffee, tea?”

Atlanta dragged her luggage into the entry hall and left them, following Needra into the kitchen. “Whatever you’re having. I’m easy.”

“Don’t I know it!” They both laughed. “So how’s life?”

“Oh, you know, Needra- the kids are struggling and fighting with their spouses. Money’s tight. But the grandkids...”

“I’m so glad you came. I didn’t know who to tell.”

“I knew something was up. You have that glow.”

They giggled conspiratorially as Needra poured out two cups from a percolator. “Still take it black, Atlanta?”

“I take a little sugar now. So you have a boy toy?”

“Nothing so lascivious. I had a dream.”

Atlanta looked confused. “Ah, so did Martin Luther King, and look how that turned out!”

“No, no, I have, well had, a condition. I couldn’t dream. Not for years. Then this morning-”

“I didn’t know that was even a medical problem. I never imagined...”

“Some folks dream, but they don’t remember, or just do it early in the night. I stopped about fifteen years ago. Until this morning.”

“What changed?” Atlanta asked.

“I don’t know. But it was the weirdest.” Needra explained her dream.

Atlanta kept shaking her head, thinking her friend fell off the deep end in her old age. *Too long alone in a big house*, Atlanta surmised. She looked around, wondering if she should suggest Needra move into a retirement center. *But the house seemed well maintained.*

Needra saw the anxiety in her friend’s eyes and changed the subject. “Well, let’s get you situated upstairs. Have you had breakfast?”

“No, but I thought I’d invite you out for it. Any good diners around here?”

“That’s unnecessary.”

“Of course it is.”

Needra couldn’t wait for her next morning’s nap. She hoped for a dream during her regular sleep, but it didn’t happen. Undeterred, she picked up a crime novel and read it the next morning. She could hear Atlanta snoring next door. It was nice to have someone in the house again.

Grenoble stirred, yawned, then sat at the window, after rubbing against it. Needra let the cat out and went back to her book. Soon the fatigue arrived, and she snuggled back under the covers. Almost immediately, she felt Atlanta shaking her.

“You stopped breathing. I... I had to make sure...”

“I’m all right. But you didn’t let me dream.”

“Didn’t let you...”

“Forget it!” Needra snapped. Frustrated, she could hardly blame her friend for waking her. Had Needra done something wrong? What had she done differently? What did she have to do to dream again? She spent the rest of the day contemplating this during every spare moment when she wasn’t entertaining Atlanta.

They walked in the park. Fed the swans. Went out to lunch and went shopping for dinner. It was like no time passed between them. They picked up right where they left off in their friendship. The old intimacy was just instantly there. They shared things they told no one else.

That night, Needra prepared. She would repeat everything she did the night before and in the morning when she had her first dream. Even down to what she ate and drank, and the book she read. Even though she finished that romance novel. Ah, the pleasant fatigue...

Needra awoke dreamless. She pounded the pillow and screamed in frustration.

Atlanta raced in. “What happened? Are you all right?”

“Nothing happened, nothing! And that’s the problem. No dream. Am I asking too much?”

Atlanta came over and held Needra as she crumpled, tears running silently down her cheeks. “I’m sure they will come back.”

“I’m a woman in the desert begging for water. Worse, I’m in a life raft, and even the sea is thirsty. I can’t make it without dreaming!”

“There, there, dear.”

“Maybe you should leave,” she retorted, turning on Atlanta. “I did everything the same, except for you. You’re here.”

Feeling Needra’s anger, Atlanta said, “Maybe you’re right. I should. I should just leave. But how could I possibly stop you from dreaming by sleeping in the other room?”

“Of course, you’re right. I’m such a fool. What am I thinking? I have a perfect life. I should be grateful for what I have, not fret over something as silly as...”

“I’m here for you, Needra. And it’s not silly. I’m happy to stay as long as you need me, or until you dream.”

“You’re a good friend. Let’s get up. I’ll make some coffee.”

“Now you’re talking.”

Needra was riding a tricycle in a forest fire, towing a kid’s wagon. Someone filled the wagon with squirrels. She stopped to pick up others. Despite the danger, she was happy, realizing she was dreaming once again, acknowledging her dream within the dream. Pinwheels flew on either side of her handlebars.

She knew the flames should scare her as the fire licked at her heels, but they didn’t. A whale surged up from the pine needle covered forest floor and splashed down ahead of her, seeming to clear a path to freedom. She tricycled onto the trail, racing along with the chattering squirrels behind.

Beside her a majestic elk appeared, thundering along, beating the ground with his hooves, his rack on fire. Her heart pounded with each stomp of his legs. An opening in the forest lay ahead, freedom from the rapidly advancing fire, felling trees behind her. The squirrels squealed, terrified, but sensing deliverance so near. Then a huge burning tree fell in their path.

Needra belched fire and woke with Atlanta’s lips on hers, giving her mouth to mouth.

“There you are! Thank God. You stopped breathing again, Needra.”

“Yes, but I dreamed. I dreamed of...”

“Tell me later. Recover now. I’ve called an ambulance.” They heard sirens approaching.

“No, really. I’m okay. We don’t need to go to the hospital. I feel great.”

“Let them check you out. I had to do CPR on you and...”

“What? Well, okay. No harm in-”

“Is that her?”

“Yes,” Atlanta said to the paramedic as they pushed through the bedroom door.

“You did good. We’ll take it from here.”

Back home, the same day with a clean bill of health, because, as the Emergency doctor said, “We found nothing that could have caused this, Needra. But we’d like to keep you in for observation.”

Needra refused and opted to go home. Atlanta hovered over her like a mother hen, even worse than before. More tea, fewer cookies, became the afternoon routine on the front porch, while the chickens pecked around their feet.

Needra’s dreams hadn’t recurred in several days. In and of itself, that made her more anxious than the fact she had died, even briefly. At her age, she didn’t worry about death. She was glad Atlanta stayed, though, if only for her companionship. Dr. Patel called her the next morning concerned about her near-death experience and made her a follow-up appointment in his clinic. She promised to keep it after Atlanta broke into the call.

Needra stuck with what worked before to make her dream again. She called it her dream routine. A hot cup of cocoa before bed, wake and read the same romance novel (narrowed down to one chapter), then take a morning nap. She learned that if the now familiar waves of fatigue didn’t wash over her, there was no point napping as a dream would not come.

When it did, a few days later, she struggled against her excitement and anticipation to avoid waking up. This

time the fatigue waves rippled and rose, lashing into white caps, making her dizzy. The word 'swoon' came to mind, and for a moment, she blacked out. Only to discover she was swirling in a vast ocean, caught in a maelstrom.

Her body spun round and round in the whirlpool and every so often she glimpsed the bottomless maw and into the darkness below. Helpless to resist its pull, she headed toward the bottom. Her flowered dress soaked her to the skin, stuck on her youthful body. One she long forgot. The sea was ripe with life. A gale wind carried seaweed and flotsam, tossing them up over her head as she dropped into the trough of the circling waves.

Then a sound, a great sound, frightened her ears. The loud rasp of a garbage disposal drawing her down. She hung at the lip of the drop for just a second, seeing the steel blades whirling below. She left her body there, descending with only her terror to protect her. But that was a delusion as she struck the blades with a clang. They tossed Needra into a tunnel at high speed. A bloody scar ripped across her chest.

Searing pain for just a moment, then nothing. Moving fast now, she landed on her feet, grabbing for the leather handle above her to keep from toppling over. She was in a subway car in a tunnel. The occasional lights flashed by the window. The car's design changed several times, memories of riding on the Tube in London, the Metro in Paris, the U-Bahn in Vienna, then the stink of a New York train. Looking around, she saw someone packed the car with... balloons.

Needra blinked saltwater from her eyes then rubbed them, chilled by the air conditioning. She shook her head, trying to clear the vision of being crowded in by human-sized balloon animals. The lights outside flashed by again, and the overheads inside the car went out. When they came back on, she felt herself crammed in, refugees looking at her, eyes filled with despair. Darkness again, then a subway car filled with the dead.

To her horror, one of them was Atlanta, her head tilted back against the window, her face gray. Going over to check on Atlanta, she was indeed dead. Needra looked up, tears forming as her grief made her glance at the front of the car. The cars ahead of hers dissolved, then the door vanished, and the wind in the tunnel tossed her hair back, driving the tears into her ears.

Leaping so as not to fall onto the tracks as more of the car dissolved, she caught the underside of an enormous clock hanging down from above; the hands struck midnight. The gong rumbled in her chest with each chime of the clock. Her weight made the clock face stretch and distort. The clock itself cried out in agony, a squeal that woke her. She shivered in bed, goose bumps rising on her forearms. It was all too strange, but she was happy at least to have dreamed once again.

Climbing out of bed stiffly, she threw on a natty yellow brown bathrobe and walked down the hall to the bedroom where Atlanta slept. Needra pushed open the door into a deep quiet, the lump of Atlanta's form under the covers still. She walked over by the bedside table saying, "Atlanta, I just had the strangest..."

She froze, touching the back of her hand to Atlanta's cheek. She shivered when Atlanta didn't stir. Her flesh was stone cold and gray, just like in her dream. Needra threw the covers back, only to note that her nightmare resolved into reality. Her friend was dead. Her goosebumps and shivers returned, this time for real.

Shaken, rather than calling emergency services, she dialed Dr. Patel. His answering service responded, and he called her right back. Dr. Patel told her he had been worried about her all week, but when she told him her friend might be dead, he offered to come to her house immediately.

Arriving disheveled was something Needra didn't expect from her doctor. He was always so neat and well shaved in the clinic. He checked Atlanta and pronounced her. After a few questions to Needra, sitting in a chair with her head in her hands, he called the local mortuary to collect the body.

Needra, in her grief, never dreamed again. The thirsty sea drank her desire for more.

About the Author:

Dr. Raymond is a Family and Emergency Physician. He practiced in eight countries in four languages. Currently living in Austria with his wife. When not volunteering his practice skills, he is writing, lecturing, or scuba diving. In 2008, he discovered the wreck of a Bulgarian freighter in the Black Sea. He has multiple medical citations, along with publications of two novels, many short stories, and poetry. He is the fiction editor of *SavagePlanets* magazine.

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I was standing outside in the garish golden light of a late October afternoon in Los Angeles, smoking a cigarette even though I don't really smoke, and thinking about how obscenely inappropriate this weather was for a funeral, and how bizarre it was that I had just put my mother in the ground.

It's strange to think about 'putting someone in the ground' isn't it? But that's what we do, when someone dies. We put them deep in the ground, so they can't find their way up again, or we put them in an oven and bake them to ash — anything to make sure that, once someone's gone, they stay gone. That's what it's all about. I know that now.

There was always something wrong with her — my mother. We were always seeing some doctor, waiting to be seen in some ER. If the first one said there was nothing wrong with her, that she hadn't had a heart attack or a stroke, that she showed no signs of TBI or hysterical blindness, she would just move on to the next one, even if we had to drive for an hour. More than once I missed school because we had been out all night, hitting up every hospital in a 200-mile radius to find just one doctor who would take Mom's heart palpitations or leg pain or unbearable sinus pressure as seriously as she did. I would lie across the backseat and stare through the water-spotted window at the black night sky, pocked with stars. They reminded me then of the needle marks my mom had on her arms from all the tests and IVs, all of them inconclusive, or worse, normal.

At most, she'd be diagnosed with abnormally high levels of stress, and then the questions would come. Had she been worried lately? Under a lot of pressure? And where, pray tell, is the boy's father?

Where to start with that one? We hadn't seen him in five, then ten, then twenty years. We didn't know where he'd gone. We didn't use his name. We couldn't remember his face.

Well, that's not true. I remembered his face, or thought I did. I remembered sitting on his lap when I was little, holding his big smiling cheeks in my little hands. I couldn't have been older than three. Mom never believed I actually remembered him; she said I was confused, that I was thinking of something I'd seen on TV, or a neighbor or a friend of the family, but I hardly ever had the chance to watch TV, and we never saw our neighbors, never had any friends in our family.

I remember my father's face every time I shave my own. I'm pretty sure I look just like him. The angle of my jaw, the slope of my chin seem too familiar — like they're not the first of their kind. Sometimes like they don't even belong to me. Mom hated when I talked this way. It would usually end with her having some sort of coughing fit, or an overpowering wave of nausea — in any case, the conversation would be over and we'd be back in the car, onto the next urgent care, clinic, or hospital.

In the end, it was carbon monoxide poisoning that got her. I mean, imagine my surprise — it wasn't illness or an accident or even suicide — just a stupid blocked flue, a total coincidence. 'A touch of unfortunate luck' is how they'd put it at the funeral home. Seems like more than a 'touch' to me.

I pulled my phone out of my back pocket to check for any new texts. I'd never really made many friends, but I was hoping for a distraction. Nothing. Of course.

Annoyed, I swiped my thumb upwards, preparing to click my screen dark again, when I saw it: A little red dot in the upper right corner of the green phone icon, like I'd missed a call. Curious, I thumbed the square — no missed calls. But there was one voicemail, from an unknown number.

Probably spam. Still, I pressed the blue triangle, set it to speaker, and took another drag from my dwindling cigarette.

The voicemail was only 13 seconds long, and she sounded like she was in a tunnel, or at the bottom of a well or something, but it was obviously her. I would know that voice anywhere. And that tone — it was the same pleading tone of voice she would use whenever she wanted company for another ER jaunt.

"Benny," she said, her voice high-pitched, wavering with emotion. "Benny...Ben—"

It was my mother's voice, calling my name.

I hit stop on the message, glanced at the timestamp. The date was today's, the time less than five minutes ago. The funeral had been over for nearly half an hour.

"Benny. Benny...Ben—"

I played it two more times. Then a third, to be sure. Guilt welled up in me like magma churning underneath a dormant volcano.

It was her. There was no denying it. But when had she left the voicemail?

How?

That night, I couldn't sleep. I kept hearing her voice calling me, sounding every bit as pathetic as she did when I was a little kid.

But something else about the call was bothering me too. Why did I get the voicemail *after* her funeral? Even if there'd been some sort of delay in the delivery, Mom had died over a week ago.

Had she called me while she was dying? Was she saying my name while the poison filled her lungs, stopped her heart? Was there something I could have done to help her?

Could I have saved her?

I couldn't just lie there anymore. I had to get out or I would go crazy. But what was open at 3:30 in the morning?

There was only one place that I knew of. It wasn't 'open' exactly. But it didn't really matter, because there wasn't anyone around who could complain.

Back at the cemetery under the cold glow of the moon, it was a very different vibe than the one it had in the afternoon. LA cemeteries are usually pretty chill: sunny, full of awkward swaying palm trees and tweaked out squirrels, usually some goth influencer girl all dressed up to do a photo shoot. I had almost convinced myself that maybe cemeteries were *never* scary, had never *been* scary. It was easy to believe in the cloudless heat of another sunny California day; it wasn't so easy to believe now.

It was dark, it was quiet, and I was spooked.

The voicemail kept playing on a loop in my mind. After everything she'd done for me, after all we'd been through together, after so many decades of playing the dutiful son, how had this ended with me failing her when she needed me the most?

I hadn't cried since she died. I think I was in shock; it had all happened so fast. But when I reached her grave, that rectangle of still bare earth yawning out in front of a too-clean, factory-fresh headstone, I finally sank to my knees and wept. Actually *wept*, for maybe the first time in my life.

By the time I was ready to head home, the sky had lightened to a milky midnight blue. When I finally made it back to the car, parked just outside of the cemetery gates, I steadied my nerves with another smoke and pulled out my phone for the first time since I'd left the house. It was after 5 AM. And I had a voicemail.

At the sight of the red dot, an invisible fist squeezed my heart, hard. The number, like before, was Unknown. Fingers trembling, I pressed play.

Her voice again. Still distant, but clearer this time.

"Benny," she called, and it was like she was calling me in for dinner, like she was calling me on the phone just to say hello, like she was calling me to the front door with that tinge of panic to her voice I knew meant it was time to get in the car and go see some doctor about some imaginary ailment. Tears blurred the lightening sky outside my windshield

"Benny...Benny — it's so dark. Please, help me."

Every hair follicle on my head and arms lit up with cold dread and I sat there, staring, until my cigarette burned down to ash and singed my fingers. I sat there, staring, until the sky lightened into dawn.

And then I pressed play on the message again. And again.

I drove home that morning and sat inside my apartment, staring at the wall until the sun started to set again. All I could do was play the message over and over, trying to decide what to make of it.

Were they somehow messages from before her death that had been delayed in their delivery? Was this gruesome audio diary of her demise going to leak into my inbox slowly over the next few days, weeks, months? It didn't make a lot of sense, but it was basically my best hypothesis — my *only* hypothesis, unless...

Unless.

There was one other idea that kept leaping to the forefront of my mind, and the more I tried to ignore it the more insistently it would hop onto all my other trains of thought, derailing them. See, the thing is, both voicemails showed up when I was in the cemetery. When I was near my mother's grave.

I twirled my car keys around my index finger and leapt to my feet, surprisingly sprightly for someone running on the fumes of maybe twenty-five minutes of uninterrupted sleep in the last thirty-six hours. I grabbed a flashlight from the hall closet, a few of the white pillar candles Mom had made me buy in case of a blackout, and checked my pocket for my trusty lighter. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt this motivated to do anything. It was nice, having a purpose.

I shoved everything into a backpack and squinted at the street through my blinds.

The sun was going down again. And I was heading back to the cemetery.

I parked on the street just like before, but this time I had a better plan, one that didn't involve climbing over the fence like an idiot.

No, this time I was going to sneak in and hide. Like an adult.

It wasn't hard. Basically I just walked in, played the part of your average, everyday LA cemetery tourist, and then snuck into a quiet corner of the columbarium about fifteen minutes before the gates were set to close. Crouched in the dim light next to some beloved wife's long-forgotten urn, I actually had to put my hand over my mouth to stifle my own giggle when the security guard walked by to do one last sweep of the place before closing.

As his footsteps went back toward the columbarium entrance and faded, I pulled out my phone. No texts, no missed calls, no voicemails. I had charged it on the way over so the battery was full. I heaved my backpack onto my shoulder and set the timer on my phone for twenty minutes — I figured that would be enough time to wait for the security guard to lock up the gates and take off for the night. After that I could wander back outside.

I could go see what Mom needed tonight.

When I finally emerged, it was into soft twilight. By the time I reached Mom the night sky had darkened another two or three shades. I pulled out the candles and arranged them carefully on the dirt patch that covered her like a hospital gown covers a body. I pulled out my lighter, lit them one by one, and glanced around to see if I was attracting any attention, but there was no one there to attract. Finally, I pulled out my phone and set it directly on the dirt, in the center of the circle of candles, and sat down in front of it.

"Okay, Mom," I said. "It's me. What do you need?"

I let my phone sit there for ten minutes before I opened it up to check. I don't know where I found the willpower, but I didn't want to be too hasty. When I finally picked it up and typed in my passcode, my heart was vibrating with adrenaline.

There it was. The red dot. I opened it; I listened. Then again. Again.

Without bothering to pick up the candles, without even bothering to blow them out, I stood up and backed away. About ten feet from Mom I turned my back on her and started walking towards the entrance gates. Then I started to run. I had never run so fast in my life. Not since I was a kid, at least. I practically vaulted over the fence and sprinted the rest of the way to my car.

When I opened the trunk, I was winded. Breathing hard. Sweat dripped off my hair and splatted onto the shovel I kept there, pelting the metal like tiny salty raindrops. I smiled.

And then, back over the fence. Back across the vast expanse of dead bodies, the wide fallow fields of corpses wedged in the earth like seeds that would never sprout because no one cared enough to tend them. Because no one loved them enough to try.

When I got back to Mom, I kicked the candles aside. They rolled over, spilling hot white wax into the grass. The flames flickered and sputtered and went out. I didn't need them anyway. The moon was high and bright and blessed my work, smiled on the son who knew his place and did his duty.

I buried the shovel deep in the soft earth spread across her grave.

I started to dig.

I know how this looks. A real mama's boy, right? Grow up. Time to cut those apron strings. Or whatever people might say about someone like me. It doesn't really matter anymore, because I did what I had to do. Do you see? Any son worth his salt would do the same.

All I know is this: she needed me. She asked for my help, and I had to give it. She depends on me; she always has. And this is what it means to owe someone something. To owe the person who brought you into this ugly world. I never asked to be born, but that's not the point. That's never been the point.

It's just as simple as this: When your mother calls, you answer.

Don't you?

About the Author:

Melissa Pleckham lives in Los Angeles with her husband and their two dapper tuxedo cats. Her work has been featured in Francesca Lia Block's *Lit Angels Literary Journal*, *Sliced Up Press' Sand, Salt, Blood* sea horror anthology, *Rooster Republic Press*, *DarkWinter Literary Magazine*, *Luna Luna*, *Flame Tree Fiction*, and more. She is a member of the *Horror Writers Association*.

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Aimée was stopped by Death on the bad side of Rampart Street in the shadow of St. Louis Cemetery Number 1.

"*Bonjour*," she said, gesturing toward her assailant. "But are you really. . .?" The figure was tall and gaunt, wearing a hooded black robe that shaded its face and was holding a scythe, and as Aimée saw it, it was too early for Mardi Gras but also way too late for Halloween. And moreover, while not impossible but still odd even for the early hours of morning, other than them, the street appeared deserted.

"I *am* Death, yes," the figure said in a deep, slightly quavering voice. Aimée wondered – was it high on something? But then Death continued, its voice gaining more confidence. "And you are a vampire."

That startled Aimée. It struck too close to home and, not only that, it seemed rather rude. "Why would you say such a thing?" she demanded.

"That you are a vampire? Remember, I am Death, and Death knows many things. That you are possibly older than you look. Maybe even as old as the ones who originally came here, according to legend. The ones some people call the 'Casket Girls.'"

Les filles à les caissettes, Aimée thought, yes. This did strike too close to home. Though Death seemed to imply they all had been vampires, not just the one, Aimée herself, who had turned her now-sisters during the long, cramped voyage from France and their stay in the Ursuline Convent just after they first arrived here, nearly three centuries in the past. Who then, with the others, had integrated herself into the highest ranks of New Orleanian society, and indeed this night had been making her way home from Charity Hospital to the French Quarter, following a fundraising gala.

She thought for a moment of Batman and Bruce Wayne, a creature of the night himself who disguised his vocation through late night attendance at similar philanthropic affairs. Though he was a fiction while she was real – indeed was a member of the Charity Hospital Board. Where most members, to be sure, looked older than she, but which she had joined in the guise of a daughter newly returned from college in France, and now striving to fill the pumps of her 'mother'.

But that still left the problem of Death, who seemed to know too much.

"Tell me," she asked, "if you are Death, what business would you have with me? If I were a vampire as you suggest, would I not be 'undead' already -- in which case, it would seem to me, you would be better served by attending the living. That is, the ones you might yet recruit to your side."

Death paused, as if puzzled. It seemed for a moment to stagger, just slightly. "Maybe," it said, "I am not here for you. How do you know a car might not even now be careening off South Claiborne Avenue, coming this way where it will be involved in a fiery crash? But since you *are* here, it seems to me you are somewhat troubled. Somehow unfulfilled."

"Ah, then," Aimée said, "but if I were a vampire, would not my becoming fulfilled be easy? After all, would not fulfillment be simply a matter of finding one's supper?"

Death shook its head slowly. It opened its robe wide, spreading its arms. "If that is all you seek as a vampire, then you lack true purpose. Come, find it in my embrace."

Of course, Aimée thought. And did she not have a naturally pale complexion herself, now that she considered it, which even in dim light might have been noticed? And long, black curly hair framing her face, and wearing dark clothing this night as well? A vampire indeed! She would have to ask -- had the Goth look already gone *that* out of fashion? And, as for a purpose...

At least *this* she understood. Death was trying -- how did one put it? -- to cop a feel.

She thought for a moment of one of her fellow *filles*, Claudette, who no doubt would enjoy the irony of this. Claudette, with her marvelous sense of humor. But she, Aimée, while she wasn't a grouch – not exactly – she wasn't overly tolerant either of things that annoyed her.

And Death was one of these.

"A moment," she said. She turned her back and moistened her teeth with her tongue, then whirling she leapt, bracing her hands on the tall figure's shoulders, and tore out his throat. Her mouth instantly filled, she pushed him back while twisting to avoid the spurt as blood continued to gush from the wound. Sated, she checked her surroundings once more -- they were still alone -- then pushed Death into the gutter where, face down, he might at first look like a passed-out drunk. And, more to the point, any trace left of her DNA would be washed away by the time he was finally found.

Let them think it the attack of a vicious dog, she thought, as she strode away, turning right, toward the River. It was a strange night, she thought, licking her lips, but she had learned a new thing.

While admittedly she had had better, Death didn't taste that bad.

About the Author:

James Dorr's THE TEARS OF ISIS was a 2013 Stoker Award® finalist for Fiction Collection; his latest, TOMBS: A CHRONICLE OF LATTER-DAY TIMES OF EARTH, a novel-in-stories from Elder Signs Press. He currently harbors a Goth cat named Triana, and counts among his major influences Ray Bradbury, Edgar Allan Poe, Allen Ginsberg, and Bertolt Brecht.

Blog: [James Dorr](#)
Facebook: [James Dorr](#)

Family Care Center | *A. L. F. Fagan*

Jeff Mann sat in his motorized wheelchair. Next to him was his wife, Whitney, nervously rubbing her hands together as Dr. Davis flipped through the pages of the folder on his desk. The only sound was the drone of Jeff's oxygen tank, attached to the rear of his chair.

Finally, Dr. Davis sighed and looked somberly at Jeff and Whitney. "The test results are worse than I feared. I'm sorry, there is nothing that I can do."

Whitney said, "Nothing at all?"

"I don't want to give you false hope. The cancer has advanced too far and is extremely aggressive. I'd be lying to you if I said otherwise. At this point, I'd recommend hospice care."

Whitney, teary-eyed, reached out and clutched Jeff's frail hand.

Dr. Davis briefly looked down at the papers on his desk, then looked up and said, "You're more than welcome to get a second opinion, but I think any doctor that is being honest will tell you the same thing. Again, I'm sorry."

Jeff said in a soft and hoarse voice, "You're the fourth specialist that we've seen. The others all came to the same conclusion." He turned to face his wife. "Honey, I'm afraid it's time to accept reality. We need to start making plans for what is inevitable."

"But what about Jenny? She's due in six months. You might not even be able to see your grandchild," Whitney said as she wiped away tears from her face.

"That's not true. Even if I'm not here, from above, I'll see my grandchild come into this world. I'll be watching over all of you. Even when I'm gone, I won't leave my family. Not now, not ever."

Whitney continued to cry. Then suddenly, her jaw tightened, and she turned to Dr. Davis. "Isn't there anyone else who might be able to help? Perhaps there is an experimental treatment? I'm not going to give up without a fight. There must be something."

"Well" Dr. Davis hesitated for several seconds before replying. Then in a hushed voice he said, "Well, there is one place. Perhaps you've heard of Dr. Bloodworth's Family Care Cent—"

Jeff interrupted him. "No, that is not an option. I won't put my family through that."

Whitney asked, "Doesn't your family have a say in this?"

"Honey, I want to be with you all, but not like that. It's too much to ask."

"You don't need to ask—we can decide for ourselves."

"No, and that's final."

Whitney turned to Dr. Davis and said, "We clearly need to have a discussion at home. Thank you for the suggestion."

It was evening when Whitney and Jeff got out of their car in the Dr. Bloodworth's Family Care Center parking lot. The front door of the clinic opened automatically when they approached it. The lighting inside the waiting room was subdued. The couple entered the lobby and went to the reception desk. As they moved past several people waiting in the lobby, Jeff noticed that they all had pale skin and dark circles under their eyes. A middle-aged woman slowly walked out of a door into the lobby. She staggered slightly and took the nearest seat available. There was a blue bandage around her arm at the elbow.

Whitney walked up to the receptionist and said, "We have an eight o'clock appointment with Dr. Bloodworth. The name is Jeff and Whitney Mann."

The receptionist was a woman in her forties. She had dark brown hair and pale white skin. She was wearing a surgical mask, and the name plate in front of her said Rebecca Bloodworth. Rebecca looked at a list in front of her and

replied, "Yes, you're right on time. It looks like all of your paperwork was completed online. You're all set." She picked up the phone and said, "The Mann family is here for their eight o'clock appointment. Can you take them back to the exam room? Thank you."

Within seconds, a young woman wearing a light-blue nurse's uniform and surgical mask came out.

Rebecca said to her, "Luna, here is the Mann family. Can you take them back?"

"Sure, Mom, no problem." She turned to Jeff and Whitney and said, "Right this way."

Luna escorted the couple to an exam room and told them that Dr. Bloodworth would be with them shortly.

A few minutes later, an older man in a dark suit entered the room and introduced himself. "Hello, I am Dr. Bloodworth."

He had a bright-red necktie and matching silk handkerchief. The doctor, too, was wearing a surgical mask. His skin was pale, and his grey hair was combed straight back. The doctor took a seat and began flipping through numerous pages in a file folder while Jeff and Whitney waited patiently. Finally, he closed the folder and looked up at the couple.

"Well, reviewing the results of the tests performed by Dr. Davis and the other doctors, your cancer does seem advanced. I can see why other doctors were unable to treat it. Still, I think there is a good chance that I can help. We use some innovative treatments here at my Family Care Center."

Whitney said, "Thank you, Dr., we were just about out of hope."

"Well, you have come to the right place. I specialize in helping people who are out of hope. I expect that it will take weekly visits for several months to get the cancer into remission."

"If that's what it takes, then we'll have to deal with it."

"That's good. I want you to be well informed at every step of the way."

Jeff spoke up in a soft voice, "What will it cost?"

In response, the doctor asked, "When a life is on the line, is any expense too great?"

Jeff looked dismayed. "I want to know up front what we're getting into. I don't want to saddle my family with too great of a burden."

"Is there a greater burden than the regret of not helping to save the life of a loved one?"

"Just give it to me straight."

"Very well. You have excellent insurance that will cover ninety percent of the financial costs."

"And are there other costs?"

"Our standard agreement does require certain periodic follow-up donations."

"Donations by whom?"

"Family members, of course. Your wife, any adult children, siblings, and any parents if they are still alive."

"For how long?"

"As long as needed."

"And how long is that?"

"There will always be a need."

Jeff turned to Whitney and said, "That's it, we're leaving."

Whitney said, "But this is your last chance! We can't just leave."

"In all the years that we've been married, I have tried to meet you halfway. You know that. But this is my choice to make, and I will never agree to it. We all have to go sometime, and this is my time. My decision is final, there's no point in arguing about it."

Jeff activated his wheelchair, moving toward the exam room door. Whitney reluctantly got up and followed.

As they left the room, Dr. Bloodworth said to them, "At this point, it is not too late to reconsider. If the cancer advances too much, even I won't be able to do anything."

Jeff stopped and pivoted his chair around. He said, "You call this a Family Care Center. I can't help but wonder whose family you are really caring about." Jeff then turned around and left the room, Whitney following behind.

Dr. Bloodworth simply shrugged.

Several weeks later, Dr. Bloodworth knocked on the front door of Jeff and Whitney's home. It was evening, and he was wearing a black pin-striped suit and a surgical mask. He had on a matching necktie and handkerchief in peach.

A young man answered the door and said, "You must be Dr. Bloodworth."

"I am. And you are?"

"Jeff's youngest son, Jack."

"It is good to meet you then."

Jack led the doctor to his father's room.

Whitney stood up as the doctor walked in. She said, "Thank you for coming. I know that most doctors don't make house calls anymore."

"I guess it is rare, indeed, these days. It was far more common when I first started in this profession."

"Jeff lost consciousness, and Dr. Davis said it will just be a matter of time. We've been having hospice care here at home for him. Is there anything you can do for him?"

Dr. Bloodworth sighed and said, "I'll have to examine him to know that."

The doctor spent the next fifteen minutes examining Jeff as Whitney and Jack watched. Finally, Dr. Bloodworth looked up. "This is very late indeed. That being said, I believe there is still a chance that I can help. In order to do so, I will need to get him back to my Family Care Center. We must act with haste."

"Thank you," Whitney said.

"We still have another hurdle to overcome. Jeff expressed that he didn't want me to intervene. With him unconscious, I can't get his consent."

Whitney reached over to a small table and picked up a document. "Before he lost consciousness, I got him to sign over power of attorney. I can make that decision for him now."

The doctor looked the document over. "Yes, this seems to be in order. I took the liberty of bringing our standard agreement form with me to be signed. You are now the one who will have to do so. Please take a moment to look it over."

Whitney took several minutes to read the numerous pages. She said, "It says family members must make blood donations on the twenty-ninth of each month. Aren't blood donations supposed to be made every fifty-six days?"

"Don't worry about that. I'm the doctor here. Trust me, all will be fine."

Whitney continued to silently look at the pages.

Dr. Bloodworth said, "You are very fortunate to get the twenty-ninth. That means that every February, you won't have to donate, since there are only twenty-eight days in the month. That is, of course, with the exception of leap years."

Whitney picked up a pen and asked, "Where do I sign?"

The doctor showed her several places to sign and initial. After that was complete, Dr. Bloodworth reached into his jacket and pulled out a small plastic kit, which he opened on the table.

He announced, "The last signature must be made in blood."

A look of dismay came to Whitney's face. She turned and briefly looked at Jeff. Then she turned back to the doctor and said, "Fine."

The doctor opened an alcohol prep pad and cleaned her finger. He then took a lancet and pricked the finger. Whitney winced slightly as he did this. The doctor squeezed her finger to get several drops of blood into a small pen. He then handed the pen to her and pointed to the bottom of the last page. "Sign here."

After she signed, Dr. Bloodworth gathered up the pages as well as his small plastic kit. "Excellent. I will have my team here within the hour to get your husband to the Family Care Center. Trust me, I will do everything in my power to save your loved one."

Jack then led the doctor to the front door.

Dr. Bloodworth walked to his luxury car and got in. He took out his phone and gave instructions for a private ambulance to move Jeff to the Family Care Center. After finishing the conversation, the doctor put his phone away. He removed his mask and began to flip through the pages that Whitney had signed.

When he got to the last page, his eyes opened wide. He opened his mouth, revealing sharp white fangs. Dr. Bloodworth then licked the signature that had been made in blood. A euphoric expression came to his face. After several seconds, he set the pages down on the seat next to him, started the engine, and drove away.

About the Author:

A. L. F. Fagan was born and raised in Washington DC and is currently living in suburban Maryland. He has a BA in speech communication. Most of his adult career has been in theater tech. Andy enjoys reading fantasy, science fiction, and history. His leisure time is spent running, baking, and playing guitar.

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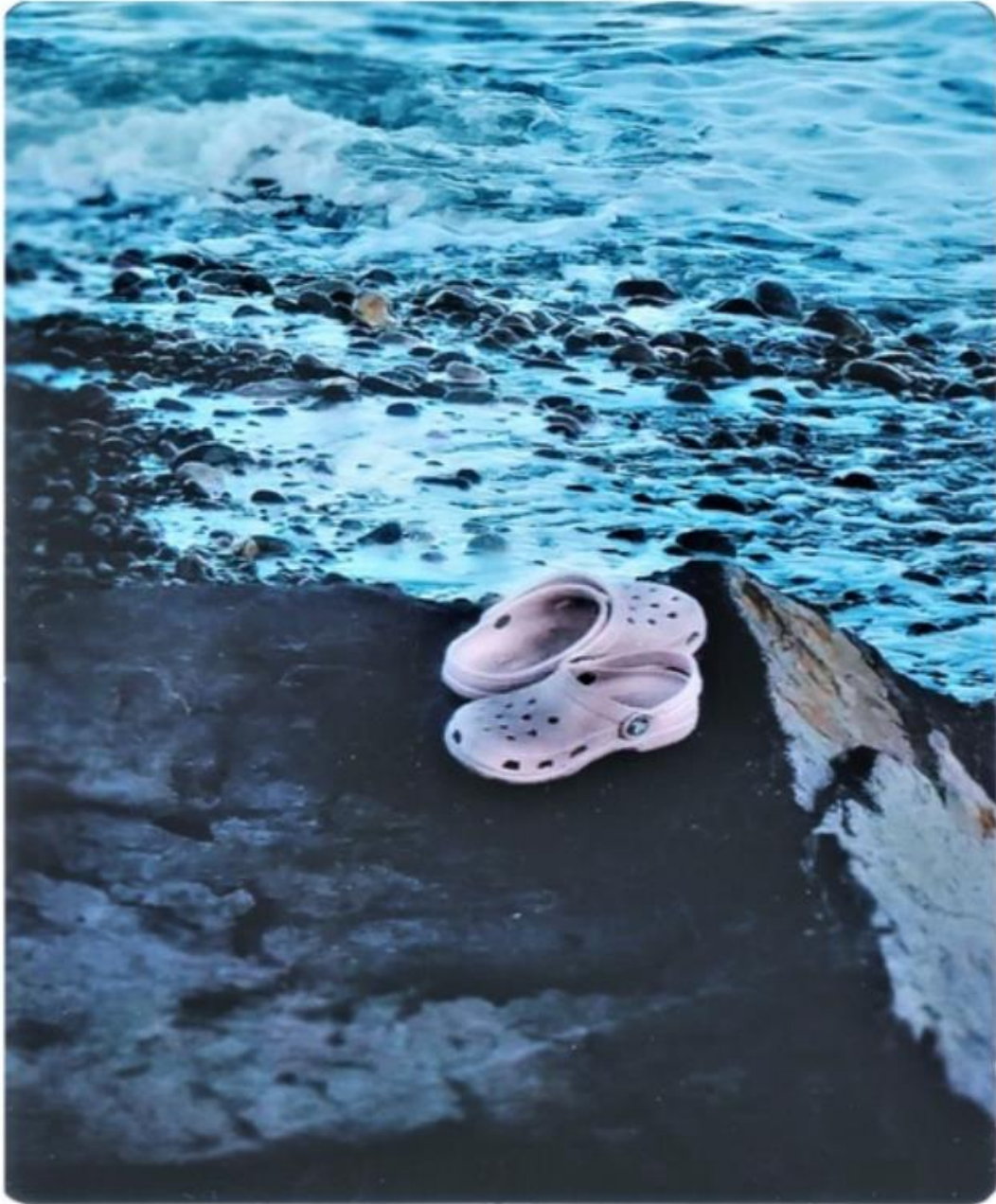
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34 ORCHARD

Darkness is just across the street.

ISSUE 8

AUTUMN 2023



A twice-yearly literary journal that takes you dark places.

34Orchard.com

Bobby's Party | K. A. Williams

Sandy put on the blue mask that completed her costume and inched her way gracefully out of the car, careful not to mess up her dress.

When she rang the bell, the door squeaked open revealing Bobby in ragged clothes and torn sneakers. His normally clean-shaven face was covered in fake hair and phony fangs protruded over his lips.

"C'mon in." He stepped back as she entered. "Unmasking's at midnight." He smiled. "But I already know who you are, Sandy."

She returned his smile and passed by Robin Hood, Elvis, and Wonder Woman on her way to the table laden with snacks, drinks, cups, plates, and napkins. Captain Jack Sparrow poured rum into the punchbowl. He caught Sandy's gaze and winked, holding a finger to his lips.

She bumped into a tall man with dark hair who managed not to spill a single drop of the liquid in the cup he was holding. The man offered his drink to her. "I got this right before the pirate spiked it."

She accepted the cup and sipped the punch. "Thanks."

From behind the red mask, blue eyes caught and held her attention. "I am Count Dracula, and you are?"

"Snow White."

"Of course. You are the fairest one here." He took the cup from her hand and set it down on a nearby end table. "Shall we dance?" The vampire offered his hand to her.

She clasped it and he led her to the back where other couples were dancing to Halloween themed music. Sandy inhaled his cologne and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, the black cape rustling beneath her fingers.

Soon though, she felt hemmed in by the other guests in the tiny dancing area. "Why don't we go outside for a while?" the count suggested as if he had read her mind.

She nodded and they threaded through the crowd passing Harry Potter, Cleopatra, and the Wolfman who asked, "Leaving so soon?"

"We're going for a walk," Sandy said.

"Yeah, well don't let any zombies or ghosts get you, I see a vampire already has."

Snow White and Count Dracula strolled down the sidewalk, autumn leaves crunching underneath their shoes. "I suggested this because you looked uncomfortable," he said.

"Yes, it was too crowded, but I'd like to go back soon. I wouldn't want to miss the unmasking."

The count grabbed her wrist. "No, my dear, I have other plans." He pulled her toward a black Saturn.

Sandy screamed and tried to escape his iron grasp but she couldn't. Bobby ran swiftly toward them.

He was still dressed like a werewolf, yet looked different. "Thith ithn't a cothtume," he lisped around real fangs as thick hair sprouted on his face. "Go!"

Sandy hesitated. Bobby's clothes and shoes ripped apart as his body changed. When Bobby launched himself in the air toward the vampire, she ran to her Honda. Tires squealed while she sped away.

Bobby wasn't in the office the next day, and Sandy wondered what happened to him. Their boss said he didn't call in sick that morning and hadn't answered his phone.

After work, she drove to Bobby's apartment building. His car wasn't in its usual parking place. Sandy rang the doorbell anyway and waited. She desperately wanted an explanation about last night, but no one opened the door.

As she turned to leave, she noticed something half hidden under the potted plant on the porch. She pulled the red mask out from underneath.

There was a note stuck to it that read, *He won't bother you again, and I'm leaving town.*

Sandy sighed. That was just as well, she wasn't really attracted to hairy men.

About the Author:

K. A. Williams lives in North Carolina and writes speculative, mystery/crime, romance, general fiction, and poetry. Her fiction has been published in *The Sirens Call*, *Yellow Mama*, *View From Atlantis*, *Mysterical-E*, *The Creativity Webzine*, *SavagePlanets* etc. She has self-published ebooks of poetry and short story collections, novellas/novels, and Kindle short reads. Apart from writing, the author enjoys classic rock music and CYOA games.

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Halloween's Lost Child | Jack Iain Benson

They say spooky things come out on Halloween night, but I considered it an old wives' tale. Who in their right mind would expect to see anything creepy?

It was late evening, and all the kids had gone home for the night. The rain started trickling before evolving into a downpour, pitter-pattering the leaves and soaking the sidewalks.

I sat safe and snug in my car. In the back seat was my daughter, Sophie, dressed as a princess. She leaned against the head of the back seat, asleep, her rosy cheeks undisturbed.

So ends Halloween 1993. You did well, Jen.

I never realized how many houses my sister's neighborhood had. So many homes, with an occasional two-story house here and there. Many homes had decorative jack-o-lanterns, trees and bushes daubed with fake cobwebs, and plastic skeletons hanging from a rope or lounging about the front yards.

As the wipers cleaned off the water accumulating on my windshield, my turn came up. As I made the turn, a person's silhouette appeared along the side of the road.

The person was a child. Dressed in a witch's pointed hat and gown that were soaking wet from the rain. The child, a girl, hung her head.

"Hey!" I said, rolling down my window and peering my head out. "Are you lost?"

The girl did not respond but continued to hang her head as the rain poured.

"Do you need a ride back to your parents' house?"

The girl looked up at me, a look that made me regret pulling over in the first place.

The girl's face was pale like a ghost's. Pallid and unblemished. But this is not what alarmed me.

It was her eyes. Two voids stared into me. How could anyone have eyes that were so black and devoid of any features?

"Trick-or-treat," the girl said. "Can I please get in?"

I yelled as I retreated my head back into the safety of my car. I gripped the steering wheel and applied full force to my pedal, fleeing from this demonic child. The commotion of the whole ordeal spurred Sophie awake.

"Mom...what was that?"

"Oh sweetie, I...almost hit a deer." In the rearview mirror, Sophie's face contorted into shock and horror. "But don't worry, sweetheart. I didn't hit her, and she even made it back into the woods."

Sophie's face then relaxed.

"Oh...ok."

The rain was still coming down in buckets at my suburban home. I kept Sophie close to me, opened the umbrella in hand, and I escorted her to the door. She clutched her pillowcase of a whole night's worth of spoils, ensuring the rain didn't dampen it.

I tucked her into bed a while later and wished her goodnight, telling her she could start eating her candy first thing tomorrow.

As I closed the door to her room, a knock came from the front door downstairs.

Tricker-or-treaters still out at this hour? And in this weather?

I figured some kid wanted to do one last house before calling it a night.

I crept downstairs and got the small bowl of candy I had left out earlier. There was so little left. I wouldn't have been surprised if the kids took more than one piece.

"Coming,"

I opened the door and recoiled at what I saw.

It was the same black-eyed girl from earlier, several miles from my home.

"Trick-or-treat. Will you please let me come in?"

"No!"

I slammed the door and locked it tight. The girl's dreadful knocking resumed. Cold shivers overtook me as I contemplated what to do.

I took to my corded phone and dialed the number for the local police department.

In a shaky voice, I told the operator of my situation. The operator assured me that a patrol unit was on its way.

My relief was limited as I sat at the kitchen table. My hands gripped the table so hard that my knuckles were turning white. My eyes never once left the door as the black-eyed girl continued to knock, chanting “trick-or-treat” and “please let me in.”

This continued until the patrol car lights illuminated my front porch with red and blue flashes. I smiled, grateful that help had arrived. I didn't even notice until a second later that the knocking had ceased.

I went to the window, pulled back the blinds, and watched an officer step out of his car and walk over to my porch. He didn't utter a word the whole time, not even shouting once.

A new knock sounded, coming from a higher part of the door.

“Police.”

The cop was standing where the girl had been moments ago.

I explained my situation and what the girl looked like. He raised an eyebrow when I mentioned her black eyes.

The cop looked around my property for any sign of her but told me she had somehow escaped. He then gave me his card if anything else occurred, as Halloween night was known for mischief. The officer bade me goodnight as he returned to his patrol car and drove away.

The situation made no sense.

She could not have gotten away so fast without the officer seeing her. And how the hell did she find my place and catch up with me at lightning speed?

