

DECEMBER 2008

# NITEBLADE

FANTASY AND HORROR MAGAZINE

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*"What's in the box, buddy?"*

## *BAIT WORMS*

AARON A. POLSON

Allan stood in his kitchen with a warm mug of coffee, peering through the window into the driveway and the street beyond, looking for the boys. The morning sun had burned away a thin layer of fog, revealing a pristine, blue sky. It was a perfect Saturday for two boys on bikes; a perfect day for mischief.

Allan took a small sip of his coffee, turned to his wife, and asked, "Where did they say they were going?"

"I don't remember," Meghan said. She tucked her light hair behind her ears and pushed away a bowl of soggy corn flakes. "I'm not sure they told me. They're twelve now, Allan. Old enough."

He set his mug on the counter and leaned down with elbows resting on either side. "Old enough for trouble." He glanced to the window again. "Did they take anything with them? Fishing poles, or a ball?"

"Owen asked for my old garden spade, and I think Lonnie was carrying something, too." She stood and stretched, flashing a sliver of her pale stomach where her t-shirt and pajama trousers usually met. "He's not a baby anymore, bub."

\*\*\*

Later that morning, Allan squatted on his driveway in front of his side-turned push mower, scraping the bottom of the cutting deck with an old paint knife. As the knife blade scraped against metal, thick clumps of grass clippings dropped to the ground. He wore shorts and an old, ragged t-shirt despite the early October chill. He turned at the sound of rubber skidding to a halt behind him.

“Hey, Dad,” Owen said, dismounting his bike. The boy’s hair was his father’s color—brown and thick, but his features stretched long and lean like his mother.

Allan flicked a clump of grass from his blade and stood. “Hey.” He rubbed his smudged hands against his shorts. “You and Lonnie have a good time this morning?”

Owen looked down at his bike and set it gently on the ground. “Yeah, just fine. Planning on going fishing this afternoon, up at Potter’s Pond. After lunch.” He pushed the spade behind him, flushing slightly as though embarrassed.

“What’s that?”

“Nothing. Just Mom’s old spade. The little one, for digging in the garden.”

Allan nodded. “You guys dig some worms? For fishing?”

Owen glanced at the house. “Yeah,” he said, rocking from one foot to the other. “Look, I’m pretty hungry.”

“Where’d you find the worms?”

Owen shrugged as he started walking toward the garage.

“Owen, where’d you find the worms?”

The boy stopped, his shoulders dropped, and he turned slowly to face his father. “Just in this old garden. Nobody uses it anymore. Really.”

Allan flinched slightly as though bitten. “Owen, was it the old house just north of the high school, the little white one?”

The boy dropped his head. “Yeah.”

“You know it isn’t safe—that house is slated for demolition.”

Owen nodded. “I know, but Nick Snyder said the best fishing worms lived in that garden.”



Allan knelt to his son's height. "I don't care what Nick Snyder said. I just want you to stay away from there, okay?" He tried to mask the concern in his voice. The man and his son stood in silence for a moment, the space between them growing tense and heavy. The front door crashed open, and Meghan stepped out, wiping her hands against a small towel.

"Owen, Lonnie's mom called. Said he wasn't feeling well, and he needed to take a rain check on the fishing trip." Owen slumped to the garage to replace the spade. Meghan turned to Allan. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine," he muttered.

\*\*\*

During dinner on Monday night, Allan watched his son poke the meatloaf on his plate for the fifteenth time before saying anything. "Not hungry?"

The boy looked up, his face washed with a white frown. He shrugged and dropped his eyes back to the plate. His fork jabbed into the meatloaf again. "Not really." He dropped the fork with a clatter on his plate. "Look, can I be excused?" His eyes swelled, rimmed with pink, prompting Allan to nod. Owen pushed from the table, grabbed his plate, and carried it into the kitchen.

Allan leaned closer to his wife. "I'm worried about him."

"It's a phase." She grinned before taking another bite, and her green eyes danced. "I think he was a little upset because Lonnie is still sick."

Allan looked at his hands and rubbed a thumb across the opposite palm. "I wish they wouldn't have gone to Jantz's place." He took a sip of water, closed his eyes, and rubbed his temples with both hands. "I'm glad the city has decided to tear it down." His eyes opened Meghan's smile. "Demolition starts next week, and the new lot should be up before the end of the school year."

Meghan nodded and took another bite. They sat in silence for a moment while she chewed. Eventually she set her fork down and studied Allan's face.

“I know that place carries some bad memories. Why don’t you lie down, let that headache melt away a little?”

“The dishes.”

“I’ll handle the dishes. Go lie down.”

Allan obeyed, leaving his dinner plate on the counter next to that of his son. After staggering upstairs, he stood at the foot of his bed in the dark room, pushed off both shoes, and flopped onto the comforter fully clothed. His eyes drifted shut.

He remembered that little house when its whitewash was fresh and the old man spat at trespassers. Elroy Jantz was a squat, shriveled man with black eyes and a quick temper. They’d teased him before—throwing rocks at his windows, even breaking one once. But Elroy Jantz’s garden had the best bait worms in town, and the promise of fat, wriggling things pulled the young Allan to that black garden with his own partner in crime, a thick boy with blonde hair named Ralph Chapman. Their parents warned them away from that old hermit’s place—said he was strange and dangerous, but the boys were twelve years old and invincible.

In Allan’s memory, Ralph swelled fat and whitish-pink, just like the worms. The swollen Ralph poked a hand toward Allan and called his name, “Allan... Allan... Allan...”

“...Allan?”

He started awake and looked into Meghan’s green eyes. “Megs...”

“You were out cold. Thought you might like to shower or at least change before bed.” She pulled her t-shirt over her head and started on the bra clasp.

Allan rose, blinking heavily, trying to shake the malaise from his limbs. He watched Meghan’s muscled back and pressed his hands against her skin.

“Oh, feeling frisky?”