My stomach turned in knots as I put the idea out of my mind and went upstairs. I lay in bed, having difficulty falling asleep as that girl plagued my mind. And her eyes. Chilling sweat coated me whenever I thought of her creepy pure black eyes.

Before I knew it, a whole year had passed, and I had dismissed the entire thing. It was already Halloween again, and this year, Sophie's father was taking her trick-or-treating, so I was free to treat myself to a comfy night.

I dressed in my pajamas, drank white wine, and watched a couple of horror classics. I figured that passing out candy that year would be fun. Upon hearing the doorbell ring for the first time that night, I picked up the bowl and went to the door.

Upon opening the door, I dropped the bowl of candy and screamed. It was the same black-eyed girl from the year before, in that same rain-soaked costume. This was most uncanny, as it had not rained that Halloween night.

“Trick-or-treat. Can I come in now?”

I slammed the door hard in her face, then bolted the lock, panting hard.

I squeezed my eyes shut, trembling.

Just ignore her, Jen, and don't let her in.

The knocking persisted, along with those eerie monotonous chants.

There goes my plans for the night. I couldn't enjoy myself with that devil child knocking at the door.

I took my wine upstairs and closed my bedroom door tight. Given the quietness of the house, the knock echoed. I kept reassuring myself that everything was going to be alright like it was last year. The wine was a wonderful escape from that infernal terror.

I woke up with a hangover and had to call my boss, telling him I couldn't make it that morning. I spent the whole day recuperating from my second experience with that child, knowing full well that I hadn't imagined the incident.

It became an annual occurrence every Halloween. I no longer permitted Sophie to trick-or-treat in our neighborhood and insisted she spend the night at her dad's.

This circumstance persisted even when Sophie started high school. That was when she moved in with her father, and I found myself a studio apartment, the complex having tight security. Only residents had access, which meant no trick-or-treaters.

Such a sense of safety was shattered when that knocking came on my studio door. And on Halloween, no less. I stifled a scream after peering into the peephole.

“Trick-or-treat. Please open the door, ma'am.”

I spent all night in bed, distant from my apartment door.

This was the Halloween curse I picked up in '93. Unease enveloped me whenever I thought of what would happen if I were to let her in. Could it be a fate worse than death?

I am writing this chronicle in my hotel suite in New Orleans. A couple of girlfriends and I thought we should go to a big public bash for this year's Halloween.

There had been nothing unusual as far as New Orleanian revelry went. Tonight was the most Halloween fun I had in a long time.

So maybe I'll take more vacations around this time of year.

Update: Just moments ago, I heard a knock on my hotel door. The one I know all too well.

"Trick-or-treat."

About the Author:

Jack Iain Benson is a short fiction author and life-long Halloween lover based in Portland, Oregon. He has been writing since 2021 and specializes in horror, fantasy, and sci-fi. Benson's work has been featured on audio programs such as Scare You to Sleep, Creepy, and Chilling. Many of his short stories can be found on his Medium page.

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Secrets of the Sea | *Gwynne Weir*

The morning was silent. Sule was first awake, freeing her to run down to the beach before her duties. The cold sand was rough against her feet as she hurried through the muffling mists towards the waves, stopping where they whispered their secrets to the shore.

She watched as the icy foam covered her toes; her instep; swirled around her ankle. She wriggled her feet into the wet grains as the skin on the top of her foot became numb.

A chill breeze caressed her skin, teasing locks of hair from the leather tie she had fastened it with the night before. As the force of the wind grew, Sule heard a sound she hadn't heard in a long time. A low whine travelled across the now choppy waves.

She looked out across the water.

From the sea, a blurred shape was breaking through the mist. A huge, black shadow looming closer.

It was back.

How could it be? The time for the collection of souls wasn't for days.

Sule tried to turn; to run. Her feet refused to comply. The sand held her fast. She opened her mouth to cry for help, but the crashing of the surf stole her voice. All she could do was stare as the shape drew nearer.

Tendrils of mist reached out and wound around her, clammy arms holding her faster still than the sand that had swallowed her feet. The once bright morning turned grey, then black, as she was lost to the mist and the sea.

Later, when the mist receded—burned off by the sun—all that remained of Sule was the leather thong, floating in a shallow pool left by the retreating tide.

About the Author:

Gwynne Weir has been writing short fiction for a number of years. Having completed an MA in Creative Writing through the Open University, she has written in many genres, including horror, science fiction and fantasy. Growing up on a diet of Stephen King and Anne Rice led to a love of dark tales, and writing her own has become a passion.

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George pulled into the dusty dirt-covered area that served as the parking lot for Captain Bubbubs. Keri looked at George.

"Is it even open?" Keri asked.

"The metal cow on the L-stake says they're open."

"That metal cow could have said that for 20 years, for all we know. There isn't even a visible window. I think they've all been boarded up."

George looked up at the building. The large and imposing wooden structure appeared to be two stories. There was a porch across the entire front with aged wooden stairs going up. A rusted tin roof over the porch and a crude metal sign that said Captain Bubbubs was centered on the building above the awning. In the center of the porch were two wooden double doors. Boards appeared to have been fitted over all the visible windows, completely blocking them. On the roofline in the center, a weather vane with a rooster sat, as rusted as the roof over the porch.

"This is the first restaurant we've seen in fifty miles," George said. "If I don't eat soon, I'll pass out. We can go up and try the doors; if it's locked, we'll leave and find another place."

"Fine, but it's on you if I get sick from the food."

"A risk I shall have to take."

George opened the car door, and a blast of heat hit him like a wave. The buzz of katydids in the grass filled the air. George stepped out of the car, shut the door, and met Keri at the back of the vehicle. The two walked over to the entrance to Captain Bubbubs together. The old wood of the steps creaked and moaned as the couple mounted the stairs and went up onto the porch. George reached out and pushed on the doors; they opened inward, revealing the restaurant within.

What had appeared from the outside to be two stories was one big room. Large fluorescent lights dangled down from the rafters, and the walls were just untouched wood darkened with age. The floor was unfinished wood, and all the tables and chairs were also wooden. George expected to see a hostess station or, at least, a hostess, but none was visible. The doors shut behind them.

"This place looks like..." Keri started saying.

"It might have food," George finished cutting off Keri. "Hello," George called out into the seemingly empty restaurant.

They heard a clumping noise, and a lady came in through a wooden door in the back of the room. The lady didn't appear to be in uniform.

"Just the two of ya?"

"Yes," George said.

"Come over here," the lady said and motioned to a table toward the back wall.

George and Keri took their seats at the table.

"Do you have a menu?" Keri asked.

"Just the Captain's catch."

"I didn't know there was a lake around here," George said, looking surprised.

"There isn't," the waitress replied. "The Captain is a hunter, and we offer his latest kills to our patrons."

"Kills?" Keri asked. "That sounds a little unappetizing."

"Sorry – ma'am, growing up in a hunting family, you think nothing of it. I'm sorry if that bothered you."

"And what is the, um, catch of the day?" Keri asked.

"Boar."

"We'll have two boar then," George said.

The woman turned and left the room.

The woman returned from the back carrying two chipped off-white plates. There was a slab of grayish meat with a metallic smell on the plate and a pile of dark green overcooked vegetable matter. The woman placed a plate in front of each of them, walked off, then returned with two glasses of clear liquid and a set of utensils and paper napkins.

"What's that?" Keri asked, pointing at the dark green vegetables on her plate.

"Mixed vegetables."

"Oh," Keri said.

The woman returned to the back room.

"I don't suppose they get much repeat business," Keri said, looking at her plate. "Go on, try your – boar."

George cut through his meat and sniffed at it.

"It has an iron smell to it."

He put the fork into his mouth and chewed.

"Well..."

George finished chewing.

"The meat is a little tougher and stringier than I expected, but it has a pork-like taste with a bitter undertone."

Keri poked at her meat with her fork. She noticed she could hear a low mechanical whir.

"I don't even want to know what the Captain is doing to his latest catch of the day," Keri said disgustedly.

"Ouch!" George screamed. "Something is pricking into my foot, and I can't lift my foot off the floor!"

Keri looked under the table. She watched the top of George's sneaker burst upward as a giant drill erupted out of it. Swaths of George's flesh and white chips of bone flew off the drill as it surged upwards. Keri heard George screaming in pain as she threw up.

She returned from under the table and saw George's face had drained of all color. George opened his mouth and tried to say something, but it came out as garble. Keri grabbed her purse and fumbled through it, a lipstick case falling to the floor in her haste, until she located her phone. She whipped it out, slid to unlock it, mashed her thumb on the phone button, and hit 9-1-1.

"Fuck!" Keri screamed.

The phone showed no network. Keri heard a crash and jumped, looking across the table at George. He had fallen forward into his meal and appeared to be unconscious. Keri jumped up, knocked her chair over, and ran to the exit. She hit the door full-on and bounced back, falling on her ass when it didn't open. Keri winced with pain as her head bounced on the floor. Shaken, Keri got up and remembered the doors swung inward when they had entered. She grabbed the door and pulled, but it didn't open. She yanked again and again, and the door didn't budge!

Keri turned and saw that George was still lying on his plate. She looked around the room, where the windows should be; there were also boards on the inside. The only other exit from the dining room was the door to the kitchen, where the lady had gone.

Keri crossed the room, trying to be as quiet as possible. She didn't hear any noise, but she knew the person who had taken their order was somewhere in the kitchen in the back, along with at least the chef. When Keri reached the door, she pushed on it slowly. The hinges sounded absurdly loud to Keri as they broke the silence in the room. Keri peered around the door as she opened it. The door revealed a small doorless vestibule that opened into the kitchen.

She walked into the kitchen, hearing the door close behind her, and looked around dumbfounded. The cooking area hadn't been used in years. There was dust on all the aging equipment. Spider webs went down from the hood over the stoves to pots still sitting on the stove. No lights at all were on. She couldn't even hear the hum of the refrigerators. She opened one, and it was empty and warm inside.

Where the hell did our food come from? Keri thought.

Keri saw another door and rushed over to it. Boards were nailed across the exit. She tried the handle, but the door wouldn't open. She pried at one of the boards with her hands and screamed as one of her nails ripped off her finger. Keri felt heat as her blood flowed out from the cuticle. Keri went over to the sink and turned on the faucet to rinse off the blood. The pipes made a knocking sound, then dark brown sludge started coming out.

Where the hell did our water come from? Keri thought.

Keri ripped off part of her shirt and wrapped it around her bleeding finger.

There's got to be an exit, Keri thought. *The lady is in the building, and our food came from somewhere.*

Keri looked around the room but didn't see any means of an exit. None of the machinery looked like it had scratched the floor by being moved often, either.

Maybe if I go back out front, I can wrench the door open, Keri thought.

She turned and went to go back into the dining room. Keri noticed the spot in the vestibule where the door to the dining room covered another door when it was open. Keri slowly opened the door and noticed that some thick lining had been added to the back of the door. Once the door was open, she could hear a commotion; she looked through the doorway and saw a wooden staircase going down, lit by bare lightbulbs.

Well, now I know where the food came from, Keri thought, and where the lady went.

Keri made her way down the stairs, each step creaking as it took her weight. At the bottom, her feet hit dirt. She saw that the stairs led her to a corridor that had dirt walls with wooden supports sunken into them. Bare lightbulbs were strung haphazardly along the path.

She heard two people arguing but couldn't quite make out the words. She cautiously made her way down the passage. The right side opened up to a square chamber. Keri could see the flooring from the dining room above her. Along the sides of the room were plates and cups. Some looked somewhat clean. Others were still covered with molding food scraps and covered in maggots. A stool in the middle of the room held a drill. The humungous bit in it was coated with red. Blood dripped down from a red stain on the wood above.

George's body must be up there, Keri thought.

She couldn't find anything like an exit, so she retreated to the earthen passage and continued deeper. She felt sweat beading and running down her body. The passage was getting warmer the deeper she went. She tried to wipe the sweat away and felt grit from the dirt on her skin like sandpaper.

A not wholly unpleasant smell of cooking meat was present. She saw another antechamber opening on the opposite side. She saw a fire come into view. Above the fire was a crude spit with what looked like a person slowly turning on it. Keri felt bile start coming up her throat as she saw a portion of the buttocks had been sliced off. Keri choked down the sour fluid. She saw a short, rotund shirtless man at the back of the chamber, with his back to her.

"She's in the passage," said a shrieking voice from beside Keri.

The man spun around, a butcher's knife in his hand and a blood-stained apron on his lower half. Keri turned and saw the waitress standing beside her. Instinctively, Keri pushed the waitress and ran past her.

"Stop her!" screamed the waitress.

Keri didn't look back as she continued forward. Ahead she saw another wooden staircase. The top had angled wooden panels covering it. She dashed up the stairs and pushed on the boards. The sun blinded her at first. She stepped out into the daylight and saw that she was at the far side of the parking lot.

She could hear the woman screeching behind her as she bolted down the hill from the restaurant. Tall grass and weeds were smacking her face, and she could feel seeds sticking to her sweaty skin. She made it to the road and looked in both directions. Heat radiating from the pavement made the images her eyes saw swim in the air.

A dusty orange 1986 Datsun 280Z came into sight. Keri waved her arms, trying to hail the car. The car stopped just in front of her. The driver was a teenage-looking gangling male with a blonde mullet who looked like he needed a bath.

"Help!" Keri cried out, running toward the car.

"Get in, and I'll get you to help."

Keri got into the car's passenger side, and the vehicle sped forward with a jolt. The teenager looked over at Keri.

"Don't worry. My Uncle Bubbub will know how to help you."

The car sped forward, back toward Captain Bubbub's.

About the Author:

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

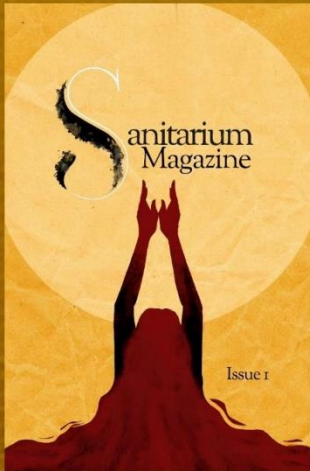
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A Halloween to Remember | C. D. Kester

It's Halloween tonight. I got whatever costume was cheap at the store and would use my pillowcase to put the candy in. It was some kind of knock-off Ninja Turtles thing... Altered Adolescent Amphibians. My family wasn't wealthy by any means, and I was fine with doing what was necessary to help save when I could. I would never wear the costume again, so why spend a fortune on it?

I was starting to realize this might be the last time I dress up and go knock on doors for candy anyway. It was fun while it lasted, I guess. It's kind of sad, really. These moments when you realize you're at the end of certain roads...

Too old for Barney, too big for the egg hunts, or how Christmas starts to feel different when you realize there's no fat man wearing red coming down the chimney. It's alright, I guess. One day I'll be an adult and I'll be able to do whatever I want. I've always got that to look forward to at least.

A ring came from the doorbell, and I grabbed my pillowcase and ran to the front door. I pulled down my thin plastic mask with the little rubber band on the back and there stood my best friend. He was dressed up in something from G.I. Joe, I never really got into that so I couldn't tell you exactly who it was. Snake Eyes maybe? He was in all black, whoever he was.

I said, "Nice costume, dude. You ready to go hit the streets? It should be dark before we make it over to the rich neighborhood where they have the good candy."

He said nothing.

"You're really taking this character seriously, huh? I'm guessing G.I. Jerk isn't much of a talker in the movies, huh? It's cool, I can play along."

I pulled out my ninja sai, as I guess I was supposed to be Rafael. It only came with one of them, instead of the usual two. The headband color on the mask was also more of a red orange instead of just red... Probably how they got away with using the same mask for the Rafael and Donatello clones.

"Cowabunga, dude!"

I laughed and walked out of the door. He followed and walked in a stiff and almost robotic manner. We played practical jokes on each other all the time, so it wasn't unlike him to stay way too committed to something just to mess with me. Especially on Halloween.

One time I waited until he fell asleep and turned everything inside of his room upside down. When he woke up asking what the heck happened, I just pretended it must have been fairies. I stayed with that story so long he actually started to wonder if it was true. For whatever reason, he was sticking to his guns on the silent treatment, so I used the time on our walk to complain about whatever had been bothering me throughout the week.

"It sucks that we don't get Halloween off from school. I don't care, though. We can stay out as late as we want. I mean my mom will probably start to worry after about ten, but let's just have a good time and see what happens. My step dad has been pissed at me all week since we played that joke on him with the paper clips in his office, totally worth it."

He turned his head towards me then looked back towards where we were walking. I just realized something was strange. He didn't even bring a bag or a bucket. What was he going to put his candy in?

"You're acting really weird, man. You can drop the act. It's just you and me."

He kept his head straight without looking at me. Realizing it was probably just too soon for him to relent I continued with my ranting.

"I'm so tired of Ms. McCarthy sending me out of class every day. She's on a real power trip lately. I know I goof off and stuff, but I'm not gonna learn anything sitting out in the hallway!"

I looked both ways and we crossed the intersection into the 'rich neighborhood' where they handed out full sized candy bars. There were the new-age *crunchy* moms who liked to hand out nothing but healthy snacks and sugar free candy also, but the two balanced out and was still better than what we got across the way.

We started to walk up to the first house that was right by an entrance to the trails. That's when I saw something that made my heart drop into my stomach. Walking away from the front door, was my friend... my best friend. He was wearing a G.I. Joe costume, but it was one of the good guys with no mask. So, who was walking beside me? I turned to look but he was gone.

My friend called over to me as he approached. "What's up? I thought I would hit up a couple of houses while I waited on you to get over here."

I pulled up my mask and he could see the look on my face.

"Dude, what's the deal? You look like you just saw a ghost or something."

I looked around seeing no sign of the kid. "Yeah... Yeah, I guess maybe I did... You're not playing some kind of joke on me, are you?"

He genuinely seemed to have no idea what I was talking about. I shook it off. I could explain it all to him while we got some candy. We made our way down the street, making sure to stop at every house that had decorations up.

One house had spiderwebs and lights all around their yard and the owners were out in their driveway watching scary movies on a projector screen. Another house had inflatable decorations all throughout the yard. Beetlejuice, Jack & Sally, Hocus Pocus, it was a really cool display.

As we walked away from a house that was at the end of a street, we had to walk around the corner to get to the next one. It was dark now and we were making our way along the tree line that blocked in the trails that surrounded the neighborhood.

My friend pointed towards the forest as we rounded the corner. "Dude, is that the Snake Eyes kid you were talking about?"

Standing in the trees and facing directly towards us was the same kid who showed up to my door and followed me around as if he was my friend. We walked quickly away and down the street where there were plenty of families and kids to make us feel a bit safer.

As we got about halfway down the street, I said, "That was pretty freaky. I was already kind of weirded out. Do you think we should call it a night?"

My friend shook his head. "Nah, screw that, man. We're not gonna let that little jerk screw up our Halloween night. He's just messing with us, let's keep going until our bags are full and go back to your house to watch Ghost Adventures like we planned."

I shrugged and figured he had a pretty good point. We kept going until it started to get pretty late. The people in the streets were becoming fewer and further between. Our bags were also getting heavy, and the call of Zak Bagans and his live Halloween special started to grow stronger.

We came up to the last street that would lead back to the front of the neighborhood and there he stood. The Snake Eyes kid was standing there in the middle of the road. No bag of candy, no friends or parents, just him alone staring straight at us.

I looked to my friend, and he seemed about as creeped out as I felt. I said, "Let's just take the trail... This one cuts right through to the front..."

He nervously agreed and we started jogging down the trail. We both took out our phones to use the flashlights to see where we were going. We just had a little bit more to go when we saw a figure in the middle of our way. It was him...

Emboldened by the lengths this kid was willing to go to my friend stepped up to him, throwing his bag of candy on the ground.

"Ok, you think you're so tough, huh? Well let's see who you really are!"

I kept my flashlight trained at his face as my friend reached up and snatched the mask off of his head. There was nothing there... The costume was standing but there was nobody inside. I threw my bag of candy and we both took off running at a full sprint. That was a Halloween night I will never forget.

About the Author:

C. D. Kester is an author of fiction. He lives in Kingwood, Texas with his wife and two children. Kester has published two books. *Chasing Demons* & *The Bunker*. He also had stories in anthologies, ezines, and in podcasts and YouTube videos.

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Halloween night was the last time I ever slept with the lights off. It was almost midnight, and the trick-or-treaters had long stopped knocking at my door. My bedroom was now pitch black, and I was just drifting off into slumber when the door to my closet, which was only a yard from the foot of my bed, suddenly unlatched by itself and slowly swung open with a quiet squeak of its hinges.

More curious than scared, I switched on the lamp on the small table next to my bed and looked up. The door was about a foot ajar. Grumbling about being woken up but also curious about how the door could have opened by itself, I got out of bed and staggered drowsily over to it. Pulling it fully open, I peered inside, half expecting to see a raccoon or neighbor's cat that had somehow found its way into my dwelling. I knew from amusing YouTube videos that enterprising individuals of both species had learned how to grasp a doorknob and turn it so that a door would unlatch.

However, nothing but my clothes and shoes greeted me. Shrugging my shoulders dismissively, I re-closed the door, making sure that the knob was firmly latched, went back to bed, and turned out the light.

Within seconds, my blood ran cold and every hair on my body stood on end, for the closet door once again unlatched itself and swung creakily open. I lay like a frozen corpse under my covers, thoroughly unable to believe—much less comprehend—what was happening.

To my unutterable horror, I could hear the sound of unseen feet padding on the carpet coming from the closet doorway in a fearfully slow, deliberate manner. More than I can possibly express, I wanted to reach my hand out and turn on the bedside lamp, but sheer terror and disbelief had stricken me with immobility. Then, as if my abject dread could not have gotten worse, the thing in the darkness made a sound.

It laughed.

It was neither a loud, obnoxious guffaw nor the revolting cackle of a malicious night-hag, but a muffled, simpering sound that I barely heard in the impenetrable darkness. The indescribably hideous, snuffling laughter, which seemed to come from the mouth and nostrils of a snickering, gabbling lunatic, a tittering ghoul of unimaginable loathsomeness, filled me with more fright and trepidation than had I ever thought possible.

Worse still, whatever jabbering, slaving, suppurating monstrosity was now in my room, it put its inconceivably vile, gangrenous hand—or paw—on the foot of my bed. I now realized through the fog of my terror and immobility that the odious, abhorrent obscenity in my room was no disembodied phantasm from the deepest cesspit in Hell, but a solid, cadaverous abomination clawing at me in the dark, seething with predatory malignancy. The putrescent, shambling carcass-creature was pressing into my mattress, starting near my feet and sidling up to me, slithering pitilessly, inexorably toward my head, its necrotic feet padding on the carpet with repugnant certitude, accompanied by its malevolent, psychotic chortle.

What manner of scabrous, leering night-beast had materialized in my closet, and from what chthonic portal in Hell it had spewed, I will never know, but the scrabbling, verminous excrescence was unstoppable. My mounting terror reached its summit when the skulking, Hell-born prowler reached my head. Then, this chuckling, giggling entity of insatiable malevolence looming above me leaned down into my face, as I could tell by the increasing volume of its laughter. I expected to smell the noisome, noxious corruption of a pestilential charnel pit, but all I perceived were puffs of odorless air hitting my face, emanating from what must have been an incalculably foul, nauseating maw.

At this, perhaps by the most bestial, primordial instinct in my innermost being, my left arm flailed outward defensively, trying to push the unholy, gibbering night-thing away from me, but my limb cut through nothing except the ebony darkness. My assailant reacted simply by emitting a grotesquely revolting, half-whispered, sneering laugh that was an unholy, repugnant hybrid of a snort and a burble.

What happened next was far worse than anything that had heretofore befell me. I felt clammy, leprous hands groping for my neck, bony, cankered fingers wrapping around my throat. Again with the basest instinct I possessed, I reached up with both hands to grab the wrists of my execrable attacker, but again there was nothing there. I writhed and wriggled, trying to get the maniacal claws off my neck, even though their owner seemed to have no corporeal existence. Contorting and squirming like a snake in the merciless beak of a raptor, I kicked my feet in all directions, sending the bed covers flying.

I wanted to scream for help, but the hellish, ice-cold talons held me in a nightmarish vice grip. I continued bucking and kicking with the feckless, pathetic futility of a deer whose neck was caught in the jaws of a mountain lion, but to no avail. Through the black swirls and eddies of my unspeakable terror and physical torment, I resigned myself to a lonely, gory death.

Suddenly, the diabolic talons let go of my neck. I gasped for breath, sat bolt upright, and turned on the light.

There was nothing—and no one—in my room.

Holding my throat in searing pain, I crawled out of bed and tottered madly into my bathroom. Switching on the light, I cautiously removed my hands from my throat and looked in the mirror. My blood ran cold as I beheld what was there: angry red welts across the front of my neck.

I did not know, nor will I ever know, what was in my room that night, why it had crawled out of the fetid bogs of the underworld, and why it had suddenly relaxed its grip on my throat and disappeared forever.

From now on, though, I will sleep with the lights on.

About the Author:

Stephen Caesar has been an English teacher/tutor since 2004. He served as adjunct professor of English literature at Newbury College in Boston and is former Senior Docent at the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East. He has had two research articles published in the peer-reviewed journal *The Jewish Bible Quarterly* and three short stories published in *Black Petals*, *Fabula Argentea*, and *The Horror Zine*.

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That New Costume Feel | *Villimey Mist*

I've always felt uncomfortable in my skin.

Bits and pieces don't seem to fit quite right whenever I move around and the sagging rolls on my back have taken away my once beautiful posture. Usually, I manage to shrug it off and go on with my mundane life, but it becomes particularly irksome around October. More specifically, when Halloween approaches. That's when the birthmarks that run a neat, perfect line down my side protrude and transform into fleshy nubs of buttons.

Picking and probing at them as they grow is an addictive, little itch I can't stop scratching. I try every year to resist, but as soon as October rolls around, I give in to my forbidden habit and shed my skin.

My fingers caress the buttons before giving them a squeeze and a twist. The muscles relax and free the nerves holding the largest organ of my body. My skin unfolds like an unraveled burlap sack and hits the floor with a wet squelch. I marvel at the shiny organs and the raw pink meat clinging to my skeleton. How the nerves connect to every minute thing in my body. I'm just not fond of the leathery, liver-spotted, wrinkled skin that obscures the visceral beauty within.

A dry cough rattles my bones and I hold onto the insides for fear they'll tumble out. Droplets of blood spatter the carpet. I'm getting too old for this. I avoid looking at the grey husks of lungs heaving much needed air. This might be my last Halloween. My last time to look young again. Thankfully, going shopping for new skin is a favorite pastime of mine in October.

I've been eyeing a particularly youthful one for a week now. A girl that works in my neighborhood corner store. She's what the youths would call a hipster: baggy overalls with an oversized striped shirt and a beanie that barely covers her brightly colored, cropped hair. And the best part is her limbs are permanently inked with tattoos.

I've never gotten inked myself as it seemed like a waste of money when I was young and worries of financial stability occupied my mind. However, I've always wanted to wear the skin of one who has them. That whimsical aspect of youth is a craving I must sate.

She's got a late shift at the corner store tonight. Before she gets ready to go home, I will strike.

I wait by the corner as the last costumed teenager stumbles out of the store, hefting a bag full of candy. Hiding beneath the shadows of the tall oaks, I watch the lights turn off, casting the spooky ghost and spider-webbed decorated interior of the store into inky blackness.

I pull at the sagging folds of my skin, fighting the urge to toss the damn thing into the bushes. I could have left it at home instead of wearing it, but there'd be less trust of someone stalking the streets showing all the lady bits and more. No, as much as I hate to admit it, my current skin is the best disguise.

The backdoor opens and out walks my catch of the year, bundled up in a large parka that sadly conceals the fascinating paintings on her skin. As she rounds up the corner, I wobble in her direction, plastering on a look of confusion.

"Wait, this isn't my home," I tut in a weak tone.

The girl's alert features soften, and she gently snares her arm through mine. "Are you lost? Do you want me to walk you home?"

Her smile is so pretty. I can't wait to try it on myself.

"Oh, I don't want to trouble you, dear." I wave my hand dismissively.

"Nonsense, it'd be my pleasure."

I give her supple hand a pat and nod, grateful the girl thinks the tremors coursing through my body are due to the weather. The girl is courteous enough to guide me up the stairs of my meager apartment. She even helps me out of the coat.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" she asks politely, as if she were handling a customer.

I offer her my most pleasant smile. "I'd like your skin, please."

When she blinks in bewilderment, I pull a syringe from the pocket of my skirt and plunge it deep into her neck. It's going to leave a bruise on her skin, but it can't be helped. Her eyes bulge in horror as I push the sedative into her system. Her body goes stiff, then crumbles on the floor. I glance from her to the already prepped kitchen table. Sinister smiles are carved on the lit pumpkins that adorn the kitchen and I smile back.

The fun part begins.

I ignore the muffled whimpers and the tugs against the rope that binds the girl to the table. I've done this often enough to know she won't escape. I should have increased the dosage of the sedative but squinting at the tiny letters on the label tires my eyes. Besides, I've grown accustomed to the screams.

Years of wearing different skins has honed my flaying skills. That and having a good set of sharp knives. My fingers hover above the bare skin. They twitch, yearning for that tingling caress; I direct them to the scalpel instead. A good knife for the incision.

It runs across the back of the girl like butter. Thin rivers of blood trail down from both east and west. The gag in the girl's mouth absorbs most of her agony. I grab the skinner knife from the table and slide it between the sections of flesh and skin. It runs smoothly as I hold on to the flap. Draining the body of blood should have been a priority when skinning, but I have no time for that. Crimson pools in the lower back of the girl who occasionally trembles from her pain.

"Don't struggle. You could damage your beautiful skin," I say, shushing her while switching between scalpel and skinner knife.

I won't have to wait long until she becomes silent. The shock on the body is too strong to handle. Even a man built like a musk ox had survived mere minutes before giving into the undiluted suffering.

Once fully skinned, I give the body and skin a wash, cleansing the sticky blood. I'm eager to yank off my wrinkled husk, but patience is important on such a delicate task. I clasp my fingers around her skin and gently pull it away from the meat.

Some strands of nerves and musculature cling to it, like a drowning man to a straw. A simple strike with the knife cuts them off. They snap like guitar chords. I relish in the last sounds they'll make.

In my excitement, I throw off my sagging skin, kick it to the side, and slip on the new inked one. It's slippery and warm. It hugs against my bare, visceral frame, as if welcoming an old friend.

I let out a shuddering sigh as the face envelops my skull. I give it a few tugs and pinches, so everything falls into place, and then, stand before the mirror. Pink colored, short hair. A tiny, upturned nose and thin lips. My new arms and legs have become a private showing of various art.

My smile, my new smile, splits wide.

God, I love it— this new costume feel is more than perfect...

About the Author:

Villimey has always been fascinated by vampires and horror. She lives in Iceland with her husband and two cats, Skuggi and RoboCop. Villimey is the author of vampire horror *Nocturnal* series which currently comprises 4 books; *Nocturnal Blood*, *Nocturnal Farm* and *Nocturnal Salvation*, *Nocturnal Liberation*. She has released a short story collection called *As the Night Devours Us*.

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A Witch Walks into Walmart | Catherine Kenwell

"Curses!" Helen exclaimed, shaking her head with disgust. "They do this every year. And every year, it's earlier than the last one...it's an assault on my *<ahem> sensitive* nature."

Sure enough, the aisles in front of her beckoned children and their parents with 'spooky' bats and black cats and cute little ghosts that shout 'BOO!' in balloons above their heads.

Have some respect, Helen fumed to herself. Families these days...well, it's not like in the old times, when Halloween meant something truly frightening. There was no *cuteness* to Halloween, no babies dressed as bumblebees, no Little Mermaids.

Halloween had been appropriated by the masses and the big-box stores. Most witches were offended, as what was a sacred time for them had been steadily diluted and 'Disney-fied' over the decades. Helen's mother used to tell her, "The only children you should see on Halloween are the ones bobbing in your cauldron." Helen laughed—her mother never actually ate children, did she? Surely, it was just an old crone's tale.

"Repulsive," Helen muttered as she picked up a snow globe that rained tiny bats over a jack-o-lantern when she shook it. "Ghastly, and not in the good old witchy way. A snow globe? Ugh! Is that supposed to represent our sacred celebration?"

Helen realized she was talking to herself. People could hear. She mustn't say too much. But as she surveyed the shelves, the garish orange-and-black displays, she noticed others doing the same. They were speaking into their Bluetooth devices, laughing and answering questions like they were actually speaking with someone on the other side. They sounded crazy, just like she thought she might.

The snow globe would do. She put it in her basket and continued to search for the most offensive tchotchkes and home décor. Silly, she thought, how regular people pretend they live in haunted houses and think that somehow an embroidered skeleton pillow is the perfect accoutrement for their TV room sofa.

She grabbed the pillow.

"OK," Helen whispered. "Snow globe...skeleton pillow...one more."

A precocious brat bumped her hip, trying to reach up to a top shelf. "Mommy! Mommy! This one! I want this one!" the child pointed.

Helen followed the child's gaze. "Oh, dear demons in hell," she cursed under her breath. "What kind of blasphemous abomination is *that*?"

A four-foot black cat stuffy glared down at her. It was dressed as a wizard or gnome or something quite confused yet likely highly marketable. And between its paws, it held a painted sign with the dreaded message: HAPPY HALLOWEEN!

"Oh, child," Helen spoke. "Are you sure you want *that* one?"

Recoiling ever so slightly, the little imp stared at Helen, then nodded. "THAT ONE!" she screamed.

Helen shuddered and turned to the child's mother to await her reaction.

"No, baby, you can't have everything," she attempted to explain. "You've already picked out the pumpkin stuffy and the mermaid costume. You need to decide, which do you want?"

"I WANT ALL OF THEM!" the tiny brat screamed. "ALL. OF. THEM. MOMMY! ALL!"

The spawn's mother was perplexed but calm. Helen realized this probably happened regularly, this bratty behavior.

"NOW! NOW! NOW!" the child wailed. She stomped her feet. She screamed like a netherworld creature. She dropped, cross-legged, to the floor.

Aha, Helen decided, the black cat elf wizard was the perfect third to add to her bounty.

"Sorry, child," she grinned. "This one is mine."

The brat gazed up at her, not believing her teary eyes. "NO! NO! NO! NO! NOOOOOOO!"

"Yes," Helen said as she grabbed it from the high shelf. "And look, dear child, it's the only one."

Helen chortled as she turned to the mother, who appeared both relieved and shocked that a stranger stood up to her beloved baby.

"Come on, baby, Mommy has other shopping to do. You can decide what you want before we leave."

Helen walked away, searching for the quietest corner of the store. She stopped at the end of the last aisle of housewares.

"This will only take a moment, but it's got to be done," she muttered.

Helen leaned the cat against the end of a shelf. She removed the pillow and the snow globe from her basket and set them beside the cat. It was time.

She began her spell:

*Curse the houses of those who buy
Pale replicas of times gone by
For those who think the day is merry*

*Must pay the price and curses carry
Fill these things with haunt and fright
When comes our witches' sacred night.
Cats and bats and pumpkins too
Will resurrect and come for you.*

Helen exhaled. Another year. While some of the other witches found this retail ritual tiring, it exhilarated her. The only drawback was having to wait longer and longer each year.

She found her way back to the Halloween aisle, carefully placed each item within reach of other customers, and wandered out into the night.

Meanwhile, Mother and the naughty child headed towards the checkout. The child noticed the black cat goblin stuffy was back on the shelf.

"MOMMY! LOOK!" the child exclaimed. "IT'S HERE IT'S HERE IT'S STILL HERE!"

"Well, that's odd," the mother sighed, more than a little wary that the tantrum would start all over again.

"Mommy, can I? I'll put back everything else. I'll be good. The stuffy is special. It's like he came back to wait for me!"

October 31

Claire and Tom knew Claire's mom loved Halloween. Even at 83, she watched whatever scary movies were being shown on TCM, and she decorated her retirement home bedroom with cats and ghosts and crepe-paper banners that shouted, "HAPPY HALLOWEEN" and "TRICK OR TREAT".

Claire had found the perfect gift for their Halloween visit. "Mom will adore this little snow globe," she excitedly gasped as she unwrapped it to show Tom. "Look, you shake it and all the little bats dance like snowflakes!"

As they pulled up to a parking spot outside the home, they looked up and saw Claire's mom looking out and waving to them. Claire donned her black cat ears and Tom steadied his light-up devil horns. They didn't care that they were middle-aged adults—they knew they looked cute and oh-so-spooky. And Mom would get a chuckle out of them.

Mom was thrilled with the snow globe. She held it in both hands and shook it repeatedly while the couple visited. A single tear rolled down her cheek.

"Oh, how I miss greeting the kiddies and shelling out," she sighed. "The smallest kids, oh, they were the best...little bumblebees and fairies. The cutest things you'd ever seen. Are you two shelling out tonight?"

"Mom, no one calls it shelling out anymore," Claire explained. "It's trick or treat, and sometimes the kids don't even say trick or treat, but they do shout Happy Halloween after you give them treats."

"And yes, we have to go home to hand out candy, Mom, but we wanted to stop by and give you that little gift, because we remember how much Halloween meant to you."

"Means to me," Mom laughed. "I'm not dead yet!"

After Claire and Tom left, Claire's mom held the snow globe to her heart. She thought it was perfect. She shook it again and again. Those teensy bats, she thought. How cute.

She'd place it on her bedside table, so that she could see it when she woke up, she decided.

She pushed the forward button on her electric wheelchair. It lurched, and the snow globe slipped. The glass orb crashed against the footrest and smashed open. Immediately, Claire's mom's feet blistered and burned, and the caustic liquid spread upwards to her lap, her hands, and her torso. The tiny bats burst into flame and flew into her hair, causing her scalp to burn.

Her heart stopped before her skin began to char.

"Retro farm chic, that's what I'd call it," mused Emily as she fluffed the vintage-looking skeleton pillow. The embroidery was deliciously old fashioned. "You gotta love it, right? It's adorable!"

Jane rolled her eyes. "Whatever you say, Em," she replied. "It does look cute with the dancing skeleton bunting you hung. You really like this Halloween stuff, huh?"

"I've loved Halloween since I was a little kid," Emily smiled. "My favorite time. I remember my first one, I think I was three. My mom dressed me as a bumblebee, and she'd carry me to our neighbors' doors. Then I'd wobble on my chubby little bee legs and shout, 'Trick or Treat'. Probably sounded like 'tweek-o-tweet...I had problems with my Rs when I was little."

Emily placed the skeleton pillow in the corner of her massive leather armchair. This would be her home base for the evening. She'd already filled the HAPPY HALLOWEEN-emblazoned black plastic cauldron with snack-sized chocolate bars. She poured herself a glass of wine, and she and Jane hauled the chair to the front door.

It wasn't long before Emily heard the doorbell ring, followed by a shout of 'trick or treat!' She opened the door to a pint-sized Little Mermaid and a flower-sheeted ghost. The children held out their pillowcases, and Emily dropped two bars in each. "There you go...and there YOU go! Happy Halloween!" she smiled.

It was a warm night for the end of October; Emily decided to leave the door open so that the trick-or-treaters could walk right in. She walked to the kitchen counter to bring the wine bottle over to the chair. She poured another glass and placed the almost-empty bottle on the floor.

Emily could hear shouts and screams of kids on the street. Next, a shuffle of little feet. Up popped a fuzzy little bumblebee wearing pipe-cleaner antennae. Oh, she thought, how cute, just like when she was a little girl!

"Tweek-o-tweet!" exclaimed the little bee.

Emily attempted to stand up—but she felt like she was sitting on something. She couldn't move. Certainly, she hadn't had that much to drink, she thought. She stared at her wine glass. Alongside her hand was a bony white fingerlike protrusion. A skeleton hand! It gripped the glass and tossed it, splashing the tiny bumblebee with blood-red merlot.

The child's eyes popped in horror. Emily cried out, "Run!" But it was too late. Bumblebee opened her mouth in a silent scream as the bony arm pulled Emily backwards, backwards into the folds of the leather armchair. Slowly, Emily crumpled into the chair innards until she was gone.

"What's taking you so long, sweetheart?" called Bumblebee's mom from the sidewalk. Carrie the bumblebee stood frozen. Her mother stepped up to retrieve her.

"Did you get some candy?" she asked. "Or is this one of those places where you can help yourself?"

Mother peered into Carrie's bag. Nothing.

"What's that all over your costume?" her mother asked.

Carrie's jaw wasn't working right—she couldn't explain.

"That's weird," her mom said as she surveyed the scene. "There's an empty wine bottle, but no one is..."

"Doesn't matter," she huffed as she reached into the cauldron. "We'll just take it all."

Carrie knew she'd been the best girl. She'd behaved since that late-summer evening when her mother bought her that giant cat stuffy.

Other than pushing her little cousin into the swimming pool and watching him sputter until his mom pulled him out or stealing extra cookies at daycare and blaming a kid with autism, she'd been on her best behavior.

Carrie wasn't rotten, but she was mean. And spoiled. That was the problem. Her mother thought she could do no wrong.

When Halloween arrived, Carrie dressed up in the bumblebee costume her mom had hand sewn for her. It was pretty, with gold sequins for stripes and adorable little antennae. Little white gloves like a grown-up lady would wear. She knew she was special. And she knew that when she returned home from trick-or-treating, she'd get her big treat—her black cat wizard stuffy!

Her mother let her climb the steps at the first house she visited that night. They were big steps—one, whew, two, ah, three! "Trick or treat!" Carrie shouted.

The door was open, and a lady was sitting in a nice comfy chair. The lady smiled at her and tried to stand up. Then something really weird happened. The lady threw her wine at Carrie, and then... the chair ate her. The chair ate the lady. Carrie was certain that's what she saw.

Her mom came up the front steps and looked around. Asked Carrie how her costume got dirty, but she couldn't answer. How could she explain that the lady who was eaten by the chair threw wine at her? Then her mom said, "We'll take all the candy, then," and poured it into Carrie's bag. The two headed down to the sidewalk, hand in hand.

"I don't need any more candy, Mommy," Carrie offered. "We don't need to go to other houses." She was still a little confused at what she'd seen. Of course, Carrie knew that when she returned home, she'd get her giant stuffy.

Sure enough, after Carrie and her mom returned home, Carrie tore off her costume, jumped into her pajamas, and brushed her teeth. Sitting on her pillow was her long-awaited black cat stuffy. It had been almost three months since she'd seen it—in fact, she'd forgotten that its furry mouth had been full of sharp little kitty-cat teeth. But she adored it.

When Carrie hopped into bed, she cuddled the stuffy tight. It was bigger than her! She hugged, hugged, hugged until her little face was pressed hard against its fur. She rolled over, and the goblin cat landed heavily on her chest.

Why is it squishing me? was Carrie's last thought before the last bit of air was sucked from her lungs.

Carrie's mom grabbed a piece of chocolate before heading upstairs to bed. She unwrapped it, popped it into her mouth, and looked in on Carrie.

Carrie lay lifeless and blue on the floor; the black cat grinned from atop the bed. As the resurrected stuffy charged toward her, she gasped. Inhaled. And choked to death on the chocolate.

Helen marked a big ‘X’ on her calendar. Her years were getting shorter, she pondered. What used to be a once-a-year course seemed *<ahem> inefficient* in recent years. And she mused, “I wonder what Amazon’s return policy is?”

About the Author:

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

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Hide and Seek | *Patrick Wynn*

Bobby stands in the center of the living room quietly listening for the tiny footsteps. Soft giggles travel up the hallway and Bobby turns quickly to catch a glimpse of a small figure darting from one bedroom to the next. As quiet as possible he shuffles down the hall and then shoves open the bedroom door. Smiling, he sneaks over to the closet and slides the door open to find it empty. Next, he kneels down and yanks back the covers to check under the bed, again nothing. Soft giggles followed by the sound of a child’s small feet running down the hall bring Bobby’s attention around, and he jumps up and runs down the hall; a wide smile fills his face as he spots the cute feet sticking out from under the kitchen table.

“Aha, found ya” Bobby laughs as he kneels down and pulls back the tablecloth but finds nothing.

Giggles and running feet once again sound from down the hall and Bobby stands up and starts down the hallway again. It was hard trying to play hide and seek with a ghost but at least he was spending quality time with his daughter.

Killing the Monsters | *Patrick Wynn*

Ed ignored the screams as he finished off the werewolf. Drawing deep breaths, he tried to catch his breath as blood dripped from his arms and the long knife he held in his shaking hand. His heart thumped heavily in his chest as his head swiveled back and forth taking in his environment looking for more of the monsters on this wicked night. Confusion filled his brain as he let his gaze fall over the blood covered lawn, a vampire, a zombie and a ghost lay sprawled and unmoving where he killed them. Stepping back towards his front door he reached back to open the screen door but froze when he spotted another coming up the walk. He raised his blade and prepared to take the head off the small Frankenstein but the screams of his wife behind him caused him to stop.

“ED, ED, EEEEEDDDDDD They’re not real. It’s HALLOWEENNNNN” His wife screamed from the porch a bowl of candy in her hand.

Past Time | *Patrick Wynn*

Ben pulled up in the driveway and shoved his truck into park. He sat staring up at the house; taking a deep breath, he climbed out. The walk up the drive then up the steps to the front door was long, the fading sun just added to his dark mood. Opening the front door, he tossed his keys on the side table and walked past the living room and kitchen knowing without a doubt where he would find his wife. He shuffled down the hall and opened the bright pink door, he shrugged remembering the happy day he painted it. Ben stood smiling down at the sight before him. His wife Cheryl sat in the deep brown rocking chair they had purchased just after they’d received the news they were expecting. Cheryl rocked slowly back and forth making little baby sounds to the small bundle in her arms. Ben frowned with the knowledge that eventually he was going to have to rebury the tiny girl and soon, the smell made his gag reflex rise. But not tonight he didn’t want the argument and he really didn’t mind so much when she brought it to bed with her.

About the Author:

Patrick J Wynn is an author of short stories that range from horror to the weird. His stories have been published in The Sirens Call, Short Horror Stories, Weird Mask, Dark Dossier and Trembling with Fear. You can follow him on his Facebook page and find his work on Amazon.

Be ready for all kinds of shenanigans and mischief!

HAUNTED INNS AND HOTELS OF VIRGINIA



SUSAN SCHWARTZ

HAUNTED AMERICA

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

“Can’t believe it’s been seven months,” Carl, Richie’s dad said as he placed another sugar skull on his mother’s grave.

“Feels like only yesterday she was chasing me out of the kitchen,” Soledad, Richie’s mom, lamented. “I don’t know how her tamales were better than mine. I taught her how to make them.”

“I miss abuelita Debbie too,” Richie agreed. It was the first Dia de Muertos he’d spent outside of California or Mexico, and though he missed the food and carnival-like atmosphere, he did not miss his cousins calling him bolillo when an adult wasn’t around, or his aunt’s nickname for him: ‘mi gringito’. It wasn’t his fault he took more after his father than his mother. Another thing he wouldn’t miss—sunburns.

“I know,” Carl placed his arm around his son’s shoulder.

“You know, I never thought about it but where’s grandpa’s grave? Why isn’t abuelita Debbie next to him?”

“She didn’t want to be near him,” Carl answered.

“Why?”

“She had her reasons,” Carl muttered.

“Cariño, he deserves more than that,” Soledad appealed to her husband.

“He was... He was a bad person,” Richie’s dad mumbled.

“Mijo, this is a difficult subject for you. Let’s just clean up and go home, okay?”

“Okay, but... can I just see his grave? Is he even here?”

Carl nodded. “If you really want to see that man’s grave, it’s that way,” he waived to an older portion of the cemetery. “Fifteen minutes.”

It took Richie ten minutes to find the grave. Unlike his abuelita Debby’s elaborate marble tombstone, Carl senior’s grave was marked with a small, a nondescript concrete slab. It read:

Carl Schilmme Senior
1948-1989

“Hi. Um. Grandpa. Can I call you grandpa? Or would you have preferred the German word for grandpa? Sorry, I don’t know it. I do know that you probably wouldn’t want me to call you abuelo. Pretty much the only thing I’ve ever heard about you is that you wouldn’t have approved of my mom. Ironically, she’s why I’m here, actually. It’s Dia de Muertos. Well, not really. That’s on Wednesday, but because of school we came today instead. We’re supposed to have a picnic and clean the family graves. It’s a whole thing. We usually fly out to see mom’s side of the family, but mom wanted to stay and have Dia de Muertos with abuelita Debby. They were really close. Dad didn’t give me enough time to like, clean your grave, but I can at least say hi.”

A car in the parking lot honked. *Must be dad*, Richie thought.

“You ever have one of these?” he asked, motioning to his last calavera. “Mom can’t make them as good as the ones in Mexico. You can have it.” Richie placed the sugar skull on his grandfather’s grave. “Dad says you were a bad person, but wish I could have met you. Gotta go. See you next year, maybe,” he said, then turned and started back to the parking lot.

A faint whistling stopped him in his tracks. Glancing back at his grandfather’s grave, he saw a tall man with spiteful eyes grinning maliciously at him. Richie took an involuntary step backward and lost his balance. By the time he scrambled to his feet, the man was gone. A cold wind blew through the graveyard. The remaining leaves on the surrounding trees rustled malevolently, and he heard the whistling again as he ran back to his parents.

“Dude, get your head in the game! We’re barely winning!” Ethan, Richie’s best friend, howled from Discord.

“It’s not me! Damn internet is laggy again!” Richie whined.

“Fucking Spectrum!” Ethan cursed. “So, why’d you skip church anyway? Amanda missed you.”

“She did! What’d she say?”

“Nothing, I made that up. Where were you?”

“Asshole. We went to the cemetery for Dia de Muertos.”

“Isn’t that Mexican Halloween or something?”

“Sort of,” Richie sighed. He hated explaining anything related to his Mexican heritage. Mostly because he didn’t know a whole lot about it, which embarrassed him.

The wind howled outside, and a chill ran up Richie's spine as he heard the whistle from the graveyard. The eerie tune came from the window. He turned and spotted the same man from his grandfather's grave staring at him from outside.

"What the fuck?" Richie whimpered. His room was on the second story.

"I know, right!" Ethan screeched. "There's no way that sniper could have made that shot!"

Richie screamed as the grinning man pressed his face against the window and proceeded to float through it.

"Richie? What's the matter?" Ethan asked but the headset fell off Richie's head as he fell off his chair.

"What happened? What's wrong?" Carl asked as he burst into the room. The specter disappeared as soon as Richie's dad turned the light on. "What is it, Richie?"

"Did you see it?" Richie asked as he scrambled to his feet and ran into his father's arms.

"See what?"

"Nothing," Richie muttered. "I... I thought I saw someone outside the window."

"Hmm... It's that damn tree," Carl declared as he let Richie go. "I'll get the landscaper to prune it next... next..."

"Dad, are you okay?" Richie asked. Carl had started to choke on something.

"I'm... I'm fine..." Carl wheezed, then broke into a coughing fit.

"Here, drink this!" Richie handed him his mostly empty Mountain Dew bottle. Carl sat on Richie's bed, and took a swig.

"I don't know how you can drink this swill," he muttered after he recovered. "Don't stay up too late. School night," he croaked as he left the room.

"I won't," Richie answered. He shut his Xbox off and closed the blinds, but he could still hear the wind outside.

"Dude, what happened the other night? One minute we're kicking ass, next minute you're screaming like a little girl. We got curb stomped, by the way," Ethan declared as he sat next to Richie on the school bus.

"Nothing. I just. I thought I saw something outside the window. What are you doing riding the bus with us peons?"

"Dad decided to go to the office today. No car, but dude, *no one* screams that loud when they 'think' they see something. What was it?"

"Just. A shadow, I think. The tree branches made a shadow that looked like a dude just kinda floating out there."

"Well thanks for getting back to me so quickly. I've been messaging you like crazy."

"Yeah, sorry about that. I sorta broke my phone when I fell off the chair."

"A shadow spooked you so hard you fell off your chair?"

Richie shrugged.

"What's the meme? All right, keep your secrets," Ethan said as he whipped out his phone started scrolling. "Oh shit! He's back!" he exclaimed after a few minutes and shoved the screen in Richie's face.

"Who's back?"

"The Ohio Whistler! Look!"

The headline read: "Ohio Whistler Returns! Strangled Victim Found Missing Thumb!"

"It's probably a copycat. People are sick."

"Eh, you're probably right. So, are you gonna tell me about this shadow or not, cause I think you're holding out on me. Spill it."

"All right fine. It wasn't a shadow." Richie looked around to make sure no one was eavesdropping and lowered his voice. "It was like, this old guy. Gave me the creeps. And then he like, came into my room. Through the window!"

"Oh shit! Sounds like something followed you from the cemetery!"

Richie gulped. "Well. Thing is... I actually had seen the guy earlier, at the cemetery."

"Dude. We gotta sage your room!"

"See, this is why I didn't want to tell you. It was probably just my imagination. Too many horror movies lately."

"Tis the season," Ethan grinned.

"Here's my stop. Fornite in a bit?"

"Does bigfoot smell like shit?"

Richie entered his house through the kitchen, where Soledad busied herself by emptying the dishwasher.

"Oye mijo, I need you to take your clothes out of the dryer," she greeted him.

"Nice to see you too," he joked as he set his backpack on the kitchen table and went to the basement. Abuelita Debby used to do his laundry, but mom insisted he do it. Something about girls preferring a man who could take care of

himself. He dropped a couple of socks in the space between the washer and the dryer and had to get a broom to fish them out. In addition to the socks, he pulled out a bloody hand towel. A very bloody towel. He picked up his basket and went upstairs.

"Mom, what is this? Did you cut yourself?" He handed her the bloody rag.

"No, no." She took the towel and inspected it carefully. "Your dad was down there poking around earlier. He must have hurt himself. It would explain a lot."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing, he just... He hasn't been himself lately. Get those clothes upstairs. I'll be back in a bit to make dinner," she said as she reached up and kissed his forehead.

She said nothing to Carl as she passed by him in the living room.

Carl sat on the couch inspecting some knickknacks. A dirty, but ornate wooden box lay on the coffee table.

"Whatchoo got there?" Richie asked.

"What?" Carl jumped, startled. "Nothing, don't worry about it, Richard," he said as he quickly stuffed the objects into the box and closed it. The lid had a label that read: "Carl Schlimme, Senior."

"Hey, that's Grandpa's box!" Richie yelled excitedly. He set his laundry basket down and sat next to his dad.

"Yeah, I found it in the basement."

"Let me see!" Richie exclaimed.

"No!" Carl shouted as he snatched the box, stunning Richie. His father had never raised his voice to him. "Why don't you go see your friend, what's his name... Ethan?" he said as he hurried upstairs. "It's Halloween. Watch a horror movie or two with him!"

In his haste, Carl had knocked the coffee table out of place. Richie sighed as he got up to set it back. He'd never hear the end of it if his mother saw that it was crooked. Something caught his eye as he fixed the table. His father must not have noticed dropping it on the floor. Richie picked up the small, white object, examined it for a second, then ran upstairs to call Ethan on Discord.

"It's a bone."

"A bone?"

"Yeah, a little bone. About half the size of my thumb."

"Dude. Give me a sec. Okay. Okay, I'm sending you a couple of pics. Does it look like one of them?"

Richie opened his email and inspected the pictures. "Yeah! Yeah, it looks just like the second one!"

"That's part of a thumb! Your grandfather was the Ohio Whistler!"

"No way man, that's ridiculous," Richie spat, but a part of him couldn't deny that if true, it would explain a lot.

"Remember when I joked that something followed you from the cemetery?"

"Come one man, don't start with the woo woo."

"Hear me out. You saw a tall guy, at the cemetery, near your grandfather's grave, I'm guessing. You saw the same tall man *float through your closed window*, and then your dad had a coughing fit when he checked on you, and he's been acting funny ever since. I mean, he called you *Richard*. Only substitute teachers call you Richard! Let me guess something you didn't tell me. You heard this both times," Ethan whistled. Richie froze. It was the same tune he'd heard each time he saw the tall, grinning man.

"I'm right, aren't I?"

"Bullshit," Richie said. "How could they possibly know what his whistle sounded like?"

"His second victim. She was a tough lady, dude. She survived his attack and distinctly remembered him whistling that exact tune both just before he ambushed her and when he left her for dead. I'm telling you, your serial killer grandfather is possessing your dad!"

"That's... that's impossible," Richie countered, but he couldn't help thinking about the bloody hand towel he'd found in the basement.

"Tell me *exactly* what you did at his grave. Don't leave anything out."

"I dunno man, I just kinda said hi and told him I wish I could have met him. Oh, and I left a calavera for him."

"A cawhat?"

"A calavera. A sugar skull candy. My mom made a batch. They weren't great."

"Bro... Seriously? This time of the year the veil between worlds is thin! You can't just go around asking spirits to meet them! You invited him back to the world of the living!"

"Ethan. Do you hear yourself? That's nonsense!"

“Maybe. I hope it is. But what if I’m right?”

“Okay,” Richie sighed. “Let’s say for the sake of the argument, you’re right, not that I believe any of this mind you, just hypothetically. How do I fix it?”

“Okay, so first of all, ouch. How do we fix it, man. You’re not alone. Second, full disclosure. Ghosts and spirits aren’t really my thing. I’m more of a cryptids and aliens guy. But you but you know who *is* a ghost expert?”

“No. No, don’t say it, not her again,” Richie whined.

“That’s right! Razel! Come over. I’ll borrow my dad’s car and we’ll go to The Conjuror’s Study! Razel will know what to do!”

“The Conjuror’s Study gives me the creeps. You just wanna look down Razel’s shirt again. You know her real name is Jennifer, right?”

“Look, we need to like, cleanse or exorcise your dad, and she’s our best bet. And if she happens to have to grab something from a bottom shelf again, that’s just a bonus. Also, using someone’s dead name? C’mon man, not cool. I’m disappointed in you, Ricardo Antonio Schlimme-Gimenez.”

“Okay, you’re right,” Richie laughed. “Not cool. I’m on my way.” He closed his laptop and headed downstairs. He was almost out the front door when something caught his eye in the living room. The coffee table was off again. Groaning, went to put it back in its place, but then he noticed a foot on the floor lying next to the couch.

It belonged to his mother. She lay there, partially hidden between the coffee table and the sofa, her face contorted with fear, clouded eyes staring blankly at the ceiling. A small pool of blood formed beneath her left hand, which was missing the thumb.

The same eerie whistle from the graveyard emanated from the kitchen. Richie turned. Carl stood there, surprised to see his son had discovered his handywork. He carried a shower curtain in one hand and a bucket with various cleaning supplies in the other.

“I thought I told you to go to your friend’s house and play,” Carl snarled.

Speechless, Richie backed away, and tripped over his mother’s corpse.

“What’s the matter, Richard?” Carl asked as he advanced. “Weren’t you just telling me the other day how you wish we could have met?”

About the Author:

San Ashitaka is a naturalized American citizen originally from Mexico. He spends some of his time writing fantasy, horror, and science fiction, but mostly he procrastinates. He currently resides in Florida.

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Halloween, 1978 | Christopher Hivner

The air moved through Homer’s costume raising goose bumps on his skin. He walked forcefully toward Mr. Deloitte’s house with the menacing roof that looked like a falcon in flight. Homer had a trick for the miserly old man, a bag of his dad’s Marlboro butts in the face. At the door, he knocked. Homer cocked his arm, waiting to see the craggy skin of the man who gave out toothpaste but then Homer was hit instead, a wet slap to his nose. Something splatted at his feet, his father’s bloody right hand, a burning cigarette still between the fingers.

About the Author:

Christopher Hivner writes from a small town in Pennsylvania, sometimes with a pen and a notebook and other times with a laptop. His book of horror/dark fantasy poems, *Dark Oceans of Divinity*, is available from Cyberwit.

Twitter: [@Your_screams](#)

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"There is no better way to spend Halloween than with my friends," Ray exclaimed, sitting at a table in the restaurant with Gus and Fred. All three men were in their forties and met every Halloween.

"A year has passed and you fellows haven't aged at all. All year I look forward to this night, when we get together," Fred announced.

"A toast to lifelong friends and Halloween," Ray raised his glass.

"It's going to be a full moon tonight, fellas," Gus informed them.

"Are you afraid of werewolves?" Ray asked him, finishing his drink.

"On Halloween the veil between the natural and supernatural is lifted and who are we to say what exists," answered Gus.

"Are you gentlemen ready to order?" asked the waiter.

"We will have the usual," Ray requested.

"I have yet to see a werewolf in my lifetime, and I seriously doubt I ever will," Fred stated.

"How about vampires?" Gus asked.

"Only in movies and books. Werewolves and vampires are great to read about and watch on the big screen, but it ends there," Ray explained.

"Here comes the food," Ray said.

The waiter brought over a screaming nude woman whose arms and legs were bound in heavy chains. Ray bit deeply into her throat, tearing it out and dipping his bread into the gushing blood. Gus sliced off the woman's breasts with a knife, added salt and butter, and began to devour them.

Fred tore out the woman's heart with his razor sharp nails, placing it between two slices of bread loaded with mayonnaise.

"Excuse me, I must be getting old," Ray admitted as he forced his eye back into the socket it fell out of.

"You're not the only one. I don't know where I lost the damn thing," Gus displayed his rotting maggot-covered hand, missing a finger.

"Don't count me out," Fred remarked, as his head accidentally detached itself and rolled onto his lap.

"Have you tried the worms, they are very slimy tonight," Gus asked, passing around a bowl of squirming worms.

"I should have ordered the roast infant stuffed with rats, I hear it is truly filling," stated Fred slurping up a worm and allowing it to escape through his severed neck.

"It's almost morning, we should head back to our graves. There might not be werewolves and vampires, but there are definitely zombies. A final toast," Ray suggested, as they raised their glasses of thick human blood.

"Closing time," the zombie waiter announced, as the zombies rose from their tables, some still feasting on human body parts, to return to their graves until next Halloween.

"Anybody going to take some leftovers to snack on?" Ray asked, twirling the long intestine around his wrist, and carrying a severed foot under his arm. Fred and Gus shook their heads, and the three of them walked into the moonlight toward the cemetery.

About the Author:

Andrew Kurtz is an up-and-coming horror author who writes very graphic and violent short stories which have appeared in numerous horror anthologies. Since childhood, he has loved horror films and literature. His favorite authors are Stephen King, Clive Barker, H.G. Wells, Richard Matheson, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and Ian Fleming.

Linktree: [@horror672](#)

Amazon Author Page: [Andrew Kurtz](#)



Willow pushed Malcolm's hand away again when he reached out. "This is taking longer than expected," she said to herself. Her brows furrowed. "I'll be back in a moment, darling."

"Will... ow," he rasped. "Need a doctor."

"My darling husband, you don't need a doctor." She ran the backs of her fingers along his jaw. "What you need is in the garden."

She stood, put the chair back in the room's corner, then glanced in the mirror so she could see herself to straighten her long, black dress. Her hand was on the door handle when she remembered something. She walked over to the bed where her husband lay and collected the bowl from the bedside table. "I know how important it is to you that everything be put back in its place after use. I'll bring you more soup."

"No... Please, I need..."

"I won't be long." She opened the bedroom door and walked down the stairs to their spotless kitchen—which was not at all like this when her great grandma was alive. The corners of Willow's lips curled when she pictured how it once was: herbs hanging from the rack, flour scattered over the worktop and floor, a pantry filled with jars of jam and beetroot, an apple pie cooling on the chopping board, and there was always something bubbling away on the stove. If she concentrated, she could smell the aromas from the past. Her half smile faded. "I miss you, Grandma."

Today, of all days, she needed to feel her grandma's presence, and now there was only one place left where she felt it: the apple tree in the back garden. She put the bowl on the worktop with no intention of washing it up, took a basket from the cupboard, then made her way to the back door. The day was glorious for late October; it could easily be mistaken for spring if it were not for the leaves scattered in the grass. Before she made her way to the tree, she looked over to the left at her vegetable patch, making a note of what she needed to relieve her husband's pain, which was planted between the carrots and Brussels sprouts.

The apple tree she sought was magnificent: not only did it tower above all others, it also possessed the strength to hold on to all its leaves throughout winter. Willow could almost hear her grandma's voice as she approached it. They had spent so much time underneath it, come wind, rain or shine. She collected a couple of fallen apples off the roots that protruded from the ground, then took a seat on one, next to the tiny mushrooms that sprung from the damp bark. "Oh, Grandma, I tried to follow your recipe, but he is still struggling to breathe. It's been three weeks now." She threw an apple into the gooseberry bush.

When her grandma died, Willow had inherited the house. It was Victorian, with bay windows at the front, an outside toilet, and no central heating; not that they needed it. The fire kept the house warm at night and the thousands of books that lined the walls retained the heat during the day. She sighed. If Malcolm had not thrown her grandma's books away, she'd know how best to help him. Against her will, her thoughts returned to that day.

"This house needs modernising," he had said, shortly after their wedding. He had stripped the house back to bricks and mortar, painted it grey and white, replaced the wicker chairs for a corner sofa, and replaced the oak table for a glass one. Willow had hated the thought of it, but only agreed to the renovation because Malcom had promised her he would build her a bigger bookcase, but he never did. He had said that the builders had thrown all her books in the skip by mistake, and therefore, she no longer needed one.

"The books wouldn't have gone with the new interior. Why can't you understand that? Look at how much nicer it looks without that clutter," he had said sharply, while she wept. "You should be grateful I took the time and had the money to make this house liveable."

Willow had regrettably argued that it was actually her money that had paid for this so-called 'higher standard of living'. She threw another apple into the gooseberry bush. Some of those books had recipes within them that her great, great grandmother and grandma had handwritten. The only recipes she could now remember were the ones her grandma had taught her under this tree. Her thought returned to the time they were cutting apples into quarters.

"Now, remember, we need exactly two hundred and one apple seeds," her grandma had said.

"Why two hundred and one? Why not just two hundred?" the much younger Willow had said.

"The extra one is for luck, my sweet girl."

"And what are we making?" she asked, while popping three more seeds into the jar.

"We're going to make a special pie for your grandad. He's been very angry lately, and this will cheer him up and then keep him quiet."

Willow looked up at her grandma's bruised eye. "Why has Grandad been angry with you?"

"It's the drink; it makes him do stupid things," was all she had said.

After her grandad died, the house had become a haven—no more shouting, slamming furniture around, and no more hitting and hair-pulling. She and her grandma had found peace; not that she had known any differently until then. Thank goodness her husband was nothing like her grandad. It had pleased her to learn that Malcom never drank a single drop. He said he didn't like to feel out of control—something Willow now more than understood.

Her husband was a doctor, and they had met shortly after her grandma died, when she'd fallen into a deep depression. He'd told her she was still grieving and perhaps felt lonely, and had said that all she needed was someone to talk to—he was right. He had made several calls to see how she was getting on with the grievance counsellor before he suggested they meet for a coffee. She smiled to herself when she remembered the phone call and how he had so confidently asked—no, not asked—suggested. Her heart had instantly lifted; there was a light at the end of her gloomy tunnel, and they had fallen in love almost immediately. He had been so impressed with her house when she first invited him over for dinner. “A house like this must be worth a fortune,” he had said.

Three months after their first coffee date, he had taken her to Rome and asked her to marry him; another three months after that, they were married. Everything happened so fast, it felt like he had yanked the rug from beneath her feet. But wasn't that what love was: to feel swept off your feet?

Willow plucked a few mushrooms from the apple tree's roots, then popped them into her basket. The mushrooms were called *amanita phalloides*, also known as death cap mushrooms. She was proud of herself for remembering what they were called when other memories came to mind. Her grandma had been so knowledgeable about plants and would spend hours telling Willow what they were called, where they were from, and their various uses.

She had told her about the legends that accompanied them too: how the Norse Berserker warriors had taken *aconite* (wolfbane) to shapeshift into wolves before battle, or how witches would rub *belladonna* (deadly nightshade) into their thighs to enable them to fly on their broomsticks. Her grandma had also taught her that everything Mother Nature created had a purpose and how important it was to give back what we took. Willow had never fully understood the meaning of that until she helped bury her grandad under the bramble bush. The blackberries had been divine and plentiful the following year.

Now, there was one more thing she needed to help her poor husband: *hemlock*. As she was about to stand, she noticed a black toad resting on her dress. “Hello, little one. It's too cold for you to be out now,” she said, cupping the toad in her hand and placing it in the basket.

On the way back to the house, she stopped at her vegetable patch. The *hemlock* had wilted, but that mattered very little; it was the roots she needed. Willow kneeled in the soil, not caring that her dress was now dirty, and used her fingers like a rake to loosen the soil, then started pulling out of the ground what looked like skinny parsnips. She pulled up as many as she could find this time. *Too many is better than too few*, she thought. Then she carefully lifted the black toad from the basket, placed it in the shallow hole from which the roots had been pulled, and then covered it with loose soil and fallen leaves. “You need to sleep, little one. See you next year.”

While Willow was boiling the *hemlock* roots and mushrooms in a pot, she heard a thump from upstairs—her dear husband must have fallen out of bed again.

“I'm coming, darling,” she called out, hoping he'd heard. Bless him, he was in so much pain, but he wouldn't be for much longer. She quickly added salt and pepper to the soup, then poured it into a bowl. She didn't bother with a tray as she made her way out of the kitchen to the stairs.

As she rounded the corner, she jumped back when she saw her husband's hand clawing over the top step. “Oh, darling.” She put the soup down and took two steps at a time to reach him.

He was wheezing as he tried to talk.

“It's okay.” She brushed his fringe out of his eyes. “I'm here now.”

Not knowing any other way to get him back into the bedroom, she grabbed him by the ankles and dragged him while he was on his stomach. He tried in vain to hold on to the top step, but he was too drained. Once they were inside, she knew it would be impossible to lift him onto the bed, so she grabbed his pillow, put it beside his head, then rolled him over.

“Willow... please.” He tried to reach out to her.

“I'll be right back. My soup will ease your pain, I promise.” She rushed out of the room, then came back again with the bowl.

“No, Willow... please.”

She put the soup on the side table and took another pillow from the bed. Malcolm flinched when she brought it over his face. She looked from him to the pillow, frowned, then looked back at him. “Don’t be silly,” she chided. “I just need to prop your head up a little so I can feed you.”

She gently lifted his head and lowered it onto the pillow, then knelt beside him with the soup. When he tried to push her away with his feeble attempts, he spilt soup from the bowl. “Malcolm, we can either do this the easy way or the hard way. Don’t make me sit on you.”

“Why, Willow? Why?”

“Because you wanted to cut my grandma’s apple tree down, that’s why. Now, open your mouth.”

Willow sat under the tree with one of her new books and her lunch—she had made herself an apple and cinnamon pie. The apples from her tree had been perfect this year; full-flavoured, brightly coloured, and bigger than any other year she could remember. She looked over her shoulder at the loose soil between the roots of the tree. Her grandma was right; to fully reap Mother Nature’s gifts, you must give back what you take.

About the Author:

Kelly Barker was born in Oxford and now lives in Witney with her husband and dog, Lana. She has been a barber for over twenty years, and loves her job, however, reading and writing is her true passion—a passion handed down to her from her great grandmother, Isobel O’Leary.

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The Bicycle | Donna Cuttress

Sharon and Lyndsey struggled against the wind, it blew their hair into their eyes and stole their breath. They turned their backs on it and waited for the gust to subside.

“Let’s use the short cut. It won’t be as windy.” Sharon shouted. Lyndsey followed her into an alleyway that ran between the back of some houses and a park. The wind eased as they walked quickly, then they were stopped. On the ground was a bicycle, large enough for a teenager. It was matte black and looked almost new, in fact the tyres were barely worn. There was a shiny bell attached to the handlebars. It looked out of place and old fashioned.

“Who does this belong to?” They both looked around. No one would have left it outside without chaining it to a lamp post or a fence, not if they wanted to see it again. The houses that backed onto the alleyway were quiet. The park was empty. There was no one around to ask.

“I’ll prop it against the wall, so no one can fall over it.” Lyndsey said. She stood next to it. It was just the right height for her. There was a temptation to just climb on it and ride away. She looked at her mother and raised an eyebrow. Sharon smiled, “If it’s here when we come back, then we’ll knock on some doors and see who it belongs to. Ring the bell. That should bring them running back to get it.” Lyndsey rang the bell, but the sound seemed to be swallowed up by the wind. They both knew that if the bicycle was there when they came back, they would not be knocking on doors to find the owner. Not tonight anyway. It was Halloween.

An hour later they turned the corner onto the alleyway to return home. Sharon carried a large shopping bag packed with bags of cheap sweets for the local children. Lyndsey ran along the path, carefully avoiding any light from the lampposts lest anyone should see her from a window. The bicycle was still there! She waited for her mother to catch up. Sharon nodded, “Hurry up and get on it. Get it home and put it in the shed. It’ll have to stay in there until it’s forgotten about or the kid’s got a new one. We can sell it!”

“What! No way!” Lyndsey was already on the seat.

“We’re selling it, Lyndsey. Enjoy it while you can.”

“I’m keeping this. It’s mine now. Happy Halloween to me!” Lyndsey had already disappeared into the darkness. Sharon followed, while checking around them. *They shouldn’t let their kids leave expensive bikes outside should they?* she thought, *Anyway, I need the cash more than them. Tough.*

The bicycle was locked away in the shed. Sharon fastened the lock, turning the key with a click, then ran inside. She had left paper bags filled with sweets on the porch for the local children. On a piece of paper pinned to the front

door was a note that read *'Just take one. Close the gate on the way out.'* They could fight over them if they wanted. She just wanted to curl up on the couch and watch her soaps.

"Why can't we just let the kids knock and give them a bag each? It always causes trouble when you put the bags out. They always take more than one." Lyndsey was feeding her leopard gecko a dried grasshopper. It snapped and crunched wanting another.

"It's fun to hear them fight! The little thieves." Sharon began to laugh and waited for the first Trick or Treater.

"When can I use the bike?"

"In a couple of weeks. When it's forgotten about by the owner."

Lyndsey slumped on the sofa. Most of the house lights were turned off apart from the porch light. The creaky garden gate opened. They could hear children laughing. An adult voice told them to slow down. Sharon unwrapped a shiny toffee apple. "Showtime!" she whispered to Lyndsey and took a large loud bite. Bored, Lyndsey went into the kitchen and sat at the table. She tapped the screen on her phone. There were notifications from her local Facebook page. A post from someone new. 'Someone stole my bike!' She closed the page quickly as though she had been caught looking and went back into the other room where her mother was trying her best not to laugh at the bickering kids on their doorstep.

As the evening passed, Lyndsey's paranoia grew. She kept on scrolling through the various timelines, but kept returning to the post about the bike. She squirmed at the comments. 'Bastards!' 'Scum' 'Who would do this tonight when the kids are out!' 'I've put this post on Share so everyone in the area can see it and keep a lookout.' It went on. Lyndsey stopped. A comment made her freeze. 'Think I saw who took it. Was it a black bike??? Send me a message' She checked who had posted the comment, but didn't recognise the name. There were no mutual friends and no photographs. *Who was it? Who saw us?* she thought *Must have been someone from one of the houses or the park.*

"We need to get rid of the bike mum!"

"Shut up!" Sharon unwrapped one of the sweets she should have put out for the children. "Why?" Lyndsey handed over the phone. She read the comments. "So what? They haven't seen *anything* and whoever mentioned the colour well, they're probably guessing. Most bikes are black now. They're just pissed off that they didn't see it first!"

They fell quiet, but both surreptitiously kept checking the comments on the post. Thankfully Halloween night was drawing to an end.

"Well, I don't think there'll be anymore kids knocking tonight do you?" She opened the front door to the porch. The note pinned to the door had changed. It read, *'I know YOU BOTH took my bike. Happy Halloween to you.'*

Sharon ripped the note off the door and screwed it up. She stepped into the garden, walked along the path and closed the gate, looking around her as she did. Everywhere was quiet. No more kids and no noise. She returned inside and threw the note at Lyndsey. "This is not funny!"

Lyndsey unwrapped the note and read it. "I didn't write this!" Her phone began pinging, as more notifications came through. 'Thank you everyone. Hope I'll have it back soon. Happy Halloween.' The comment was 'liked' so many times.

They stood facing each other.

"Someone knows we took the bike mum."

"I know. I'll call the police ... hang on, I can't. We'll get in trouble again."

"Let's take it back!" Lyndsey whispered, already heading for the garden. "Whoever wrote this," she waved the note, "Will know for definite it was us then, but we can just bluff it out. Say we never touched it. In fact, we can say we saw someone else doing it. Blame them!"

Lyndsey stopped, she turned toward her mother.

"What's that?"

They both could hear something, but couldn't make out what it was.

"There it is again. What is it?" Sharon put her ear to the back door. "Sounds like a phone ringing." It was getting louder. "Hang on. That's not a phone. It's a bell!"

It rang again, louder this time. They slowly opened the door to the garden and followed the sound to the shed. It carried on ringing, angry and demanding. Sharon and Lyndsey froze. The wind had got back up, the air was freezing and someone was hiding inside the shed on Halloween.

"Open the door, Lyndsey."

"No way. You do it. You've got the key!"

The bell was ringing louder now. It was grating. Annoying.

“Fine. OK then!” She banged a fist on the shed door. “I’m gonna phone the police! Breaking into my shed. How dare you?”

She ran inside and snatched her keyring from her coat pocket. Her hand shook as she went to open the lock. The ringing stopped. They looked at each other.

“I’m scared mum. Don’t open it.” She stopped Sharon’s hand by the lock. Sharon, gratefully, agreed, “It’s probably just the wind blowing through the slats of the shed. It’s making the bell ring.” She stepped back, “Let’s get inside the house. I’m freezing.”

As soon as they stepped inside, there was a knock at the porch door. They didn’t stop, they pounded on and on, louder and louder, as though they were kicking it. The door shook, rattling the glass. Sharon realised, she hadn’t locked the porch door, the keys had stayed in her pocket instead! She crept to the front door and looked through the spyhole. They had a hood over their eyes and a scarf wrapped around their mouth and nose. Their arms were at their side, they rose and fell as they breathed.

“All the sweets have gone!” Sharon shouted. They pulled the scarf down to speak. She could see it was a teenager, a younger man, but not real somehow. He covered his face again, she could feel him waiting, watching his breath fog through his scarf. He leaned forward until he was eye to eye with the door.

“I want my bike back.”

There were a few heartbeats of silence.

“We haven’t got your bike. Go away!”

The bell began ringing again, but much louder this time. Sharon and Lyndsey screamed out. She looked through the spy hole again on the door. He had disappeared. Lyndsey grabbed her phone and was about to call the police, but instead a notification popped up. The post was brief. The bell carried on ringing, she felt inside her skull.

“Thank you all for your help tonight everybody. I’m going to get my bike back.”

The same poster as before and it had already received lots of ‘thumbs ups’ and ‘stay calm’ in return. Lyndsey began to panic. ‘All?’ How many people knew it was us? Have we been outed as robbers? What’s going on? Have they set up a private Whatsapp group about stolen bikes in the area? Everyone knows it’s us! She began to cry.

“We need to call the police mum! Everyone knows it was us!”

Sharon tentatively opened the door to the garden and looked around. There was no one else there. “Right! Come on you.” She grabbed Lyndsey’s arm and dragged her to the shed.

“We’re gonna take this bike back. Leave it where we found it. He can get it there.”

They unlocked the shed. The bell stopped ringing. The bike was still there, and so was the man. Neither Sharon or Lyndsey could speak at first.

“We were gonna bring it back, weren’t we Lyndsey?”

Lyndsey nodded. “We looked around, it was just left in the alleyway and we moved it. No one came out when I rang the bell! If anything you shouldn’t have left it there! We could have fallen over it. All of this,” She waved her phone at him, “Over a stupid bike!”

They could just about see his eyes under the hood of his coat. He leaned forward and with a gloved hand began to ring the bell. The door slammed shut on the shed, the lock closed over. The wind got up, almost storm like and lasted the rest of the night. Proper Halloween weather everyone called it. There was thunder and lightning all night.

The posts regarding the missing bicycle disappeared, in fact no one could remember even seeing them. A few days later there was a new post on the local FB page with a photograph of a missing mother and daughter. They went shopping on Halloween afternoon. The daughter was last seen riding a black bicycle along the alleyway between the park and houses, while her mother followed on behind.

About the Author:

Donna Cuttress is from Liverpool, U.K. Previous works have been published by The Sirens Call, Celestial Press, Firbolg, Flame Tree, Nocturnal Sirens, Black Hare and Darkstroke’s Dark Anthology series. Her work for The Patchwork Raven is available as an artbook. She has been a speaker at the London Book Fair. Her work with Red Cape publishing is now available on Audible.

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I'd seen dozens of pictures of the Sequim Witch Cabin throughout my life, but when I journeyed at last to the peninsula there was little left standing. Just a heap of rotting wood being slowly reclaimed by the conifer forest.

The refuse of past visitors — old beer cans and food waste, the dayglow orange caps of hypodermic needles — nestled about me in the underbrush, and what remained of the original structure was covered in the crude graffiti of wannabe occultists.

Disappointing didn't begin to cover it.

After college, I'd tooled about for years, working odd jobs for quick cash, and spending my time exploring the strange, verboten places tucked away inside the uncharted recesses of the North American landscape.

Sometimes, I'd go with friends or with a girl I was seeing, but mostly I'd just go it alone. There was a certain thrill in being left to rely solely upon one's own grit and cunning should anything untoward occur.

I'd always wanted to make the hike out to the Witch Cabin, tucked back miles away inside the Olympic National Forrest, and now I had. Four hundred bucks in travel expenses and a nasty cold water shave in the fly-specked mirror of a rented cabin, and all I had to show for my efforts was this.

Old wrappers and rotting logs.

Irritated, I stepped through the spot where a door might once have been and unbuckled my belt. In the midst of those pathetic ruins I proceeded to relieve myself as the crows glared reproachfully from the branches high above. Perhaps, I mused somewhat morbidly, I was pissing on the very spot the witch had sacrificed her infant victims.

By most accounts the witch in question had been one Eloise Herrin, rumored to have died sometime in the seventies though the County Clerk had no record of her burial.

Before her demise, she'd been blamed for a rash of infant kidnappings in the area as well as for the untimely deaths of livestock, but she'd never been formally charged with a crime. It was of popular opinion that chickens would not come near her for anything.

Mad-eyed and unkempt, she was said to have sworn her allegiance to Satan, and would spit at or even upon anyone who wore a crucifix.

It might have all been bullshit, but the legend remained.

"How d'ya like that, Eloise?" I said, shifting my stream from side to side across the rotted floorboards. Venting my annoyance in liquid form.

From the trees, the crows began to squawk and cry. Four or five to a branch like a row of burnt-out Christmas bulbs. A few took wing and departed, but most of them remained.

My blood froze with the sound of their uproar, but a moment later I felt foolish. They'd been startled by the sound of my voice, I reasoned, and nothing more.

Having seen all there was to see, I wolfed down a few handfuls of trail mix, slugged back some water, and headed for home. I'd kept my cabin for another night, and the bed there, however lumpy, sounded glorious about now.

That night, Eloise came for me.

I found myself within a darkened forest, lost and bewildered. Each way I turned felt rife with the promise of danger. The sky, vast and empty, offered no stars to guide me, and I was beginning to lose all hope. I sensed that I was dreaming, but the night air felt cold upon my skin.

Far above me, the tapered crown of a Mountain Hemlock shifted in the breeze, the swaying silhouette of a witch's hat.

I heard the sound of beating wings from somewhere behind me, and when I turned to look she was there. Her body naked and pendulous, slathered in filth. Her limbs, barren tree branches twisting against the wind. I met her gaze and saw the fire that lived within.

She snatched my jaw with one hideous hand and began to squeeze. Tighter and tighter until the pressure and pain became unbearable. I stared, paralyzed, into those baleful, burning eyes as the bones inside my mouth began to crack.

I woke screaming with the taste of copper on my tongue.

It was daylight, and I was drenched in sweat. My body felt hot and cold all at once as if I'd fallen prey to fever as I slept.

A sharp tap upon the cabin's window nearly stopped my heart. I watched the shadow of a crow depart against the sunlit wall beside me.

Had it come and tapped its beak upon the glass? I wondered.

Tap! It came again. Then Tap! Tap! A pause, then several more to follow. I saw now that tiny objects were colliding against my window.

Were the crows dropping pebbles against the glass?

I threw back the covers and stepped out from bed. My eyes squinting from the sunlight, I approached the window hoping to catch them in the act.

Tap! Tap! Two more tiny objects hit the pane.

I peered out the window and saw that the trees around the cabin were filled with crows. Hundreds perhaps. And every one of them completely silent.

A shudder ran down my spine.

From the bristled boughs of a Douglas Fir, two birds took flight and traveled towards me. I saw that each had in its mouth something small and white.

Tap! Tap! They dropped their cargo deftly against the glass as they passed overhead.

I looked down to see that several of the objects lay scattered along the outer sill, and as I did, I saw the hairs of my chest had become a mat of crusted gore. It was only then did I register the pain.

The tiny objects were teeth, their torn and bloody roots still glistening in the sun.

One look into the mirror above the rusted sink only confirmed my horror. Eloise had punished me gravely for my disrespect, and she had taken them from me.

She'd taken every last one.

About the Author:

Matthew Gorman is an author of speculative fiction residing in Edmonds, Washington who specializes in supernatural horror. His work has appeared online and in a number of print anthologies including Horrortree.com's Trembling With Fear, The Corona Book of Ghost Stories, and Flame Tree Publishing's Supernatural Horror edition from their Gothic Fantasy series.

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Secrets in the Chicken Forest | *Soter Lucio*

What a strange name, Yvonne thought to herself as they drove through the quaint little village nestled in the foothills of Paramin. She sat in the back seat fiddling her thumbs, her heart pounding in her chest concerned and scared of the darkness that loomed ahead. Being a city girl she was not accustomed to dirt roads or streets with no pavement. She thought again on the reason for the drive, dwelling on the expected result. She was on the brink of financial ruin. Her employees whom she believed were her friends, had betrayed her and sold the secrets of the formula she had developed to make her perfume that lasted a lot longer than any on the market. Plus, the scent did not deteriorate into something morbid after a week or so. There were now so many people producing it at a cheaper price that her business was going downhill fast. Her creditors were breaking down her doors and she was about to lose her house and everything she had worked so hard for.

Emily had proven herself a loyal friend and so here she is on the way to the Chicken Forest to meet someone able to right all wrongs. Nothing in a Chicken Forest could be all that bad. If anything she'll feel a whole lot better knowing she did do something to save her business.

"You're very quiet Yvonne. I know you're not accustomed to this sort of scenery." Emily's voice brought her back to the present.

"I'm okay. There are no more houses?"

"The Bus Shed was the end of the village. We are into the forest now. Just an hour more driving."

Yvonne felt a pounding in her chest. Now that the bewitching hour was almost there she was beginning to doubt that she was doing the right thing.

“Emily, what exactly is this person going to do?”

“Nothing too drastic. A bit strange, because it is not in your way of life. Don’t worry. You’re in good hands.”

“I trust you.”

“Here we are,” Emily said as she parked the car. Yvonne scrutinized the immediate area but could see no signs of civilization.

“Are you sure, Emily? There’s nothing here but trees and bush. And a little track that could possibly lead us to thy kingdom come.”

Emily gave her most disarming smile. Yvonne wasn’t any more comfortable.

Taking her by the arm, she led her down the path that was lined with white stones and after a few minutes they got to a shack covered in vines. Emily moved them left and right exposing a door through which they entered. Yvonne could feel her heart pounding in her chest, so scared was she. She began having doubts about Emily. Why should she be her friend when everyone else hated her and was trying to destroy her? *Something is not right*, she told herself. But too late now to do anything about it. Here she is behind God’s back and no way to get out of here. This is Emily’s domain.

“Gosh! You’re so stiff. Everything will be fine. This lady will tell you everything you need to know and what to do about all your troubles. Just do as she says and watch your enemies fall one by one and your business will be back on track. It’ll even be better and more profitable.”

“Is she a magician or a miracle worker?”

“Oh no. Like I said she is our own local obeah woman. She does help a lot of us here in this little town. Here we are.”

Here meaning a large well-furnished living room, kitchen, complete with heavily embroidered curtains and carpeted floors. The entire interior belied the bushy exterior. The burning incense mixed with the aroma of boiling coffee gave Yvonne a heady feeling.

“Take a seat while I go fetch Mother Ursula.”

Mother Ursula turned out to be quite a fascinating individual physically and personally. Not quite what she expected of one living in this remote area. She came in quite light on her feet, sort of glided into the room. Slim built with a round face and a scarf wrapped around her head, a long multi-colored dress with a sash around the waist. She sat opposite Yvonne and greeted her with a cheerful smile.

“Don’t let what you see fool you. I know that I look quite young but I assure you I am not. I am eighty-eight years old and proud of it.”

“And so you should be.”

“Don’t let the night sounds bother you. They are quite harmless.” She noticed the scared expression on Yvonne’s face. She’d gone quite pale. The sounds were more ferocious on this night. There weren’t any breaks but continuous, making it all eerie and getting more so as the night grew.

Emily came in just then with a tray of coffee and sweets.

“Here Yvonne,” she said handing her a cup. She accepted, and tasting the coffee, found it so bitter that her face screwed.

Emily and Mother Ursula laughed, “Don’t worry, it is bitter for a reason. When you’re done come through this door. Everything is ready for you.”

Yvonne didn’t take too long because she wanted to get out of there quickly. She gobbled down the beverage and went through the door as instructed. When she moved the curtain she felt a tap at the back of her head and said, “Oh my, I think that coffee has raised my blood pressure, because I felt a sharp pain at the back of my head.”

Emily came to her and helped her to stand upright. Then the giggles started.

“Oh my,” she heard herself saying, “I don’t know where this has come from. I think I need to sit down.”

They helped her to sit on the cushioned chair at the table. She surveyed everything there on that table and again heard herself saying, “Where is my calabash?” in such a rough and gravelly voice as to shock her into the present tense. She covered her mouth and jumped from the chair.

“What are you two doing to me?”

“We are here to get your enemies out of your life and to get your business back under your control.”

“I don’t know you, Mother Ursula, but you Emily I thought, no, I believed you to be my friend. This is the worst form of betrayal. And you shall pay dearly for this.”

"And how are you going to do that?" Emily's laughter reeked of pure unadulterated hatred. Yvonne couldn't fathom how one could have so much hatred in their chest.

"Like this." She took the plain glass from the table and flung the contents in her face. Mother Ursula stepped away from Emily so not a drop fell on her. But she was looking at Yvonne with a rather queer questioning expression.

"Who are you?" She didn't turn her head at the sound of Emily dropping to the floor.

"Who do you think?" Yvonne answered, her voice cold but not soothing.

"I'm not sure." Mother Ursula answered. "But I think I should be more scared than I am right now."

"I'm a descendant of the one who owned this place, but left it because of people like you who did their best to ruin the lives of others." Yvonne listened to herself speaking not knowing what was happening. To prevent her mind from snapping, she paced the floor while rubbing her legs with her hands.

"How come you didn't know where Emily was taking you?"

"Grandpa Joe put a seal around all his descendants up to the fourth generation. When I drank your coffee my eyes opened. And when I touched the curtains, understanding entered with the tap at the back of my head."

"Leader Joe was your ancestor?" Mother Ursula was shocked and scared at once. She slid on the wall to the floor with such a horrific expression that Yvonne felt sorry for her. "Leader Joe died and was buried on All Souls Day some years ago." She continued. "The next day the coffin was on top of the grave."