He spun his wife, pressed his lips against hers, and forced his wriggling tongue into her mouth. They tumbled into bed. After they made love, Allan

lay with her pressed against his naked body for a time, sucking in her sweet scent, trying to forget the memories.

\*\*\*

A week burned away, and Owen sat at the kitchen table, scribbling small robots on scrap bits of notebook paper. Allan slipped in through the front door, dropped his briefcase next to an old wooden desk, and sat down next to the boy. Owen wore a pale, unresponsive scowl.

“Hey, buddy,” Allan said.

Owen cast a quick glance at his father, muttered “hey,” and dropped his eyes back to the paper. His hands worked quickly, spreading dark doodles across the white page. Allan began to notice a different pattern to Owen’s robots. Instead of fighting each other, the usual motif, Owen had rendered a handful of large worms poking from the ground and devouring his creations.

“Looks interesting.” Allan smiled as he spoke, trying to engage his son in conversation.

Owen shrugged. “Guess so.”

Allan watched the boy work for a few more minutes before the silence ate at him. He moved to the stairs, glanced back at his son, and hurried to his bedroom. Slipping from his suit felt freeing; Allan was always happy to shed his work clothes and throw on a pair of shorts and a worn t-shirt. He took a deep breath and sat on the bed for a moment. The room darkened slightly, and Allan turned to the doorway.

“Hi.” Meghan moved from the doorway and plopped on the corner of the mattress.

“Hey.” A moment passed. “Is Owen okay?”

Meghan slipped one hand on Allan’s back and rubbed the knotted muscles between his shoulders. “You’re tense. Carrying too much extra weight.”

“What’s up with Owen?”

Meghan's hand dropped. She moved it to Allan's knee. "Lonnie's been sick all week. I think Owen is just a little worried about his friend. Maybe you two should go see him after dinner tonight." She patted his leg, stood, and walked out of the bedroom.

\*\*\*

Allan pressed the Bowman's doorbell, and waited in silence next to his son. Owen had brightened slightly at the prospect of visiting his best friend, but the trip to Lonnie's house had been quiet, almost tense. When the door clicked open, Allan sighed long and slow. A well-etched face greeted them.

"Yes?" Lonnie's mom was a plump woman, middle-aged with too many worry lines around her eyes. She brightened a bit upon spotting Owen. "Oh, Owen. Lonnie will be happy to see you. Come in."

Owen moved closer to his father as they crossed the threshold. The Bowman's house smelled of flowers and Lysol. "Dad, come with me," he whispered to his father.

"Sure, buddy." Allan unconsciously reached for his son's hand.

"Lonnie? You have company," his mother announced at a bedroom door. The odor of disinfectant swelled from the dark interior, overwhelming the hint of flowers. She reached into the room and flicked a switch, illuminating the room.

Lonnie, his face washed like a bleached desert, lay under a thin blanket on his bed. His cheeks had collapsed some, lost some of their childish blubber in just one week. Under the blanket, his body shifted like a loose pile of bones. His mouth opened as if he would speak, but no sound came.

Allan staggered, seeing his old friend in Lonnie's eyes: Ralph, sick and fading, pale and dying, just like Lonnie Bowman. Ralph ballooned in his memory and blocked out the lamp. Some things were better left in the ground. "Owen, I..." He retreated into the hallway and blew out the sick air. "Owen, I'm going to wait in the kitchen. You two probably want to talk."

The boy turned to his father, nodded, and stepped closer to what remained of his friend.

Mrs. Bowman offered Allan a glass of water, and he sat sipping in silence. For her part, Mrs. Bowman bustled about the kitchen, finishing dinner dishes and scrubbing the stove top. She tried to ignore his presence, but seemed haunted by something. The silence grew, Allan fidgeted on his stool until he finally broke.

“What does the doctor think, you know, about Lonnie’s condition?” he asked, blushing and embarrassed like he was a child again.

She stopped her bustle. “Doc Wilson doesn’t know what to think. His tests come back showing anemia and all sorts of malnutrition, but he can’t find any cause. He has these pink marks, swollen in places—little lines, but the doctor doesn’t know what they are.” She laid the dishtowel on the counter, and shook her head lightly. “I don’t know what to do—”

“What to do about what?” Owen stood at the entrance to the hallway, cradling a white cube under his arm.

Allan turned. “Nothing buddy. We were just talking. You ready?”

Owen nodded.

Mrs. Bowman pinched her face into a forced smile. “Thanks for coming. Really. I’m sure it meant so much to Lonnie.” She paused for a moment, took a breath, and steadied herself. “He’ll be back in school before you know it.”

\*\*\*

Father and son sat next to each other in Allan’s car, both riding in silence and staring ahead into the dark night. Something writhed in Allan’s memory, and every few minutes he would glance at the styrofoam box resting on his son’s lap. His hands tightened on the steering wheel until the question burned from his mouth.

“What’s in the box, buddy?”

Owen opened the lid slightly. “Just the worms. The ones we dug out of old Jantz’s garden.” He pushed the lid shut. “I’m sorry, Dad. Sorry about going there, lying...”

Allan closed his eyes for a moment, stuffing his memories further into his brain. He sighed. “It’s okay, Owen.” He directed the car into their driveway.

“I think some of the worms got out.”

“What?”

“Some of them got out.” Owen pulled open the box again. “Only about half of them are left.”

\*\*\*

“I made him leave them in the garage. For the night at least.” Allan thrust his hands under his head and closed his eyes. He tried to relax as Meghan contorted during her nightly yoga routine. “I think we should dump them in the morning.”

Meghan stood and stretched, exhaling as her fingers extended to the ceiling. With a light sigh, she moved to the side of the bed, flipped up the comforter, and slipped in beside Allan. There was a purpose in her silence.

“Meghan?” Allan propped his head on one arm.

She closed her eyes. “Yes?”

“Don’t you think we should dump the worms in the morning?”