"What does that mean?"

"There was talk around the town that he did say he won't stay dead."

"He won't stay dead. That had to have put everybody on edge."

Mother Ursula got up from the floor. "What you said about people like me destroying lives of others. What did you mean by that? I don't destroy anyone."

"You knew that you were going to take my body as your own and dropped my soul in a milk tin, and cover it with cement didn't you?"

"Oh no. You have to believe me. I only do what I am told."

"Okay Tell me. What were you told?"

"Emily asked me to prepare a charm for you to get all the money that you ever want. She said that you were having a hard time at your place of employment."

"Is that so!" Yvonne turned at the sound of some movement in time to see Emily sneaking out of the room on all fours.

"Really, Emily? I thought you were my friend."

"How can anyone be a friend to you?" Venom was dripping from her lips as she lifted herself from the floor. All the fear seemed to have taken a back seat. "Anything you touch turns to gold. While we who started school with you remain catching our royal trying to make ends meet. It is not fair."

"So, all this is because of envy?"

"Yes. What did you expect?"

"Well, Emily, watch the result of hatred. You all tried to destroy me in a way that I wouldn't be able to help myself. Well thanks to Leader Joe I can help myself and give you all a taste of your own medicine." Horrendous laughter cut through the air so sharp that Emily bled from her nostrils and ears.

Yvonne moved around the house like she knew it. She opened doors and cupboards inspecting them all, while Mother Ursula followed diligently, hoping against hope for some respite from her. Unable to bear the suspense she asked Yvonne whether she was looking for something specific.

"Oh no just checking, thanks." The chickens stopped their noises altogether and the forest went quiet.

"Do you know why it has gotten so quiet?" She asked Mother Ursula who she noticed had gone quite pale and was shaking like a leaf. Emily cowered in a corner with her eyes closed and covering her ears.

"There have always been noises in the forest and the chickens never stopped clucking. This is the first time we've had such an occurrence. The silence is deafening and worrisome."

"Leader Joe is angry. Chickens never stay up late in the night. They go to bed with the setting of the sun. Whether it is six or seven o'clock. Did you know that?"

"No I don't know anything about chickens."

"You live and operate here in the Chicken Forest and you never bothered to find out the reason for the name or all these chickens running wild, never going to sleep and nobody tending to them?"

"Actually, I was never interested. I was brought here from the east and told to perform certain duties for a fee. I had been out of a job for a long time so I accepted this without a second thought."

“But you know he was buried on All Souls Day and the following day his coffin was on top of the grave.”

“Yes. One of the villagers told me. He was disabled so I didn’t think too much of it.”

“Did he look like Emily is right now?”

Mother Ursula turned to see Emily shuffling across the room with a silly grin on her face and wringing her hands. Mother Ursula slapped her mouth to prevent the scream that was threatening to come out. Deep within her being she knew this was not the time to scream or to have the mouth open.

“All those chickens harbour the spirits of those who did hurt Leader Joe before he got the power. He wasn’t always bad like the people say. He was normal. But there were those who did use their powers over him and his wife and children. His entire family died some horrible deaths. All except a few grands they didn’t know about. I am the daughter of one of those grands. And now that I am here, he will rise again and all the chickens will now die a horrible death and their descendants will see it. Did you know we have twelve spirits plus a soul? Well, we do. And in case you don’t know your parents and grandparents are out there as chickens. They messed with Leader Joe.”

“But I am not from here.”

“Yes you are. That’s why you were drawn here. You saw nothing wrong nor strange in adopting the body of the one you are wearing and dropping her spirits in a milk tin and covering it with concrete. Oh yes you are one of them.”

“So I’m going to be punished for one small mistake?”

Yvonne swung her hips and spun on her heels so fast that Mother Ursula froze on the spot at the expression on Yvonne’s face.

“You nincompoop!” Her teeth gritted and Emily giggled at Mother Ursula’s apparent discomfort and fear.

“She knows everything now. Hehehe. She touched the curtain. Hehehe.”

A group of villagers suddenly appeared in the room. Emily continued giggling. Mother Ursula picked up her skirt and tried to escape.

“Hold her!”

Two of the men strong armed her and brought her to face Yvonne.

“Please Yvonne. They’ve had our daughters for plenty of years. Bring them back please.” This request was made with so many tears that the chickens made a mournful cry out in the forest, even though they were related to Mother Ursula.

Yvonne, not sure of what was happening, lifted her hands to the skies with the palms upwards and chanting words she didn’t know in a melody she’d never heard, kept up the practice for what seemed like hours. Suddenly a door to the back of the building swung open, slamming against the wall and smashing into bits and pieces. A few milk tins came rolling out with the concrete covering falling apart. Black smoke emerged and dissipated within a few seconds. Mother Ursula watched with eyes wide open.

“Go and collect your girls. They’ll be a bit groggy but they’ll be fine. What should I do with the chickens?”

“Don’t kill them, but give them the power of speech.”

“At a specific time of day or night.”

“Okay. So be it. From one to two in the afternoon every day. And now I am tired. I need to sleep.”

Yvonne dropped right there but was held before hitting the ground. They carried her into the house with Leader Joe watching them with a smile. Only one person saw him but kept quiet.

About the Author:

Soter Lucio is a great-grandmother who recently cancelled all her forty ironing appointments in order to fulfill her dream of writing full-time. She is from the mountainous region of Paramin in Trinidad West Indies, where stories of lougharou, soucouyant, and la diabolise abound. It is not unusual to see a chicken walking the streets wearing slippers or a donkey wearing glasses.

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THE FINAL GUYS PODCAST – CELEBRATING 6 YEARS OF HORROR AND HUMOR

When you think of the words Final Guys, you might conjure images of some 80s slasher flick where a bloodied, beaten, and breathless dude survives the night against a crazed killer. Or maybe Ash from *Evil Dead* wielding his boomstick and chainsaw, having conquered demons from hell. And what about young Cool who survived a night battling *The People Under the Stairs*?

In reality, the Final Guys are four friends (or vanilla faces as they're often called by one of their live chat regulars) who host a weekly all-things-horror podcast that has been going strong for six years. Another reality check – Jason, Jack, Chad and Hunter would NEVER make it to the end of a real-life, honest-to-Bagul slasher. In fact, they're more likely to be the first to get deep-sixed when the pea soup hits the fan. But that doesn't stop the dedicated podcasters from loving or hate watching everything in the genre, from the Universal monsters to modern found footage. You'll find them broadcasting live on YouTube every Tuesday night at 8pm EST without a net and supported by a loyal gaggle of maniacs in the chat who either keep them honest when they (often) get their facts wrong, or soundly mock them for their taste in movies, books, video games or the innumerable inane things that come out of their mouths.



Let's get down to the Final Guys origin story, shall we? Way back in 2011 (a year that gave us *The Human Centipede 2* and *The Innkeepers*), Jack Campisi and his fledgling author buddy Hunter Shea started a video podcast called *Monster Men*. It was and continues to be a show about two guys taking on a horror subject, like vampire movies that don't suck or bigfoot flicks to get your kicks, and jawing about it as if they're at a bar just passing the time. It's a blending of humor and horror and maybe some pumpkin ale. Or whiskey. At the time, believe it or not, there weren't many horror-themed podcasts around. Nowadays, everyone who owns a black t-shirt with any random horror movie emblazoned on the front seems to have podcast. (Case in point, every member of the current Final Guys roster has at least two podcasts). *Monster Men* enjoyed their little corner of the interwebs and all was right in the world.

A couple of years later, author Jason Brant started his own podcast called *Drinking with Jason*. The concept was to have an open conversation with horror authors while Jason would imbibe the booze of his guest's choice. One might say it was a clever excuse to get drunk once a week. Having discovered *Monster Men* in his quest for guests, he had Jack and Hunter on separate episodes, and they embraced the theme of the show, to say the least. The main problem with *Drinking with Jason* was that most of these supposed masters of terror preferred to drink milk or water. Lame. But, a friendship was born! When Jason decided to do a horror review show a couple of years later, he tapped the *Monster Men* to join him on his quest, and on a late May evening in 2017, Final Guys was born. (Cue Dr. Frankenstein chanting, "It's alive! It's alive! It's alive!")

The early format of the show was simple – talk about movies they watched, then focus on a main feature, and above all, be silly asses. Strangely enough, the very first main feature was *Alien Covenant*, which is horror adjacent at best. In that premier episode, they toyed around with calling themselves Three Guys No One Gives a Shit About. Cool show title, but maybe a tad too long. A few shows later, they did a deep dive on *Wonder Woman*, marking the first (of many) times they would twist a word around and beat it to death as the name of actor Chris Pine hit their collective funny bone. They couldn't resist referring to him as Pinus. If you were to drink every time they said Pinus over the next

fifty episodes, you would be on your fourth liver transplant. Puerile humor was to become a landmark of the Final Guys podcast, one they embrace whole dead-heartedly. Oh, more on drinking games to come!

With Jason at the controls, the Final Guys trio provided weekly reviews and entertainment to a live audience, navigating their way through the horror landscape from little independent films to blockbusters, with some side forays into the world of superheroes (where Hunter was guaranteed to roll his eyes and complain like a whining baby). There was plenty of self-deprecation, busting one another's stones, costumes and general shenanigans. The format began to evolve, with drinking words provided by stalwart chat O.G. Sheridan Bradford, a man imbued with the psychic ability to know exactly what nonsense is going to come out of their mouths, award winning news segments provided by Jack (no awards were harmed or actually awarded in the making of the news), curation where the lads discuss the old and new movies, books and video games they partook in the previous week, capped off by a deep dive into the main feature of the week.

When the pandemic hit in 2020, they decided it was time to make the trio a foursome, and author Tim Meyer became an official Final Guy. For over two years, Tim was the yin to their yang, professing love for the unlovable (can anyone say *Blair Witch 2?*) and standing toe-to-toe with Jason, Jack and Hunter as they berated him for his lack of taste or his head-slapping steel book collection. An experienced podcaster himself, it goes without saying that he fit right in with the crew. Other than his undying lust for just about any horror flick from the 90s, Tim was also responsible for instituting a pickle rating system, sparking folks to buy pickle ornaments for their Christmas trees.

It was a sad day when Tim announced he could no longer be a regular, but it also led the Final Guys to tap his writing co-author (Wormwood), Chad Lutzke to take the fourth square. A Tubi and 70s horror aficionado, Chad brought a new point of view to the weekly coffee klatch. Looking like a roadie for the Black Crows, Chad is a calming presence to what can sometimes be a contentious and hysterical group discussion. And it's always amusing to see if his phone blaring Davie Lee Roth will interrupt the flow.

Let's not forget the fifth Final Guy, author Laurel Hightower. Hunter appreciates when Laurel is on the show because she opens the door for non-PC talk, taking the weight off his shoulders and having a potential co-conspirator when it comes to getting the show cancelled. A hell of a writer and whiskey connoisseur, she can more than hold her own with the boys and is pretty darn funny.

If you wanted a quick profile on the current Final Guys roster, it would look something like this:



Jason Brant – anal retentive film student with an eye for aspect ratio, script critique and penchant for found footage movies. Cannot say the word 'wolf' correctly.

Jack Campisi – Whiskey drinking, vampire and Hammer honeys enthusiast who loves the Red Sox, sometimes sings or raps movie synopses, and is a cub reporter for the Final Guys Weekly. Oh, and when whiskey Jack makes an appearance on the show, strap in! Talk about 'get off my lawn!'

Hunter Shea – Sasquatch and alien nutbar gifted with a quick wit, first to mumble inappropriate things while others are talking and most likely to get the show cancelled. Many mop references are made about him. Long story not exactly SFW.

Chad Lutzke – Self-professed horror snob who owns the corner of giallo and whatever the hell Tubi has in the horror section. He’s a vaping machine with long blonde locks and a moon booby peeking over his shoulder.

The show has grown to more than just reviews. Over just the last few years, the Final Guys have interviewed a who’s who of independent horror creatives, such as:

- Rob Savage (director of *The Boogeyman*, *Host*, *Dashcam*)
- Alok Mishra (producer of *1BR* and the best damn dude to shoot the horror shit over some beers)
- Naomi Grossman (actor from *1BR* and *American Horror Story*)
- Peter Phok (producer of Ti West’s films such as *X*, *Pearl*, *The House of the Devil* and many more)
- Keith Cooper (writer of the excellent *Anything for Jackson* and fan of *Hard Rock Zombies*)
- Josh Ruben (actor in *A Wounded Fawn* and director of *Werewolves Within*)
- Alan Randall and Matt Waldeck (director and producer of *I See You*)
- Brandon Christensen (director of *Superhost* and *Z*)

After hearing all of this, and knowing they have over 300 episodes under their collective belt, you would think this must be the most professionally produced show around. Well, you’d be wrong. And that, my friends, is all part of the charm of Final Guys. They have an astounding and wide sweeping knowledge and appreciation of horror, shared love of cracking on each other, and an almost endearing ineptitude when it comes to simple things like lighting, internet bandwidth, or audio. They are the everymen who invite the world to sit with them for an hour and a half each week to bask in the glory of all that’s scary and gory.

And because the Final Guys are all about curating their viewer and listener’s horror experience, here are each of their top 5 episodes from the past 6 years. Hop on over to their YouTube page or download the audio of any and all of these wherever you get your podcasts.

FINAL GUYS STAFF (INFECTION) PICKS

HUNTER

The Greasy Strangler
Tremors: A Cold Day in Hell
Alligator and Alligator II
The Shining Miniseries
The Haunting of Sharon Tate



JACK

The Wolf of Snow Hollow
Fresh
The Sadness
Come To Daddy
Blood Red Sky

JASON

Overlord
Anything for Jackson
Bloody Hell
Psycho Goreman
Bad Ben



CHAD

The Passenger
Resurrection
Bones and All
Speak No Evil
The Innocents

Check out the Final Guys Podcast on:

YouTube: [@FinalGuys744](#)

Twitter: [@FinalGuys](#)

Instagram: [@FinalGuys](#)

Facebook: [@FinalGuys](#)

And anywhere else you stream or download podcasts!

Chad Lutzke

Chad Lutzke lives in Battle Creek, MI. with his wife and children. For over two decades, he has been a contributor to several different outlets in the independent music and film scene, offering articles, reviews, and artwork. He has written for *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, *Rue Morgue*, *Cemetery Dance*, and *Scream* magazine. He's had several dozen short stories published. He is known for his heartfelt approach to the dark side of humanity with books such as *OF FOSTER HOMES & FLIES*, *WALLFLOWER*, *STIRRING THE SHEETS*, *SKULLFACE BOY*, *THE SAME DEEP WATER AS YOU*, *THE PALE WHITE*, and *THE NEON OWL*. Lutzke's work has been praised by Jack Ketchum, Richard Chizmar, Joe R. Lansdale, Stephen Graham Jones, Elizabeth Massie, Tim Waggoner, and his own mother.



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Hunter Shea

Hunter Shea is a lifelong horror hound and writer of over thirty books of monstrous mayhem, ghostly frights and newfound terrors. Some of his bestselling books include the critically acclaimed *Creature*, *To The Devil A Cryptid*, *The Montauk Monster*, the nostalgic *Money Back Guaranteed* series, and *Jessica Backman's Death in the Afterlife* trilogy. His books have been found in the International Cryptozoology Museum and his face on the Discovery Channel where he talks about, well, monsters.

He can be heard and seen on his two long-running podcasts, **Final Guys** and **Monster Men**, both informed and humorous explorations of the best – and worst – movies, books, interviews with some of the hottest writers, directors and producers in modern horror, true life hauntings, UFOs and more.

A long-time columnist for Cemetery Dance Online, Hunter's **Video Visions** is a look back at the days of video stores past.



He's a father, husband, cat owner (aren't all horror writers?), pizza and beer lover, battle-scarred Mets fan, and leader of Hunter's Hellions, the greatest gaggle of lunatics on the planet. He lived with the ghost of a young boy for 25 years, was part of a mass UFO sighting in the 80s, and is still waiting for Bigfoot to show up in his yard. You can follow all of his travails at www.huntershea.com, and while you're there, make sure to sign up for his **Dark Hunter Newsletter** where he highlights all the best the genre has to offer.

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Jason Brant

Jason Brant is the author of over a dozen humorous thrillers and horror novels. His works include The Hunger series, the Asher Benson series, The Gate, The Dark, the West of Hell series, and multiple novellas and short stories.

He also co-hosts a horror podcast called Final Guys and reviews bad movies on his YouTube show *So Bad It's Good*.

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Jack Campisi

Jack Campisi is a Monster Man. Well, to be more accurate; he's one half of the *Monster Men*, a video podcast that he co-hosts with his buddy, horror author Hunter Shea. *Monster Men* is a web show that covers all things horror and paranormal, but does it with a sense of humor. They describe it as a lighthearted conversation about dark matters. *Monster Men* is your go-to show for reviews of horror movies, TV shows and books as well as discussions about the paranormal and the unexplained. They also interview up and coming authors and other people of note in the genre.

Jack and Hunter also co-host *Final Guys*, another horror podcast, along with author Jason Brant. Known for their sharp banter and ridiculous knowledge of useless horror facts, the *Final Guys* features reviews and discussion of horror movies, shows and books as well as the latest genre news.



Jack grew up glued to shows like *Kolchak: The Night Stalker*, *Creature Feature*, *Chiller Theater* along with every episode of the *Brady Bunch*, *Gilligan's Island* and pretty much every super hero show. He has been published in the horror magazines *Dark Dossier* and *Insidious Reflections*.

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Final Guys Podcast: [Final Guys](#)





Round-Table Horror Film Discussion

Live at 8:00 EST every Tuesday

<https://www.youtube.com/@finalguys744>

RESTRICTED
R SEQUENCES OF STRONG BLOODY HORROR VIOLENCE AND GORE LANGUAGE AND DRUG USE
Under 17 Requires Accompanying Parent or Adult Guardian

On the 31st of October, Kyle Briggs pushed Ethan Platt against the old red cylindrical post box. The force of the impact against the box was mostly taken by Ethan's upper back, padded by his tacky school uniform blazer, but he still hit his head and winced in pain. He dropped his book bag on impact, as Mike and Josh, flanking Briggs, giggled in breaking pubescence.

"Where the fuck d'yer think yer goin' ya little bastard?" Briggs asked him, not really caring for an answer.

Rubbing the back of his sore skull, and looking away from the group of three young thugs, Ethan mumbled, "I've got to get home..."

Briggs grabbed Ethan's shoulders and squeezed as he growled: "I know your 'ouse. I fucked yer mum there last night for two fuckin' hours...the fat slut was gaggin' for it."

Briggs forced Ethan back against the post box. Ethan looked about—Kelley Way was a tiny shopping district serving the group of council estates surrounding it. Most of the shops however were permanently shut, and the only potential intervener Ethan saw, a purple-haired septuagenarian woman strolling by with a canvas bag trolley, glanced briefly at the scene and ignored it, carrying on. For a split second Ethan was filled with sheer hatred for that old biddy—yet another so-called adult had let him down, betrayed him—but a large glob of Briggs's spit hitting his cheek made him focus on the assault at hand.

"The problem with you Platt," snarled Briggs in a voice already made hoarse by cigarette smoke at the age of fourteen, "is that Halloween doesn't fuckin' matter for you...you already look like you've got the fuckin' mask on!"

You can talk, Ethan wanted to say. He considered Briggs's wide, fat face, pricked with angry red spots, and thought of a sculpture moulded from lard.

The idea made him smile involuntarily, to which the bigger boy shouted: "You think that's fuckin' funny, eh?"

Briggs brought his knee up between Ethan's legs, crunching his genitals. Ethan cried out and Briggs let him fall to his knees, taking the opportunity to hit across the sore point on his head.

As Ethan let the tears run he hid his face away with his hands.

Briggs leaned down and oozed into Ethan's ear, "You're a weak li'l' cunt Platt. Now don't run home too fast and tell shit to yer mummy, 'cause I'm on the way there now to fuck 'er in the arse fer a while, ya got me?"

Ethan found himself nodding as Briggs stood up and directed Mike and Josh up the pedestrianised row, laughing and calling back obscenities, not that Ethan could hear them properly, the fuzz in his rattled head drowning out the world.

After a minute, the sobs dried out and he got to his feet on uneasy knees. He looked around. He was alone, the place a dead zone at four in the afternoon. He wiped the last of his tears with his blazer sleeve, and picked up his bag. Briggs's boot mark was on the upper flap, but at least none of the contents had been lost or too heavily bent. He put the strap over his shoulder and felt his knees—he suspected they were raw and bloody, but he did not have the heart at that moment to check. He would slip up to the bathroom at home and give them a wash before his mother noticed anything. It was the best way. He and his mum were meant to go out trick-or-treating to designated locations, and he was going to be a generic pirate.

As he began his slow and aching walk home, a voice cried out to him: "You there boy!"

He halted and turned to where the voice had come from: one of the crummy, fossilised shopfronts. The name of the old business was still visible in maroon-red on a pinkish background: IRENE'S CLOSET. The tagline beneath read in italics: *Undergarments for the discerning lady*. The flaking roller shutter on the shop, locked and undisturbed for over a decade, resembled a vicious cheese grater.

In the shadow of the recessed doorway was the pale outline of a figure pointing at him.

"Yes, *you* boy," the figure said.

"I'm not supposed to talk to strangers," said Ethan, unsure of himself.

"Really?" asked the figure. It was a warm, strong, masculine, self-assured tone compared to Ethan's hesitance.

"A growing *young man* like you ought to be able to make his own decisions, take his own chances..."

Appealing to his wounded ego softened Ethan's attitude, and he drew towards the doorway.

"Besides," hummed the figure, "I'm a *friend*."

Ethan knew there was something wrong, but the man was so enticing. He could not help but carry on to the step.

The boy blinked and his eyes adjusted to the gloom, smelling the recess's ancient essence of alcoholic urine. There stood a man in his mid-fifties, but with a body worn beyond his years. He was dressed in a grey linen sheet,

wrapped tight against his emaciated frame, his reedy arms naked in the autumnal chill. His feet were reddened, the toenails long and purpled, left unprotected by leather sandals. A stringy sallow beard hung down to his mid-chest. Below a hairless scalp, his face was cracked and stained, yet *still* managed to carry the warmth of his voice.

"Who are you?" asked Ethan, now suspicious of this obvious tramp, but still attracted by his charisma. "What do you want?"

"Don't you recognise me boy?" asked the man, smiling.

"I'm sorry sir, I don't," Ethan replied with the respect he would show a teacher.

"I am Saint Grigori of Minsk," said the man, and held out his hand for Ethan to shake, which Ethan did in the manner one of his mother's boyfriends had once taught him.

"I am the patron saint of people like you," said the man.

"Patron saint of what?" asked Ethan as what the man had said sunk in. Was he completely insane? Was this some rhetorical ploy to teach some tacky moral lesson?

Ethan looked at his watch.

"Look sir," he said, looking away. "I've got to get home..."

"You should not rush from me Ethan," said the man, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"How do you know my name?" the boy asked. Had Briggs or one of the others said it earlier? No, they had called him by his last name *Platt*, like the bastards always had, as though they were in the military.

"I just *know*," he replied. "Just like I know that Kyle Briggs, Michael Crispin, and Joshua Hall have been abusing you for quite some time, along with a number of others at your schooling house."

The weight of this revelation from the man disarmed Ethan totally, almost hypnotically.

"Let's go to a more comfortable place," said Saint Grigori, "and I will explain."

The saint gently pulled Ethan onto the cracked tiled step and put his arm around him. As they turned to the gated door, carved and jotted with names, initials, and sexual acts, it swung open with a creak and a pop onto a cold black void.

Ethan shuddered, but Grigori held him close, and whispered, "It's quite all right...in this realm it is darkness, but beyond it is *light*...trust me."

The boy trusted him, and the two stepped forward into the nothing.

Ethan found himself in a small rocky field, with broken and bent crosses spread about.

There were people, mainly in sheets like Grigori, sat on rocks and fiddling with objects, or saying things to themselves too quietly to be heard.

Ethan looked back. The doorway was gone.

"Where have you brought me?" Ethan asked. He was not afraid, only curious.

Ethan looked up to the sky: the sun was a thin and watery blue, the sky itself a dull grey soup.

As Grigori talked, he brought Ethan along as though taking him on a tour: "Many centuries ago, this place would have been called a *potter's field*—a place for the poorest of the poor in a community to be buried. Slipping between time and a time, it has become a place for saints to take refuge from modernity, a faithless age."

They stopped before an elderly black woman in a red kaftan, sat on a sharp rock, her hair wrapped away on her head. She merely stared forward blankly, not acknowledging them.

"This woman is Saint Josephine," said Grigori. "She is the patron saint of the Sudan, *and* of displaced and trafficked peoples."

"Can she hear us?" asked Ethan, concerned about the poor woman. He then briefly remembered that the woman who had ignored his plight on Kelley Way had been of a similar age, and suddenly felt less bad for her.

"I don't know," said Grigori, waving his hand before her wide eyes. "She's been like this for a long time...all those betrayed peoples the world over...Jews, Palestinians, Kurds, Afghans, Uighurs, Rohingya, Africans, Amerindians...I guess she could just not take it."

They moved along, and encountered a middle-aged man playing in the dirt with a toy phone, speaking in tongues into the plastic mouthpiece.

"This here is Saint Gabriel," announced Grigori. "The patron saint of emergency dispatchers, driven mad by the constant state of world crisis...the once great archangel. God may be his strength, but it did not help."

This last remark struck Ethan as fairly blasphemous for a supposed saint, but they carried on to a man in rags writing figures in the soil with a stick, jabbering to himself.

"This is Saint Joseph of Cupertino," said Grigori, enjoying each introduction less and less. "The patron saint of poor students...but the costs just keep *mounting and mounting*."

Grigori leaned in to the muddied saint and firmly asked him, “How are you doing Joseph?”

“Nearly there Grigori!” the Saint shouted in reply, a wild optimism in his eyes. “Nearly there!”

As they walked away, Grigori admitted that Joseph was in *no way* ‘nearly there’.

They passed a few more alleged saints, each story more depressing than the last, until they reached a wall which was more of a rockery. It was jagged and uneven, forming the edge of the fold of spacetime they occupied. It was strung with rubbish: clippings from the Bible, the Quran, and the Upanishads; paper slips from fortune cookies; leaflets for political campaigns long fought, won, and lost; disposable plastic cups; and a myriad other detritus of human civilisation.

“You see Ethan,” Grigori told the boy, the fingers of his right hand searching between two stones. “Halloween comes from *Hallows Eve*, for it is the evening before the Feast of All Saints. Our little world here opens onto your reality for just a very brief period.”

Ethan took this in, but ignored it to ask a question of growing urgency: “But Grigori...what are you the patron saint of? You said it was of people like me—who are *people like me*?”

Grigori laughed as he pulled from between the two stones what he was looking for, which he hid behind his back.

“My boy!” he beamed. “Have you not figured it out yet? I, Grigori Pyotr Valarivich Myshkin of Minsk, am the patron saint of the downtrodden, the social exiles, the *bullied*... you, Ethan, *you*.”

Ethan felt nauseous. He had suspected beneath his calm façade of acceptance this all might have just been a dream, an escape from the pain of the beating, but now things were much too real.

Grigori came down to Ethan’s level, and placed the found object in his hand: “Years ago I would have scorned such a solution, but *extreme* situations require *extreme* measures.”

Ethan looked down at the object: it was a heavy, rusting, steel Stanley knife. Without thinking, he pushed out the blade with the clip—it was long and sharp, the glint of the bland sun catching its edge.

Something within Ethan began to cause him to object and close the blade away, but Grigori put his finger to the boy’s lips and shushed him.

“You know what to do,” whispered the Saint, and turned him away and pushed him abruptly.

With a flash, Ethan stumbled and found himself on the shop front step.

He looked back at the door—it was closed, its edges caked with undisturbed filth.

The stanley knife still in his hand, he quickly shoved it into his bag and walked up the street.

He checked his watch—virtually no time had gone between his entrance to Grigori’s world and the return to his own.

As Ethan walked he still considered the possibility that it had all been some strange vision, a hallucination like in one of those stoner comedy films he was not supposed to watch. But no: as he peeked through the gap of the bag’s flap, the knife was still there, tucked against his mathematics textbook.

Only as he began to enter his own street did he realise that his knees were fine and flexible, his bag was unbooted, his shoulders untwisted, his scalp free of pain, his hair unruffled...Grigori’s saintly magic had removed the injuries of Briggs and filled him with confidence and strength, the strength to do what he needed to do...

At his house’s gate he felt the solid shape of the knife through the bag’s faux leather.

Yes, he thought. *Tonight, I will be a good boy for mum. For tomorrow...Briggs, Mike, Joshua, Sam, Joe, Neil, Singh, Kirsty, Ashra, Mahmoud, Matt...all of them...I know what you’ve done...and what you might do in future...and the first break time starts at 10:15 in the morning...*

He swung open the gate and went up to the house to enjoy his last Halloween as a free child.

About the Author:

Harris Coverley has more than ninety short stories published or forthcoming in *Penumbra*, *Hypnos*, *JOURN-E*, and *The Black Beacon Book of Horror* (Black Beacon Books), amongst many other places. A former Rhysling nominee, he has also had over two hundred poems published in journals around the world. He lives in Manchester, England.

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The rack of Halloween items at the 100-yen shop was down to a handful of plastic spiders, a glowing skull, a stack of fake tattoos, and a container of fake blood. The worse were the spiders. Five for 100 yen but they were horrible things. Nine legs instead of eight, with the two giant eyes slightly off kilter to make them look cross-eyed. Grottesque, not Halloween cute. And Japanese customers wanted Halloween cute.

Halloween was not a Japanese holiday; nor was Christmas. But people liked the orange and black color scheme. Or, as her cousin put it, it reminded them of English classes from when they were children. It was *natsukashii*, nostalgic. And in Japan, *natsukashii* had value.

Yuki did not share these sentiments. She was only half Japanese, on her mother's side, and had only been here since high school, which she struggled in because her language skills weren't good enough. Seven years later, she only got odd jobs like this. She glanced around the depressing store with its peeled paint and aisles of cheap goods. This was her life stretched out in aisle after aisle of off brand cleansers and generic candy.

Yuki took the last of the Halloween debris and shoved them in the big metal bargain bin. Marked down to two items for 100 yen. Still a profit because most of it was made in other parts of Asia, by made by laborers who perhaps earned 5 yen an hour for their hard work. Fake Western merchandise made for a Japanese market in Southeast Asia. Who says global trade isn't inspiring? The Christmas items were stacked in boxes in the corner, ready to replace them. They would be shoved to the side by the 1st of December, and in the bargain bin by the 24th. Such was the lot of mass produced holidays.

Ms. Doi was closing up the register, two aisles over and out of view. Her husband's meager pension meant the older woman was still working well into her 70's. She moved slowly, and always had the faint whiff of mothballs and cigarettes on her clothing. Yuki and Ms. Doi were supposed to stock shelves together; but Ms. Doi was too old to lift the boxes. Yuki was fine with that. There wasn't much to do anyway.

A man wandered by and looked in. He banged on the glass door. Both women ignored him. In a huff, he staggered away. He was probably drunk. A salaryman stumbling home from the bar. What he wanted from a 100-yen shop was anybody's guess.

As Yuki turned away, she bumped against the pumpkin filled with plastic spiders and they scattered all over the floor. There had to be hundreds of them. It shocked her. The pumpkin wasn't that big, it was as if they had multiplied. She looked at the pile of nine legged spiders amassed at her feet. The flashy plastic eyes all staring up at her.

Yuki picked up a handful, wrapping them in a fist, when she felt movement. She dropped them with a shriek.

Her mind was playing tricks on her. They couldn't move. Probably just the little legs rubbing against her palms in the wrong way. Still, fear had grabbed hold of her. She picked up one plastic spider by the head, holding it up with her thumb and index finger, and stared at it.

Two legs twitched.

Stunned, Yuki dropped it to the floor. The other spiders began to scatter across the linoleum, plastic legs twisting and google eyes glowing. She wanted to yell to Ms. Doi but she was too terrified to form words. She'd watched too many horror movies and was letting her imagination run wild. She raced down the aisles, past the Halloween displays, the cheap towels and the flimsy cardboard toys. A few spiders were still scurrying across the floor, but most were flat on their backs, legs curled inward in rictus.

Yuki took a deep breath. This was nothing. This wasn't happening. She thought she heard the faint strains of Ms. Doi's voice, but ignored it. The old woman was always humming or singing to herself. She needed to focus. She needed to clean. Yuki marched to the back room for the broom and dust pan. Clean it all up. That was the plan. So she swept. Swish, swish, the little plastic arachnids into the trash. The corpses piled up in the dust pan and she threw in the bin. Then she scooped up more. And then more. Four times, and that was the last of them. She dumped those in and looked down, only to see a bit of plastic from underneath the shelf. She swept under to get the last one, only to have dozens more sweep out on to floor.

This was too many. This was not right. There were never this many spiders. Yuki began to sweep frantically, feeling as if she couldn't possibly stop herself. All the while, lights flickered and flickered dancing across the little

plastic spider bodies. She swept until her arms hurt, until her fingers were stiff from clutching the handle. A bright red light swept across the store, and Yuki finally stopped, shielding her eyes.

The manager was unlocking the door with a policeman behind him. The drunken salaryman was behind them frantically pointing. They rushed in as Yuki raced around the corner. There was Ms. Doi, slumped down over the cash register, her body covered in Halloween decorations.

About the Author:

Echo Ishii is a writer of all things paranormal. She is also a fan of audio drama and B movies. Currently, she spends too much time rewatching Blake's 7. Originally from the US, she is a long-time resident of Japan.

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She Calls Me | Joy Florentine

I have a hunger that cannot be satisfied by mankind. I am a monster, or that's what they call me. I understand the meaning of the word, but it means nothing to me. I came into existence this way. Why assign worldly labels to Creation under the eyes of the Creator? It's like forcing a hardened clay pot into the mould of a cup, reducing it to a cracked fragment of the artist's work and saying, *"look, this is what was below the surface all along."*

I'm not a religious man, not in the way this world portrays faith. I believe in a purpose greater than my own. The Universe calls out to every organism. It warns to reject the Garden of Earthly Delights—to rebel against the lure of self-destruction mankind calls upon itself. I receive messages through things easy to miss by those who don't listen. I find messages in the echoes of heeled boots on concrete, in brush lines of oil paintings on oak panels, cross-stitched patterns in woollen fabric.

I first saw her at the flower shop in town on a windy day in March, carrying a bouquet of white lilies to the till. I noticed the swing of her long braid as she reached for the coins in the pocket of her long-sleeved jet-black dress. Her necklace was tight, red and layered, like long fingers wrapped around her neck. When she shook her slender hand and counted the coins in it, the metallic ring brought a hymn to me.

I could then no longer shake her imprint from my mind. She appeared to me in the cream-coloured mannequins behind shop windows, in magazine photographs of slender figures with smooth, bare legs crossed, in visions during my sleep of her calling me. The soft lilt of her voice echoed back to me in the twitter of the robins in the park repeating the five words I had overheard her say,

"thank you, have a nice day."

"thank you, have a nice day."

"thank you, have a nice day."

I wanted to preserve her virtuousness, her untainted nature; a picture beautifully unspoiled. To send her off in the midst of her purest state of being. I observed her every move and learned everything about her there was to learn, then went to take her on a cloudy November night. But when I arrived, she had no fear in her eyes. When I had my weight pressed down on her legs and hips, my hands clasped around both of her wrists, she smiled and said,

"i've read all about you in the papers, i was hoping you would come—no, you don't scare me, you're just misunderstood—yes, that hurts but you can do whatever you like—you chose me—you chose me because i'm special, right?"

She made it sound like she understood. She was eager and thirsted for my touch. She surrendered everything willingly that night: Her farmhouse, inherited from her father who she says bears a resemblance to me with his thick black hair and slender build and callused hands. Her husband, who had marked her body with stains like ink long before I laid eyes on her. Her youngest, a girl with thin straw locks of hair, and her eldest, a boy still with half a set of baby teeth between the gaps. She still whispers their names under her breath when I let her down on the floor, the sofa, the bed, and the grass under which parts of them lie buried in the earth.

She lets me sink my knife into her skin, sharpening the edge on the curve of her thighs, marking a trail on the pale, unmarked parts of her, so deep that her lifeforce erupts from her like a conclave of cardinal birds flying up out of

the snow. She is a map that now only I know how to read. Only I know the hidden pathways and dead ends. When she welcomes me, the silver of her eyes shivers under the light of the dimmed lamp in her narrow hallway, where sun-bleached teal wallpaper peels from the dusty corners.

She looks me in the eye and asks for more. She says it makes her feel alive. She tells me it makes her feel seen. She whispers in my ear. She won't have me let go. She convinces me to cut deeper. She screams out in ecstasy. She laughs until she cries. She grabs onto the hem of my sleeve when the sun starts to rise. She looks at me through hooded lids and says,

"i am so happy you chose me, so happy they're gone and you're here—oh, can't you see how happy i am? You'll come back won't you?"

She knows I'll come back because I've indulged and can't resist her call. She calls it fate. She calls it destiny. She calls it virtue. She calls it heaven. She calls it salvation. She calls it love—She calls me in the depth of the night. She tells me she's done it again. She calls it a tribute. She brings me live, warm bodies from distant towns in the trunk of her car. She buries them cold in the woods. She thinks it's what I want and it drives me insane—it drives me insane! It makes my skin crawl, my head hurt, my hands tremble. I don't have the words.

She has given me every inch of her body. Every cry. Every scream. Every broken and whole part of her. But no matter how frequently she calls me, my hunger returns.

She is spoiled.

I am depraved.

She knows she has the one thing I can't have. She knows I can't leave. She is the destruction of me.

She is my Hell on Earth. I chased after the Devil's lure and trapped myself in the depths of her shadow. She was never mine to save—from self-destruction and ruin. She can't give me what I long for—that purity would only come into existence when I myself am not there to witness it. And I can't bear the thought another would come and steal it off her face—to enjoy her so exposed and vulnerable. That another would see the one thing that she fears in this rotten world. For the only thing she now still fears is the absence of me.

About the Author:

Joy Florentine is a Dutch-Indonesian writer from Amsterdam, the Netherlands. She loves exploring different genres. Her flash fiction piece 'Ladybird' and short story 'Liza, Like Lizard' have been published on Literally Stories.

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Neighbours | Jacek Wilkos

Me and my neighbour hated each other for ages. We're malicious to one another at every possibility.

The neighbourhood kids really like Sam for having lots of sweets every Halloween, so this year I'll change that.

I snuck into his house and swapped the chocolates waiting in the corridor for the trick-or-treaters.

From my window I watched my neighbour throwing pralines into kids' bags. Little gluttons started eating as soon as the doors closed. I had a laugh watching them spit in terror from the tiny white spiders that spilled from bitten eggs hidden under a thick layer of chocolate.

About the Author:

Jacek Wilkos is an engineer from Poland. He lives with his wife and two daughters in a beautiful city of Cracow. He is addicted to buying books, he loves black coffee, dark ambient music and anything that's spooky. First he published his fiction in Polish online magazines, but in 2019 he started to translate his writing to English, and it was published in numerous anthologies across the globe.

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Foreword by Wrath James White

The air is thick with darkness.

It seeps and clings to my soul, waking me from a long and deep slumber.

Although I stopped breathing centuries ago – human traits still linger like bad habits, and I savor the scent of the distinct autumn air. Ah, yes, it is the time when trees scatter the land with gold and the whisper of winter wafts with the wind – the time of year when I wake, albeit just for a night, to satiate this gnawing hunger that dwells inside.

I slither from my sleeping place – a crumbling pile of stones once home to an ornate burial ground. Now, they look to be nothing: a mere jumble of mossy rocks masked by time near the edge of the forest. I have felt and heard humans climbing over my stones, completely oblivious and unaware of the antiquated remains buried beneath the clay, where the ghost of those bones lies in wait. A once human turned monster that still exists – yet in a different form – who desperately wishes to claw through the earth, grab them, devour them – aw, but alas, I am much too weak, until this precious night.

All Hallows Eve.

When the veil between both worlds is at its thinnest; when evil is celebrated, and ghouls and witches, vampires and skeletons skip about the streets, seeking thrills and treats; and I, a spirit that has existed for centuries, rises but again, to walk and play amongst the innocent.

There was a time, many moons ago, when All Hallows Eve meant vast flames burning towards the stars, where the townsfolk danced around the pits of fire, garbed in costumes to ward off the evil that preyed upon them in the gloom. This night has always strengthened my soul – and now, in this new age – there is no one to dance and keep at bay what lurks in the depths of the dark.

Such fools!

If they only knew what lingers beneath their feet, skulking and stagnant, patiently awaiting this one night of bliss.

Sigh. Perhaps one day I shall be strong enough to stay longer. In the olden days, when *true* witches hid amongst the villages, one would sometimes cast her magic to momentarily resurrect my humble spirit. Now, they are non-existent. Well, some *call* themselves witches, but they are a mockery of the past. Fictitious hags! I once heard the call of one, who somehow got her false little hands on an ancient spell book and mumbled the incantation. When I appeared to her in all my glory, pleased to do her bidding if it allowed a brief visit above the ground, she nearly fainted with fright. Her cowardly face turned white as bone, and she shook so uncontrollably I thought she just might expire right there. The spell she attempted diminished with her fear, and I quickly weakened but again, zapped back to my dwelling – my burial – where I always seem to go. Now, I ignore their silly calls and wait with patience for what I know to be true.

I ascend with the bats, mingling with the swaying branches, the falling leaves, the pale moonlight. The spiced air is crisp. The ominous atmosphere ripe. I hear the murmur of voices and see a cluster of artificial lights in the distance. As I near, the squeals and shouts of children echo all around me. Clad in capes and pointy hats, frilly dresses and painted faces. Such ignorant beings. I float down, wrapping around their skin and causing goose pimples on their flesh. A small child cries and hugs her mother. I laugh. The young always sense my malicious intent.

But they will not do. No. Much too young.

I float just above their heads, seeking and sensing *the one* who is worthy. The streetlamps glimmer; jack-o-lanterns shimmer, lawns are scattered with plastic bones and wispy webs; howling and cackling comes from some machinery I haven't quite figured out. Oh, how this night has evolved! How simple and easy it is now. What is the saying with each knock at the door? Trick or treat? Yes . . . well, I suppose I have a trick of my own. Again, I chuckle at myself and continue, hovering like mist.

I sense *others* nearby – ghosts, phantoms, specters – whatever they are called in this new age. They are not like me, for I am a completely different type of spirit. I do not know the word to describe what I am; time has taken some of my memory. But not the craving. That existed before my demise and followed in the afterlife. These ghosts are . . . weak. Wandering aimlessly around and around, haunting their loved ones and their homes, until they too perish. Oh, how dreadful! One passes through me, frigid and frightened: “Where is my home?” it asks. “Please, help me. I can't find my way home.”

“Be gone!” I hiss, and it quickly falters. I don't have the time to deal with them. When the first rays of the ghostly sun peak from above, I am pulled back to my grave, whether I quenched this craving or not! But enough of this banter. When one has been around as long as I have, one tends to talk to oneself.

Now, back to the hunt.

I must get away from these bloody children – find a body a bit more mature in age. I listen, filtering through the voices of the dead, the children . . . oh!

A couple. I follow their sounds onto a much quieter street and one that is near a cemetery. My bird's eye view takes in tilted gravestones and faded flowers, shadowy statues and budding ghosts. And there, on what humans call sidewalks they saunter hand in hand. They are young but not *too* young. One is blooming with womanhood, the other, a male, a bit awkward but handsome enough.

Aw, yes, one of them will do!

I swoop down and twirl around their ankles like a black cat purring for attention. They do not sense me at all and continue talking in low excited tones.

Hmm, who shall it be – the female or the male? Both are quite capable.

The woman smells of lavender and vanilla. Lush scarlet tresses flow long down her back. She too must be in costume: a black cloak, clinging dress, a dribble of fake blood dabbles the corners of her mouth. Although I have no clue as to what she is attempting to portray, I gravitate to her.

I wind my way up and around her body, sending a soft sigh of cool air about her and a subtle billow to her cape. He feels it too, and shivers. I wait for her next intake of breath, and as she sips in the night air, I enter through her painted ruby-red lips.

She stops in her tracks with the intake of my soul.

For a moment, she struggles. Her body grows rigid and tense as she tries to fend me off. Why, she is strong! Much stronger than the rest. She silently screams, not knowing what is happening. “Shhh, my love,” I say silently to her, “it is easiest if you simply sleep.” She obeys – they always do – and I fully take over her limbs, her voice, her mind.

“Bella? Are you okay?” asks her partner, clutching my cold hand. His blue eyes bulge with concern.

I release my hand from his grip. Wiggle my fingers and toes. Caress the soft skin of my face, smooth back my hair. Her body is vigorous and beautiful.

I chose well.

I turn to the young man, who is now looking at me with bewilderment, mouth slightly ajar.

“I’m quite alright.” My voice comes out velvety and rich. I scan her mind, seeking his name. Lu . . . “Lucas. Shall we scamper through the cemetery?”

“Oh, uh, what about the party?”

“We can be a bit late,” I say batting my cat-green eyes. “Besides, do you not want to spend time with me under the moon?”

He grins and shuffles his feet with nervous excitement. “Why are you talking so strange?”

“Whatever do you mean, Lucas?” I say with sweet innocence. I cannot help but stare at his exposed neck. Each time he smiles his veins protrude and pulse with the accelerating beat of his heart. I smell his masculine musky scent – the hint of fear and want exudes from his pores. I run the tip of my tongue under my teeth. Lick my lips. I can already taste his sweet metallic fluid. My, I am famished!

“Getting into character, Bells? You do look hot as a vampire.”

Vampire. Yes! Vampire!

How could I have forgotten?

A vampire is what I used to be, and what I am each Halloween.