“Look, bub, I don’t think those worms have anything to do with Lonnie’s illness. They’re not hurting anybody here.” She opened her eyes slowly and turned to Allan. “As for Jantz—all that happened long ago. Ralph’s death wasn’t your fault *or* Elroy Jantz’s.” Meghan touched his face lightly with her hand. “That was all a long, long time ago.”

\*\*\*

The weekend filled with rain, but on Monday morning Allan stood on the sidewalk in front of Elroy Jantz’s old house, a weary bungalow just

blocks from the local high school. The old man was dead now, had been for the past eighteen months, but Allan still heard the threats—angry words that kept him away from that sidewalk for almost twenty-five years. He listened as the bulldozer growled angrily, creaking and clanking toward the small structure. His eyes seemed fixed on the house, but they saw a different time.

He remembered years before—a bright Saturday afternoon when he rode to Jantz's house with his friend, Ralph. They crept through the old man's back gate, slipped past the no trespassing sign into his vegetable garden, and pawed in the rich earth for the best bait worms in town. Jantz burst from his backdoor, spewing curses at the boys, catching Ralph by the collar before he could scramble to his feet and run.

“Mr. Roberds?”

The voice yanked Allan from his memory. “Yeah—yeah, what is it?”

The foreman stepped forward, handing him a phone. “Your wife, sir. Something about a friend of your boy... in the hospital.” His voice was ground under the cracking and rending of old wood as the bulldozer crushed the small house.

When Allan came home that evening, he checked the container of worms, verifying that they were still there.

\*\*\*

Elroy Jantz came to visit Allan in his dreams that night. The old man's pinched and grey face swelled before him, just as it had twenty-five years ago. Allan was a child again, a boy cowering before the gnarled man that held his best friend. He wanted to run, to hide, but the magnetic pull the old man held him locked to the moment.

“I've been watching you. You threw rocks—broke my window, trampled my garden, and now you boys want some worms, huh? Well, have some, have some.” He forced Ralph's jaw open and shoved a wriggling thing inside. “Eat up, boys.”

The twelve-year-old Allan panicked, burned with terror upon seeing his friend's wide, frightened eyes. He turned and ran, left his bike behind the old man's fence and sprinted home, lungs exploding all the way. The old man yelled after Allan. He closed his eyes, but Jantz's face swelled again, and a voice rose in his head. "Your turn's comin' boy. You're next."

Allan woke with a thick coat of sweat covering his head and arms. He heard a sound, maybe small feet working up the stairs, and then a click of a door. Allan rose, moved quickly from bed, out his door, and through the hallway to Owen's room. Inside, the boy lay quiet and still. Allan turned back to his bedroom, and noticed a small smudge of mud on the carpet. He returned to bed and stared at the ceiling until dawn.

\*\*\*

On Tuesday afternoon, Allan stepped out of the hospital into the bright sunshine. Lonnie had looked worn and grey, much like his memory of Ralph from all those years ago. Allan felt compelled to make the visit—he had to check Lonnie's arms, see for himself all the unnatural pink lines under his skin. In the parking lot, a man stepped from behind a truck—just a pale shimmer of a man, a flicker in the afternoon sun. Elroy Jantz.

Allan's breath caught in his throat, and he forced his eyes away. The air fell heavy on his bare skin, loaded and icy—enough that Allan shivered and drew the collar of his jacket about his neck. A quick gust of breeze whispered past his ear, and curiosity ripped his eyes back to the old man. He was gone, devoured by the grey air. A voice spoke in his head as Allan rushed to his car.

Elroy Jantz's ghost chased Allan home. His anxiety grew as he sped through quiet, residential streets, knuckles whitening as he clutched the steering wheel. The worms had to go—maybe back to the lot that once held Jantz's little house or dumped by the roadside out of town—but they had to go.

He guided his car into the driveway and waited as the garage door slowly rose, allowing a growing bar of muted daylight inside the dark space. The worm box rested on the workbench, and Allan snatched it quickly and



tucked it under one arm. Meghan's voice punched at him from inside the house as Allan turned back to his car.

"Allan!" she called again, almost shouting to snap his hypnosis.

He stopped and turned. "Yes?"

"Allan, I've tried to call all afternoon. Your phone—"

"I shut it off." He backed a step toward the car. "I went to see Lonnie Bowman today."

Meghan stepped into the garage, her face pale like fresh wax. "Oh. Allan, Owen came home sick today." She pushed at her hair, an anxious gesture.

Allan blinked. The box felt heavy, and he dropped it on the hood of his car. "Sick?"

"He doesn't look good. His arms...I've called Doc Wilson."

The box seemed to throb. Allan pried off the lid and peered inside. He scanned the black earth, started clawing at the dirt, and only found a few, fat worms. He dropped the lid and dug a clump out with one fist, a writhing thing just visible between his fingers. "Not the boy...me...my turn..." he muttered before shoving the fistful into his mouth.



*"I won't even leave a mark," she said as she touched blade to skin*

## *THE OUTLANDS*

**B.A. BOOHER**

Rosa had been drawing bad things again; her father Rolan could tell. Her twelve-year-old face, soft with the hint of beauty that would come with maturity, was smudged at temple and cheek with the black of charcoal. In the false twilight before the storm, her clover-green eyes radiated under blonde locks. Her hands were shoved deep into the pockets of her blue calico dress. “What ya been drawing, now, Rosa?” he asked sitting in the wooden rocker. Off to the west, lightning marbled the sky.

“Nothing.” Rosa looked at her father’s frown.

“So what was it?” he asked holding out his hand. Rosa shuffled across the wooden porch boards and handed her father a piece of husk with a drawing of some kind of machine. Rolan took the husk, turned it, and turned it again. Sighing, he hefted the girl onto his lap. “This has to stop.”

“It doesn’t work on the steam or anything.”

“I don’t care. You’re too old for this kind of foolishness.”

“Mama used to draw.”

“And she’s dead.” Rolan knew words had been spoken between mother and daughter, deathbed words. He raised the girl and her younger brothers as best he could, but there were boundaries and barriers he could not breach.

Rolan sat his girl down. He stood and looked over the rows of swaying corn. The colors were too vibrant under the false twilight as if another sun lit the fields while the clouds blackened. “Going to rain soon; the twins are still out in the rows,” said Rolan. Jacabyn and Jacafyn, Rosa’s twin brothers, had been the death of their mother and had only Rosa’s hand at mothering. When given the chance, the two ran wild. “Call ‘em in.”

Rosa rang the triangle and called her brothers' names. They burst through the rows screaming in the private language the five-year-olds shared. Their bare chests and faces were smeared with dirt that neither noticed. They ran up to Rosa and danced and giggle around her. "Birdy come down the road, birdy and a body," they chanted sing-song fashion around their sister. Hearing his sons, Rolan scanned the sky and saw a hawk circling in the distance. Under the circling bird, Rolan saw the bobbing heads of rider and horse. Quickly, Rolan snatched a twin in either hand and hunkered down in front of them.

"Think now," he said. "Did you get a look at the rider? Was he fae like Kyrie or Eadel or was he like us?"

The twins looked at one another. "Not fae," said one. "Like us, I think," said the other.

Rolan looked up at Rosa but she was already rushing towards the door. She came back a moment later carrying the emperor's sigil. In the outlands beyond the last of the emperor's rings, the people prayed to whatever gods were offered. In a small chest just inside the door, Rolan kept several religious symbols to suit whatever and whomever might drop by.

Rolan need not have bothered. The stranger was drooped over the horse and would have fallen out of his saddle had he not been strapped in. The horse followed the path of least resistance, a dirt path that led to the cabin. When the beast cleared the rows, Rolan saw a rifle's long barrel across the rider's back. The cartridges wrapped around the rider's waist were for a pneumatic rifle, which meant only one thing. The stranger was a ringer for sure, and an emperor's man at that.

"Get 'em inside," said Rolan referring to the twins. He rushed ahead but stopped when the hawk above screamed a warning. The bird swooped down just above Rolan's head before landing on the roof. Rolan nodded towards the hawk and turned his palms up.

"Easy," soothed Rolan. Edging towards the limp rider, he rested a hand on the horse's reins. The hawk, seeing Rolan meant no harm, cleaned its

feathers. The horse's mane was sparse and there were bald and oozing sores along its flanks. Realizing he was holding his breath, Rolan let out a sigh and checked the rider for any signs of life.

"It's a woman," said Rosa, startling her father. In the distance, a streak of lightning split the sky. "What kind of woman wears pants like that?"

The rider was indeed a woman, although Rolan was on the wrong side of the horse to see the telltale, if not slight, breasts outlined in the bone colored jacket. Unfastening the woman's straps, Rolan saw that the jacket was hooded and capped by a band with five small horns. With a heavy sigh, Rolan pulled the rider up and saw what he feared: a crimson metal mask mounted on the woman's face.

"Help me get her down and tell the twins to stay clear."

"What's wrong?" asked Rosa

"She's a sanguinite."

\*\*\*

The cabin had only three rooms: a common room that served as kitchen and living room, and two bedrooms. The outlands could be harsh and there was no telling what illness the woman had. Any food found more than a day's ride west from the cabin was suspect and even a careful traveler could easily consume something tainted.

Carrying a candle and a basin of water, Rosa slipped into the room as the rain rapped a heavy beat on the roof. Her first order of business was to get to the sanguinite's face. The crimson metal was shaped like a woman's face complete with rounded lips and carefully formed eyebrows. Thinking the horned band around her head secured the woman's mask, Rosa tried to pull the band off but was only rewarded with an unconscious grunt from the sanguinite. The two front horns were not merely decorative or part of the horned crown, but actually held the mask securely to the crown and the jacket's hood. Rosa grabbed one of the horns and tried to twist it. After a moment the horn turned, eliciting a gasp from Rosa. She then unscrewed

both horns and set them on the bedside table. With the horns set aside, the mask was easy to remove with only a bit of dead skin and dried sweat adhering it to the woman's face.

The sanguinite's face had been scarred and tattooed scarlet in a demonic, and oddly beautiful, expression. Removing the hood and crown, the girl was surprised to find two, flat-topped screws imbedded in the woman's scalp just under the hairline. It was the screws that had held the sanguinite's horns, and deciding it would do no harm, Rosa screwed the horns back in.

Rolan lit a lantern as Rosa shut the door behind her and walked into the living room. "The rot's festering in her, Pa." The rot was a disease left behind as the gods abandoned the world. The banishing of the rot within the rings was held by some as proof of the emperor's divinity.

Rolan set the lantern on the table and began lighting the fire. When the flames were going well, he lit his pipe. "How bad is the witch?"

Shaking her head, Rosa shrugged. "She needs Mavery, but she's not strong enough to travel."

Rolan smoked his pipe and looked out the lone window in the room. "If the storm clears by morning," said Rolan without looking away from the window, "I'll take the twins and head into Five Horizons. If I can't take that bloodwitch to Mavery, I'll bring the healer here."

"I can watch the twins for a few days."

"And the sanguinite? More importantly, can you keep them away from the witch?"

"I could go to town."

"Not by yourself."

"But..." Rolan held up his hand and silenced his daughter.

"No daughter of mine needs to be out traipsing through town by herself, especially when she's not even thirteen. Besides, who'd take care of the witch? It wouldn't be decent for me to."

Rosa let the matter drop and turned her attention to something else. “Why do you call her a bloodwitch; is she a mage?”

Rolan sighed before easing into a chair by the window. He looked at his daughter and saw the hints of her mother in her cheekbones and the corners of her mouth. “The women who enter into service for the emperor are called sanguinites. If she sees your drawings, she might...take offense.”

“Why’d you help her then?”