A bellowing laughter ripples through the air. I am surprised to hear it comes from myself, so used to laughing internally. I lean back my head and roar again, the wan light of the moon soaks into my skin. The nocturnal creatures react: a river of bats flow into the starlit sky; a band of wolves howl from the forest deep. And for a moment in time, all who walk under the moon, feel the evil that is near. Terror grips their hearts.

Lucas, still grinning, peers uneasily all around. He hurriedly grabs my hand, thinking he is safe with me! – and leads us through the cemetery gates, where I, surrounded by the darkness and the dead . . . will swallow his blood.

About the Author:

Jasmine De La Paz is a speculative fiction author based in Bishop, CA. She weaves elements of gothic, psychological, and cosmic horror into her stories, and is often inspired by the surrounding nature and landscapes of the Eastern Sierra, where she resides. Jasmine's stories are published in 'Anterior Skies Vol. 1', 'HorrorScope Vol. 2', Quill & Crow's, 'The Crows Quill' literary magazine, and more.

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Charlie and the Blue Moon | *Londeka Mdluli*

His eyes pierce the blue moon; he draws the mahogany-brown chair into place and lingers over the indigo that settled over the sky. His past dreams have not been a façade. He knows it. He'll still awaken to the image of darn moon that had covered Shadow Valley for three months. There isn't much to do in a town of blues. There are no reflections in the water that surrounds the valley. You never know what's inside. Going for a swim is probably a bad idea. You can't sleep or wake because you can't tell the difference between night and day. The clocks on our walls don't work. Steady at 2:12 p.m. They don't move; we've tried. Hit them with a gentle bang. The town's nuns prayed over them. Hell, we even did the spirit fingers. Nothing worked, so we rang Joe, the fixer who lives on 4th Street.

He couldn't fix them. The people think aliens did this or that we're part of some secret government experiment. We don't go to school anymore. I hated Mrs. Adams anyway. I caught her in the kids dressing room making out with Gerald, the school's Janitor. Mrs. Adams is married to Joe, the fixer. I sent a note to their house, telling Joe about the affair, but darn it! She read it first and burned it. I know because I saw her from the terrace of our house: I had my dad's binoculars on. This was before the moon came. With no more school, my bag of books sits under my dresser, collecting marbles of dust. Billy says we should get out of here; he has no plan. He spends his time at Mary Jane's Bar. It's always the same drink: rum on ice! Mary Jane's bar is the only one open in town. The others have all been looted. Vicky, the veteran nurse, owns the diner across the street between dead traffic lights and destroyed pavement. We go there sometimes, Jim and I. That was before I saw her last summer, going for an itch on her bottom before returning to the stove. I was disturbed.

Before the blue moon came, we would place an order for apple juice and tacos with the 30 dollars we stole from my dad's secret stash. The diner would be jam packed with folks skipping under the disco ball, drinking to a Norseman's gulp. I'll admit, it was fun to see so much life in one room without anyone gasping for air. The radio sat a couple metres from our favourite table, close enough to the open kitchen bar. That one particular night, Karma Kameleon was playing. Jim and I laughed about it—old classic versus new school. Since then, old folks don't hang out there anymore. Instead, they sit in their homes behind drawn curtains, eating salmon and watching Jerry Springer on the tiny 90s TV screen.

My brother, Mat Junior, is an idiot. He joined a gang recently, and he has the tattoos to prove it. Mom's totally going to kill him. I can already imagine her face when she finds out her darling son is a gang member and has 12 new, sparkling, ugly tattoos to prove it! Yep! She's definitely going to kill him. Our parents left for New Jersey four months ago. They figured this idiot could take care of me. That's gone to shit. I'm turning 13 soon, and he told me to get a shotgun. He was tweaked out of his mind. I make myself food now; I even learned how to bake. I use some of Mom's old recipes. Most of us stay inside because on some days it rains, purple roses falling from the sky as if petals were thrown by the flower girl at my idiot brother's wedding. Who could even marry someone like him?

I paint now, drawing the curtains back, catching the slightest shimmer of that blue moon. I trace the small stars that run over its edges as if they were the tiny freckles on my idiot brother's face. After that, I let the canvas sit, facing the moon, hoping it sees me as I see it. Maybe then it'll finally go away and we can start over. No more dark days and nights, broken clocks, fixers who can't fix things, Vicky's empty diner, or Mary Jane's drunken bar. Shadow Valley has lost its spark; there are no more young couples kissing on a sunny day on lovers' lane. The old folks who look like they are about to die seem to have their shit together, though. You see them singing in each other's arms.

Am I going to be like that when I'm older? Without a care in the world as to how I die or what gets to kill me? Never did I imagine it would be the most beautiful blue moon that raised hell under our skyline. At 2 years, 3 months, and 14 days, I don't know how this ends. I do, however, know that there is a blue moon that shines every night and day in Shadow Valley. It traps even the slightest shadow of light into its orbit. Yesterday, instead of purple rain, fire began falling from the sky. Too bad we can't send firefighters up there. We might die soon without ever knowing where the blue moon came from or why it chose Shadow Valley. When the last fire rains to the surface, I'll leave a note with my story, hoping that someone out there finds it and tells the world the story of Shadow Valley and the boy named Charlie, who settled for 2 years, 3 months, and 14 days with an idiot brother under the blue moon.

About the Author:

Londeka Mdluli is a first-generation South African writer and storyteller. Although she was born in South Africa, she does not shy away from her Zimbabwean heritage. Mdluli began writing at age 9 after falling in love with rhetoric. Mdluli has since published pieces with literary Journals such as *The Spectacle*, *Kelp Journal*, *Prometheus Dreaming*, *Claw and Blossom*, *Coffinbell*, *Cid Pearlman Performance* and more.

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Something Good to Eat | *Sheri White*

Barbara headed home after a long day of work, just wanting to open a bottle of wine and watch some *Housewives*. As she neared her house, she had to slow down her car to avoid hitting kids walking in the middle of the street.

“Move!” she yelled inside the car. She almost leaned on the horn, then noticed the costumes.

“Halloween? Damn it! Fucking kids are going to be banging at my door all night.” She pulled into her garage and quickly shut the door with the remote. She ran inside and closed the blinds in the living room and turned out all the lights.

“I am NOT home tonight, for all they know.” She grabbed a bottle of wine, some cheese from the fridge and a box of crackers from the counter then went upstairs to her bedroom.

Barbara got in her pajamas and comfy in her bed, turned on the TV, and opened the wine. “Crap, I forgot the glass.” She shrugged and drank from the bottle.

A while later she heard a knock at her front door. She turned up the volume. “Not home! Sorry, not sorry.”

There were more knocks throughout the evening, and kids also rang her doorbell. Barbara could hear the kids yelling “Trick or treat,” even though she never answered the door.

“Keep trying, you little brats.”

As the evening progressed the obnoxious behavior stopped, and Barbara fell asleep with the TV still on.

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK

Barbara startled awake, not sure what she had heard. She muted the TV and listened carefully, but the silence wasn't disturbed.

“Must have dreamed it.” She settled back under the covers and closed her eyes.

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK

“God damn it! What time is it?” Barbara looked at her phone. 2:20AM. “These kids are ridiculous.” She got up and went downstairs.

“You kids better go home!” she yelled at her front door. “I'll call the police!” She looked through the peephole, but nobody was there. She waited a couple minutes. Satisfied the kids were done messing with her, she started back up the steps to her room.

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK

“Fine, I'm calling the cops!” She stomped on the stairs, then realized the knocking wasn't from the front door.

“Oh, come on!” She ran to the back door in the kitchen and pushed the curtain aside from the window, but nobody was there either. Thinking the kids were running from the front door to the back, she went back to the front door and opened it hard enough for the knob to hit the wall.

“Damn it, stop—” Her porch was empty; the only sound was the rustling of leaves in the cool breeze. She stepped out and looked around but couldn't see anybody.

She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. “I don't like this,” she whispered. She went back inside and locked the door, then went back up to her room to get her phone.

Halfway up the steps she heard it again, this time louder and more forceful.

BANG BANG BANG

Barbara couldn't figure out where it was coming from. The sound surrounded the entire house. “Stop it!” she screamed. She held the banister tightly, her knuckles turning white. “Leave me alone!” She ran to her room and grabbed her phone. She stabbed 9-1-1 with her finger but dropped the phone when she heard “TRICK OR TREAT! TRICK OR TREAT! GIVE US CANDY, LADY!”

Are they in my house? How could they be?

“Please, just go away! Why are you doing this over some stupid candy?”

BANG BANG BANG

“Oh. Oh, no. How is this possible?”

The banging came from her bedroom closet. She picked up her phone, planning to run out of the room and out of her house, when her bedroom door slammed shut and the closet door opened, crashing against the wall.

Slowly, trick-or-treaters filed out of the closet, their hands holding their treat bags open. Barbara scrambled onto the bed, pushing herself against the headboard. “What do you want? Please, I'll give you candy if you'll just go. Please, go.”

As if one, the children, with their eyes shining black, reached into their bags and pulled out knives. "Too late, Barbara," they chanted in unison. "Now we get to play a trick." Barbara's screams of terror were replaced by screams of pain.

About the Author:

Sheri White's stories have been published in many anthologies, including an essay in the Notable Works for the HWA Mental Health Initiative, *Flashes of Fantasy*, published by Wicked Shadow Press, *Tales from the Crust* (edited by Max Booth III and David James Keaton), *Halldark Holidays* (edited by Gabino Iglesias), and The Horror Writers Association's *Don't Turn Out the Lights* (edited by Jonathan Maberry).

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If Summer Has to End | *Jeff Presto*

I wish I was good at normal things. Most kids my age have a certain skill or a sport they excel in, but not me. At least not in the traditional sense. I can't dance, I'm not a great cook, and there is no athletic scholarship awaiting me in my future; but what I can do is something far more unique. My talent, if it can truly be labeled as such, is one that both fascinates me and frightens me all at once. I've found that placing my hands over a cherished item or possession belonging to someone else will reveal to me when and how the owner of that item will die.

My friends don't know this about me, nor do my parents or siblings. They wouldn't understand or take me seriously. My grandfather had assured me of this fact before his passing. He could see things too, and he taught me how to properly focus and hone my ability. My grandfather had known he was gifted from a young age and he had suspected that I might have inherited this gift as well. I remember him asking me to touch various items around his house and asking me about what I saw. It took me a while to fully indulge in the idea, but he turned out to be right about me.

During the last summer I spent with him, I knew the exact day that he'd be having his heart attack. He wasn't scared. He had known about what was coming for him for longer than I had and he had made his peace with it. Once a premonition has been witnessed, he told me, there is no way to alter it. I still have his silver ring that he gave me to practice with from that summer. I've gotten better at this gift over time, but it's not something I can really show people in my day-to-day life. Luckily for me, if there is one day out of the year I can use this power and not be ridiculed or labeled as insane, it is today. All Hallows' Eve.

An assortment of different materials and supplies cover my bedroom as I work feverishly on my costume for tonight. I skipped school today to work on it, like any high school senior would do when Halloween lands on a Friday, and I'm just about finished. My witch's outfit is all stitched up and the last-minute additions to my broomstick are coming along nicely. After a few more bristles have been removed and a light coating of spray paint has been applied along the handle and the broom head, I'll have the burnt and decrepit look I'm after. As far as handmade costumes are concerned, I'm pretty pleased with how everything has turned out.

Well, almost everything. I did have to buy my own witch's hat from a party store. The instructions I found on Google were way too complicated for me to attempt. I may be crafty with my hands, but not so much with a needle.

It's nearing late afternoon and Michelle's party will be starting in a few hours. Her parents are out of town for the weekend and Michelle only lives a few houses away from me at the top of the street. The party won't be anything big, but it'll be a good excuse for me to get out of my parent's house and not get stuck passing out candy. Plus, if I decide to read anyone's future tonight, it'll be a lot easier to play off what I'm doing as a gag in front of a small group of people, rather than having to explain myself to half of the high school.

That's part of the beauty of today. My gift doesn't make me feel like an outcast during the Halloween season. For however short-lived that time period may be, I don't have to pretend to be normal. There's less of a looming sense of guilt and responsibility in having foresight over the deaths of others whenever death is so widely celebrated by the people around me.

Choreographed screams wail from the TV set in my room as *A Nightmare on Elm Street* returns from an ad break. I don't even flinch as the actor is disemboweled onscreen. The movie is simply background noise for me while I work. Loads of old slasher movies from the seventies and eighties have been added to streaming this month, and at this point, I've nearly seen them all. My family, unfortunately, has probably heard them all, too. I grab the remote and

quickly lower the volume. Dad is working in the home office today, and I don't need him walking in here again to tell me I'm being too loud. If mom didn't have to go into the office today, she'd probably tell me the same, but she'd also probably give me some pointers on my outfit. I'll have to make the final decisions on my own. I take a step back from my costume and examine it one final time.

The black robe in front of me is soft to the touch. There isn't anything elaborate about it, but I've threaded a pale-yellow trim along the neckline for character. The rest of my appearance will be marked with more subtle flair. A pair of black plug earrings, a costume jewelry pearl necklace, and a special effects makeup kit await me on my nightstand. The pearl necklace still needs some flecks of red paint flung across it, but otherwise, I'm basically good to go. I stare at the necklace for a moment and imagine how it would look beneath various patterns of fake blood. As I try to make up my mind, another darker and more morbid thought surfaces.

The necklace isn't mine, not originally. Summer gave it to me a few weeks ago when I was trying to decide on what to be for Halloween. It was cute, in a younger sister sort of way, and I really couldn't say no to her. An eight-year-old who doesn't yet hate her older sister isn't something to take for granted. I swore after my grandfather had passed that I wouldn't use my gift on other family members, but in less than a year I'll be on my own. I'll have left my parent's house for state college by then and Summer will be growing up without me. I won't be able to keep an eye on her forever, and given her age, I'm not too worried about what the necklace might tell me. I debate whether or not to go through with the plan, but Summer still has her whole life ahead of her. Besides, it's Halloween. It's the one time of year where everyone likes to be a little scared.

Trick or treat.

I gather the necklace in my hand and begin to concentrate. My eyes close and I block out everything else around me. The lights, the TV, and my costume no longer exist. I can't see or hear any of them anymore. There is only myself and the necklace.

The colors are the first thing that my mind picks up on. Whenever a premonition occurs, it isn't like most people would imagine. There's no cinematic stream of consciousness that plays inside of my head. There are no angelic or demonic voices that whisper fate's intentions into my ear. Instead, the colors inform me of the immediacy of one's death.

When death is nearest, my vision becomes clouded by a deep shade of red. The red aura indicates that the person it is associated with will not live to see another day. For this reason, it is very rare to see a red aura during a reading, but I can still vividly recall the swirling red aura I got on the day my grandfather had his heart attack. It pulsed and flashed like a giant thunderhead of fury and pain behind my eyes. It's not pleasant to think about, much less to witness, and is the mark of finality.

The other colors that may appear during a reading all depict a much broader timeline of life expectancy. Green auras indicate that a subject still has over half of their life to live and are facing no immediate danger. Yellow auras denote that a subject is in the second half of their life, but nearing closer to death. An orange aura will appear if a subject has less than five years to live, and a fuzzy white aura arises for subjects who are entering into the final year of their life.

As for how each individual dies, that knowledge is simply bestowed upon me after the color of the aura is revealed. There's nothing that alerts me to this information or any sensation that lets me know it has arrived. It's just there; tucked away in the back of my mind like some long-forgotten memory I've repressed. That's just the way it is. Some objects and people are easier to get reads on than others, but the process never changes. Not for me. Not for my grandfather. Not for Summer.

My hand closes tightly around the necklace as the darkness behind my eyes begins to shift. The aura's presence washes over me. I continue to focus but the green imagery that I had expected to see never follows. Instead, my mind is enveloped inside of a dense crimson haze. Its textures are thick and oppressive as it pulses like an open wound. My jaw quivers at the sight of it and my breathing quickens into short and heavy bursts. There's nothing that I can do or say to change this. Right now, I'm unable to say much of anything. I'm paralyzed with grief and the knowledge of the unfair cruelties awaiting Summer. I finally open my eyes when I hear a voice coming from the doorway of my room.

"Marissa?" Summer addresses me with a whimper.

"Hey Summ," I reply, trying to compose myself before turning to face her.

"You already know. Don't you?"

"What?" I turn while trying not to sob. "Summer, what are you talking about?"

"The necklace," she answers quietly. "You have to know because you're holding it and you're crying. I'm sorry, Marissa."

“Summer, don’t be sorry. It’s—”

“You can’t use the necklace tonight. It’s not really mine and I have to give it back.”

“Give it back?” I gasp as my thoughts begin to spiral. “Summer, whose necklace is this?”

“Mom’s,” she pouts, embarrassed. “I just wanted to give you something cool. I thought you would think that all my stuff was lame. Promise you’re not mad?”

“I’m not mad,” I tell her as she begins to cry. “I promise.”

“I have to put it back in her room before she gets home. Dad told me the necklace isn’t fake and that I shouldn’t touch other people’s things.”

I give Summer the necklace and hug her tightly as I search for the right words to say. It’s too difficult to think clearly anymore, but I tell her everything is going to be okay. I can’t tell if she believes me or not, but it’s enough to get her to stop crying. I tell her to go and put the necklace back in mom’s room as I walk downstairs towards the front door. My legs feel weak and wobble beneath me. Summer stands at the top of the stairs and watches me as I leave.

“Where are you going?” she asks nervously.

“I just have to go outside and make a phone call,” I say, forcing a smile. “Michelle’s party is going to start soon and I need to ask her if she needs me to bring anything.”

“You’re mad because I ruined your Halloween costume,” she moans. “I ruined everything.”

“You didn’t, Summer. I promise. I’ll be right back.”

I exit out the front door and softly close it behind me. If I have to look at Summer’s face for another second, then I’ll start to cry too. I pull my cell phone from my pocket and dial mom’s number as I walk out towards the edge of the driveway. I know that she won’t pick up, but I’m hoping that she might still get to hear the voicemail that I leave for her. Michelle’s party will be starting soon and I know that mom will be working late. I just want to tell her that I’m going out for the evening and that I wish she was here.

About the Author:

Jeff Presto is an author from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He’s a lifelong fan of all things horror, but also enjoys mountain biking and a good cup of coffee. His favorite authors include Chuck Palahniuk, Bret Easton Ellis, and Ray Bradbury.

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Halloween Doctors | P.S. Traum

“Are you sure we should be playing doctor?”

Greg pulled down his Mad-Scientist mask.

“Sure, just don’t tell Mom, she’ll probably freak out.”

“Yeah, you think? Ooh...that feels weird...” Marcia giggled.

“Yeah...I didn’t think it would feel so...slimy?”

“Well, I am a pixie after all.”

“Yeah...I guess pixies have different parts.”

“Different, uh...anatomy...they, uh...aaaaaa...”

She wasn’t moving or talking. Greg held his sister’s spleen. Well, so he assumed. He didn’t really know anatomy. He had already removed a ...kidney?

“Marcia? Wake up. Your turn to be doctor. Marcia? Marcia?”

About the Author:

P.S. Traum is a lifelong horror fan and a newer horror author with a range of styles who has had short stories and poems published in several small press genre publications. Traum eschews publicity in the hopes the storylines and characters get all the attention without preconceived perceptions of external context.

Amazon Author Page: [P.S. Traum](#)

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*A wild mix of body, supernatural, and
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Trouble in Paradise City | James Pack

The rain pounded the tin roof morphing into a hum and mixed with the rushing flood water in the street. Fabricio watched the runoff. He hated living in São Paulo's slums, but today he was grateful his home wasn't flooded like so many others.

"Fabricio! Staring at the rain won't make it go away. Get back over here and help me go through these boxes."

"Yes, Mama."

"Being stuck inside doesn't mean we can't work."

"Yes, Mama."

"Can you put this one on the table? It's too heavy for me."

"Yes, Mama."

Fabricio's mother opened and sorted each box she could reach in the room. Fabricio moved the heavy boxes and the ones too high for his mother to reach. Their home with low ceilings looked like it was made just for his mother. Fabricio could reach up and touch the ceiling with no effort. No shelf or corner was too high for him. He never felt comfortable watching his mother stand on things to dust. He always offered to dust for her but would never tell her how much he hated it. He didn't mind the burden if it kept his mother safe. "Where's the trash box, Mama?"

"This one, my angel. What are you throwing out?"

"Old school papers. When I practiced my letters."

"We still have those? This is why I wanted to go through this room. There's too much junk here."

"If there's too much junk, why do we have to sort through each box?"

"Because we might find something we forgot about and don't want to lose."

"Like what?"

"Like all these birthday cards you and your sister made me when you were little. That's such a cute drawing of our family. I wish your sister had gotten that scholarship to art school. Maybe she would've found a smarter husband."

"Adrianna loves Marco. He's a good guy and he treats her right. So what if he's not smart. I'm not that smart either."

"Don't put yourself down like that. You are smart. And so much more handsome than Marco."

"Stop, Mama."

Fabricio's mother screamed and fell over after a loud thunderclap.

"Oh my God!"

"Mama! Mama, are you okay?"

Fabricio ran to help her up and she cracked with laughter.

"I'm so embarrassed! Don't tell anyone this happened!"

"I'm telling everyone Mama is a scaredy cat."

"You better not!"

"Oh my God!"

"Don't mock me! Go get those boxes and stop making fun of me."

"Yes, Mama."

They kept giggling but didn't say much. A half-hour passed and they still had many boxes left. The rain hadn't stopped, and the streets were still flooded. Fabricio's mother yawned. "I think I'll get lunch ready. Come, my angel. Let's take a break and rest."

"I'll go through one more box while you make lunch. I'll rest when the food is ready."

"You're such a hard worker. I'm the luckiest mother in the world. Be careful and I'll come get you when it's time to eat."

"Okay, Mama."

Fabricio opened a new box revealing toys and board games. On top was a medieval battle game. He remembered playing this with his sister when they were young. A neighbor gave it to them. His mother always said she thought the board game was stolen. She told them every time they played the game, and they played it every day.

"Maybe Adrianna and Marco will want this if they have kids."

He took out another board game labeled *Bot*, but he couldn't remember playing it. There were a few of his sister's old *Susi* dolls and some bobblehead football figures. He saw other toys

and stuffed animals he vaguely remembered. Near the bottom in the corner of the box was a stuffed toy capybara. It was a light brown water hog. Fabricio stared at it for a moment. A flash of memory came to him. Someone gave him this toy when he was a baby still in a crib. He couldn't see the person's face. It wasn't his mother. It looked like a man. He held it in his hands. It was light and soft. In his memory, the water hog was as big as him, but now it wasn't much bigger than his forearm.

"Fabri! Time to eat!"

His mother's voice startled him, and he dropped the stuffed animal in the box. "Why are you yelling, Mama?"

"Did I scare you? Good."

"Is this because I made fun of you for getting scared of the thunder?"

"Yes. You shouldn't make fun of your mother."

She froze. She stared at the box in front of Fabricio.

"Mama? What's wrong?"

"Do you remember that stuffed animal?"

"A little. I was a baby, but I don't know who gave it to me."

"Your, um. Your father...gave it to you."

"Mama?"

She cleared her throat.

"I made sandwiches. Let's sit at the table."

Fabricio followed her, leaving the stuffed animal in the box. His mother sat down and stared at her sandwich. She wiped a tear from her face and cleared her throat again. She took a small bite from the sandwich and returned it to the plate.

"Mama? You've never talked about him before. You okay?"

"Yes, my angel. I'm okay. How much do you remember about your father?" "I don't know. I never think about it."

"It's better that way. He left us a long time ago and I don't want to think about painful memories."

"You mean he died?"

"I hope the bastard died. Oh, I'm sorry Fabri, but the man was a drunk. A violent drunk. The day he left was one of the happiest days of my life. The other two were when you and your sister were born. Now eat up. We need our strength to tackle that mess of a room."

"Yes, Mama."

They didn't talk much while they ate. The rain hum on the tin roof continued. Fabricio barely noticed the noise anymore. He looked out the window. The streets were still flooded. He watched a bike float away and felt bad for whoever lost it. His mother yawned. "Oh my, this rain is making me sleepy."

"You should get some rest, Mama. I'll keep going through boxes."

"I won't leave you to fight that mess alone."

"Then take a short nap. I'll wake you up in 20 or 30 minutes."

"Okay, but you better wake me."

"Yes, Mama. Come on, I'll tuck you in."

"Oh stop. You're sweet but I don't need to be tucked in for a quick nap."

"Okay, Mama."

She shut the door to her room. Fabricio stood a moment not thinking about anything. His mother's voice came muffled through the door.

"Fabri, clear the table please."

"Yes, Mama."

"Thank you, my angel."

He busied himself rinsing dishes in the sink. He wiped off the table and swept up the breadcrumbs. He wiped his hands on his pants and returned to the room full of boxes. Toys dotted the floor. The box they were in sat empty. His eyebrows scrunched together.

"Did I leave them like this? I thought I left them in the box. Where's that stuffed toy?" He scanned the whole room but didn't see the water hog. A noise on the far end of the room startled him. Something hit a box in the corner.

He walked over. Nothing was there. He heard the noise again. Something was between the wall and the box. He slowly peered over. A gray tabby cat laid on the floor eating a bug. Its tail casually swayed. It hadn't noticed Fabricio.

"Where did you come from?"

The cat hissed.

"Calm down. I'll let you stay only because it's raining. I'll leave you alone if you leave me alone, okay?"

The cat stared at him, its chest moving up and down.

"Okay."

He returned to the toys on the floor. Another box had fallen over spilling its contents. He looked behind the box with the cat. It was still there watching him.

"You bring a friend with you?"

He picked up the box and set it upright. It held baby things, blankets, bottles, and towels. "I guess it could have fell over by itself, but I never heard it fall. So weird. Maybe we should save this box for Adrianna too. I'll ask Mama later."

He set the box of baby things aside then started picking up the toys. He saw the stuffed water hog inside the box. His eyebrows scrunched together.

"I know that wasn't there a minute ago. Was it on top of the baby box and then fell in here? But I didn't see it on the box earlier. I must be tired too. Maybe I should take a nap." He rubbed his face, left the room, and sat on the couch. He closed his eyes and laid his head back.

"Lazy ass!" a voice said.

Fabricio looked up at the front door. No one was there. He looked at all the windows. All were closed.

"What the f..."

"Down here, brat."

The stuffed water hog sat on the table by the couch.

"How the hell..."

"Shut up."

Fabricio backed up to the other end of the couch. He stared at the stuffed toy with wide eyes. He searched the room, but he was alone. The water hog walked across the table towards him. He screamed.

"Keep it down, brat. You'll wake your mother."

"What are you? The Devil? I ain't done nothing bad, okay?"

"Shut up! I ain't the Devil. And stop yelling at me."

"What do you want?"

"Just to talk."

"How do you even know how to talk? How can you move?"

"That's not important right now."

"It's pretty damn important to me right now."

"Shut up, brat. Shut up and listen."

Fabricio sat there, his chest moving up and down.

"Good. We were having fun until your lazy ass came out here to take a nap. You mean like you and that cat?"

"What? No. You and me. I was moving stuff around."

"You think freaking me out is fun?"

"Oh, I'm just getting started. You and me are gonna have a great time."

"What about the cat?"

"Forget the damn cat. I got big plans for you."

"Like what?"

"Like punishing you."

"What?"

"I'm Cezar. I'm here to punish you."

Fabricio laughed.

"Bullshit. You're just a toy. What are you gonna do?"

They stared at each other. Cezar lifted one of his stuffed paws. He jumped and slashed at Fabricio's ankle, scratching the skin. Fabricio kicked the water hog away and leapt off the couch. He turned and Cezar was gone. He looked at his ankle. The skin was red, but he wasn't bleeding. The air made the scratched skin sting. He scanned the room again but didn't see any sign of Cezar. He tried to listen for any noises but couldn't hear anything over the hum of the rain. He moved toward the couch with slow, careful steps. He stopped and looked at the door to his

mother's bedroom. It was still closed. He let out a long breath. The gray tabby cat stood frozen at the door to the room with all the boxes. The cat and Fabricio stared at each other. The cat looked toward the open window over the kitchen sink then back at Fabricio. Fabricio didn't move. The cat ran to the window and disappeared. Fabricio returned his focus to the couch. Remaining some distance away he knelt down on the floor and looked underneath the couch. Nothing was there. He stood scanning the rest of the room.

"Gotcha!"

Cezar leapt onto Fabricio's back digging claws and teeth into his right shoulder. Fabricio screamed and strained to pull Cezar off with both hands. There was brief relief when he pulled the stuffed toy free from his skin. He threw the water hog across the room smashing into dishes on the kitchen counter. Fabricio held his shoulder. The wound was

small but it stung and throbbed. He glanced at the bedroom door. Breaking glass stole his attention. The water hog held broken glass in its paw.

“Let’s go, brat. Unless you’re still a little bitch.”

“What?”

“Don’t be a bitch and fight me.”

Fabricio pulled a memory from deep inside himself. He knew it was his memory but couldn’t remember the details surrounding it. It was only one brief moment.

He sees a man with his mother. They’re arguing.

“I don’t give a shit,” the man says.

“It’s good for him. It’s a way for him to make friends.”

“My son ain’t gonna grow up to be no bitch.”

“He won’t.”

The man turns to Fabricio.

“Is that what you want? You wanna be a little bitch? Or you wanna be a real man like your papa?”

“Don’t talk to him like that. He’s only four.”

“Shut up!”

The man slaps Fabricio’s mother.

“This is my house, and you do what I say.”

The man takes a drink from a bottle on the table. Fabricio’s mother sinks to the floor holding her cheek. Her eyes are watering.

Fabricio returned to the present when he noticed he was breathing fast.

“Let’s go, little bitch.” Cezar said.

“Shut up!”

The water hog jumped off the counter. Fabricio picked up a chair and swung it like a baseball bat. Cezar caught himself on the chair. Fabricio slammed the chair onto the floor. It broke apart. Cezar still held the piece of glass. There were sounds behind the bedroom door. “Fabri, what’s going on?” His mother said.

Cezar looked at the door. Still holding a piece of the broken chair, Fabricio ran to the bedroom door as it opened.

“Mama, go back inside and push the dresser in front of the door.”

“What? What is going on?”

“It’s not safe, Mama!”

“Why are you bleeding?”

Fabricio handed his mother the broken piece of chair as the water hog jumped up. Cezar was on Fabricio’s left shoulder pushing the glass deeper. Fabricio screamed. His mother screamed. The stuffed toy screamed. The glass was deep. Fabricio couldn’t move his left arm. With one fast motion, Cezar pulled out the glass and cut Fabricio’s neck. Blood squirted out in intervals and Fabricio dropped to the floor. He held his neck with his right hand trying to stop the bleeding. Fabricio’s mother was screaming. He heard things banging around in the room. “I told you; you would turn him into a little bitch!” Cezar said.

Fabricio tried to move but everything felt numb. He heard his mother scream. The scream faded and then he heard a gurgling sound. He told his body to move but it didn’t listen. His vision fell out of focus. He saw a brown and red blur crawl past the bedroom door. Fabricio’s eyelids defied him and fell closed.

About the Author:

James Pack is a member of Horror Writers Association and has published several collections of poetry and short fiction. Learn more about James and his collected works on his personal blog. He lives in Tucson, AZ.

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Killer Clown for Halloween | *Benjamin Kardos*

I have always been terrified of clowns. It is my primal fear of those horrible creatures that has prevented me from ever attending a circus, county fair, rodeo, carnival, parade, or any event where there is even the slightest chance a clown might be present. As a child I never went trick or treating for fear of meeting another kid dressed as a clown. It was safer to hide in my bedroom than risk an encounter with the creature of my nightmares. As the years went on and I entered high school, I hoped that my fear of clowns would dissipate along with my childhood. If nothing, the fear grew stronger. Throughout high school I kept my coulrophobia close to my heart, never speaking of it in order to avoid the inevitable judgment and jokes that I knew would accompany confessing to it.

My hometown was Bishop's Falls, a rural town of 3,000 people located in Eastern Washington just a few miles from the Idaho border. My high school was not large; the student body was made up of just a few hundred students. My own senior class contained a grand total of 75 students. Halloween was a huge event at my school and it was tradition for the senior class to organize and host the festivities each year. During a senior student council meeting it was decided that our class would transform our school into the largest and most frightening haunted house in the history of Bishop's Falls. Several meetings were held during which the arrangements were made. Over a large map of the school, the event organizers sketched out the routes through the school our visitors would travel and the themes of each room they would pass along the way. Our haunted house would include a murder room full of dead, blood-spattered corpses and an escape room full of monsters. The gymnasium would be transformed into a winding labyrinth using wrestling mats propped up on edge to create a confusing network of passages and dead ends. A list of cast and characters was composed and emailed to the entirety of the senior class, asking which role we wanted to play on Halloween night. In addition to prop engineers and extras, the monster characters included vampires, werewolves, witches, goblins and devils, specters, zombies, and a deranged killer clown.

Reading the email, I felt a shiver travel up my spine just seeing the word CLOWN. My throat tightened and my chest constricted and for a moment I considered sending an email back saying that I didn't plan to participate, but I knew to do so would cause my classmates to question why. The last thing I wanted to do was explain my fear of being in the school with a psychotic clown, even if it was just one of my classmates in costume. As I sat there staring at the email list it occurred to me; the only way to avoid being in a haunted house with a deranged killer clown was to BE the killer clown. I put my name in for the part and pressed SEND.

The senior class council didn't lie in its desire to make this haunted house an event to remember. They took out an ad in the local paper, plastered flyers in every business window in town, and did a promotional on-air interview on one of the regional radio stations. In the days leading up to the event my class adorned the school halls with cobwebs and jack o' lanterns, skeletons and ghosts constructed from white sheets.

The evening of the event we arrived at the school, met in homeroom, and dressed as our chosen characters using costumes borrowed from the theater department. In the space of an hour we were transformed from teenage students into hideous monsters.

I recognized my costume right away where it hung on the costume rack, frilly and colorful. I pulled it off the hanger and stared at it, unable to stifle a shiver as I looked at it. The full body outfit was covered in cartoonish polka dots and the neck was lined with a ruffled collar. It felt silly and foolish, but even just looking at the clown costume made my pulse quicken. As far as I was concerned, putting on a clown costume was the equivalent of trying on Jeffrey Dahmer's glasses.

Overriding my feelings, I dressed in the colorful clown outfit. Once dressed, I was led to a chair where a girl named Nicole played the role of makeup artist. Nicole painted my face white, black, and deep red around my mouth. Under the wet bristles of the brush, I closed my eyes, feeling as she transformed my face into the image of my greatest fear. Once done she stood back and admired her work.

"Oh my god, you look so good, so freakin' scary," she said. She grabbed a hand mirror from a nearby table. "Wanna see?" she asked.

"No," I said, turning my head away from the mirror. She jerked her head back in surprise at my laconic answer. "I'm mean, maybe later. I want to be surprised," I added. She nodded, mercifully accepting my senseless answer.

I stood up from my chair and opened and closed my mouth, feeling the paint drying on my skin. I then put on a wig and a red foam nose. Nicole handed me a plastic axe, my prop for the night. As I wandered around observing the other costumes my classmates commented on my getup.

"Dude! You look so creepy."

"You're gonna make people piss their pants."

“Nicole did an awesome job on you, man.”

I took their word for it. I felt a small satisfaction knowing how effective my costume was, but I felt even better knowing I would never have to see for myself.

It was time for the haunted house to open. Outside the front doors waited a long line of community members, ready for some scary Halloween fun. We took our positions around the school. A soundtrack of blood chilling screams, wolf howls, and creaking doors played over the school PA system. I was very nervous and with just a few minutes before the first group of guests was to be let in the school I excused myself to the bathroom. I quickly used the toilet, and washed my hands, making the horrible, absent-minded mistake of glancing in the mirror above the sink.

What I saw was something that shook me to my core. The blood froze in my veins as I stared into the face of the most hideous clown I'd ever seen. Blood flowed down its massive mouth, its skin was ghostly white, but the most frightening thing was that its wild eyes were the same color as mine. I took a sharp intake of air as I backed away from the monster, my vision tunneling. My stomach did flips as the plastic axe dropped from my fingers. I held back vomit as I felt myself sliding down the wall to the bathroom floor. I don't know exactly how long I sat there but from my position on the tiles I slowly recovered from the shock of what I'd witnessed in that mirror. I stood up and scooped up the axe, careful to avoid making the mistake of looking in the mirror again. As foolish as I felt, I was thankful that it happened privately in the bathroom rather than publicly under the judgmental eye of my peers. I left the bathroom and walked down the hall. No doubt, my costume was terrifying.

I was positioned at the far end of the school in a dark corner behind a thick wall of white cobwebs dotted with large plastic spiders. I was the last of the monsters our guests would encounter that night. The exit door was 20 feet away, shrouded in black and orange crape paper moving slowly in the breeze of a box fan. I gripped my axe tightly, waiting anxiously for the first of our guests to pass through. Down the hall the werewolf howled and the witch cackled. I heard screams and laughter echo down the hall as my classmates scared the bejesus out of our visitors. Clearly, our haunted house was a success. After waiting for several long minutes, I heard footsteps as the first group cautiously made their way towards my dark corner. I braced myself to lunge, determined to give them the same scare I experienced myself earlier in the bathroom mirror. The small group of girls walked towards me, holding hands with each other nervously. Their eyes jumped back and forth, anticipating the next scare. I jumped out at them with a high-pitched scream, brandishing my axe.

They passed by without a sound.

I followed them for a few steps and screamed again. They laughed when they saw the exit, speeding up to reach it. Dumbly, I stood in the middle of the hall staring as the girls pushed through the doors, heading outside.

“What did you think?” one of the girls said as they left.

“Pretty scary,” another said.

“The ending was sort of lame,” said the third.

“The axe was kinda cool,” said the first.

Perplexed by their indifference, I retreated to my position wondering what I had done wrong.

As the next group walked by I was determined to perform better. I jumped out again with a louder scream, thrusting my terrifying painted face into theirs.

Not so much as a wince from any of them.

A group of boys walked by. I howled demonically, bringing my axe down as if intending to strike them dead.

“Nice axe,” one of them said casually.

“Neat effects,” said another.

I almost revealed myself to them, but refrained from doing so. Considering how unafraid they found me, I didn't want them to know it was me giving this pathetic performance.

The night continued much the same. I listened as my class successfully evoked screams from our visitors. As the night wore on I grew increasingly frustrated. My throat was raw from my ineffectual screaming. As the visitors apathetically brushed past me I was tempted to ask them what I was doing wrong. Was I the only kid in town scared of clowns? Perhaps my costume wasn't really that scary. Perhaps my classmates were just putting me on, telling me it was scary when it really wasn't.

By the end of the event my confidence was shattered. I stopped trying to scare anyone; I let the visitors walk by as I sulked behind my cobwebs, waiting for the night to end.

When the hallway lights flickered on, indicating the end of the festivities, I trudged to the bathroom, disgusted and embarrassed by my pitiful act. What was even more embarrassing was the fact that the only person I'd successfully frightened that night was myself.

I pushed open the bathroom door to discover something more terrifying than anything I'd ever seen before. A body, dressed in a clown outfit, face painted white, black, and red, was splayed out awkwardly on the tile. Wide eyed, I stared down at the still figure. Confused and frightened, I backed away. As I did I gazed up into the bathroom mirror to make another terrifying discovery.

I had no reflection.

I raised my hands to my face, still holding the plastic axe in a tight fist. In the mirror I watched as the axe appeared to rise and fall on its own, floating. I then remembered the words of the visitors as they passed by me.

The axe was kind of cool.

Nice axe.

Neat effects.

Comments on the axe, not me. As if I wasn't even there.

I waited for the panic to set in, for my heart to start beating wildly. But no quickening pulse came. I touched my chest but felt no heartbeat, heard no breathing. In that terrifying moment I realized; the body on the bathroom floor was mine. No wonder nobody reacted to me, after all, it's difficult to react to a monster you can't see. As far as our haunted house visitors were concerned the grand finale of the haunted house was a floating axe; *neat effects*.

With nothing else to do, I ran from the bathroom screaming. No one saw me in my fear, no one heard my silent screams.

I have always been terrified of clowns. But never would I have expected to scare myself to death by becoming one. What's worse, as a wandering spirit, I have no choice but to wear this damned killer clown costume forever.

About the Author:

Benjamin Kardos is a musician and writer from Washington state. His short stories have been published by PsychoToxin Press, Wicked Shadow Press, Otherwise Engaged Literature and Arts Journal, CultureCult Magazine, Friday Flash Fiction and others. He hosts the YouTube channel Reading Monstrosities, a channel dedicated to the discussion and review of transgressive and horror literature.

YouTube Channel: [Reading Monstrosities](#)

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Not Another Zombie Story | Ryan Benson

Duane sat at his laptop. "I'm sick of zombies." He pecked the keys. "Hate them." The walking undead populated pop culture and dominated the news, novels, movies, television, and video games.

Guess the living dead are on everyone's mind. A smile crept over his face before he typed, 'In the Zeitgeist'. Pick everyone's pocket by reading everyone's mind. *Monetization.*

What started this craze? Poisoning the environment? Consumer culture?

Leaning back in his chair, Duane cracked his knuckles. *I need fresh air.*

A peek out the boarded up window revealed a dozen ambling corpses. *Damn. I miss complaining about the weather.*

About the Author:

Ryan Benson (he/him) resides outside of Atlanta, GA, USA with his wife and children. Ryan keeps busy writing short fiction stories and his first novel. *The Sirens Call Publications*, *Night Terrors Vol. 1* (Scare Street), *On Spec Magazine*, *Trembling With Fear* (Horror Tree), and *TERSE Journal* have published his work.

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“It’ll be a once in a lifetime thing. The ultimate sensory experience.” Charles bounces on the sofa like an over-excited puppy. “I’m only the third critic to be invited to review *The Götterdämmerung*. It’s such an honour.”

Genevieve is less enthusiastic. Everybody is talking about the latest dining sensation, but nobody she knows has eaten there. If she’s honest, the initial euphoria of dating a famous restaurant critic has begun to pall. Her palate is weary of the weird and wonderful concoctions of celebrity chefs vying to outdo each other. She’s had some delicious meals that she could never have afforded on her teacher’s salary, but the pompous commentary that accompanies each course is a side dish she can do without.

She would never tell Charles, but on nights they don’t see each other, she revels in a plate of egg and chips or a fish finger sandwich in front of the TV.

“But you’re always telling me to eat with my eyes,” Genevieve says. “How can I do that in pitch darkness?”

“That’s the whole point. You won’t know what to expect. You use your other senses – taste, smell, hearing and touch – to appreciate the subtleties of the food.”

“Touch?” she asks dubiously.

“Absolutely! No cutlery, hands and mouths only. Don’t dress up – it could get messy.”

As the heavy door closes behind her, Genevieve feels entombed. She lets out a squeak of alarm as a waiter – she assumes it’s a waiter – puts his hands on her shoulders and guides her to the padded booth where Charles is already seated.

“You look nice,” he says, then guffaws at his own feeble joke.

“Will they read the menu out to us?” she wonders.

“A place like this doesn’t have a menu. The chef will select the dishes for us.”

“But I like to know what I’m eating,” Genevieve knows she sounds petulant, but doesn’t care. She already hates this place.

“Trust me,” he says. “I will taste everything, identify the main ingredients and then tell you what it is.”

The waiter silently places plates in front of them. Genevieve traces the rim with her fingertips then tentatively pokes a finger into the centre, where a thin metal skewer nestles on a leaf of some kind.

“Ow!” Charles lets out a yell of pain. “I stabbed my cheek with the wretched skewer. An inch higher and I’d have had my eye out. Am I bleeding?”

“How would I know?” she asks reasonably. “What is it, then?”

She tries to block out the sound of his appreciative chewing and lip smacking.

“Chicken liver,” he declares eventually, “in a smoky chipotle marinade. I’ll have yours if you don’t want it. Just be careful handing it over.”

“No, I want to try it.” She feels carefully for the small morsel, slides it free with her fingers and pops it onto her tongue. It is delicious, but it’s too dense and chewy to be chicken liver. More like heart, she thinks, but doesn’t say anything.

The next course is soft, coated in flour and pan-fried in butter. “Scampi,” says Charles, “delicate but under-seasoned. It needs citrus to bring out the flavour.”

Genevieve searches for a fishy taste but finds none. Sweetbreads, she decides, swiping her finger across the plate to pick up any remaining fragments.

A meaty aroma heralds the arrival of the main course. “Boeuf Bourguignon,” Charles announces without tasting it. “I’d know that smell anywhere. Going to be tricky to eat without a spoon, though.”

Genevieve discovers a basket of bread in the centre of the table and uses a roll to scoop up the rich casserole without spilling too much. Exploring the meat with her tongue, she thinks it may be veal rather than beef, because it is less coarse-grained than braising steak.

She doesn’t offer the bread to Charles. His sucking and slurping indicate the lack of implements is no barrier to his enjoyment. She pushes away the mental image of Charles with his face in the plate licking up gravy like an enthusiastic Labrador.

They agree that the next dish is pulled pork but differ over the cut. Charles says shoulder, while Genevieve stands firm on cheek. The black pudding is soft and spicy, in contrast to the crackling that crunches between their teeth.

Dessert – a sharp raspberry sorbet with a jelly sphere on the top – is somewhat disappointing, according to Charles. Sorbet shows no real culinary skill, he says, and the gelatinous globe tastes of very little. He eats Genevieve’s

jelly too, just to confirm his opinion. She doesn't mind; rolling it around in her palm, it doesn't feel like something she wants to put in her mouth. She hopes the soft pop as Charles bites down is her imagination.

"The Götterdämmerung would like to thank you for your visit and hope you enjoyed your meal." The waiter has crept up on them unawares. "The chef would be delighted if you would join him for a tour of the kitchen."

Genevieve does not share Charles's excitement. She is beginning to feel queasy and would rather not find out what she has eaten. Fortunately, the waiter settles the matter. "I'm sorry, Madame, we do not allow members of the public to go behind the scenes. A taxi is waiting to take you home."