Rolan puffed on his pipe. “Your mother would have wanted me to.”

\*\*\*

The sanguinite woke in a fit of coughing that only ended when she vomited blood and bile over the side of the bed. When the dry heaving stopped and she could open her eyes, she saw that she had missed a pail by only inches. When the door opened, the sanguinite pulled the damp sheet up just under her eyes.

“You’re awake,” said Rosa. The noise had brought her from the cook fire and the sour smell was enough to make her regret coming.

“Where’s my mask? Where am I?”

“You’re about two days west of Five Horizons. Your mask is on the nightstand there.” Rosa walked over and saw the mess on the floor. “I should say it’s a good thing I took it off.” The sanguinite began unscrewing the horns on her head. “Pa said you’d be worried about him or one of the twins seeing your face. They’re gone right now so you might as well leave it off.”

“No males?” Rosa nodded. The sanguinite paused before tightening the horn. Weakened, she lay back and scanned the room. Across from the bed, her belongings rested on a dresser. “Where’s my bird?”

“Roosting in the barn, I think. Your horse is in there, but he’s pretty sick.”

The sanguinite coughed once but did not go into another fit. Rosa took out a kerchief and dabbed the blood off the woman's lips. The sanguinite whispered thanks and Rosa asked her name. Taking a moment to build up strength or think of the answer, the sanguinite replied, "Badwa." Rosa, sighing, went to get some water and a mop.

\*\*\*

Badwa woke later and called for water. Her sheets clung to her damp body and the room smelled musky. Rosa brought the sanguinite a cup of water. Slurping it down, Badwa asked for more. "Just let that settle first," said Rosa.

Badwa closed her eyes and asked for the girl's name. Rosa told her and sat in the chair across the room. "Where's your mother?"

"Dead."

There was no need for an apology. Death was the way of the outlands. "Thank you for taking me. What god should I thank for your help?"

"If you want to know what faith we are, just ask," snapped Rosa. "The emperor's sigil graces our door."

The sanguinite pushed herself into more of a sitting position. "There's no need to fear me. The mask, these markings on my face, declare my allegiance to the emperor, and make me less appealing to men."

"Why would you want to do that?"

"I'm body and soul for the emperor," explained Badwa. "And I'm a woman alone in the outlands."

"You've got your hawk."

"How's Etwin?"

"Haven't seen him since we brought you in," said Rosa. She had looked at the instruments laid out on the dresser. "What is that?" asked the girl



pointing to a strange, double bladed knife with a hollow handle that was open on one end.

Badwa looked over but had trouble seeing. “Bring it here.” Rosa did and then Badwa asked for her pack. “This is a syrknife. It is the sanguinite’s primary tool.”

“What’s it do?” Rosa’s distrust had disappeared beneath a wave of curiosity.

“When used appropriately, a syrknife collects a portion of blood from the wound.” The sanguinite opened her pack and took out a small vial that fit into the hollow end of the knife.

“Why do you want the blood of your enemies?”

“Normally, it’s used on willing participants. Here, show me your arm.” Rosa hesitated before holding out her arm. “I won’t even leave a mark,” Badwa explained as she touched blade to skin. “The temple takes the blood and ascertains how much of the taint is in it. When enough of the taint is gone from the blood of the people, the temple erects a ring and the heart of the empire grows.” Rosa felt a slight prick as a bead of blood rose up and slid over the blade. Badwa pulled the blade back. The blood dribbled into a small divot and was siphoned away to the vial in the handle. She pulled the vial out, twisted a metal cap on the end, and tried to tie a label to it. Seeing Badwa’s trembling hands, Rosa took the vial and tied the label on.

“Now there’s ink and a quill in the pack. Write your name and the date,” instructed the sanguinite breathlessly. Rosa did and admired the vial before seeing her charge’s eyes fluttering.

“How about that drink?” asked Rosa. She put the vial on the nightstand and left to get more water. When Rosa returned, Badwa was asleep.

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Badwa’s hand trembled lifting the flask to her lips. Stoically, she took a swig of the viscous, purple liquid inside and refused to retch. “What’s that?” asked Rosa carrying a tray with a bowl of broth.

“Medicine.” Three days of rest and Badwa’s strength was returning as the lesions on her chest gradually shrank. The sanguinite sat up and Rosa put the tray across her legs and sat down next to her.

“You’re getting stronger,” observed Rosa.

“I’m going stir crazy.”

“We’ve got a book of scriptures you could read,” said the girl but Badwa just waved dismissively. “Do you know how to do a web?”

“A web?” asked the sanguinite.

“With string. Eadel showed me some fun designs I could show you.”

Badwa smiled. “I’d like that.” Rosa quickly ran and got her string and another for Badwa. When the sanguinite saw the string and the first design Rosa made, Badwa smiled. “Is Eadel a fae.”

“How’d you know?”

“Where I come from, we call the string designs spider hands.” Badwa picked up the string and used it to create two parallel lines with an M design between them and a curved line underneath like a smile.

“Catching Kingfish,” said Rosa. “Mamma taught me that one.”

“It is a common design and even children in the inner ring know it. The design you did is called the Pola Door for the Pola tribe. Your friend must really like you to show you the design.”

“We’re best friends.”

“I’ll tell you what, if you show me what designs you know, I’ll show the ones I’ve learned.” Rosa agreed and the two spent the rest of the afternoon making patterns. Finally, Badwa could no longer hold her arms up and had to stop.

“I think that’s all for today,” said Badwa as she raised her hand to her temple in an attempt to steady herself.

Seeing the sanguinite's obvious discomfort, Rosa agreed and took the string. "You must have met a lot of fae," said Rosa. "How long have you been in the outlands?"

Badwa started to answer but then was rocked by a stream of coughs that left her wheezing for breath. Holding her sides, the sanguinite sank into her pillow. "Too long."

"That's obvious. Why'd you stay so long?"

Badwa looked out the window and smiled briefly. "Did you know that in the deep outlands, you can't do spider hands in the spring. Really, the fae get angry if you do. It makes the spiders jealous."

Rosa laughed at the idea of spiders knitting like ladies in a quilting circle. "Well, I should hope never to meet any of these spiders."

"I'll pray you don't," replied Badwa before drifting to sleep. Rosa, confused by the sanguinite's tone, left quietly to prepare supper.

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The next morning, Rosa found the sanguinite's horse dead. Its eyes had burst in the night and yet nothing, no crow or barn cat, had dared to feast on the decaying flesh. Rosa was not surprised, but she wasn't happy that she had to deal with the dead animal. However, she was thankful that she didn't need to worry about burying the beast; rot infected creatures were always burned.

Still, there was the matter of moving the horse. Her father had taken their only horse, so Rosa had to use the mule. Unfortunately, the mule kicked and brayed when Rosa brought the beast near the corpse. Rosa decided to just tie a long rope around the dead horse so that the mule wouldn't fight as much. When the carcass was far enough away from the barn, Rosa untied the mule and tossed the rope onto the horse. After touching the tainted animal, Rosa felt it would be better to burn the rope instead of trying to reuse it. After a makeshift pyre was built, she went back into the house to ask if the sanguinite wanted to be there for the fire. "If you're strong enough."

Badwa bit her bottom lip. "If you'd help me, I'd like to say a few things before the fire." Rosa nodded and helped Badwa out of bed, through the house and into the yard.

Standing next to the carcass, the sanguinite whispered a quiet prayer to the emperor and the gods above. After tapping a quick triangle from her forehead to her heart, across her chest and then back to her forehead, Badwa sighed and bid farewell. "You carried me well and now you're home. May your star shine." Badwa stepped back and allowed Rosa to light the fire.

When the flames licked at the rotted corpse, the smoke became thick and greasy. Rosa took Badwa's arm to lead the sanguinite back into the house when a sharp cry pierced the air. Badwa stopped and looked up as her hawk Etwin circled above. Frowning, the sanguinite held up a fist and called the bird. Etwin immediately perched on her hand. Badwa, weakened by the rot, quickly transferred Etwin to her shoulder where he squawked twice in short succession. Badwa winced and held onto Rosa harder. "Danger?" she asked the bird and he repeated the two short squawks. "North?" she asked and received no response. "East?" Nothing. "South?" The bird hopped back and forth in anticipation. "West?" Etwin screeched into the air.

"What's going on?" asked Rosa.

"They've found me."

Rosa looked to the west. "What are we going to do?"

"You are going to hide, and I'm going to do my best to kill them." Badwa began to march into the house and was seized by a fit of coughing that left her doubled over. Blood sprinkled the ground.

Rosa rubbed the woman's back but there were places where even that contact drew blood. "Rot's holding on pretty strong. You try firing that rifle of yours and you're bound to have the butt crush your bones."

"You got any better ideas?" asked the sanguinite wiping blood from her lip.

"Hide?"

“Those fae would find me quick enough. They’ve got my scent.”

Rosa looked at the black smoke curling out from the fire. “I’ve got an idea but we’re going to need more wood.”

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Rosa sat upwind on the back porch and watched the fire blaze. Her hands, tentatively pulling the strings in a pattern Badwa had shown her, trembled whenever she paused, and she knew it wasn’t just the cold. In the distance, lightning rippled across black clouds. The rows of corn swayed around the farm and rustled their whispered prayers. She wondered if her father and brothers would be caught in the storm. In the outlands, storms came in all forms.

The wind died and three fae, darker and meaner than any Rosa had ever seen before, appeared. One had vestigial wings that caught the light and refracted it across their thin span. His large frame had thick scales that grew over his shoulders and across his chest. The female of the group was the tallest and most slender. She wore a dress a tiny waist and large bustle. However, she had an extra set of arms and her legs, four of them, came out of the bustle and looked insectoid. Realizing that the female could very well be the kind of spider Badwa had warned about, Rosa hid her string.

The third fae had to come closer for Rosa to see his fae attributes. He wore a simple black suit and a bowler hat. His hands only had two large fingers and a slightly diminished thumb, but when he tipped his hat to Rosa, he revealed the extra set of eyes hidden by his bowler. “What’s cooking?” he asked. His voice was wispy as he leaned in so that Rosa could see his pointed teeth.

“I wouldn’t eat anything from that fire,” replied Rosa as calmly as she could. “Had to burn a rotted horse.”

“A rotted horse?” asked the fae. “This close to the rings?”

“Gee mister, we’re a week’s hard ride to the rings. Can’t say that’s all that close,” said the girl. She stood up and did her best interpretation of a curtsy.

“Where are my manners? The name’s Rosa. Would you and your friends like something to drink or eat? Don’t have much but water and some cornbread that’s ready.” By this time the other fae were inspecting the fire but it was too large for them to get too close.

“Mayhaps we’ll break bread with you,” said the fae as he stood. He pointed at the fire with his bowler. “You say that your horse caught the rot?”

“Not our horse; some lady’s.”

“And where might this lady be?”

“Sizzling in that fire. She died yesterday.”

The fae looked around the yard. “Where’re your parents?”

“Ma’s dead and Pa went off to fetch a healer in Five Horizons. I suspect he’ll be back tomorrow morning.”

“Hmm,” sighed the fae before grabbing Rosa by the shoulders. “That woman was an emperor’s bitch and I can smell her stink all over this place. Now where is she?”

“With her horse,” explained Rosa. “She died this morning and Pa told me before he left not to bury her if she died. He said the rot could leech out of her body and poison our well.” The fae’s grip hurt but Rosa refused to cry.

“Logael, check inside the house. Unatiah, search the barn.” The female fae headed for the barn while the other trudged towards the house. Seeing the one called Unatiah heading for the barn, Rosa tried to stall.