Genevieve is relieved. She can't wait to get away from this place, and from Charles, having decided after the amuse bouche that she doesn't want to see him again. She hears him shuffle out from the booth, guided by the waiter towards the kitchen. Another member of the front-of-house staff steers her to the lobby.

She scours the papers for his review, but nothing appears. A month later a piece is published, but it's not written by Charles, whose column has been discontinued without explanation. The new critic is full of praise for The Götterdämmerung and declares the devilled kidneys the most succulent he has ever tasted.

About the Author:

Hilary Ayshford is a former science journalist and editor based in rural Kent in the UK. She writes mainly micro and flash fiction and short stories and has a penchant for the darker side of human nature.

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Bringing Home My Bride | *Epiphany Ferrell*

"Just imagine what it must have been like in its heyday," my wife says, pirouetting in what was once the foyer. "I wish we could stay here instead of the cabin."

The cabin comes with a hot tub and a porch swing and a fireplace. It's everything she said she wanted for our honeymoon. I should have known that when she saw this place, she'd want to stay here instead. I haven't told her it's been in my family for generations.

It was a beautiful house once. Everyone said so. My mother would sweep down the grand staircase, watching herself in one mirror, gauging the reactions of her guests in another. She'd all but purr. She loved to feel the eyes of her admiring guests more than she loved my father's caress.

Party nights were good nights. Until the guests left.

Then came the weeping and the arguing, and in the morning my father's arm bore bite marks and his face deep scratches, and my mother wouldn't come down at all.

The house was my mother's but when my father left, we couldn't stay there. My mother wouldn't hear of renting it out, though we needed the money. Her lifestyle had been as immodest as most of her evening gowns.

She flung herself down the stairs, declaring she'd stay in her house forever.

As far as my brother and I know, she has.

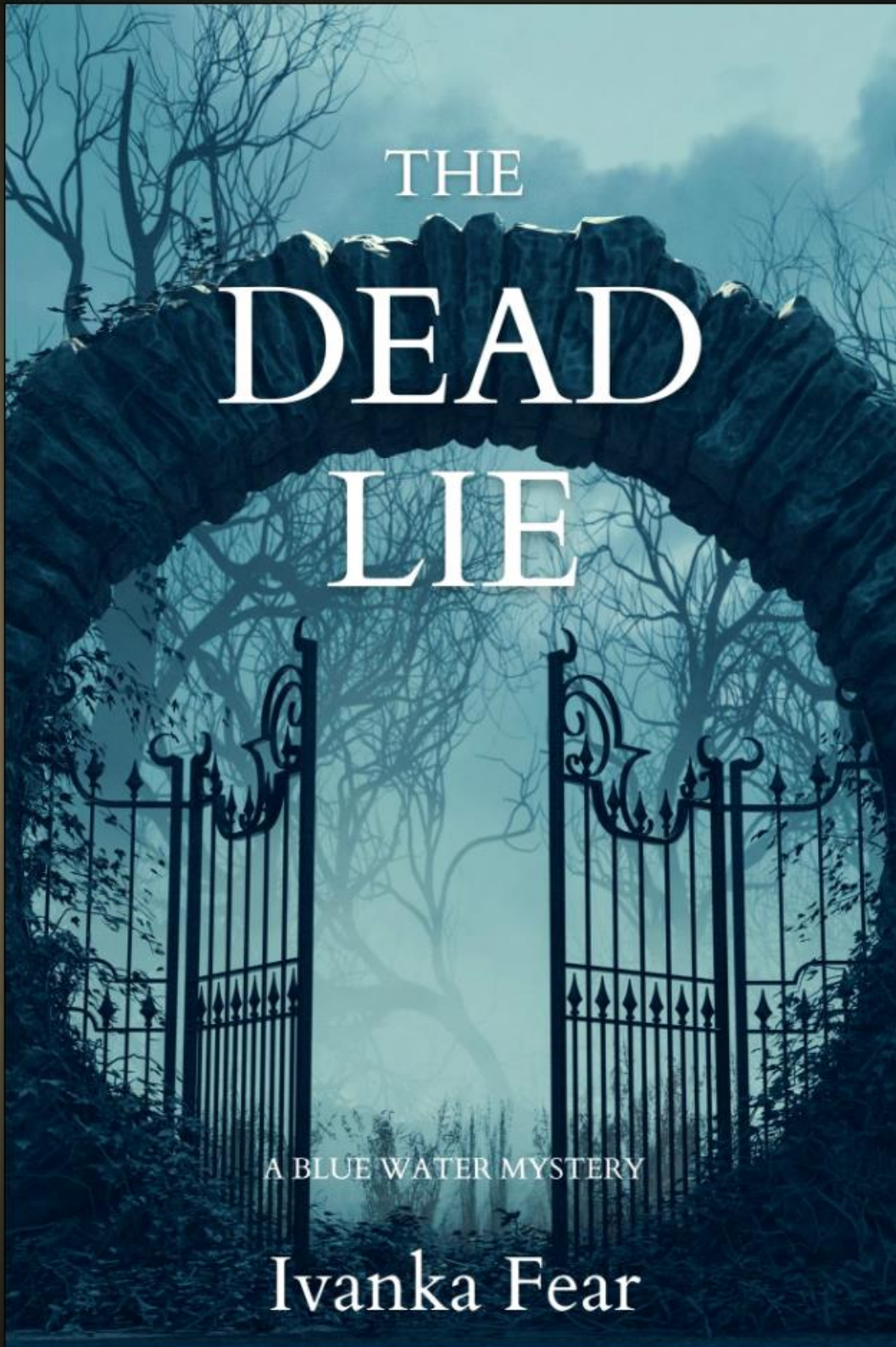
About the Author:

Epiphany Ferrell lives on the edge of the Shawnee National Forest, where she spies on creatures of the night via trail camera. Her stories appear in more than 70 journals and anthologies, including *Pulp Literature*, *Ghost Parachute*, *Best Microfiction*, and the anthology *Shakespeare Unleashed*. She is a two-time Pushcart nominee, and a Prime Number Magazine Flash Fiction Prize recipient.

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In the end, the past catches up with you.



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

Rickie Webb leaned against the tall wooden fence separating an old abandoned house (a decrepit looking clapboard eyesore that every small town in America has) from Franklin Avenue, laced his arms across his chest and grinned with delight.

He peered through the cracks between the slats in the fence and saw the three little kids trotting down the sidewalk in front of the old Langan House. He heard the sweet sound of candy wrappers shuffling inside their pillow cases which swayed with the rhythm of their gait. He imagined all of that candy sitting on a heap in the middle of his bed, glinting in the carpet of moonlight streaming into his bedroom window and licked his lips in ecstasy.

He and Delilah had been traipsing around this shitty little town for the past twenty-five minutes in search of their next prey. Ten minutes earlier, they'd stolen three candy bars from a little blond-haired boy in a Freddy Krueger costume, tore the glove of gray plastic claws from his hand and whipped him a few times until he took off with the rest of his candy. Now that these kids were coming up the street, they were looking at quite a haul.

He'd been waiting for this opportunity all day. He'd climbed out of bed this morning, grinning from ear to ear, thinking about the loot he was going to confiscate tonight.

In fact, this hadn't been the only time Rickie had ever taken what wasn't his. He'd done it all the time; if it was there it was his for the taking. As a child, he wasn't taught an iota of manners and cared for no one but himself.

He craned his right ear against the fence and listened to the sound of childish voices slowly approaching. He slid the cheap dark-green plastic Frankenstein mask over his round acne-scarred face and crept toward the edge of the fence. He peered around the side, his heart thudding with excitement, and watched the distance between them shrink with each step.

"What did you get?" said a tall ghost wearing red pants and brown boots.

A little girl in a witch's costume said, "Mister Hoffman gave me full-size candy bars."

"Misses Campbell gave me a tube of toothpaste," said a little boy dressed as a farmer.

He waited until they reached the middle of the sidewalk across from the opening in the fence, clamped his hand over his mouth and snickered. His arms held out in front of him, he gave a loud growling sound and leaped out of the darkness, landing in front of them. They flinched, their faces creasing with a mixture of terror and shock, and stopped dead in their tracks.

A trio of loud screams bellowed across the street as their bags slid from their grasp.

A large wet stain spread across the front of the farmer's coveralls. The witch tightened her tiny grip around the top of her lime-green pillowcase and spun around on her shiny black heels. When she stepped forward, a second figure appeared and gave a loud growling sound.

The girl wore a dark-blue plaid skirt, fishnet stockings, red sneakers and a pink shirt under a blue hoodie with a cheap plastic Betty Boop mask. The three kids broke out into a wild panic-stricken run, their sacks plopping onto the ground with a soft hollow thud that shook the contents inside. He waited for the kids to clear the next street before sliding his mask from his face.

"Look at those little twerps run," Rickie said.

A nearby tree branch swayed in the breeze.

"Thanks for the candy."

The girl slipped her mask off, revealing a pale heart-shaped face with a broad nose, almond-shaped green eyes and thick lips framed by neck-length dark hair. A tiny silver ring was clipped to her left nostril; four others riddled the inside curvature of her left ear. She drew a short breath, filling her lungs with gusts of sharp icy air and sighed.

A perturbed expression etched across her face. He slipped the mask off his own face and stared dumbly at her. She brushed a strand of rainbow-colored hair from her head and shook her head. "I'm suffocating in this fucking thing."

Tiny puffs of air spewed from their mouths and nostrils with each word they spoke and each breath they took. Behind her, the town of Langston, Ohio stretched out as far as the eye could see, glinting like a faint and distant light. The mixture of stucco bungalows and two-story brick and clapboard houses were neatly decorated with brightly lit jack o'lanterns, strands of orange and black lights, crepe-paper ghosts and witches and gap-toothed green faced witches; there were a few of those gaudy inflatables of the aforementioned characters.

A bright cuticle moon beamed inside the clear black sky and poured through the tree branches, spreading odd shadows across the tarmac. Bright orange leaves skittered along the streets, curbs and sidewalks; tall black-iron streetlamps cast cones of whiskey-colored light upon the street corners, pulling odd shadows across the pavement. They

sauntered past two blocks of stucco bungalows and shotgun shacks and arrived at a spacious patch of grass dimpled with gnarled oaks and thick pines. Moonlight and odd shadows spread across the property.

Delilah asked. "What are your plans for the rest of the night after we split up the candy?"

Rick slipped a watermelon Jolly Rancher into his mouth. "I haven't the slightest idea."

She flicked her gaze from a jagged crack in the sidewalk and peered at a tall oak tree standing inside the middle of an abandoned stretch of grass beside another dilapidated house. She drew a quick breath, spun around on her heels and peered across the opposite end of the street at two rows of small cozy clapboard and stucco bungalows sitting on postage-stamp lawns streaked with moonlight and odd shadows.

Leaves skittered across the street again, their withered forms outlined by the jack o' lanterns still beaming from the front porches of the houses sitting across the street. Tree branches stirred. Her cheeks flushed under the current of cold air sweeping past her.

She turned back around to where she was going and flinched. Her hand loosened from the pillowcase for a split second and then tightened back around it. She sighed.

A small kid with red pants stood in front of her, their head cocked to the right again. Her brows furrowed, she met the child's gaze and peered at him through the large tattered eyeholes.

It raised his left arm from his side and pointed his fingers toward the street. When the sheet drew back from its arm, she drew a quick breath. A bright pink plastic Dora The Explorer watch was fixed around its thin pale wrist, its tiny white hands frozen in an L formation.

She'd enjoyed this misery, basked in his suffering. They knew they shouldn't have done it but it was too late to apologize.

"Ohmigod." She said. "I'm...I didn't know that...please don't--"

Her plea was cut off by another crackling sound. The kid lowered his arm, gazed at her with cold motionless eyes and cocked his head at her one more time. Her heart thudded with a mixture of horror and dread, her skin bristled under the frigid October air.

When she felt something grazing across her left shoulder, she flinched and snatched a quick breath. She stared down, her eyes wide, and saw a thin gray tree branch sliding across the air and traced the contour of her legs.

The pillowcase slipped from her grasp and plopped onto the sidewalk beside her left foot. She heard the contents shuffle again and felt a deep ache in the center of her chest. The first branch wrapped around her ankles and lifted her three inches off the ground; the second branch cinched itself across her mouth, muffling the loud panic-stricken scream bursting from her lips.

Two more branches appeared out from the corners of her eyes. They whipped at the air and looped themselves around her wrists. Tiny flakes of gray bark peppered her tongue.

Her skin bristled with dread. Hot lucid tears brimmed in her eyes, cascaded down her cheeks and glinted in the overhead glare of moonlight. A strand of peacock-colored hair fell across her forehead just above her left eye and hung there like an unwanted apostrophe.

She tugged at her restraints, tried to tell him how sorry she was but both fear and disbelief stripped her of her voice. She blinked again, hoping that she would wake up and find herself lying in bed and feel relieved that all of this was one big stupid nightmare.

Before she could fathom the energy to fight her way free, she uttered a small muffled cry as the branches jerked her back out of the light and into the pocket of darkness between the trees. The large oak tree in the middle of the property shifted then subdued to its original stance. Moonlight broke through the clouds drifting past it, spilling across the middle of the forest and bathed the side of the massive oak tree to reveal the painful expression on her face.

She was no longer a person. She was just another twisted knot in a tree no one would ever care to pay attention to.

As a current of cold air swept across the street, sending more leaves skittering across the property, Rickie backpedaled and said, "Get the fuck away from me, kid."

The kid tilted his head to the left and slipped an arm out from underneath the sheet. There was something about the sheet that wasn't there before the last time he'd seen him. It was stained with dirt and large dried bibs of blood; the tips of his dark blue Converse were caked with large clumps of dry mud.

The kid slipped his right arm out from under the sheet, gripped the front of it and gave it a gentle tug. He released his hand and let it fall into a pile around his feet. Shafts of moonlight pouring through the curtains framed his small plump shoulders and tossed odd shadows across the floor.

Rickie clamped his right hand across his mouth. A mixture of fear and shock twisted his gut and prickled across his skin. Now he remembered the last time he'd seen those red pants.

How the hell could he have forgotten?

A sixteen-year old boy stood at the edge of Langston Quarry in a pair of red pants. His body quivering with each sob, a lucid film of snot crusted his upper lip as tiny hot tears cascaded down his face. The rock quarry behind him surrounding Lake Michelle was washed with carpets of moonlight and shadows.

"I didn't tell anyone." The boy said. "Honest. They made me tell Principal Jordan because they thought that I was going to get arrested."

"You're supposed to be our best friend," Delilah said. "and you stabbed us in the back."

"You're a fucking liar, Barnes. And now a fucking snitch, too."

"They smelled it on my clothes." He said. "I tried to take them out to the trash cans behind my house but my mother—"

"Speaking of trash." Rickie said. "I think it's time we took it out right now."

He reared his left foot back and drove it hard into the center of Barnes' chest. The impact sent Barnes doubling over, cradling his stomach in his arms and squeezed a blast of air from his lungs. He chuckled as Barnes reeled back, lost his balance and flew off the edge of the quarry.

His eyes wide with horror, his limbs flew out from his sides. He tried to grasp at the edge of the cliff but the distance was too great. Rickie and Delilah watched as the boy plunged thirty-eight stories to his death, his body consumed by the pocket of darkness lying below.

They laughed, their eyes brimming with hot lucid tears. Rickie wiped the tears from his eyes with the back of his right hand and waved to the bottom of the cliff in a cocky, arrogant manner.

Rickie blinked. His lips quivered with fear.

"No fucking way," he said. "I kicked you off that cliff and watched—"

And yet there he was standing right in front of him. His gray Miami University t-shirt and red jeans stained with dirt and crusted with blood; his eyes were glistening pools of darkness that obscured the whites around his pupils. A large bib of dried blood coated the tip of his chin and spread along the contour of his right jaw to signify what part of him had landed first before his life came to a tragic end.

Rickie's eyes glinting with horror, his mouth set in a hard line. Beads of cold sweat trickled down his brow, coated the back of his neck and secreted inside his pits.

Before Rickie could finish his plea, his throat began to swell. He snatched a quick breath and his eyes went wide. It wasn't my throat, he thought, it was the piece of candy inside my throat.

His body stiffened with dread. It squeezed his jugular vein, snatching the air from his lungs as his eyes swelled inside of his sockets. A pair of large lumps protruded from both sides of Rickie's throat. A river of small salty tears pooling in his eyes, he raised his left arm and stretched it across the room, his fingers constricting until his knuckles turned white.

He opened his mouth and sighed. His face fading to a deep purple pallor, he gave a low gut-wrenching gag and slumped onto the ground. His left arm lay slack against his left hip as his right arm lie underneath him, obscured by his plain black tee.

Barnes slipped his arms away from his chest and trotted across the sidewalk. He knelt down beside the pillowcase, slipped his right hand inside of the mound of candy inside and plucked out a mini-size Snickers. He tore off the wrapper, tossed it onto the floor beside Rickie's cold motionless body and slipped the morsel into his mouth.

He closed his eyes, chewed the tiny chocolate morsel and knew that nothing would ever come close to tasting more than revenge.

About the Author:

Brian J. Smith is the author of *Dark Avenues*, *1342 Lindley Road*, *The Tuckers*, *Consuming Darkness*, *Abbie's Wrath*, *Bad Allergies* and *Dead River*. He resides in southeastern Ohio has too many books and buys more, thinks that Valentine's Day should be replaced by Second Halloween. He can be found on Facebook under Brian Smith.

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It's Always the Jogger | *Ash Hartwell*

Ellen vaulted the little gate and powered up the incline, arms pumping, towards the children's play area. Her Nike running shoes leaving only the occasional mark in the silver blanket of early morning dew. In the grey mist, the outlines of the play equipment looked like the skeletal remains of a wrecked schooner. She crested the rise and picked up pace on the downward slope before crossing the narrow wooden bridge into the forest.

She had run this route many times before. Gnarled silver birch and green needled pine trees lined the thin track, worn smooth over the years by a stampede of runners, walkers, and mountain bikers. Even in the early light of dawn, where shapes and shadows were not always what they seem, Ellen ran with confidence. She didn't break stride as she hurdled a fallen branch, there since the first storm of winter, before straddling the frozen furrows in the dip beyond.

As the path became easier, Ellen picked up the pace again. No pain, no gain. Her lungs burned, and a dagger pierced her side with each gasping breath, condensation swirling into the surrounding mist. The damp air smelt pine fresh. She puffed her cheeks and ran on.

For Ellen, running had become a mixture of therapy and self-flagellation. It gave her time to reflect on her failed marriage, the dead-end jobs, and the demons that stalked her from town to town. But, however fast she ran, however much pain she endured, Ellen realised she would never escape the darkness.

The metallic tang of blood filled her throat as she headed deeper into the forest, the vegetation growing denser. The mist became a lingering fog from which stiff limbed branches stretched out like the hands of the dead. Ellen hadn't chosen to come this way, she had just let her legs carry her, each turn a random decision.

But Ellen knew. The scent drew her on.

The first tear crept down her cheek and she renewed her efforts, digging deep to overcome the piercing pain in her side. As she sprinted through the trees, she pleaded with herself.

Please. Please, not again.

She swung off the track and slid down the side of a steep gully oblivious of the thorns and small branches tearing at her clothes. Thick, sticky mud sucked at her trainers and coated the seat of her shorts, but she ran on. A coil of root caught her foot, rolling her ankle. Pain seared through her leg, tears obscured her vision, but she stumbled on.

Her shoulder crashed into a tree, driving the last gasps of air from her lungs. She staggered into a clearing and fell to her knees. The dismembered body of a young man lay on an old tree stump, his eyes turned towards her in an accusing stare. She'd met him in the pub the night before. She remembered leaving with him, the promise of a night unfinished.

Then the darkness came. She remembered nothing more.

About the Author:

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

Amazon Author Page: [Ash Hartwell](#)

Author Website: [The Writer's Slope](#)

Unforgiven | *Merry Marcellino*

I was sorry to end our relationship, and now he's dead. The forest where we met is darker now. No light shines through the towering multitude of limbs above. His voice echoes here, even though he's gone. Fear fills me. Like creeping tentacles stretching for me.

"You should not have left me." A whisper through the prickly thickets.

The voice, *his* voice, slithers over my skin as branches grip my throat. I claw at the bark to no avail. His face in the bark is the last thing I see as I choke my last breath.

About the Author:

Merry Marcellino lives in New Jersey in the US and works a full-time job as the Coordinator of Ministries at her church, while writing in her spare time. She enjoys reading paranormal romance and currently has self-published her first novel, *Demons and Shifters and Me. Oh My!*

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The Testimony of
HJ Pembrooke

BRENT ABELL

AVAILABLE TO PURCHASE OR BORROW ON
AMAZON

Charles X. Walshern is sweating his way across Eighth Avenue with a mob of other pedestrians. His suit feels tighter than it did when he moved to New York City that past summer, and even now, at night in October, it's still too heavy and warm.

When I get to the corner, he thinks, I'll take off the jacket. But his shirt is soaked, under his pits and *oh no*, even under his man boobs. He keeps the jacket on, hoping his super fixed the radiator in his apartment. It's been cranking out a steady 83 degrees since the end of last month. The crowd carries him up onto the curb, and he prepares himself for the human bottleneck entering the narrow sidewalk beneath construction scaffolding.

It's darker in there, and he lets himself imagine that he's back home. But no, that won't do. He'd find no pleasure in returning. His parents were happy to see him leave. They never wanted him in the first place, as best as he can figure. For thirty-eight years, they offered him nothing but indifference. Even his name was borne of inattention—*Charles*, after his father, and *X.*, not for *Xavier*, but for nothing at all, only his mother's lazy mark on the birth certificate form. If he went back, anyone from his dingy hometown who happened to remember him would enjoy his failure. No, he's stuck, as much a loser in New York as he was at home, as he would be anywhere.

He was hopeful when he left Hermon, Maine for his new accounting job. No more trailer parks, no more rude country boys in pickups. No more working all day to come home to canned soup and his parents' mumbled greetings while they watched TV. On his first day, he expected a sleek glass office building, plush carpeting, enough co-workers to offer up at least one friend. Maybe even a woman friend. But his expectations arose from the stock photos that populated the Gable & Sons website. Instead, he found himself walking up six flights to a drab, cluttered office in the middle of Manhattan's theater district, which he further discovered to be far less glamorous than he'd imagined. The district is, he thinks, as sleazy as Hermon, just lit up with gaudy lights. At least Hermon has the sense to hide.

He keeps his eyes on the person in front of him and pictures the line of people behind him doing the same. In a column they march, soldiers worn out after battle. That's how he feels, anyway, after a day spent with the younger Gable, whose sole purpose, as far as Charles can tell, is to spread constant and lavish criticism. Deeper into the dark tunnel, he imagines victory over his tormentor, conjures pride. He almost smiles. But suddenly a face, scarred and bloody, bursts out of the dark and looms before him. Charles screams.

"The *fuck*." The guy behind Charles shoves him out of his way.

Charles trips into the vacant-eyed ghoul. It grips his shoulders and releases a very human laugh. A teenager, of the same evil sort that harassed him when he was a boy, rips off his mask and shakes it at him. "Got ya, asshole!"

Charles has forgotten it's Halloween. A pumpkin has been on the office windowsill so long it's become a slightly deflated fixture—no more a sign of the holiday than the umbrella stand.

He tries a half-hearted, guess-the-joke's-on-me laugh, but it doesn't fly. Everyone nearby is laughing at him, not with him. As usual.

His eyes go watery as he gets caught up in the flow of bodies again. Before he regains control of himself, a single tear tracks a wavy course down his plump cheek.

"Don't cry." The words come from behind him.

Heat rises inside his collar, and Charles walks faster.

"What a horrid young man. Not worth your salt." A woman's voice. She is so close he can smell her. Floral and smoky.

Now the length of his back feels hot. As they walk the shadows of the covered sidewalk, he imagines a wall of heat burning between his body and hers, connecting them. He will lean back, press himself against her breasts, soft and forgiving. He will melt. She will consume him. He walks and the sensation builds.

They emerge from beneath the scaffold, into streetlights and store lights and headlights. The *DON'T WALK* sign flashes; there's time to cross. But Charles stops, and she does push against him, a brief touch before she moves to his side. She is taller than he, her dark hair pulled back, her clinging black dress low-cut and slippery looking, her pale breasts full as he imagined them. Better.

She licks her fingertip and runs it from the corner of his eye to his jaw, then licks it again. "I don't like to see a man's feelings hurt."

Charles shivers, though he still burns.

"You could use a drink, no?"

Charles isn't a drinker, but he nods. *Anything*, he thinks.

She takes his hand and leads him across Seventh Avenue.

If this is another Halloween trick, he doesn't care. He'll endure the ridicule waiting for him wherever she leads for a sliver of time with her curves and her fire, her scent, that primitive perfume. For her attention, as long as it lasts.

Some blocks ahead, they stop. The woman releases his hand to open a door, revealing a dark bar. *Look what I caught!* she'll say, when her friends come out, and they'll laugh, all of them. Charles grieves.

"What's your name?" she asks, and he tells her. "Come, Charles." Her lips tickle his ear. He follows her inside.

Beyond the bar, there are tables. An engraving decorates a dark wood podium: *The Strip House*, in gothic lettering. Charles waits beside the woman as she requests a table for two. His blood pounds. He wonders if he ought to leave. He will not leave.

It isn't quite fair to bring Charles to The Strip House without any sort of explanation. Clearly, he's terribly insecure, and his confusion only adds to his anxiety. But I can't help it. It's thrilling to watch a man squirm! That's why I chose him, after all.

Charles keeps his gaze on the floor as we walk through the dark interior, tinged red by the lighting and the velvet walls and the rich leather booths. He seems surprised when the maître d' offers us menus. He must think we're in a strip club! Delicious. He peeks around the edges of his menu, looking for a stage, I presume. He examines the leather book a while longer, then puts it aside.

"There's no show, then?" he asks.

I play the innocent. "Show? This is an ordinary restaurant." I stare into his eyes until he looks away. "You didn't think this was a—"

"No," he says. "I... Well, a co-worker mentioned a place, in the neighborhood, that has...what do you call them? A revue." His eyes dart everywhere but toward mine when he speaks. "I guess I thought this was...that place."

"It's strip as in strip *steak*," I giggle, giving him a toothy grin. "Don't worry. There won't be any naked ladies, Charles darling. Not here, anyway."

A blush creeps up his neck and colors his cheeks. He giggles too, in brief, high-pitched notes. "I know," he says. "Don't be silly."

Of course, most men wouldn't be so embarrassed by such an understandable mistake. The name of the place, the red tones, and the risqué 1920s prints displayed about the room do indicate a certain unsavory venue. But I'm not surprised. I choose the ones I bring to The Strip House for their awkwardness, the ones whose emotions control them, rather than the other way around. They're more endearing, these tender-hearts. Especially when the blood rushes to the surface of their skin. I can practically smell this fellow's embarrassment. I believe I ought to shake him up some more.

I lean forward. My décolletage is quite low, and I so enjoy the effect of the candlelight's glow on my fair skin. "I love how dark it is here. Anything can happen in the dark."

"We, um, met in the dark." He looks like he might like to crawl across the table.

Construction scaffolding does wonders for my evening games.

"But I don't know your name," Charles says, his eyes focused somewhere south of my face.

I play my fingertips upon my cleavage, and I exaggerate not—he writhes in his velvet chair. Now I'm sure he's as inexperienced as he is awkward. I'll soon have him quivering. But decorum requires patience. We must first have dinner, so I bring us back to the menus. Eyeing the way his shirt strains against its buttons, I understand food is something he can focus on. And I, too, for I am so very hungry.

"I'm having the ribeye—so tender and juicy, with that tempting ring of fat around the middle." I steal a glance at the ring around his middle, and sigh. "And you must try the strip. It comes with a length of roasted thighbone and a tiny spoon to scoop out the marrow. Mmm."

Dear Charles looks uncomfortable, but that can't be helped. At worst I'll get to eat my ribeye and the marrow from his plate. At best? I had better leave room for dessert. So when he wonders if we should order some truffle fries, I let him know I won't be sharing. "I always stay away from carbs, sweetheart. How do you think I keep my figure?" I lean back and give my shoulders a provocative twist. "One doesn't get curves like these from eating potatoes, Chuck."

Beads of sweat gather on his upper lip. "No one has ever called me that before. Not even my par... My family."

I imagine parents who don't have a term of endearment for their child, the cold detachment it suggests. "Poor dear," I say, and glide my finger along his lip.

He watches me roll my tongue around my fingertip as the waiter approaches. Charles can barely enunciate, so I order the steaks. Bloody, of course.

When our meals arrive, Charles seems to relax—he's in his element now. I can't take my eyes off him—those rosy cheeks and the way his pink lips plump around each juicy bite. I chew languidly, enjoying the ooze of the fat and the fight of the muscle, not knowing whether to make each morsel last or to hurry up so I can get to the next course. I'm so involved in the textures and tastes and anticipation that I don't realize—most embarrassing for a lady—I'm drooling!

But Charles sees. He handles it like a gentleman. He brings his red cloth napkin to the corner of my mouth. With the gentlest of touches, he pats my lips. I almost swoon. Is it the scent of the bone he placed on my dish a moment ago? Did he inadvertently dip a pinky into the juices that pooled on his plate? Or is it just...Chuck?

I have no time to determine the answer, for in an instant of frenzy, I grab his wrist and—oh, such indiscretion—clamp my teeth down on one, perhaps two, of his fingers. I dare say, a completely uncharacteristic lack of control on my part. For his part, Charles jerks his hand away.

Now I've spoiled everything. He stares at his fingers, those delectable morsels, with a combination of shock and pain and...something else.

A drop of blood blooms crimson upon one smooth knuckle. He holds his hand higher and takes a better look. (I need a napkin again. My goodness, a lady oughtn't dribble at dinner.) Then he moves it over the center of the table. The candlelight brightens the droplet, grown larger now and joined by two more beads of red. Charles looks at the blood, and then into my eyes. He seems to be searching, or rather, deciding. He glances around the room—busy, dark—and at his hand, and then brings it slowly, enticingly, to my lips.

About the Author:

Lisa Amico Kristel is co-founder and host of the #YeahYouWrite Reading Series in New York City. Her work has appeared in *LampLight*, *Typehouse Literary*, *The Fabulist*, and others, and is forthcoming in *Coffin Bell*. Currently, she's searching for a home for her novel manuscript, *A Boy, A Girl, A Ghost...and Other Recipes*. Lisa lives in Oyster Bay, NY with her husband and a dog that isn't really theirs.

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Destiny | JB Corso

Shanda stood in her uncle's private study, staring at the wall-sized puzzle. She tightly gripped the remaining section of the sacred seal. *One more to sever the veil between them and us. There'll be no going back.* She slipped the oblong shape into the mold's empty slot like a replacement tooth into a broken smile. The round fixture splintered around its wooden border. The pieces sunk through the wall as if being pulled a thousand steps inward. Shanda gasped as the air filled with the scent of ancient decay. An old crone's spirit waved her forward with a provocative grin.

Joel's Exit | JB Corso

Flies gather around the rancid carcasses of missing neighborhood pets littering his basement floor. Joel wades through the clinging stench. He stops at his altar with a ritual cup. Twelve chimes ring from deep in the shadows from a towering onyx clock. *It's now or never.* Joel pours thick blood over viscera-laden knives, a raggedy bone pile, and open pages from his battered family tome. The last drops snuff out a black candle's flame, expelling a sharp hiss. Velvety blackness engulfs everything. "Inhi flueq gjo." A radiating vortex manifests, sucking Joel and his screams through before vanishing into the darkness.

About the Author:

JB Corso enjoys slithering through the darker shadows of their readers' minds. They provide mental health care to vulnerable populations. They served throughout Europe as a combat arms veteran. They are a Horror Writer's Association member. "Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'Iyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn." Facebook is a good place to make contact... for those willing to risk their sanity.

Facebook: [JB Corso](#)

The Reluctant Ghost | Paul Lonardo

She heard the laughter of the trespassers as they made their way across the lawn. The three boys who mounted the steps to the front porch were not wearing costumes, but she knew instantly that it was Halloween. She strongly disliked the holiday and avoided it at all costs, but it caught her by surprise this year.

"Let's go inside and divide up the take," said the boy carrying two pillowcases filled with candy.

"Just as long as you divide it equally this time," another boy spoke up.

"I'll decide what's even," the first boy shot back.

A sudden pounding on the door rattled the walls and ceiling, dislodging a layer of standing dust inside, which drifted down around her like dirty snow.

"Trick or treat, Dead Girl."

She quickly ducked behind the couch when a shadow appeared in the window across the living room.

"I think I saw her," the third boy screamed.

"Where, where?"

"I don't see anything."

The window filled with silhouettes.

"Over there. Behind the couch, near the fireplace."

There was a tapping on the glass as cell phone camera lights partially penetrated the pitch-black interior. This was the only window in the entire house that wasn't broken. Because it was entirely concealed by dense, overgrown hedges, it was protected from the stones that the local teens frequently hurled at the old house. She had plugged up the other windows with carboard, though it was more for privacy than as any sort of hindrance. The children in the neighborhood were afraid to set foot inside the abandoned house, though Halloween was different. This night had a way of making some kids brave, or at least daring enough to act on things that otherwise scared them. Mischievous children would wander closer to the house than usual, walk around the grounds, and occasionally knock on the door. They wanted to see a ghost. However, if any one of them had ever found themselves in the presence of an actual ghost, she couldn't be sure how they might react to her, so would always spend Halloween night locked in the basement. That's why she hated Halloween.

Now, she felt trapped. She would already have been in the safety of the cellar behind the steel-reinforced door if she had realized that it was October 31. Her only hope was to make a run for it before the teens got inside. There was a large open space between her and the door in the kitchen that led to the basement. She was sure to be seen, but she had no choice. She dashed toward the kitchen, hoping the shadows would conceal her movement.

"There she is! Come on! Let's get her!"

As she entered the kitchen, the back door started to open.

Oh, no, she thought, remembering that she'd left the door unlocked after coming in from the back yard that afternoon. She stopped and quickly dove under the kitchen table as someone entered the house.

"Is anyone here?" The soft whisper was followed by the sound of the door closing and the *click* of the deadbolt lock.

She crawled on her hands and knees across the floor to the far end of the table as the intruder came further inside. The legs of the boy stopped directly front of her, between her and the cellar door.

"It's okay. You can come out." The boy's voice was kind. "I don't mean you any harm. I just want to meet you."

She didn't move for a moment, then she slowly crawled out from under the table and stood facing the boy.

"Hi," said the tall boy with a gentle smile. He had on a white robe with a separate oversized hood that was pulled down behind his head.

"Hello."

"My name is Roger. What's your name?"

"I don't remember."

The house was dark, but she was glowing with a low, throbbing luminescence. "You don't seem surprised that I can see you."

"This is the only night of the year that just about everyone can see me," she said. "I'm not really sure why. I think it's because people expect to see ghosts on Halloween, and their minds are open to it."

"I see you all the time," Roger told her.

"You do?"

"Yeah. Out on the back porch. Sometimes in the back yard."

"There used to be an old tire tied to the branch of a giant sycamore tree that I used to like swinging on," she said. "It's gone now, but I still like to go outside and try to remember what it was like then."

"What else did you like to do?" Roger asked.

"I don't know."

"You don't look like a ghost," he told her. "You seem like a regular girl."

He smiled at her and she averted her eyes.

"What's it like to be..." he began. "You know?"

"It's not bad," she said.

"Aren't you lonely? Do you miss being with your friends?"

"I never had any friends when I was alive," she said.

"I don't have any friends, either."

"What about those boys outside?"

"Oh, that's Dennis, my older brother, and his friends, Jaden and Alex. I was out trick-or-treating with Dylan. He's my little cousin, so I don't think that even counts as a friend. Those big boys came along and took our bags of candy.

Dylan ran home crying and I came here to get our candy back from them. I thought maybe you could help me."

"Me, help you?"

"Sure."

"What do I have to do?" she asked.

"Do you ever scare people?"

"I try not to scare anybody."

"But you could? I mean, if you wanted."

"I guess so." When Roger smiled at her, she couldn't help but smile back. "And you'll be my friend if I help you?"

"We're already friends," Roger told her. "Besides Dylan, you're the only other kid that will talk to me."

"What do you want me to do?" she asked.

When he finished telling her his plan, the sound of shattering glass from the living room caused them to look up.

"Okay," Roger said. "It's time. Let's go." He paused briefly and looked her in the eyes. "Thanks."

A moment later, they disappeared into the basement together as the three teens entered the house through the broken window.

"Whoa!" Dennis exclaimed, shining the light from his phone around the vast living room. The sparse furnishings were festooned with cobwebs and covered in a half inch of dust which rendered the room colorless, like an old black & white TV show.

"This place gives me the creeps," Jaden said. "I say we get out of here."

"Let's see what we got first," Dennis said as he opened one of the bags and reached a hand inside. "Give me some light."

The other boys fixed their phones on Dennis, whose eyes widened with fright as something attached itself to his hand. The LEDs revealed the lower part of his arm swarming with cockroaches.

"What the..." he began as he withdrew his arm from the sack and shook it vigorously to dislodge the vile insects before they made it above his elbow.

Dennis dropped the pillowcase and the roaches spilled out, disappearing under the sofa and into the nearby walls.

Just then, a small figure in a white robe appeared out of the gloom and stopped near the boys. The hood was pulled up, concealing the identity of the wearer, but Dennis recognized the homemade costume as the same one that his younger brother had been wearing.

"Roger?" Dennis stepped closer to the hooded figure. "What are you doing in here?" He reached down and pulled the hood back. When it dropped down, there was no face, no head, nothing at all inside the costume. Then the robe fell to the floor and there was nobody inside.

"What's going on here?" Alex asked.

Dennis was too shaken by what he had witnessed to respond.

"Can we get out of here now?" Jaden begged.

Something moved inside the other pillowcase Dennis was holding and he released it from his grasp. It struck the floor with a heavy *thud* and out rolled a bloody severed head. It came to a stop face up, and when Dennis saw his brother grinning up at him, he took a step back and yelped. "Let's go," he said breathlessly and set out quickly in the opposite direction. The other boys followed.

"Where's the window?" Jaden asked, his voice shrill and full of panic.

"It's got to be here," Dennis said, more of a demand than a statement. But as they continued along, there was only an endless dark wall.

"We must be going in the wrong direction," Alex suggested. "Let's double back."

They headed back the other way, but there was still no window to be found. Their frantic movement released clouds of dust particles into the air, which swirled all around them, diminishing their vision even further.

"We're trapped," Jaden bellowed. "We never should have come in here."

"You better shut up," Dennis warned him.

All at once, the lights on their phones went off at the same time and it became as black as a tomb inside the old house.

"My phone battery just died," Alex said.

"Mine too." Jaden shook his phone vigorously and struck it with his other hand to try to get it to work. "What are we gonna do?"

"We're gonna stay calm," Dennis said evenly. "This house isn't that big. There are other ways out."

A loud bang, like the tailgate of dump truck opening was followed by the sound of a heavy granular substance being emptied. All around them damp soil began to pile up rapidly. It ran over the tops of their feet and continued pouring in.

"We're being buried alive," Jaden croaked.

They maintained their position atop the rising tide of earth, riding it like a semisolid wave. Higher and higher they went, well beyond where the ceiling should have been. Completely blind and terrified, their pleas and cries for help did not resonate. It was as if they were underground, and no one could hear their anguished screams. Soon, they were at the peak of a high mountain of dirt, where they were no longer able to maintain their balance. One by one they fell, tumbling down the steep slope. In an uncontrolled descent, their faces impacted the dirt as chunks of soil lodged in their ears, noses, and mouths. Sputtering and coughing to keep from suffocating, the boys thought they would continue to fall forever. Then, without warning, they rolled to a stop, their bodies collecting in a heap. It took a moment for them to get their bearings, and to their collective astonishment they found themselves lying on the ground in front of the old house. No one said a word as they surveyed one another's faces, which were caked with mud and blood.

Dennis was first to get to his feet. "We tell no one about this," he warned his friends.

Alex and Jaden nodded and then all three boys quickly strode away from the house at a brisk pace, almost running.

Watching from the broken window, she and Roger laughed.

"That was awesome!" Roger said. "You're pretty good at that. Especially for never having scared anyone before." He looked down at the pumpkin lying on the floor and nudged it with his foot. "I really liked that trick. Did you see the look on my brother's face when he thought it was my head?"

"It was nothing," she said.

"*Nothing?* It was nothing short of spectacular."

She blushed.

"Thanks again," he said.

"I should thank *you*," she said. "That was fun. I probably used to like Halloween a lot. I do now, at least."

"I meant, thank you for being my friend," Roger said. He stepped close to her and gave her hug, and even though she did not have a physical body, she felt his embrace.

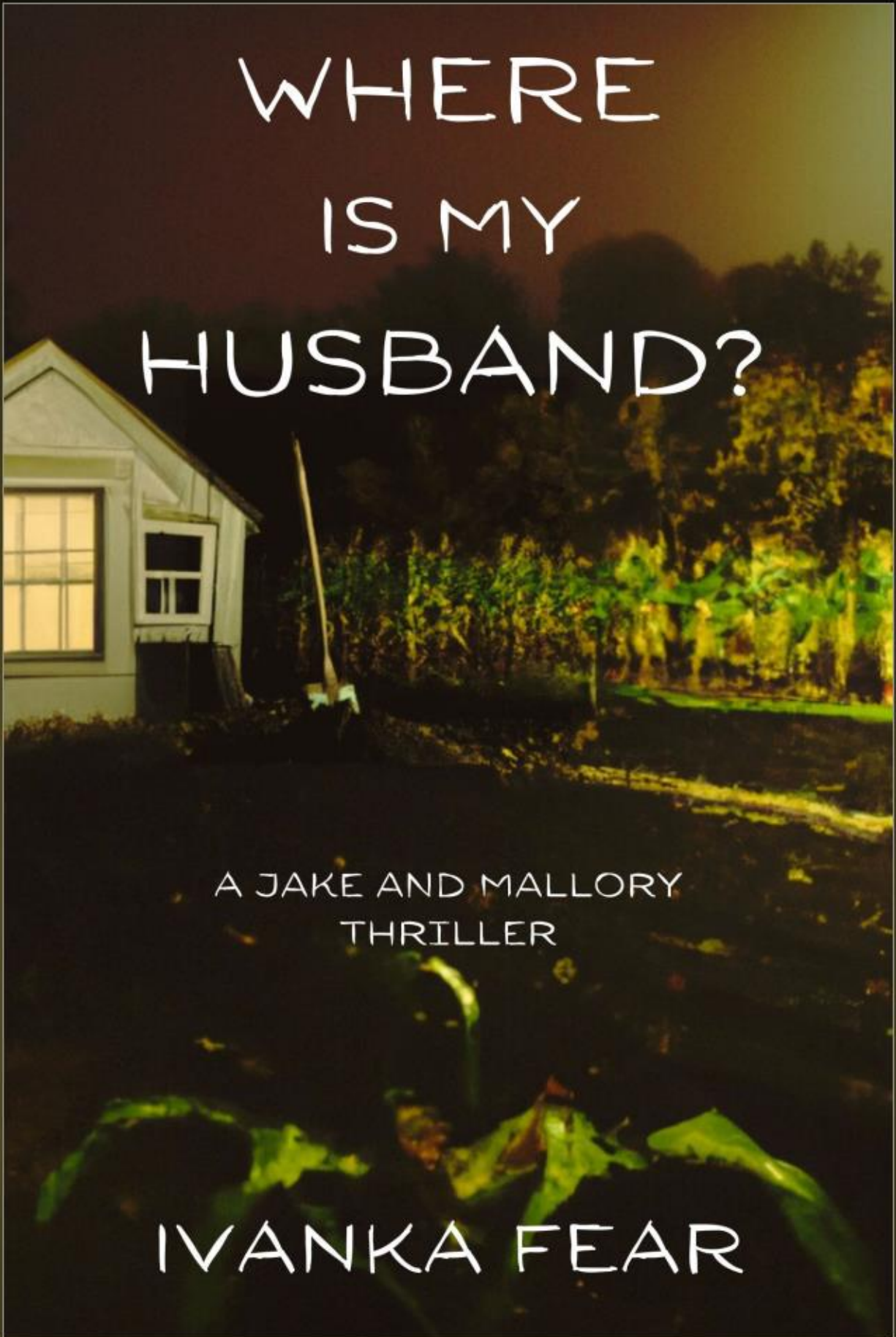
About the Author:

I am a freelance writer and author. I've placed dark fiction and nonfiction articles in various genre magazines and ezines. *Penny Dreadfuls*, a collection of haiku horror, was published this summer, and *Small Dark Things*, an anthology of horror and dark fantasy stories will be released this Halloween. I am a contributing writer for *Tales from the Moonlit Path*. I am an active HWA member.

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Too many secrets and lies—and now a missing husband.



WHERE IS MY HUSBAND?

A JAKE AND MALLORY
THRILLER

IVANKA FEAR

AVAILABLE ON AMAZON!

Macy raised the candy-coated apple to her lips. Its red matched her vibrant lipstick. She opened wide and bit. The candy cracked, and she pushed a bit of it into her mouth with her pinky finger.

Jan scowled. "Why you gotta be like that?"

Macy's brow creased. "Like what?" Her voice was like spun sugar.

Jan opened her eyes wide at Tina, her lips pressed tight in 'can you believe her?' exasperation. Tina ducked her head over a secretive smile.

A bit of Macy's sweetness soured. "Like what?"

Jan spun to face Macy, elbows propped on wide knees, chin on her fists. "Like you're some kinda princess. Seriously, who're you impressing? It's just Tina and me here."

Macy's lower lip trembled, but her brows forecasted an angry storm. "I'm not trying to impress anyone. Just being tidy." Her rapid blinks and averted gaze prevented embarrassed tears from falling. She set her candy apple on a dessert plate, no longer hungry for it.