“You think I’d help someone from the empire? We hate the empire. The fae here have shown us how evil it is. All you’re going to do is mess up the house and get my hide tanned.”

“You’re a friend of the fae?” Rosa nodded yes. “Prove it.” Rosa thought for a minute looking around her. Seeing the string, she grabbed it and quickly completed a spider hand.

“My friend Eadel showed me this. It’s called the Pola Door. You think she’d show me this if I was a ringer? Please mister, Pa will be angry if the place is a wreck.”

“I’m sorry, girly, but I don’t care if your pa welts your backside and then gets excited.” The fae threw her aside while the one named Logael ransacked the house. Rosa landed hard on the ground and crawled away from the house towards the large oak that had been her parents’ wedding tree. The sound of dishes breaking, furniture being thrown around, and wood splitting emanated from the house but Rosa heard none of it. Her attention was only on the barn.

Logael emerged from the house, his wings buzzing with excitement. “She was here, Turook. I don’t know which smells worse; the witch or the rot.”

Turook clenched his three-fingered hands. “Did you find her rifle or that infernal blade of hers?”

“No.”

Turook spun around and leapt from the porch to a branch just above Rosa. His feet grasped the tree while he swung down and picked the girl up. “Do not play games with me, girly.”

“Pa took her stuff with him to sell in Five Horizons. Now put me down!” Instead of putting her down, he brought the girl’s face up to his and snarled.

“Hey, that’s the witch’s mask,” said Logael. Turook inhaled letting the air hiss over his teeth. He dropped Rosa before somersaulting out of the tree and landing on his toes. Logael jabbed the handle of a broom into the fire, hooking the tip through the mask’s eye and pulling it from the fire. He grabbed the mask too soon, swore, and dropped it as Turook laughed.

Rosa scurried around the oak and peeked out from the side. “Told you she was dead.”

Turook grinned. “Unatiah, we’ve found the witch’s mask! Unatiah!” The two fae waited for an answer but none came. Turook eyed the barn carefully

before looking at Rosa. "Come here, girly!" Rosa darted back behind the tree and refused to come around. "Come here now or Logael'll ruin you for your wedding night." Slowly, Rosa shuffled forward with her hands held behind her back. Turook grabbed her and held her against his body.

"If Unatiah is dead or hurt," growled Turook in the girl's ear, "I'll put that mask back in the fire till it's red hot and then shove your face in it." Just then, there was a loud crack that filled the air. Turook instinctively ducked behind Rosa as Logael fell face first into the ground. His wings twitched as a blood pooled around his head.

"Damn you witch!" howled Turook in the light of the fire. "I'll drag your carcass back across the outlands and feed it to my 'thalls! I'll have your hide as a banner! I'll..."

"You'll let the girl go and thank your heathen gods that I let you live," replied Badwa from the loft window, a bandana covering her face.

"How about I throw her into the fire?" asked Turook dragging Rosa closer to the flames. The girl did her best to turn her face from the heat but there was little she could do in the fae's grasp. "Drop your gun and face me, witch, or she burns!"

Badwa emerged from the blackness of the barn. She held two blades but instead of holding both up, the right blade was pointed forward, but it was easy to see that she could barely hold the knife. Both weapons were already bloodied. "Let the girl go," said Badwa. "She and her family did nothing more than help a stranger. She's not part of this."

Turook threw Rosa aside and drew a long, slender blade from his suit. With a roar, the fae pounced and knocked the frail sanguinite to the ground. With a scream, Etwin dove from the sky scratching and clawing at the fae's eyes. Turook batted at the bird and stumbled back from Badwa. Just as it seemed that Etwin might actually drive Turook off, the fae impaled the hawk on his knife. Flinging the twitching body away, Turook advanced on the crippled sanguinite.



“Where’s that blasted syrknife you witches are so famous for?” asked the Turook.

“Where it can do the most good,” replied Badwa. Her chest hitched a bit and her cheeks puffed out before she forced herself to swallow. When she opened her mouth again, blood stained her teeth and lips. “Blessed be the knife that kills you.”

“Better than the knife cursed by your witching blood,” snapped Turook. “I’ll never get the stink off the steel.” Kneeling down on her chest, Turook pinned Badwa’s arms with his knees and was rewarded with the sickening crunch of bone.

“Don’t pass out, witch. I want you to feel this.” Turook punctured Badwa’s right eye. The sanguinite screamed and thrashed but could not escape as Turook pulled her eye from its socket. The fae laughed and howled at her pain. He traced the contours of her face with his blade as Badwa jerked and twitched. Just as he was about to take her other eye, he stopped and stared into the fields. He turned to look behind him but never made it before slouching off to the side, Badwa’s syrknife buried in his back.

Rosa, forgotten until now, looked down at her bloodied hands and at Badwa. Trying not to cry, Rosa set about getting Badwa inside and figuring out how to tend to her wounds.

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Rosa and Rolan helped Badwa onto the horse while the twins played with marbles off to the side. The sanguinite had expelled the rot from her body weeks ago but her right arm would forever be lame. The scarred eye socket was just barely visible under her crimson mask.

“What will you do when you get to the rings?” asked Rosa.

“Whatever the temple will have me do,” replied Badwa. “Thank you for taking me in. Will the fae seek revenge?”

“Doubt it,” said Rolan. “I told them you died and they assured me that the three who came were from out deep.”

Badwa looked to the horizon and sighed. She pulled her sheathed syrknife and tossed it to Rosa. "Rosa, I want you to have this. If you should seek a life inside the rings, present this to the temple in Five Horizons."

Riding into the sun with her rifle strapped to her back, Badwa cast a long shadow. When the corn was all they could see, Rolan hugged his girl while the twins forgot their game to squeeze close around their father's legs. Rosa smiled, and gave the knife to her father.

"You don't have to give that to me," he said.