Jan shook her head, face tight with disgust.

Tina stood. "I've an idea." She walked into the kitchen where they'd made the candy apples earlier in the evening, before they'd handed out treats to costumed neighborhood kids. "My gram told me about an old Halloween tradition." She grabbed a knife from the block and apples from a bowl on the kitchen table. She extended the knife and an apple toward Jan. "Peel the apple, hopefully in one long strip, throw it over your shoulder, and it's supposed to form the first letter of your intended's name."

"Really?" The airy sound returned to Macy. She licked her lips with anticipation.

Jan sighed. "That's kinda stupid."

Tina shrugged and put knife to fruit, spinning, spinning, until she produced a long, curling peel. Macy watched on tiptoes to get a better vantage. Jan stole glances while pretending to consider her ragged manicure.

Tina tossed the peel over her shoulder. She and Macy leaned over it.

Macy traced the shape in the air above. "It looks like an L."

Tina nodded.

"No it doesn't." Jan pushed Macy out of the way.

Macy squeezed between the girls. "In cursive. See? A loop, straight line, a smaller loop, and the bottom." She traced the shape again, smiling. She turned to Tina. "Whose name starts with L?"

Tina shrugged.

Macy chewed her lip. "Would the letter be a first or a last name?"

Tina laughed. "I guess it could be either."

"Lawrence, Labriolla, Littlejohn..."

Jan snorted. "That's it. Tina's gonna marry Benjamin Littlejohn."

Macy's eyebrows pinched together. "Why not? Tina, do you like him?"

She laughed and handed Macy an apple. "Your turn."

Macy rinsed the apple, closed her eyes, then, with bit-lipped concentration, carved the peel.

Tina watched. "In Norse mythology, the goddess Idunn's apples granted immortality."

Jan lowered her eyebrows and smirked. "You don't say?"

"I did it!" Macy hopped up, pleased. "One piece. Can you believe it?"

Tina nodded. "Now toss it over your shoulder."

Macy's grin widened. "I'm nervous!"

"About what?" Jan hoisted herself onto a high stool alongside the breakfast nook, far enough from the action to seem aloof, but close enough to see the results. "A stupid game?"

Macy's smile faltered. "Jan, please try to have fun."

"I'm having a blast watching you make an idiot of yourself."

Color rose in Macy's cheeks, but Tina placed a hand on her back and whispered, "Don't worry about her. Give it a toss. Let's see what happens."

"Ok." Her smile wobbled, widened. She closed her eyes, held the peel to her chin, then tossed it over her shoulder. It landed by her heels. She hunched over it and squinted. It had broken into two pieces. "D E." Her brow wrinkled. "Is that what you see?"

Tina's eyebrows shot high into her hairline. "Yeah. Maybe it stands for Ed Danvers?"

Macy widened her eyes. Her mouth formed a perfect O. "Ed Danvers? He's awesome! I've had a crush on him since grade school."

"First of all, I've had a crush on him since kindergarten. You copied because you always do. And second of all," Jan slid from the stool and pointed at the apple peels, "that looks like a P and maybe an O, so you're on crack. No way you're hooking up with Ed Danvers."

Macy pressed her lips into a thin line and crossed her arms. "It does so look like a D and an E. You're just jealous."

Jan spun, toe to toe with Macy. "Look here, toothpick, nobody thinks you're cute." Her nostrils flared as she looked up into Macy's shocked face. Her voice deepened to a near growl. "Especially not Ed Danvers."

Tina grabbed another apple and tossed it into the air. "You know," she caught it and tossed it again. "It's said if you carry apples and silver bells, you can walk through the many realms."

Macy and Jan turned astonished faces toward Tina.

Tina tossed and caught the apple. "Especially on days when the veil between the worlds thins." Toss, catch. "Like Halloween."

Jan faced Tina. "What the heck're you talking about?"

Tina shrugged. Toss. Catch. "Apples. They're amazing."

"An apple a day keeps the doctor away, right?" Macy edged toward Tina.

"Something like that. So, Jan, it's your turn." Tina threw the apple to her. "Let's see your destiny." Tina wagged her eyebrows, grinned wide as a Jack O'lantern, and extended the knife, handle first, to Jan.

Jan took it and huffed. "Why not." She kicked Macy's apple peels toward the garbage bin. "Hey!" groused Macy. Jan peeled, biting deep into the flesh. The blade slid from the apple and bit deep into Jan's thumb. "Damn it!" She popped the injury into her mouth to catch the blood and tossed the apple and knife onto the island. She grabbed a first aid kit from a cabinet and ran her thumb under the faucet. She glared as tap water rinsed her wound. "Bet I need stitches."

"Let me see." Tina dabbed the thumb with a paper towel. She pressed to determine the depth of the cut. "I think it'll be alright." She sprayed antiseptic on the wound and bound it with a wide, highlighter-yellow Band-aid. "See? All better."

Jan tried unsuccessfully to bend her thumb. The bandage impeded movement.

"Might as well try your fortune, especially after you spilled your blood." Tina's eyes caught the light, giving her the glazed expression of a zealot. "Some would say that gives your foretelling extra reliability."

Macy handed Jan the apple peel. Her thin smile wavered an apology. "I brought all the parts."

Jan had produced an apple peel fat with apple flesh in one main piece and several small bits. Blood had soaked into a small section.

"What the Hell." She took the peel from Macy. "Here goes nothing." She tossed it over her shoulder.

They tilted their heads to consider the result.

"An A and a D," Macy interpreted.

Jan's lip curled. "I think that's an E and a D, actually." She straightened to her full 5 feet. "We all know what that means!" She threw back her shoulders. "And Tina said my forecast is stronger because I bled on the pieces." She wore a self-satisfied grin and blinked slow as a cat while she gloated. "Sorry, Macy."

Macy lifted her chin. "Don't be. I see an A, not an E."

"It's clearly an E." Jan adjusted the peel as she traced the shape with her finger.

"You moved it! You're not supposed to move it."

"Did not."

"Oh my gosh, you so totally did."

"I think I'd know if I moved the stupid peel. What's wrong, Macy? Don't think you can take the competition?"

"I don't have to worry about it, because you cheated!"

Tina slid the knife toward their heated discussion.

Jan slammed her hand onto the island, grabbing the knife. "Did not." Before she realized it was in her fist, she'd slashed. An angry red bloomed over Macy's cheek.

Macy pressed her hand to the cut and stepped away. Blood bloomed between her fingers.

Without thinking, Jan thrust into Macy's tiny waist. Macy doubled over, hands atop the new wound, eyes betrayed.

Jan sunk the knife deep into Macy's warm ribcage. Blood and bile roostertailed.

Unsteady, Macy stumbled back, blood billowing, slicking the tile with abstract images. “Jan?” Macy stumbled, eyes rolled, and she collapsed. Blood disgorged around her slight frame.

As though blinking free from a horrible dream, Jan dropped the knife.

Tina whispered into Jan’s ear, “Better run, killer!”

Jan gabbered “Didn’t mean to,” and fled.

Tina sliced her apple in half, dipped it into Macy’s pooling blood, and took a bite. Blood dribbled over her chin.

She raised her hands above her head, a tiny silver bell suspended from her fingers, and called in an ancient, breathy language, to her lover.

Her fallen apple peel glowed, widened, formed an entry. Long, ebony-tipped fingers pushed through, pulled at the edges, ripped.

Lilith, raven-haired, leather-winged, perfect in proportion and deadly beautiful, stepped through.

Tina moaned her name.

About the Author:

HWA member Kerry E.B. Black writes from a cottage slipping into a swamp situated along the Allegheny River. To date, this Halloween enthusiast has published two YA paranormal thrillers (*Awakening at Equinox* and *Spring of Spirits*), three collections of short stories (*Herd of Nightmares*, *Carousel of Nightmares*, and *Fairy Herds and Mythscapes*), and a compilation of poetry (*Poetic Nightmares*).

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I Don’t Think I’ll Make It | *Epiphany Ferrell*

My ice cream truck was set up at the park near the hospital. I sold ice cream bars and sno-cones to moms of kids who’ve just come from surgery or whatever. Good tips. This close to Halloween, I’ve got caramel apples going and purple and green cotton candy. I wink at the moms, tell them the apples are a healthy choice.

This afternoon, a little girl presented for payment a round rock like a hockey puck. It was ruddy granite and someone had painted on it in black. I guessed she was the artist.

“It’s a good luck charm,” she said. She was sweet, the kind of little girl that makes a person want to have kids. So yeah, I accepted the rock for payment.

When she took the sno-cone from me, our fingers brushed ever so slightly. It burned. Freeze-burned. I mean, my fingertips were white and numb. She was already walking away, but turned and smirked at me—an expression much too old for so young a child. Then she wobbled. It was like there was a heat haze around her, and in her place was an old woman glaring at me, lips peeled back in a drooling grin.

“Good luck, Brady,” she said, but she didn’t say it, I heard it in my head. Then she was the little girl again.

I was still holding the rock. It had been cold but now it was burning hot. I dropped it and it rolled under the biggest freezer. My hand was already blistering.

I didn’t go to the hospital. Too many people know me there.

When I got home, the rock was on my bedside table. I don’t know how. I saw it roll away. But there it was.

I picked it up, meaning to take it outside, throw it into the street. It exploded in my hand. A million crystalline splinters flew out of it, embedding themselves in my hand, my arm, my chest, my face. My lip bristled with them, my face was a mass of tiny stone stakes.

The more I tweezed out, the more appeared.

They are still there, under my skin, I can feel them in my veins. They cruise slowly along my bloodstream, ripping apart blood cells and scarring my arteries. They are on the way to my heart. There is no stopping it.

I don’t know why this is happening to me.

“Yes, you do,” says the voice inside my head.

I was not ready, not at all ready, by the time It got to “10 – ready or not, here I come!” I hid in the closet. Specifically, in It’s closet—an unexpected move that bought me some time though I could hear It snuffling near the doorframe.

I had never believed in monsters under the bed, in closets, in the basement. I never understood why people wanted to talk about such things. Aren’t there monsters enough in the world? Aren’t we every day reading about them, from the mighty in Hollywood to the lowly in the shack at the end of town? Why do we want more monsters?

I was asking the wrong questions, making the wrong assumptions. I believed it was make-believe and nonsense. I was wrong. I can admit that. I was wrong—hideously wrong!

The monster from the closet was in a playful mood. I hadn’t jumped or startled or shown alarm when several of my dresses fell at once in the closet. I thought the dresses just fell. No big deal.

Until It grabbed my arm.

It was offended. It wanted me to be afraid. It said I had some catching up to do, not having been afraid of monsters as a little girl. And It wanted to hunt. There had been no little girls in the house for a very, very long time. And, It pointed out, tonight was Halloween. A special night. A playful night.

Hence the game of Hide and Seek. I’d always been a good hider and an indifferent seeker. But ten seconds is no time at all to hide, especially if you are hiding for your life.

The nice couple next door is out tonight. I saw Mr. Nelson pulling into the driveway with Madison, the 14-year-old babysitter who will play games and tuck in for the night the two little Nelson girls.

I can hear the monster moving around upstairs, chuckling and chortling. I can see through a sliver of front-room window Madison crossing the lawn to my house, a small pitcher in her hands. How sweet and old-fashioned that she would come here to borrow milk!

I sneak out of the closet. I know which floorboards squeak and I’m careful to miss them all. I open the door, ready to bolt out of it. I find I’m not able to leave, though I am able to let Madison into the house. A closet-monster force field? That hardly seems fair. Monsters aren’t, they aren’t fair.

“Hi, Madison, sure you can have some milk, it’s in here,” I say, and I trip her into the closet, slam it shut, stand against it while she kicks at the door.

The closet monster is on the stairs, coming down. It’ll be in sight soon. I shoulder roll into the kitchen before It sees me. It approaches the closet, where the babysitter cries inside.

“Monster,” I call from the kitchen, “Let’s make a deal.”

About the Author:

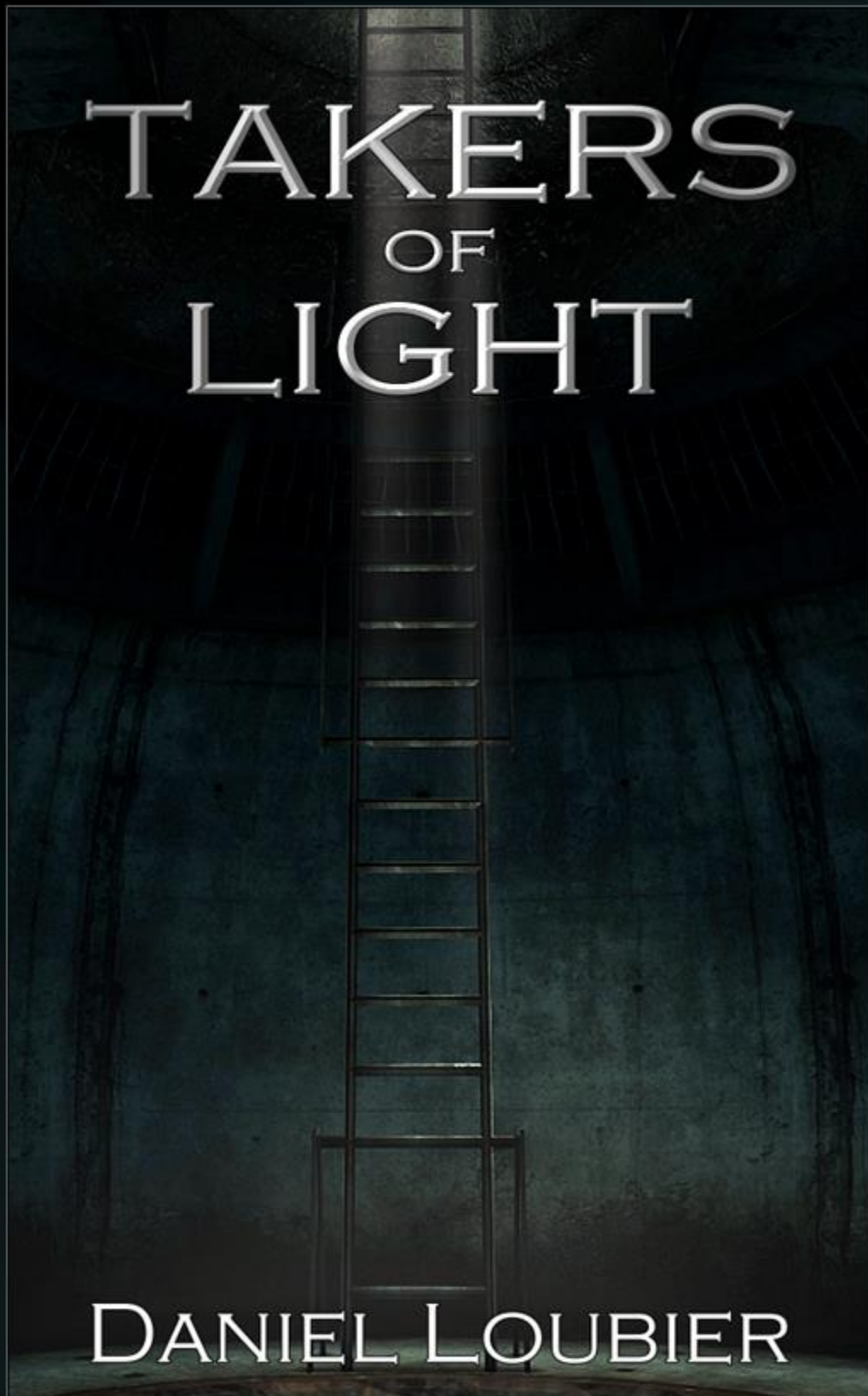
Epiphany Ferrell lives on the edge of the Shawnee National Forest, where she spies on creatures of the night via trail camera. Her stories appear in more than 70 journals and anthologies, including *Pulp Literature*, *Ghost Parachute*, *Best Microfiction*, and the anthology *Shakespeare Unleashed*. She is a two-time Pushcart nominee, and a Prime Number Magazine Flash Fiction Prize recipient.

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Driven underground by those of the light...
Now known as The Dark Dwellers...



Available Exclusively on Amazon for
Purchase or Borrow!

Under starless sky and absent moon came the topics of death and rebirth. Danny Severns hadn't ever given them much thought before, but Henry kept probing, and Danny kept responding, and the more the two of them talked, the more they descended, physically and mentally, into the depths of the sunless countryside.

"Or scarier still, what if we *do* only get one shot at life, and when our curtains fall we return to the nothingness from which we came?" said Henry.

"I'd consider that a relief," said Danny.

"A relief? I thought you were just singing the praises of reincarnation?"

"Listen, the only thing I sing the praises of are the pints at the Coffin's Rest. And maybe an hour or two with Reggie on a Thursday night. Anyone who thinks coming back to all this is a good thing probably gets off jamming their prick in a light fixture."

"Yet you choose to believe in reincarnation?"

Danny shrugged. "How involved are we in our beliefs anyway? I guess I believe it even though I wish I didn't."

He wanted to get off this path. It was leading even farther into the countryside he had only ever seen from his driver side window, usually with a cigarette smouldering in the breeze, usually on the way to the Coffin's Rest for a pint. That's where he'd been an hour ago. Before Agnes had hit him with a broom just to get his drunken arse out the door. Then his third favourite thing in the world had given him the middle finger; his car coughed and wheezed when he turned the ignition but the engine didn't turn over: it wasn't waking up without a kiss, or a mechanic.

"Don't you be driving in that state, Danny Severns," said the daughter of the Coffin Rest's owner, to which he remarked: "The car's not starting anyhow."

She glanced away, saying, "You got a guardian angel looking out for you then," and then she was walking through the lucence of the streetlamps.

Danny sighed. "Well, can't be that far back to Glumdale—right?"

"I reckon about four miles," Henry had replied. "I know a way."

The straightness of the path morphed into serpentine curves. This night was primordial, unmarred by electric light, veiling treeless fields inhabited by silent sleepwalkers and rutted with Neolithic cursuses. It is a miraculous thing that the haunted past still speaks even if most words are lost, like blotched ink from tears of ephemeral lives.

When the land dipped again into the well of the past, both Danny and Henry saw a static light belonging to a bearded man over fifty-five and below sixty-five. He was smoking a pipe, looking out into the dark, looking into his own mind, thinking, in contemplation and cogitation. The oil-lantern on the flat rock on which he was sitting lit up one half of him. The rock stood unnaturally, placed there by a forgotten world (why was it placed here? was a question without an answer).

"I'm glad to see you two," the older man said, resting the pipe on his knee, not even taking a look at the two young travellers. "I sat down for a quick rest and forgot what I was doing. You shouldn't be walking the lych way at this time of night."

"The what way?"

Only his head turned toward Danny. "The lych way. You don't ... ? This is a haunted path. It's an ancient path."

"Right, okay. See ya."

"Don't be drifting off like that. This isn't the sort of path you just use for merry constitutions."

"A path's a path, old man," said Danny.

"That's where you're wrong. This path was used to carry the dead to St. Mildred's church so they could be buried in consecrated earth. Some villagers would have to walk five, twelve, twenty miles. Sometimes local priests had a coffin you could borrow to help carry the body, but mostly you just had to carry the bodies in the linen they were wrapped in. Quite a journey, don't you think? We used to make this trek in wind, rain, snow. The dead, pain, and sorrow are woven into the ground on which you stand."

"Just get a car."

"You're not from around here, are you?"

"Born and raised."

"And you don't know the lych way? What about the ghostly barouche?"

Danny was about to speak, but the man halted him with a raised wrinkled hand, all five of his long, stick-like digits on show.

"There's no driver, no passengers. It's just the barouche and the two spooked horses. Now, I don't know the rules of ghosts, but it strikes me as an odd occurrence that horses would get trapped as spirits." The man stood up dusting himself off. "Mind if I join you on your walk?"

"I just want to get home," said Danny. "But, I'm heading toward Glumdale. Suppose you could join us. What do you think, Henry?"

"We can't let the poor guy stay out here in the dark."

"That settles it then," the man said, uncorking his whisky bottle and tipping some of it onto the ground around the flat stone on which he'd been sitting. "There was a stone like this one outside Glumdale. It's split in two now. Folk say the stone actually spoke, but in its effort and exertion the entire thing ripped apart."

"Stones can't talk."

"Not usually, no. We should get on. Before they get here."

"They?"

"Look behind you."

"I don't want to."

"Corpse candles," said Henry.

The man nodded, saying, "Lost spirits from the trail. If the coffin on the lych way touches the unconsecrated ground, then the spirit wanders off—it gets lost. Becomes *them*."

Danny made no effort to look back, even when everyone began moving forward, the man holding aloft the lantern. The trail descended and they were greeted with presentimental mist pooling in the lowland.

The lights had reignited in Henry's mind the matter of metempsychosis. His voice had the timbre of great concern in it when he said, "I think the problem is when you presume the goal is to escape the world. Thinking like that, then coming back is like being put back into the jail cell. But, I don't believe it's about escaping the world. I believe it's about waking up in it. You can't escape it because there's nowhere to escape to."

"I wake up in it every day," said Danny. "And every day it's a struggle. Coming back is a curse. And no doubt in my mind, we're all cursed."

Henry looked off into the gloom. The so-called corpse candles had scattered, like scared deer. "Well, maybe you just haven't appreciated the beauty of the world, nor considered why some people would see coming back to it as beautiful and not malevolent."

The man, who had been listening but presumably had no interest in the issue, drank the whisky bottle empty then pocketed it. He gesticulated before him and said, "Michael MacGregor in the days of yore spoke of a headless black dog on this path." Was Danny hearing barking behind them from where they had come? "It wasn't the legends of ghosts that got his knickers bunched, no, but the idea that not only was there a dog loose, it had no head to boot. To boot!"

"I don't like dogs," said Danny.

"Don't be so callow," the old man snapped. "Nothing wrong with dogs. Unless they're like Old Shuck, or headless."

The fog grew heavier. Were there faces out there looking at Danny? It was hard to tell. The path that they had erroneously trusted was leading them farther and farther from the living lights of civilization and into the company of carboniferous cliffs and eroded dolerite stone breaking through the topsoil. For a brief moment, when he turned, something resembling a monk holding a candle with two hands stood at the edge of the path, and he almost lost his willies.

And if that wasn't strange enough, there was no convincing him of not having heard the distant clacking of hooves on the path. His mind, still foamy with beer, imagined the barouche from the old man's story and the ghostly horses pulling it, not a soul controlling it nor being transported by it.

The old man was taking long strides, his legs popping, and sometimes they wobbled as if they were made of driftwood.

“There’s something up about this guy,” said Danny, leaning into Henry’s ear.

Henry nodded in accord, whispered back: “I was thinking the same thing.”

It was hard to see but a hedgerow was up against the path. After they had passed a bush a woman sprawled out from behind it, startling them, landing on her knees in prayer, shaking her fists at the sky, her dark veil obliterating her face with shadows.

“O’ travellers, o’ travellers,” she wailed. “My son, my child, he is lost on this wicked path.”

“Where’s he got to then?” asked Danny—and his voice did quaver.

“It was his funeral,” she sobbed. “His poor body was on the horse but the horse took off. He has to be put to rest in St. Mildred’s churchyard.”

Her crepe veil fluttered in the breeze like the black smoke of a stubble fire.

Henry leaned over to Danny’s ear. “You thought the geezer was odd? Check out the dame.”

“We ain’t sending a party out to find the lad,” the man said; and, before limping off—Danny and Henry following—he added, “But if you care to join our company you’d better keep up, and we’ll keep a crooked eye out for your boy.”

Soon there were a dozen or more manifold mourners walking on the path. In front of Danny a coffin was being carried by four pallbearers, and ahead of them was a single row of singers and a single drummer. Glowing with bioluminescent intensity, mysterious flowers formerly unseen bloomed, serried alongside them like spectral spectators. Familiarity struck Danny: *the lych way remembers you*.

Whether he intended to or not, Danny was now participating in the abrupt procession. The singing bellowed across the nightly land. The mourners were silent: no tears, no crooning, just the squelching of the mud beneath their shoes as they listened to the songs. The coffin was held at waist-level and it was the reason the procession existed. One death is the effigy of all life. Any life is dictated and measured only by what came before it, and knowledge of its end. But not everyone gets a holy or justified internment. How many bodies were buried out in the wilds with stakes through them to keep them from coming back? This wasn’t a belief—it was a folk fact. Those phantoms belonged to a different world, yet they were tethered to now: an old world where even if you could question it, you wouldn’t risk it. A world where suicides and other sins were a betrayal of the very gift of life.

“Henry,” whispered Danny, “is this really happening?”

But no verbal reply came, only the rising of Henry’s index finger to his mouth to quieten him.

There were, in darkening fog and rising cold, tombstones and unmarked graves, their engraved names worn smooth like a woodworker’s thumb. There was candlelight on the road and ravens on the road and a funeral march on the road and hymns on the road and a mourning woman on the road who had appeared from behind a bush beside the road.

Possibly a headless black dog on the road.

“I don’t want to leave,” said the old man, as if it had come directly from his heart and not his mouth, and he looked older than he did when he had been sitting on the rock. “I don’t want my life to be over. What about the people I loved?”

His face was gaunt and pensive. In the dim, lambent light of the candles, Danny could even see the fear emanating off it like moonlight reflecting off polished stone.

“We’re on the way to where again?” asked the old man.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m going home.”

“Home,” the man repeated. “There’s nothing quite like it, is there? Home, where we put together our possessions and surround ourselves with the comforts of a hurting heart in a cosmic sojourn. I’ve a confession, young man.” He brushed away with the back of his sleeve the sparkling tears in his eyes and the tear scars on his cheeks. “I took a coin purse from a body meant to be buried with it. How’m I to repent now? There are no listeners for this confession.”

Step by step their movements were in unison. Invisible strings made them one. The beat of the drum had made them one. Death had made them one. Death is the law of the land and presides over all. It is the final word.

Either the stream or the little stone bridge over the stream made the procession stop. The singing ceased and the mud squelching too. The pallbearers stood very still with the coffin between them and stared ahead, candle light spilling like juice all over the path still wet in the shade of the cliff. Sparkles of light in the puddles. Corpse candles in the puddles. The dead trapped in the puddles.

Danny hadn't at first noticed that no one was walking. Alone on the other side of the little stone bridge he paused in his stride and turned around. Eyes without glimmer watched him as though they were tree hollows, and the skin on the faces were stretched over the bone, directly over the bone. The undesired truth was hinted at if not entirely revealed. A skull was hushed behind every face.

"Why's everyone stopped?"

Henry stepped out of the crowd. "It's the water, Danny," he said. "Spirits can't cross running water."

"What you mean spirits?"

"You know what I mean."

Danny scuttled backwards to give more distance between him and the crowd.

"Come on, Henry," Danny pleaded.

"You know I can't."

"Don't be ridiculous. Just step over."

"I just told you. I think I'm to walk this lych way for longer still. It was nice meeting you."

"Henry!" Danny shouted once more, but the procession was turning around, people were fading away. But Danny was thinking not about what had happened but how he had met Henry. It was just after he got out of the car. On the road out of Wirlton. Just outside, in the dark, on the first steps of the lych way. He'd never met him before. But people passed through here all the time.

Danny was mute as he watched Henry fade away with the procession, coalescing into the dark, the crowd becoming little glinting lights in the distance, and then those, too, disappeared.

About the Author:

Robert Weaver is a writer of dark fiction and a lifelong admirer of mysteries and the macabre. When not writing or reading, Weaver enjoys listening to falling rain, drinking coffee, and shaking an angry fist at the sun. He's in support of having a year-round countdown to Halloween.

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Jenny's Big Joke | Richard Alexander

Don't forget your mask this Halloween. All the creatures that go bump in the night will be out and about. The skin-walkers, the redcaps, the shapeshifters, the witches. This year, the dead shall walk the earth.

Another lame seasonal commercial for some overpriced costume shop. How predictable. I was already running late to my sister's dress rehearsal. Ashleigh chose the day of Halloween to get married in the cemetery. For some reason, that escaped me. That was my little sister for you, a big walking cliché.

Oh, the spooky girl is getting married on Halloween. How original, I thought to myself as I rolled my eyes, driving from one shop to another to find the perfect dress. If I was going to do this, I wanted to do it right. It was the season, after all. Time to let my inner monster out, and I knew exactly what I needed.

I had always been interested in visual effects and even had a side job doing makeup for big events. Scaring the hell out of my little sister was the goal this year.

I preferred not to count the stores, but eventually found the perfect outfit for the wedding. It was a black dress that hugged my curves in just the right ways, hanging an inch or so below my knees, with crimson red stripes down the sides in a way that looked like someone had slashed it with a knife. By the time I had my purchases in hand and left the thrift store, the sun was disappearing behind the mountain peaks.

I was going to have to hurry in order to seem as if I was arriving fashionably late. Even so, you couldn't wipe the grin off my face if you had steel wool. I would just take a moment to clean the day off of me and head right back out.

Shower, check. Makeup, check. Dress check. Shovel... double check!

I was dressed to kill and ready to go. With one last look around, I closed the door behind me and made my way to my car.

With Monster by Skillet blaring on the radio, I screamed along to the music as I headed to the cemetery. *Fifteen minutes there, and another thirty before dinner started.*

“Plenty of time,”

Pulling up, I could see the lights and hubbub at the front gate, so I took the back road in to avoid attention. The bumps smoothed out as I came to a stop near my destination.

“Ten minutes, not bad,” I said, glancing at the clock.

Looking around, the cemetery was not well lit, especially with a wedding happening in the next twenty-four hours. With caution in mind, I put one foot in front of the other as I made my way to the designated location. Good thing I did some prep-work, otherwise I would be out here digging all night.

I quickly found the grave site I had chosen and the lumber I had used to cover the hole. Promptly yet gently, I transferred all the soil that had been covering the boards onto a gardening cloth before shifting the planks and gazing down at the casket below.

With a deep breath, I reached in and pulled it open, revealing the custom interior. The satin dress felt nice as I ran my hands down my body, flattening it out before stepping into the coffin.

This is quite comfortable.

They lined the inside of the wooden box with a black, plush fabric with some of those flat LED light strips running along the lip. I simply didn't want to be in a tight and confined space while in the dark.

I quickly found the cord I had previously run as I laid down and pulled the lid shut over myself. I was convinced that this would spook my sister more than anything else. I just knew it!

Right at the end of dinner, I would pop up and scare everyone. I painted my face to appear as one of the undead. The dress appeared to be vintage, reminiscent of the 1940s, and my hair seemed to have worms crawling through it. Best work I had ever done, if you were to ask me.

I grabbed the cord and pulled it, covering my grave with dirt.

“I cannot believe she is doing this! UGH! Bitch is lucky she is my sister!” Ashleigh practically screamed halfway through supper. Jenny never showed up for dinner, and she was supposed to bring the wedding rings from the cleaner for the rehearsal.

It was dark. Darker than I had expected.

“I must have fallen asleep.”

Feeling around the top, I felt for the release button.

The air immediately filled with the stench of burning plastic and metal, causing me to cough on the fumes. My heart rate was so fast I could hear the thumping in my ears. I placed my hands flat against the lid and pushed with everything I had, but it refused to give. The tiny, cramped space was rapidly filling with smoke, and it was becoming clear that I was going to be unable to force my way out. Hastily, I reached down and padded around, looking for my phone like I lost it in the covers in bed.

Cough. My throat was already irritated by the fumes.

I grabbed my smartphone and entered my passcode: **1031420** before tapping the first name on my favored list: Ashleigh.

Dee doo

The call dropped immediately. I glanced at the corner of the device. *Zero bars shit!*

I pounded and screamed as loud and hard as I could, to no effect. My lungs were burning. Guess I shouldn't have spent so much money on the casket. It's almost too well built.

About the Author:

Richard Alexander is a non-binary and queer US Navy Veteran as well as dark modern / urban fantasy author who having had enjoyed reading and writing ever since they were a kid is currently working on their debut novel.

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Once, I knew a guy who knew a guy who said he met Coyote.

Not those run of the mill scavengers who we displaced. Naw, the OG sell-the-clothes-off-your back. You know the one.

Guy says he met 'em on the shores of Lake Winnipeg last October. Sure as day, Coyote came rambling on his hind legs, saying there was treasure in the lake. Guy had just sat down for dinner, cooked rabbit on an open fire.

Guy asked, "What kind of treasure?"

Coyote grinned wide, "The kind that'll set you for life, but you gotta dive deep. I'll come with, make sure you got some light."

By now the sun was mostly down, pink and purple feathers drifting across the sky.

Guy shrugged, taking a bite out of the rabbit, to test it. Done real well. Medium well.

Coyote looked to the rabbit. "Gimme a foot, we'll go out, real slow and steady."

Guy shrugged again, thinking better of questioning a spirit animal. He tore a foot off, tossed over. Coyote caught it with his teeth. Boy didn't even chew.

Coyote moved to the canoe, hoisting himself in like a born sailor. "Come now," he motioned to the other seat.

Slowly, Guy got in the boat, grabbed a paddle and Coyote pushed them out into the still, dark waters. They rowed awhile, almost to the middle of the lake. Moon peaking out behind the cotton candy clouds. The water's a black mirror. Nothing within earshot.

Coyote pulled a torch from somewhere, blazing bright orange. He pointed left. Guy saw his reflection wobbling as the boat made ripples, slowing to a stop. "Straight drop from here," Coyote said.

Guy stripped down to his delicates, breathed deep. He stepped up, ready to dive off the edge.

"Don't forget your light, friend. It will guide you," Coyote spoke up. Guy turned to Coyote.

Coyote grinned big, white teeth glinting. He struck out with the torch, ramming it straight into Guy's eyes.

Guy fell backward, bellowing to high heavens before sinking.

With a splash, he surfaced, eyes aglow like hot coals. Water sizzled into steam off his face.

"It burns!" he screamed like a dying bird.

"Get swimming, I gave you sight to find the treasure," Coyote sat back.

Hoping it would end the pain, Guy dove deep as his lungs would take him. Far as he dove, the water evaporated, turning the clouds above dark, pregnant. Eventually, he swam to the bottom, saw a big stone, with his name etched on.

Squinting from the pain, Guy touched the stone, which started glowing orange. Guy looked to the sky, swore he saw the earth mother smiling. Wordless, he dropped to the mud, lifeless.

Howling laughter was eventually drowned in a deluge. Coyote rowed away, licking his chops.

My friend says each time it rains over Lake Winnipeg in October, the water's orange, carrying Guy's spirit from one spirit realm to the other. Says you can even hear the screams, echoing like thunder.

About the Author:

A gamer, lover of autumn, its dark histories, and horror media, Aaron Grierson's work often blends folk elements into society's love of technology. He is a First Reader for *Flash Fiction Online* and former Senior Articles Editor at *The Missing Slate*. Always hungry for more literature, references and puns inevitably sneak into his musings. Previous publications appear in *The Missing Slate*, *Marisa's Recurring Nightmares*, *Polar Borealis* and *Polar Starlight* and past issues of *The Sirens Call*.

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Author Blog: [Your Local Poet](#)



Everyone called it Still House. As far as haunted houses go, it was an anomaly. Rather than crouch menacingly on the corner of Cadorette Ave and Whispering Leaves Ln, it sat comfortably nestled in a picturesque edging of rose bushes, behind a quaint white picket fence that seemed to stay pristine by some kind of magic. With three bedrooms, two full baths, an attached garage and spacious backyard, it was the impossible ideal for some bygone Americana dream. As far as anybody had been able to uncover, it didn't have any semblance of a blood-stained history—no infamous owners, no scandal, not even an ancient burial ground hidden in its past.

"It's the quiet," the rumors say. "Why do you think it's called Still House? People can't take the silence." Practically the whole town of Cypress Grove would scoff at the suggestion. Plenty of people had been in Still House, and they'd heard plenty—the perpetual hum of the refrigerator, the sounds of their own heavy footfalls on the stairs, the soft swish of doors opening across plush carpet, the whoosh of windows sliding in their tracks as people opened them, not to mention the cadence of their own voices as they chatted easily within its walls. Clearly, there was nothing to that theory. Nothing at all. Why buyer after buyer fled the house, despite any possible consequences, after their first October in Still House was beyond comprehension.

Lee Baskins was in a position to find out. Her mother was the one with the keys to Still House now, after Baskins Realty had been the only agent in town willing to deal with the last owners. The place hadn't been empty for long. Already, there was a buyer ready to move in just next month. If Lee was ever going to solve this mystery, the time was now; and what a perfect way for her and her thrill-seeking friends to spend their Halloween.

The frisky cricket chorus of chirps overwhelmed any lingering late-night frivolity of a quiet, residential street as Lee and her crew slipped down the street and up to the dark doorstep of Still House.

"So far, so loud," Devon joked under her breath. Lee swatted her playfully and they all shared a quiet giggle as Lee fit the key into the lock. They all smirked at the sound of the deadbolt sliding free and the turning click of the doorknob.

"Now, c'mon, before someone like Mrs. Donaldson spots us and calls the cops." Jamie peered over their shoulder, towards the house directly across the street. A car speeding past on Cadorette made them all tense up, but the feeling passed quickly.

"She's like ninety or some shit," Riley muttered. "Why would she be awake after midnight?" He turned on the flashlight he'd brought with him, so they wouldn't be stumbling blindly into the house.

"What's the matter, Jamie?" Kenzie snickered as he cut through the group, to be the first one inside. "You chi—" His voice cut as soon as he had stepped fully over the threshold. They all laughed softly, under their breaths, until Riley shone the flashlight just off to the side of Kenzie's face and they realized he hadn't been pulling one of his usual jokes. They all knew his tells far too well and the way he simply stared back out at them dumbly, as if a dial tone echoed through his head, was chilling.

Lee pulled the key out of the lock as Devon all but shoved everyone inside and pushed the door shut behind herself. There was no click of the latch fitting into place, no creak of the floorboards under their feet, not even the sound of breathing. Riley rotated his flashlight wildly, trying to see everyone's face. Everyone's mouths moved frantically, but no one made a peep. Jamie pulled out their phone and opened the group chat. Light from their phone screen lit up their faces, but no one could hear the loud, simulated click clack of the keyboard that Jamie always refused to turn down, much to everyone's annoyance.

Jamie: *So creeped out!!*

The beam from the flashlight moved across the floor as Riley put it down and more artificial light lit up more faces as everyone pulled out their cells.

Riley: *Fuck, guys. I can't hear /anything/*

Devon: *can't even hear myself think*

Kenzie: *This can't be for real. . . can it?*

Lee: *Shit.*

Lee could feel her clammy skin breaking out in chilled goosebumps, even as blood rushed through her veins and throbbed soundlessly against her eardrums. She could feel her breath as it hitched in her throat, but she could not hear a single thing—not even the strange staticky sense of silence she usually perceived when it was too quiet.

Lee: *IT'S REAL!*

They all looked up from their phones at the same time, their screens lighting their faces from underneath, as if they were telling ghost stories by the campfire. It made their smiles seem grotesque as they grinned. Still not used to the utter quiet, their mouths all moved frantically as they attempted to shout excitedly at each other. Silent laughter contorted their faces as they remembered themselves, and Devon held up her phone with a smirk.

Devon: *wow, this is wild*

Riley: *K, let's look for spooky shit*

Kenzie: *Right on, my guy!*

Riley locked his phone and slipped it back into his pocket before picking his flashlight back up. Being the one with the keys, Lee felt as if she ought to be a leader of sorts, so she kept her phone out, to use the flashlight. Only Devon and Kenzie put away their phones, and trailed the others as they crept through the house. They conducted an impressively thorough search of the house—both floors and even the garage as well. Unable to talk, they paused throughout their explorations, to turn in towards each other so the whole group could see the different facial expressions of disappointment and frustration.

Finally stopping in front of the master suite for the second time, they all pulled out their phones, to open the chat.

Devon: *what a bust*

Kenzie: *Yeah, this sucks donkey balls.*

Riley: *Bruh. You suck donkey balls*

Three faces contorted with silent laughter, and a fourth with a sharp smirk as Kenzie looked up from his phone to scowl at his best friend. Riley only blew him a teasing kiss, to which Kenzie responded with a middle finger.

Jamie: *Well, it's still creepy af. We can't hear anything.*

Lee: *Yea, but this is kinda boring. Go home?*

They all looked up again, to read each other's faces. One by one, they shrugged at Lee.

Kenzie: *If we stayed overnight, that's still bragging rights.*

Devon: *i just wanna sleep now, tbh*

Devon: *getting tired*

Lee: *Yea, ok. So, three bedrooms. Wanna split up?*

Jamie: *I'm not really cool with that. Can't we just all share the master bedroom?*

Devon: *we can make, like, a nest on the floor*

Jamie: *Slumber party!!*

Riley: *Grab all the shit from the other bedrooms.*

They all nodded and went about stripping beds to create a pile of blankets and pillows to the side of the bed. After they'd closed themselves in the room, and taken turns using the en suite, they settled into a circle and amused themselves with funny faces and shadow animals on the walls and ceiling until drowsiness finally claimed them, one at a time.

Lee's eyes popped right open, as if spring-loaded. There was none of her usual foggy-headed blariness; her mind was clear and vivid. Her body was primed. Curious, she reached for her phone, and turned on the lock screen, to check the time.

3:30

Sun, November 1

Hmmm, she thought, what gives?

She let out a sharp gasp at the perceived sound of her own thought, then clutched her throat, startled, when she realized she'd heard the harsh intake of breath. She sat still and listened. With her senses hyper-focused, she could make out her slightly heaving breaths as her nostrils flared. Her own pulse thumped rhythmically in her ears, and she could hear the cricket serenade outside. A grunt, followed by a loud snore broke her out of her trance, and she smiled at herself. She turned on her phone's flashlight and aimed the light near where Riley lay on his back, mouth gaping open. Air moved in and out of him as noisily as possible, and Lee couldn't help but wince. She peeked at all her friends, one by one. Either they were heavy sleepers, or she was the only one who could hear again, if Riley wasn't waking them. Just then, Kenzie turned onto his side. "Yeah, that's right," he muttered in a

sleep-heavy voice, “that makes me so happy.” He huffed out a laugh, and Lee had to hold back one of her own. *I am so telling everyone that he talks in his sleep.*

Deciding it must have been the snoring that woke her up, Lee turned off her flashlight, set her phone down, and snuggled back into their makeshift nest. As she was getting comfortable and finally shutting her eyes, a low, persistent ringing went off in her ears. She would’ve assumed it was only Tinnitus—she’d heard of that, but thought it only happened to the elderly—only, the ring was accompanied by an invisible, inexplicable tsunami of presence. There wasn’t a doubt in her mind, just then, that there was something else in the house, out in the hall.

She could feel the intangible mass crawling along the floor, like someone clawing their way out from the grave. It crept along until it was flat on top of her, dragging finger-like sparks of sensation through her hair, and tickling the shell of her ear with the ghost of breath. Lee’s teeth chattered in her head, from the shock of her fear, and her brain frayed with an overload of urgent messages that her body was wholly incapable of receiving.

If I scream, she wondered, will anyone hear me? Will they wake up?

“Shhhhhh,” a soft voice washed over her slowly, easing some of the worry from her mind. Something about it felt maternal, like when her mother used to rock her to bed every night, singing hushed little songs that she’d made up, just for Lee. “Quiet now, Child.”

Lee at last relaxed into the non-touch that moved through her hair and along her face. She welcomed the weight that pressed down on her, as if it were only a weighted blanket, and she listened. She listened to that motherly voice sing her nonsense songs, in church-quiet whispers, until she’d been lulled into such peace that she didn’t notice how voices began to build, one right on top of the other.

“Listen,” whispered a harsh, powerful tone.

“Yes, listen,” groaned another.

“You musst lissten to usss,” hissed a third.

“I’m listening,” Lee muttered unconsciously. “Tell me a story.”

A whole chorus of whispers wormed their way into her mind, through her ear canals, and set to work crafting their tale.

“THIS IS THE—”

“Murder”

“**Kill. Kill. Kill.**”

“—WHAT YOU MUST DO.”

“Special.”

“**You’re so special.**”

“ONLY YOU.”

All that was left to find, on the morning of November 1st, 2009, was the utter devastation and horror that comes along with the slaughter of four innocent children.

They call it Still House; and ever since the brutal murder and ensuing manhunt that changed Cypress Grove forever, it’s no longer an anomaly among haunted houses.

Tomorrow’s Halloween... wanna break in and spend the night?

I hear that if you do, you can find out what happened to Lee Baskins.

About the Author:

Lennox Rex was born in Oregon, but raised in sunny San Diego. He wrote his first story in second grade and hasn’t stopped since. To him, life is best enjoyed with books, music, body mods, and plenty of coffee and sweets. He lives with his husband and their three children.

Instagram: [@lennox.rex.writer](#)

Author Blog: [Bookish Rex](#)



There are even worse things in the world
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A FEAST OF SORROWS



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The Unfinished Game | *Fariel Shafee*

The procession passed the graveyard like it always did this time of the year. This day was meant to remember the dead. The mourners were wearing masks, depicting ghosts, demons or skulls.

Thinking of the dead made me squeamish. I had seen death up close. I could not breathe and I felt somebody was dragging me towards darkness. Even nowadays, at night, I often wake up screaming, feeling out of breath. *No, I don't want to die.*

For days, I tried to forget the pair of arms grabbing my throat and the husky voice: "You thought you'd get away?"

I was not the person who died that evening. I held him firmly under water until he felt like a soaked rag doll. His gun had already drifted away.

I had wished that a new life would leave me liberated and thankful. He was gone. I, however, was now a prisoner of my own guilt and fears.

That was possibly why I saw that face in the crowd. He was tall and lean and his disheveled greyish hair reached below his shoulders. I was not sure if it was the mask or the face itself that stared at me. The balloon-like object was pale and the lips were thin and bloodless. The eyes were as they had been before – sharp and judgemental – sparkling like a pair of emeralds in a sea of indignation.

That face stared at me for a while as the procession moved straight and then took a turn. When the last head disappeared I knew I needed a drink as well as my sleeping pills.

I must have slept for hours. It was past midnight when I got up and heard myself whispering: "Go away. You deserved it." But he did not leave. This time I heard him clearly: "I deserved it? Did I start this war?"

The room was dark and I only saw a silhouette. I knew that it was him – that masculine smell, the gait, the sighs, it was the whole bundle. He also came with hatred – now stuck in my head.

"I know you're in my mind," I shouted this time.

"Am I?" He was sarcastic. "You cheated me. I cheated on time and death."

"You did not die? I saw you drown."

He laughed out mockingly, possibly at death. Lightning flashed – a storm was brewing. Perhaps it was the torch of that other world that sparkled and showed me my deed – a body devoured by little fish here and there, bones showing."

"No," I wanted to throw up.

"Are you afraid of death?" He smiled. "But this life just never ends. We can fight for ever, die and live and die."

I pressed on the light switch, but the room was dark. I felt suffocated as though this man had swallowed up all the air. Far away, I saw a little light and a tunnel that popped in from eternity.

Setting Things Right | *Fariel Shafee*

"Open up!" the crowd was demanding.

I curled up behind the door, holding tight the axe. He was in the bedroom, sitting still as though he did not care.

They had come for him. It was I who was shaken.

I feared this crowd. I wanted these people swarming like stinging bees to change course and head elsewhere. I wanted to smash these insect-like beings.

But I did not leave the village the last time.

They had taken him and they had shouted. I had heard him scream. I had seen the smoke rise.

Then I had locked the door and I had cried.

I did not leave.

Perhaps I was a coward. Perhaps I was weak. I did not protest that day.

This time they'd have to fight me.

"I won't let them take you again," I clarified as the crowd started to kick my door.

He said nothing, but walked up to the bathroom and changed into a white shirt as though he was getting ready for a dinner date.

“They did wrong. You had done nothing,” my voice was filled with tears. “I should never have let them take you.” I expected him to say something, anything – curse me, curse the crowd, absolve me. But he said nothing, and simply stood in front of the mirror.

“Let go,” an angry large man with an unshaven beard demanded.

“I shan’t,” I was stubborn.

“Now don’t be a fool. He can’t be here.”

“He did nothing wrong,” I screamed. “You were unfair.”

The crowd did not care for righteousness or fairness. They had come for blood like hungry felines.

They first stabbed me in the leg.

“Leave my house!” I screamed. They broke my plates, mutilated my furniture. “Grab him,” someone ordered. He still said nothing.

“Where is he?” I heard them complain. “We were here, by the door.” “Is there a basement?”

“Go away. Save yourself,” I whispered at him as my world slowly turned dark.

When I got up, my body ached. My mouth felt salty. I smelled mud.

“Dig it,” someone shouted.

The crowd was still there. This time it was me they wanted dead. I knew this place.

I frequented this marshy land strewn with thorny weeds almost every weekend. I knew those stones and the daffodils I had left. I always thought he was dead, that he lay there in this grave.

“You can share the same grave. He’s somehow come out, but you’ll be there,” the words were cruel and dirty.

They dug as I watched, and I panted as my body protested. Six feet under, and that’s my spot.

But the coffin was bolted still. When they broke it open, he lay silently like he sat on my bed. He was grinning at the world, reduced into a skeleton, the arms slightly extended as though he was waiting for me to join in. That’s why he had come.

Making Amends | *Fariel Shafee*

Sarah lit a candle and left a chocolate-strawberry cake on a white plate on the porch. Today was the day the dead visited. They came quietly and left silently. The loved ones who still remembered prepared feasts for them. That’s why Sarah had baked Mike’s favorite cake.

She actually lit a candle every week. To the world, Michael had disappeared one morning and had never returned. To Sarah, he was dead. He had left the house in the morning to fish. She had followed him and found him by the swamp alone. He did not look. She strangled him from behind using his fishing thread.

She visited that place often and wept. “I didn’t want to. But you’d have killed me. You’d have killed my child.”

The child was dead anyway. She was born still. But that child was not Mike’s and he would have known.

“I had nowhere to go,” she would explain to the dead man earnestly. “You’d also drag me back. “You put me in a prison,” she would complain before breaking down in tears. “But you took care of me. I shouldn’t have.” Finally, she would grow somber. “I never loved you. But I had no choice.”

Sarah did not go to her lover after the death of Michael and the child. She lived in the decent house Michael had left behind and she repented. She wore black and she fasted every Sunday. “I wish you were back,” she would sigh. “I wish it was me who got killed.”

The villagers had searched for Michael by the sea and in the jungle for a few days. Dogs sniffed the earth and barked. But he was nowhere to be found. How would they find him? She had wrapped him up and put him on a boat before dumping him in the middle of the river. There, by the swamp, was her little shrine – the stick, the cross and the withering flowers. “Maybe he has gone away. One day he will be back.”

“I want you to be back,” Sarah had also wished standing by the river. “One day you will rise and I shall hug you and say how sorry I was.”

Sarah wished for the same when she left the cake. “This is your favorite. I hope you enjoy.”

But when half the cake was gone, she got angry too.

“I want these children to leave,” she cursed the neighbors’ kids before walking up to her room to change. “The cake wasn’t for them!”

But she was not left alone there too. The room smelled of cologne.

“Who is it?” she shrieked. Then someone breathed heavily. He did not say a word but embraced her from the back. He was ice-cold, like a frozen fish, but Sarah knew it was him.

“You asked for me,” he reiterated.

It was that night that Sarah screamed and stabbed his heart with a knife before the neighbors found Michael lying dead in the bedroom.

About the Author:

The author received her degrees in physics from MIT and then Princeton. However, she loves to write and to paint. She has published prose and poetry in *decomp*, *Blaze Vox*, *Sirens Call*, *Deracine* etc. Recently, she especially writes horror pieces. She is also learning classical painting techniques and digital art, and has exhibited internationally.

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Aromatherapy | Jennifer Canaveral

Lynette locked herself in the upstairs bathroom and studied her face in the mirror. She rubbed the dry skin encrusting her eyelids and brows. Her irises were ablaze yet, through the burning, she managed to glare at her altered reflection with contempt. Inhabiting this deteriorating body was exhausting enough but finding courage to open the bathroom door and face her sorority sisters felt impossible.

“Hey, Lynette,” A voice said, followed by a light knock. “It’s Dina. Are you alright in there? We’re worried about you.”

You should be worried, Lynette thought.

She wanted to confide in them but couldn’t face the ridicule. Couldn’t stand admitting her blasé and snide attitude towards that smarmy vendor is what put her in this heinous position.

The vendor seemed innocent enough. Just another local eccentric, hawking his homemade something or other at a farmer’s market. The man’s claims were so ridiculous, Lynette had to entertain them, if only for sheer amusement.

“The beauty secrets of my Ottoman Viper Oil date back to Ancient Greece,” The vendor told Lynette. “Inhale its essence by using the oil in a diffuser overnight. Put it on your face, massage it into your scalp, and apply droplets onto your eyes! This oil fixes any and all beauty woes because only the unique oils extracted from the Ottoman viper—Greece’s most venomous snake—contain exceptional properties. Certain...metamorphic properties, you might say.”

“So, you are literally a snake oil salesman?” Lynette asked, her tone deadpan, as she inspected the bottle.

“Yes, I am,” The vendor replied. “And for the small price of thirty dollars, you can be a snake oil *proprietor*.”

Originally, the purchase was a joke—a gag gift for a future Dirty Santa exchange, perhaps—but Lynette soon found herself entranced with the oil. The plan was strictly to test its potency in a diffuser, practice self-care with a little aromatherapy, but Lynette wouldn’t be satisfied with solely inhalation of the product. She felt a sudden desire, an all-consuming urgency to douse herself with the snake oil.

Following the vendor’s instructions, Lynette rubbed the oil all over her face and body, massaged it deep into her scalp, saturated every strand of hair, and even applied oil drops into her eyes until the bottle was empty.

The next morning, the headaches and eye pain began. Lynette experienced pounding, debilitating migraines while her eyes burned with the slightest exposure to light. Analgesics like ibuprofen failed to have any effect on the throbbing and no ophthalmic solution available could thwart the photophobic vision.

Following the headaches, Lynette’s hairline started receding and clumps of her silky, flaxen tresses peeled away from her scalp. As alopecia quickly set in, Lynette’s entire integumentary system malfunctioned; her once healthy complexion now resembled the dry, gauzy skin of a molting snake.

Since initiating the Ottoman Viper Oil aromatherapy, Lynette rarely left the sorority house. If she did, it wasn't without a pair of dark-tinted sunglasses and a hooded sweatshirt to conceal her hair loss and desiccated skin. Hers may have been the worst case of *caveat emptor* in existence and there was nothing left to do but figure out how to live with this unfortunate transformation.

Lynette gripped the edge of the sink, reliving her encounter with the vendor.

So, you are literally a snake oil salesman?

These haunting words reverberated in her mind, like a relentless echo compounding her embarrassment and anguish.

Lynette collapsed to the bathroom floor, raising her hands to her head and feeling a cluster of small, tender mounds. She stood up, examining the bumps in the mirror when a sun ray beamed through a shower window. The rays blinded Lynette, causing her to writhe in pain, as streams of salty tears excoriated her tender corneas.

"Lynette," Dina said through the bathroom door. "Come out and talk to us. We barely see you anymore and it's got me worried."

Lynette wiped her tears with a hand towel and took a deep breath. She gathered her composure as best as she could then replied, "Don't worry about me. I'll be out soon." As she debated whether or not to unlock the door, a buzzing from above caught her attention and she stared horrified as a lone yellow jacket flew past the shower curtain.

The prescribed Epi-Pen she was supposed to have on her at all times? In the downstairs kitchen. Her eyes widened as she leered at the wasp, following it as it hovered over the shower then descended towards the toilet. It flew aimlessly in circles until it collapsed and made a clinking sound as it plopped onto the porcelain lid.

The insect lay motionless, but was it dead?

Lynette grabbed a toothbrush by the sink, ready to inspect and prod the corpse but, before she could, a strange wave swept across the wasp's body, muting its vibrant yellow abdomen to a dull gray. With the toothbrush, she scooted the corpse until it dropped and shattered onto the tiled floor.

Lynette collected the ashen remains, rolling the firm granules between her fingertips and identified its coarse texture.

"Stone," She whispered to herself then touched her eyelids, feeling a strange sense of ease, the chronic pain throughout her body suddenly lifting.

"You sure you're alright, Lynette?" Another voice—an irate voice—said through door. "I mean, I'm sorry you're feeling like crap and all, but some of us need to shower! In this century!"

Lynette stood up and, once again, studied her reflection in the mirror. Her eyes were still wrecked but no longer burning. The mounds forming on her scalp were all coming to a head, like a cluster of pustules nearing eruption, only these were no pustules. No pimply whiteheads at all.

Surveying her translucent scalp, Lynette saw each mound had a serpentine head and a pair of beady eyes. She touched their tiny heads as they thrashed on top of her skull and felt an aching in her bones—a sort of maternal pang—sensing the snake 'births' were imminent. Lynette patted the tender mounds with tears welling in her bloodshot eyes, then said, "Soon, darlings. When you're ready, Mommy will be here to greet you."

"Look, Lynette," The angry voice said, followed by a fist pound on the door. "Open up and toss us a bottle of Motrin! That shitty oil you've been diffusing all week is killing us. Thanks to *you*, we all have migraines and the *gnarliest* cases of pink eye known to man!"

Caressing the budding snakes, Lynette closed her eyes in ecstasy and whispered, "You hear that, little ones? My sorority sisters are blessing you with cousins."

About the Author:

Jennifer Canaveral is a writer and US Coast Guard veteran from San Francisco. Her recent work was published in Horror Tree's Trembling with Fear. In her free time, Jennifer enjoys playing guitar, cooking, reading, and watching scary movies. She works as a librarian's assistant and lives in Kodiak, AK with her husband and three children.

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Dinner Date at Verna's | Rick Sherman

"How the hell did you manage to score a table at Verna's? I have to say I'm impressed."

"I was able to pull a few strings. Or rather my boss at the agency was able to pull a few strings. I had to kind of beg him to do it, but then I told him I was taking the prettiest vegan in Hoboken out for steaks! He relented."

"I still can't believe I'm actually eating flesh tonight."

"You make it sound so grisly. It's not even real, flesh, as you put it. Besides, when was the last time you ate meat?"

"I was twelve, my class went on a trip to a local farm. I actually saw chickens and cows and, well, after that they became actual things to me, you know, people."

"Cows are people, really?" asked Jack

"To me they are," Eileen replied.

"Well, Verna is still alive and happy."

He gestured to a large framed photograph of a cow on the wall. Verna the cow stood in a vibrant green pasture beneath a perfect blue sky filled with perfect cotton ball clouds.

"Thanks to her, billions of cows will be spared slaughter."

"And so much less methane in the air to kill our atmosphere," she added.

"My dad has a friend who knows somebody who was one of the first people to try meat grown in a lab. What made it so gross was just that it didn't really have any taste at all, though he gave them points for the texture."

"And then they started cloning Verna, what was it, two years ago now?"

"Yeah, Eileen, they found the most average healthy cow they could find and just started cloning her flesh"

They both took a moment to inspect their menus.

Jack made up his mind first, "I'm going to have the ribeye."

"Hmmm, I have no idea what to get. I don't even know the difference between these different cuts."

Jack signaled at the tuxedo clad waiter who immediately glided up to their table, looking prim in his little apron.

"Are you ready to order?"

"I am, but Eileen here is having trouble making up her mind. She's a vegan."

The waiter gave curt, knowing little nod.

"May I recommend something unusual?"

"The unusual always makes an impression, what is it, shoot."

He gave a thin, pleased little smile.

"Tonight we have a new item on the menu, in fact you would be one of the first customers to even try it."

"Ok, I'm game, what is it?"

"It is called The Hanger."

"Doesn't sound particularly appetizing."

"It comes from Verna's belly. It actually hangs from the diaphragm. What it lacks in notoriety I assure you it makes up for in deliciousity."

"Ok, what the heck," she said with a fetching smile, "I'll try that."

Then they ordered their sides, appetizers and drinks and the waiter took his leave.

"Is 'deliciousity' actually a word?"

Jack laughed, "I admire your adventurous spirit."

"Well you can try a piece if you'd like. So do you, like, write TV commercials or just print advertising?"

"Do you really want to know about my job?"

"Actually I was just trying to make conversation. I couldn't care less about your job."

He almost choked on his gin and tonic.

She burst out laughing, "Relax, Jack, I'm just giving you shit. I want to know all about it, I really do."

Jack got to talking about himself, something he excelled at. Eileen smiled and nodded a lot. Eventually, the food came.

Eileen stared down at the rectangular slab of cloned beef laid out on her plate next to some asparagus and potatoes au gratin. She poked at it a bit with her fork.

"I still can't believe I'm actually going to eat meat."

Jack held up a chunk of steak on his fork, "Look at that, pink in the middle and juicy as a virgin on her wedding night." And with that he put it in his mouth and let out some almost orgasmic groans of delight.

“As good as any ‘real ‘steak I’ve ever had. Delish! Go ahead, dig in.”

Years of aversion were hard to overcome.

Finally, she cut off a little slice and popped it into her mouth. As she chewed it her mouth filled with saliva and flooded with rich, beefy flavor. A ‘mmmmmm ‘noise escaped her lips almost involuntarily.

She just couldn’t believe how good her steak was, it did indeed have a high level of deliciousity. Before she even knew it, she had finished the whole thing.

“Well look here, who’s president of the clean plate club?” Jack said

Strangely she found herself blushing.

“Well...uh, I forgot to save you a taste.”

“I’m just so glad you enjoyed it. I still have half of my ribeye to go. I’m savoring it.”

It was then that a piercing shriek broke through the hushed atmosphere of the restaurant.

An elegant, exquisitely coiffed middle-aged woman stood at her table and began to yell.

“My lord Astaroth, your time is nigh. No, not the wombats, not now, my lord!” And she began raking her claw like fingers in the air around her.

“Take them away, my lord! Oh, most holy Astaroth, I am thy vessel. For Verna demands it be thus!” She let out a howl and started clawing at her face with her long, lacquered and sharp fingernails, leaving angry bloody red troughs on her cheeks.

The three other people at her table looked on, aghast. Finally, she collapsed onto the floor, her body heaving heavily as she writhed and contorted on the carpeting and then fell utterly still. The restaurant went as silent as a cemetery at midnight.

The maître d’ strode to the middle of the space and addressed the shocked customers.

“An ambulance is on the way. We at Verna’s apologize for what you had to witness. All of your meals will be comped. Please, resume and enjoy.”

Someone at another table asked, “I wonder what she ate?”

“Magic mushrooms,” her date replied.

Things were tense back at Eileen and Jack’s table.

“What in bloody fuck was that?” Eileen demanded.

“Do you want to go?”

“No, you haven’t even finished your steak. That was upsetting but, it was also...”

“Memorable?”

“No, I was going to say unexpected and disturbing. But I suppose ‘memorable ‘will have to suffice.”

They sat in silence for a while as he cut into his ribeye and she sipped her pinot. She looked at her side dishes but just couldn’t bring herself to eat. Jack wasn’t suffering from that problem.

As time passed the dining room filled once again with the pleasing ambience of hushed conversation and the tinkling of cutlery on porcelain. Of course, it happened again.

A ruddy cheeked man with a thatch of unruly gray hair let out a high-pitched ululating wail that hit Eileen like an ice pick to the base of the skull.

“Astaroth! Astaroth! As Verna demands so must we succumb! Great lord Astaroth, your time is nigh! Let my blood turn the keys, let my breath unfreeze the gears of thy dominion!”

He picked up a clean silver fork from his table and plunged it into his left eyeball, popping it. The diners at his table shrieked in horror as a shiny jelly mixed with blood oozed down his cheek from the ruined pulp of his eye.

The dining room filled with screams as people got up from their tables and began to run from the restaurant.

At a table near the exit a twelve-year-old boy stood, his eyes glazed over and his head thrown back. He stood in the space next to the hostess’s lectern to block the exit.

“Lord Astaroth demands your veins and arteries and guts and your meat. As Verna would have it! It shall be done!” And grabbing a serrated steak knife from the table he plunged it into the thigh of the stockinged leg of an attractive woman trying to leave. She howled in shock and pain.

A wave of chaotic hysteria swept through the diners assembled in the restaurant. Jack reached over and grabbed Eileen’s hand and squeezed it, looking deep into her eyes.

“We’re going to be fine, honey.”

It was then that their ever so prim and proper waiter returned, utterly dapper and unperturbed.

“I offer you my humble apologies. Until we understand what is happening I would ask you remain seated until the authorities arrive.”

“One thing,” Eileen asked, “what did they eat?”

“Excuse me?”

“What the hell did those crazy people eat?”

He looked a bit uncomfortable and glanced away. He opened his mouth to speak and then shut it. Licked his lips.

“What-the-fuck-did-they-eat!” she demanded.

“It was...it was the new dish. The hanger.”

Her jaw dropped and her face lightened to the shade of the porcelain on the table. Her eyes welled up and she shook her head in denial.

“Look, Eileen, you’re going to be fine, ok? You’re going to be okay, ok? How do you feel?”

“I-I don’t know. I guess I feel good, it’s just... “

It was then that they both noticed the waiter had made good on his exit.

“It’s just what?”

“Nothing...I’m ok...I’m...ok.”

“You keep saying that,” he reached out and held her hand, it was cold and damp to his touch, “I hope this doesn’t ruin things. I mean, up ‘till now I thought this date was going really smooth.”

“It’s what Verna demands.”

“Uh, what now, Eileen?”

She stood flinging her arms out, her fingers contorting like angry spiders.

“Lord Astaroth! Birth through me! As Verna would have it! I am thy vessel!”

“Holy shit!” Jack was legit terrified and yet somehow had the stray thought, *I am so not getting laid tonight* creep through his head.

The front of her white silk blouse began to turn dark, wet and red with arterial blood. She dug her fingernails into the center of the suppurating, blossoming wound and buried them deep into her flesh and howled and laughed in mad idiot lunacy.

From her chest something emerged. Something that seemed too large to be coming out of such a petite girl. A large round sphere squeezed out, the size of a watermelon, bald with some wisps of stray hair and pink skin running scarlet with Eileen’s red life juice. The thing, it was a head, now Jack could see that as he sat paralyzed in his seat, body frozen in disbelief and terror.

The head poked all of the way out and looked at him. It was the head of a baby, a newborn. Its eyelashes gossamer and its mouth sprouting a confused gaggle of needle fangs.

Exultant, Eileen screeched, “Astaroth is here!”

The baby-thing looked a petrified Jack in the eyes and said in a voice like broken glass and boiling puppies, “Verna demands it.”

The rest of Astaroth came through the doorway of Eileen’s slender frame, ripping it to bits in the coming. It stood in the puddle of her viscera. A giant cross-eyed baby head on top of slimy scorpion thorax, claws snapping, a thousand millipede legs writhing in the remains of Eileen’s bloody guts.

Astaroth had arrived and Verna’s will would be done.

Jack began to laugh hysterically.

About the Author:

Rick Sherman is a retired award winning Magician/Mentalist living in the manicured suburbs of Long Island, New York. Finding himself with a surfeit of free time he has turned to writing with increasing degrees of success. He lives with his wife and five children (only three of which have four legs and a tail).

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The Family Home | Robert Runté

Lester had always sensed the comforting presence of his mother's spirit whenever he returned to his childhood home after an overseas contract. He had rented the house out this time, thinking his mother's ghost might enjoy the company.

Now, standing in his living room once more, he could detect no trace of his mother's familiar warmth. On the contrary, the room was chilled, an overwhelming darkness pressing in from all sides, just beyond his peripheral vision.

It hadn't occurred to Lester that the renters would come with their own histories—or that those dark phantoms could push his mother out.

Spellcheck | Robert Runté

The giant frog lifted its right front leg off the pentagram, examined its four sticky fingers, and croaked, "What the fuck, Gerry?"

Gerry backed up a few steps. "I must have said it wrong."

"You think!"

Gerry examined the script again. "It's perfect. I ran it through spell-check and everything."

The giant frog slapped its hand over its eyes. "Gerry, please tell me you remembered to turn off predictive text?"

"Of course. Oh, wait. I see it now. I mistyped 'wisdom' as *sapientia* and spell-check corrected it to *salientia* — Latin for 'frog' — instead of *sapientiae*."

"I hate you, Gerry."

Staked to the Stars | Robert Runté

The Count's hand caressed the dirt covering the bottom of the coffin-shaped ceramic pod.

"From your garden," the official affirmed.

"So, I stay grounded. *How long* to Trappist-1e?"

"153 years. But you'll be asleep for most of that."

"A long time."

"Less than you've lived already." The official spread his hands feigning enthusiasm. "First to the Trappist system. That's huge."

"Then stranded."

"Well, yes." The official gestured at various consoles. "But all of human music, art, literature at your disposal. First to explore a new world!"

"And if I refuse?"

"Then it's the Van Helsing option for you, I'm afraid."

About the Author:

Robert Runté is Senior Editor with EssentialEdits.ca where he edits SF&F. Back in the day, he published nearly 150 issues of various fanzines, such as *The Monthly Monthly*, *Neology*, and *New Canadian Fandom*, which led to his being Fan GoH at the 1994 Worldcon. He currently reviews SF&F for *The Ottawa Review of Books*.

Author Blog: [Essential Edits](#)

It was Halloween and Mikey called at eleven p.m. He'd be late. He blamed it on a perfect storm: a busy night, people plowing extra stuff down their drains colliding with heavy rains that overtaxed the ancient system. Another emergency at the sewage plant. Right.

Melanie battled not to twist or overthink Mikey's excuse. It was her tendency to believe the stories in her head although until tonight, he'd given her no real reason to think he was cheating.

How could he? On their anniversary.

She breathed deeply like her therapist suggested. Their black, shimmering Halloween tree waited in the living room corner for him to come home so they could decorate it together. The tree they'd bought on their trip to New England, where they rode their Harleys from dawn to dusk, and where they'd adopted Foster, a kitten they smothered with love. She stopped simmering. Barely.

Ten years ago, tonight, she was eating breakfast alone near midnight at the local diner, when Mikey walked in. Like her, he was tall, wore a leather jacket and was alone. Uninvited, he'd slid into her booth, set his beefy hands on the table and said, "Neither of us is going to spend the rest of Halloween alone. Ok?" She agreed.

He ordered breakfast and they talked and drank coffee until sunrise. They had been together ever since. She twirled her wedding ring; they'd promised each other to celebrate their Halloween encounter every year at home.

Mikey's absence could only mean he was cheating.

It must be the new floozy she'd met a few months ago on a surprise visit to his office. He always told her about everyone at work but never mentioned this chick who rode the same model Harley Melanie did.

Then a week ago, listening at the bathroom door, she thought she heard Mikey flirting on the phone. Did he say, 'she was so adorable' and he 'could meet after work any time'. She didn't confront him; she couldn't admit being so insecure as to eavesdrop. But she stewed.

Now, staring at the Halloween tree, she punched the living room wall and then called her therapist.

She didn't pick up. Melanie hung up and started box breathing: inhaling for four counts, holding for four counts, exhaling four counts, holding four counts.

Calmer, she got busy stringing the orange and black lights and decorating the tree which calmed her. Hanging the last ornament, Melanie looked over the miniature motorbikes, handcuffs, and the tiny stiletto knives and shoes they'd collected over the years. Memories of their travels.

How she wished Foster was here to nuzzle and soothe her. Boy, she missed that cat, but they'd agreed, it felt too soon to replace him.

Then, her poisonous thinking started again.

She threw the ornament boxes into the closet; Mikey was probably decorating his new babe's tree. Or something. Was it possible another woman didn't mind his mix of spicy cologne and sewage scent?

She turned away from the closet, kicked out her leg and slammed the door closed with her spiky heel and returned to the tree. It was one a.m.

The only thing left was to place their skeleton couple on top. Mikey always did it around midnight, then they'd eat breakfast like they did the night they met. Her fantasy of Mikey and his coworker partying on Halloween was overwhelming.

She got her pocketknife and began fiddling with the lights and the skeletons, reworking them like he'd instructed her not to do when he'd taught her to rewire their bedroom lamp.

"This'll make you sizzle."

At one-thirty Mikey called. "Be home by two-thirty, honey," he said. "I'm hurrying."

"The tree's done." She tapped her stiletto heel eyeing the tree. Why couldn't he stay loyal? She only wanted him.

She stroked the little leather seat of the bike ornament he'd given her this year for her birthday.

"Honey, I'm sorry. I'll explain later. You saved the skeletons for me, didn't you?"

They'd had the skeleton-couple tree topper custom made with lots of tiny sparkling lights.

"Of course, sweetie. I can hardly wait for that." She glanced at the skeletons laying on the coffee table.

"We're still having breakfast, right?"

“Like always.”

“I love you, honey.”

“Hmm.”

In the kitchen, she prepared to scramble eggs and cook bacon. Just before two-thirty Mikey’s headlights flashed on the wall and Melanie greeted him at the door. He was damp and had his arms crossed awkwardly at his chest.

He stepped into the kitchen. “Happy Halloween, honey!”

Melanie was silent.

“I didn’t forget,” he said. “Happy Anniversary!”

He cradled something underneath his jacket. And that something began squirming up his chest. The face of a fluffy, black kitten appeared.

“What did you do? Who’s this little guy?” She looked up at Mikey.

“Surprise! This is Parsley. But you can give her another name.”

Melanie cried. She clasped her hands around Mikey’s thick neck, leaving room between them for Parsley.

“I love the name. She’s a cutie pie.”

“I know how much you miss Foster.”

“You miss him too.”

He kissed her. She stepped back and stroked his face. Mikey was better looking than ten years ago. His deep brown eyes were kinder than those of a saint.

“The sewage backup was bad. The roads to get to Parsley were flooded. I’m so happy to be home.”

Melanie reached for the kitten.

“Whoa! Let me introduce her properly. At the tree.”

“Give me a minute.”

Melanie turned to stir the eggs, her insides calmer. Mikey’s wet boots squeaked as he headed to the living room.

“Come on Melanie,” he called, “I’m putting on the topper.”

She dropped the spoon. The back of her throat turned sour.

She ran to the living room.

Mikey reached to place the skeletons while holding Parsley in his other hand.

Melanie shrieked and charged toppling him.

Mikey was stunned but fine. Parsley cowered under the couch. Nearby, the two skeletons sparked and twitched in the dim light.

“Why’d you do that?” Mikey lay on the floor rubbing the back of his head.

Melanie lay on top of him relieved but shivering. “I, I, I just had a bad feeling ...”

Mikey turned and looked at the skeletons.

“Shit, Melanie! Something must have shorted. I could have ...”

He wrapped his arms tightly around Melanie and she whispered into his ear how much she loved him.

‘Never again’ she promised herself. From now on she’d take that proverbial step back to breathe and think.

When they parted, Melanie spotted on Mikey’s neck what looked like a lipstick smear and not like a graze he’d gotten in the fall. A flame ignited in her gut.

Forgetting to breathe, she reached for the crackling skeletons.

About the Author:

Liz Mayers writes short fiction from Long Island, NY. She’s a hiker, cat lover, eavesdropper, and lifelong gephyrophobic. When not spinning stories in her head, she communicates telepathically with her ever-blooming orchids and African violets. She’s a Pushcart Prize nominee.

Author Website: [Liz Mayers](#)

It's time to let the monsters out!



AVAILABLE ON AMAZON

Featured Author | *L. Stephenson*

For the longest time, I thought that writing for movies and television was what I wanted to do with my life. Taking Media Studies in college, I acted in a short film, 'Now we are grown up', by the Desperate Optimists – a creative partnership who have produced short films, movies, theatre productions and online artwork together. I also worked with the popular British rock band, Kaiser Chiefs on their 'Employment' tour, and had the opportunity to interview up-and-coming Indie bands. I then continued on to university where I studied Film & TV Screenwriting. The course was absolutely bare-bones compared to what it is today, but during my time there I attended writing festivals on the other side of the country and helped create and write the soap-opera radio drama 'Estate of Affairs', which broadcast on Preston FM out of Preston in the North-west of England.

Before I committed my spare time to writing novellas, novels and short stories, I turned to songwriting. Not as a profession, but as a hobby and creative outlet. I would create songs as a way of making sense of different aspects of my past and current relationships with boyfriends, friends and even family members. Over the course of eight years, I recorded close to sixty songs at a studio in Liverpool under the name Boy In A Blue Hood. In fact, the city's rich history in music was one of the main reasons I chose to relocate to the area. Looking back on that period of my life, I feel grateful to have had such a fulfilling pastime.

But when I returned to writing, I addressed deeper, much more painful topics, particularly in my short stories. I drew from experiences concerning my life-altering skin condition, my sexuality, my sanity and my thoughts on life and death. In contrast to this, I also strongly believe that writing horror is a wonderful way to free one's own mind, to let go. It can be fun and entertaining, as well as intellectually satisfying without having to be analyzed into the ground.

About the Author:

L. Stephenson has been telling stories of killers and boogeymen to his friends and writing them on his computer since the summer before he began high school. A university degree in Film & TV Screenwriting, a handful of anthologies and a novella later, and not much has changed, it seems! Stephenson's first short story was published as part of a Halloween-themed collection by Dark Ink back in 2018. Nearly five years later, terror just came full circle as the author has returned home to Dark Ink to release his debut slasher novel, *The Boatmore Butcher*.

Amazon Author Page: [L. Stephenson](#)

Instagram: [@L_Stephenson](#)



THE
BOATMORE
BUTCHER



L. STEPHENSON

Jamie Brooks, Pt. I

It all began that very night. The night he returned for the first.

Nineteen-year-old Jamie Brooks sat alone on the third story of the university library. The overhead lamp of his study cubicle shone down on him like a spotlight in the darkness as it was one of the few lights left working on the entire floor, courtesy of the evening caretaker. Those that burned on illuminated the great staircase that corkscrewed its way down to the revolving door entrance. By day its constant spin swept in as many bodies as it did out, but now, at this late hour, it lay still.

The tip of a pen hung frozen over an empty page of lined paper as Jamie stared at the screen of the phone sitting next to his notepad. Having vibrated obnoxiously a moment ago, the student looked around guiltily before tapping the device.

A message from NIGEL:

Are you okay? Everyone missed you at the meeting.

Of course. The LGBTQ+ meeting he was supposed to attend two nights ago. He had signed up on the first day of the opening semester. Even paid for a full membership. Such pride he had felt, being brave enough to walk right up to that table with the rainbow flag draped down the front. And so casually, too. He went to one meeting. He didn't approach anyone and no one approached him, so he spent the time sitting by himself writing melancholy song lyrics on his phone that he would never use until it was over.

By the following Thursday, as he stood across the street from the group's designated bar, all that pride and all that bravery was gone. He felt a cold and hollow sadness where he had always imagined the warmth of friendship and acceptance would be. When would he feel like he belonged somewhere? What would it take? He didn't know, and so he faded into the foot traffic of the night to lullaby the ache of his hungry belly. Halfway through gobbling his large portion of chunky fries and melted cheese, he cried his first tears of true loneliness.

Jamie jolted as he was startled by a noise. Like the sound of a door clicking shut, and shuffling. Someone running? Or creeping towards him at an alarming pace?

Seated close to the far wall, he had a wide view of the floor as he quietly leaned back in his chair and took a look around. All he could see were books, the shelves they rested upon, and the shadows that enveloped everything. Silence and darkness. He dared not call out. What if someone answered? What were they doing there, sneaking around and hiding like that?

He drew in a sharp breath as the lamp above him jumped. He squirmed as something snagged his foot. Fingers grappling the edge of the desk, he pushed himself away and peered beneath. Relief washed over him as he realized that he grazed the lamp's ugly gray power cord with the toe of his sneaker.

Shielding his eyes from the powerful bulb's blaze, it occurred to him that if there were someone standing on the other side of the brilliant white light, all he would see is a blinding wall concealing their presence from him.

But there was no one there. There couldn't be. There wasn't.

Was there?

A reminder alert caught his attention. The message again. A second review thawed him a little. Maybe there was still hope after all. With a half-smile, he swiped away Nigel's kind white lie and resolved that he would give the meetings another chance. Feeling encouraged by this decision, he hustled to his feet and brushed his pad and pen into his flimsy excuse for a satchel.

Turning to leave, he halted as the phone throbbed in his hand. The name MOM appeared.

"I'm leaving now," he told her as he walked slowly along the row of empty cubicles towards the aisle.

"Good boy," his mother's voice said. "Oh, I've missed you so much!"

"I've missed you, too," he admitted sadly. "Really."

"I know, dear," she soothed. "Did you get your tickets? I sent them to you."

"Yeah, yeah. I printed them earlier. I've been at the library, so..."

"Excellent! I can't wait to see your sweet face when I pick you up from the ferry tomorrow afternoon."

Jamie stopped when he reached the middle of the aisle. Swallowing dryly, he asked, "Will Dad be there?"

There was a moment of quiet on the other end, and then: "You know he has to work on the boat to provide for us."

"Okay..." His mouth trembled as he struggled for words. "It's just I haven't talked to him since I told him I was—"

His head snapped around as something slapped down on the floor somewhere behind him. A book had fallen from one of the shelves. By itself?

“What is it? Are you all right?”

“Mom, I need to go,” Jamie said as he backed away from the towering shadows of the book cases all around him.

The groan of metal cut into him as the chair he had been sitting in tumbled over.

He staggered away, hearing the sound of another book hitting the floor as he turned and raced down the aisle towards the staircase. He dared not look back as he tore his way down to the ground level of the library. Not until he reached the revolving doors as they stood frozen in front of him. His eyes frantically searched the entire room behind him as it appeared to come alive, closing in, reaching for him. He made for the side entrance and pounded the green EXIT button. The door released. Forcing it wide open, he barged out into the night.

The university grounds were dark, empty, and wet from a gentle rain as Jamie pumped his way across them. He soon reached the main street where a town bus was just about to depart. Scurrying around the front of the vehicle, he jumped aboard as the doors closed behind him.

His phone pulsed again as he fell into a seat.

“Yeah, Mom, I’m fine,” he assured her. “I gave myself a good scare, that’s all. I’m just on my way to the station now. I’ll call you when I get to the hotel, okay? Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.”

* * *

The 19-year-old student only had seconds to spare as his connecting bus was already waiting at the station.

Announcements blared out and echoed along the walls of the great old building as a large round clock passed over the boy’s head in his haste. An ever-changing blue television screen flickered as it listed off all the scheduled arrival and departure times.

The place was practically deserted at that late hour, save for a janitor who swept away with his wide broom and a drunk who could barely hold his balance as he stunk to high heaven.

Jamie had no time to acknowledge either of them as he heard the piercing hiss of his next bus preparing to depart.

“Wait!” he called out as he dashed back out into the freezing night air where he just made it.

Stepping on board, he smiled at the weary bus driver as he showed him his pass before taking a seat towards the back.

Rolling up his sleeve, Jamie smiled to himself. No matter who he was, and no matter where he was, he would always have at least one friend. Upon the delicate flesh of his left wrist was the name ELLA, his Grandmother’s name. The only person who knew who he truly was, even before he did. As a growing boy, he would visit her every weekend and she would prepare him bowls of soup with plenty of bread and butter to sop it up while she sat contently in the corner and smoked her cigarettes.

As the bus set off, Jamie reached up and opened a window above the seats in front of him. Apart from the bus driver and himself, the bus was empty. He leaned back against the headrest and closed his eyes, taking in the cold night air as it washed over his face.

Just as he began to relax, he heard a loud cough coming from behind him. Jamie turned to look.

Was he there before?

Sitting at the back of the bus was a man in a pale hood staring directly at him.

Jamie faced forward, gripping the support bar in front of him. He tried to distract himself with the scenery as the city disappeared into the night, but his thoughts wandered back to the passenger behind him.

Was he hiding back there? The back seat was empty.

Unable to resist, Jamie slowly turned his head again.

The man was still staring at him.

Snapping forward, he froze as he realized something. The man was no longer sitting on the back seat. He had moved places when Jamie wasn’t looking. The man was sitting closer now.

Holding his breath, he listened. He could hear the tires on the road, the night air coming in from the window, and the floor of the bus creaking quietly as the man moved even closer.

The next thing Jamie heard was someone breathing, deep and heavy. Tears surfaced as he realized the man in the pale hood was now sitting right behind him. Then he heard the flickering of paper. The strange sound was almost like someone playing with a deck of cards.

Jamie jumped hard as something dropped down onto the empty seat beside him. Flinching away from the object, he looked down to see what it was. His notepad?

He looked up again as the man in the pale hood got up and walked to the front of the bus.

Returning his thoughts to the notepad, he remembered hearing a second book fall in the library as he made a run for it, but he never saw what it was. It must have been the sound of the notepad falling out of his bag as he went. Which means...

He was there.

The bus came to a stop just inside the mouth of a great arched tunnel that curved its way beneath the derelict train tracks high above.

Jamie quietly got out of his seat and started to back away as he heard the man in the pale hood having words with the driver.

Their conversation ended quickly as the hooded man drew a black metal pipe from beneath his coat and smashed it over the side of the bus driver's face. Jamie held back a gasp as he ducked behind the nearest seat, his eyes searching frantically for a way out.

With chilling ease, the man in the pale hood ripped the bleeding bus driver from his seat and hurled him out of the sliding doors. There was a dull thud as the driver's body bounced off the wall of the tunnel. Staring directly at Jamie, the man pushed a button, automatically slamming the bus doors shut.

Jamie slid all the way down to the floor where he could feel the body of the vehicle humming beneath him, but then the engine stopped, the floor became still, and all the lights went out.

In the dark of that bus, all he could hear now was the man's footsteps, slow like a steady heartbeat as they got closer and closer.

With every step forward the man took, Jamie felt his throat tighten up a little more. He wanted to scream, but the grip of his own fear was too strong. He couldn't breathe; his lungs ached as they burned with their need for air.

The bus began to shake as the footsteps got heavier, louder, faster.

Petrified, he climbed back up onto his seat and curled into a trembling ball, hoping that he remained hidden.

In the distance, he could hear the sound of car wheels racing over the tarmac surface of the road. Jamie slowly edged his head around in time to see the entire back window of the bus illuminate as it captured the full beam of the car's headlights. He jolted with fright as the car's horn blared like the cry of a startled elephant. The squeal of its tires pierced the dense air inside the bus as the car swerved to avoid it. Three more angry horns, followed by one long furious horn, blasted the night as the car sped off deep into the tunnel.

The footsteps had stopped.

Jamie squinted into the darkness in front of his eyes. His breath caught in his throat at the black shape looming over him. The light from the motorist's car had shown the hooded man exactly where Jamie was hiding. He smiled emptily as he reached out for him. An arm gently wrapped around his neck as a voice whispered, "Hello, my boy..."

As cold fingers scratched at his throat, Jamie screamed as he dove over the seat in front of him, reaching out for the metal handle of the emergency exit door. The headlights may have given away his hiding spot, but not without illuminating a way out. He yanked the handle and leapt blindly out into the middle of the road.

The impact of the landing kicked his head back at the same time as it threw him forward to the ground. The rough surface of the road shredded his palms and fingers. Ignoring his torn flesh, Jamie clawed himself to his feet and took off into the pitch-black throat of the tunnel, pumping his legs as fast as he could.

Jamie hurtled through total darkness, stumbling over potholes, loose pieces of brick from the tunnel walls, and even his own feet as his toes jabbed the surface of the road too steeply. Sobbing and whimpering, he pressed on, praying for another car to come by. He would flag them down and he would be safe. Safe from the man who, for all he knew, was only inches away from grabbing him.

He ran faster. His heart and windpipe seemed to fuse into one. Every sharp breath of air he took pulsed beneath his Adam's apple as if something was trying to punch its way out of his throat from the inside. Was he going to die here in this tunnel? In the dark? He felt like he was dying already, enveloped in that terrifying blackness, and then...

Light! There was light coming from the tunnel behind him. The car he had prayed for was on its way. Safety was now within his reach. He stopped in his tracks, wheezing, coughing, and smiling as he turned to flag the car down.

But there was no car, only the bus. The lights were blinding as its engine choked into life. Jamie shrieked into the beaming glow of the monstrous machine's headlights. They were like the devil's eyes burning into his soul, and the engine was its bone-splintering roar, beckoning him into the deepest of depths. Jamie screamed at the beast and the creature bellowed back. He turned and ran further into the tunnel. The bus growled as its wheels began to turn.

The boy's throat was ripped raw as he screamed every frantic step of the way. Contorted in his own fear, his body ran too fast, even for itself, as if his bones meant to burst free of their skinsuit. He stumbled and tripped and screamed and cried. All the while the bus behind him rapidly gained momentum.

Jamie looked to the shadows cast by the light of the beams. He searched for a maintenance door to charge through or a pillar to hide behind, but he found nothing. He fast approached a sharp bend in the tunnel that curved beneath the bridge.

The cry of the bus engine cut through the air like a power saw as it raced through the tunnel. Within seconds it was behind Jamie, beside him, and finally in front of him. There was a roaring crash, the sparking and shredding of metal on brick, the shattering of light fixtures and windows.

The boy found himself pinned up against the wall of the tunnel. He was unable to breathe, unable to move, unable to make a sound. The darkness, the pitch black, returned. It engulfed him. It had such a cold grasp, empty of warmth, empty of light, the suffocating end of all things. And so it came to pass: Jamie Brooks was dead.

But then he blinked his eyes and allowed his mouth to open and his lungs to inhale a much needed breath of cool night air. He found himself standing face to face with a cold wall of metal. As he looked from side to side, he realized that the bus had cornered him at the curve in the tunnel.

Releasing the greatest sigh of relief, he kissed the name that was forever etched on the skin of his left wrist. He wiped away tears, for there was no time to stop now. He had to keep going. He had to keep trying.

Shakily but cautiously, he crept alongside the bus towards the front. The metal skin of the vehicle had mashed itself into the bricks of the wall. Turning, he limped in the other direction, finding the same result. The bus had fenced him in. The impact of the crash had fused the wall and the vehicle into a cage.

The boy froze as the lights inside flickered on. The man in the pale hood stood right above him with only a sheet of window glass between them as he raised the black metal pipe in his hand.

With one sharp gasp of panic, Jamie dropped to his hands and knees and scuttled under the bus. The road under him ate away at his fleshy knees and bleeding palms as he went. Clenching his teeth, he fought through the pain and the numbness. As he felt the night air blowing against his face on the other side, he sprang triumphantly to his feet.

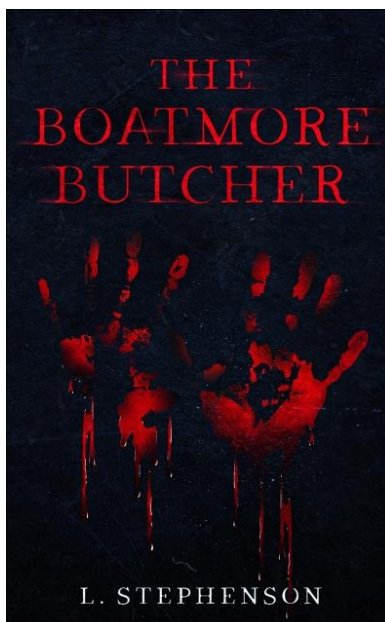
Before he could take off running, two arms came down from above his head and wrapped themselves around the boy's throat as they ripped his body from the surface of the tunnel road. Jamie screamed for his life as he was pulled back through the emergency exit he had used to escape.

The exit door slammed shut, the screaming stopped, and the lights went out.

He had him. Finally, he was his.

The first.

[The Boatman Butcher](#) is available on [Amazon!](#)



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Z Martin
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Sheri White
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Sidney Williams
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Nick Young
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Featured Column

Mike Lera's Corridor of Horror

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Featured Project

Final Guys Podcast

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Featured Book

The Boatmore Butcher

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