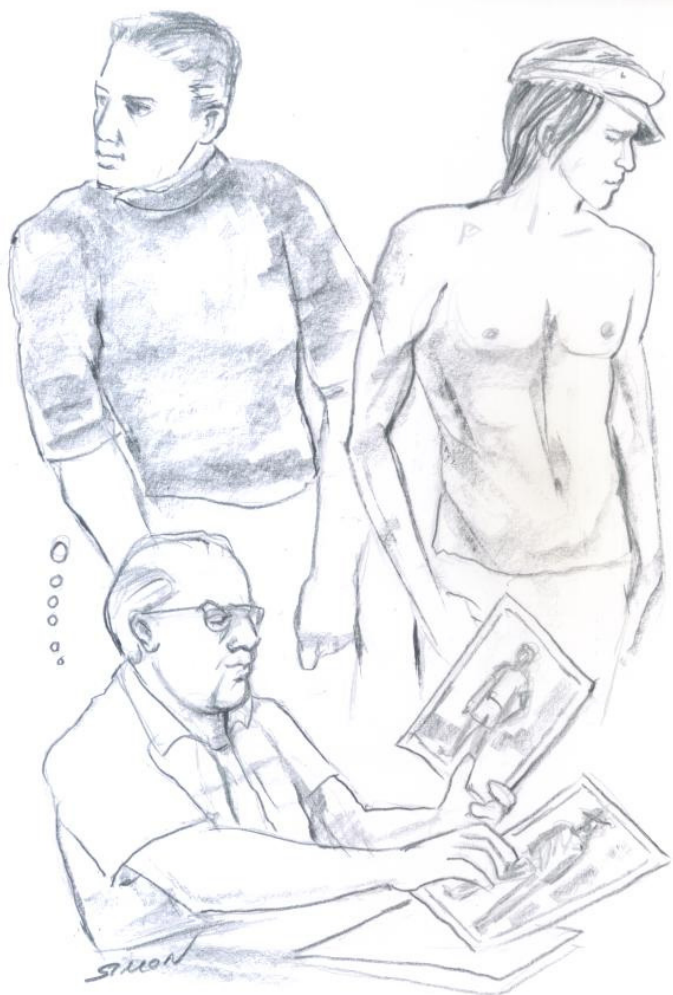
"Mother would want me to."

Seeing his wife in his daughter's eyes, Rolan kissed Rosa's head and then sent her to get water. Pride not withstanding, life had to go on in the outlands.

## *A MOMENT BEFORE, A MOMENT AFTER*

BRIAN ROSENBERGER

as 18 wheels of mass destruction  
changed his body into  
a manuscript of cuts and lacerations  
powdering his bones  
charcoaling his skin  
Jelloing his internals  
he remembered the crone  
and her curse  
death is denied you  
to his astonishment  
he lived  
to his horror  
he always would



*"It's probably better if you leave the niceties to me."*

## ***AN UNSUITABLE REPLACEMENT***

**JONATHAN PINNOCK**

**T**he physician withdrew his finger and took off the rubber gloves.

“Well, Mr Parkinson,” he said. “There’s nothing actually wrong with you, as such. It’s just...”

“My body is wearing out?”

“Exactly. I couldn’t have put it better myself. It often happens at your age, you know. Joints start to pack up, skin goes a bit leathery, that sort of thing. And once it happens,” he shrugged expansively, “There ain’t a lot you can do about it, old chum.”

“Oh,” I said. “I see.”

“Then again, I see you’ve got insurance,” he said, his face brightening, “I wonder if you’re covered.”

“Covered for what?”

“A replacement, of course.” He said it as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“I’m sorry? How does that work?”

“Well, basically we remove the brain from your tired old body and put into a new one provided by a donor.”

“A donor? Excuse me for being a bit thick, but I wasn’t aware that it was possible to carry a whole body donor card. And in any case, wouldn’t a donor with a dead body be pretty useless?”

“Of course they would! No, no, no. For a total corporoplasty you need a live donor.”

“Sorry?” I was being a bit slow, I could tell. “Wouldn’t that involve murder?”

“And your problem is?”

“I ...well...surely...”

“Mr Parkinson, basically the question is: do you want to shrug your shoulders, heave a big sigh and say, well, that’s it, it’s downhill all the way to an early death? Or do you want to grab life with both hands?”

“Someone else’s life, you mean?” I have to say that I didn’t really like this.

“Ye-e-ess. Someone, well, less important than you.”

“Isn’t this a bit unethical?”

“Ooh, ethics. That’s a big word for a patient to be using, Mr Parkinson. I think it’s probably better if you leave the niceties to me. What I need to know now is do you wish to consider this form of treatment? It isn’t cheap, but there’s a pretty good chance that your policy will cover it.”

I have no idea why I said yes. Actually, that’s a complete lie. I know exactly why I said yes. I wanted to live. And, fuck, I was worth it. All the same, it was a surprise when I was given a prescription for cyanide. Frankly, that’s not something you see any day.

But the chemist wasn’t fazed at all.

“We see this all the time these days. It’s a very popular treatment. Remember Mr Gibson from round the corner from here? His name’s Sarah now, you know.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. Not really sure how that one’s working out, to be honest. Doesn’t always do to mix and match, if you know what I mean.” I wasn’t sure if she was saying that because she’d caught me eyeing her up, but frankly, nice body though she clearly had, I wasn’t sure that I could cope with all the baggage that came with being a woman.

I spent the next few weeks checking out potential donors. When I was young, I took my looks for granted, although I accepted their gradual loss as

a fact of life. But faced with such a wide range of options to choose from, to say that I was bewildered was a massive understatement.

Did I want to be dark-skinned or light-skinned? Short or tall? Macho or camp? Muscular or slim? Was earning power important? How young did I want to go back to?

During this time, I also got into a significant number of fights. I grew to dread the words 'You lookin' at me?' Even if I was.

I finally settled on a chap I'd noticed drinking in a bar not far away from where I was living. He looked well-to-do, in his late thirties. He was clearly waiting for someone to turn up, and had been waiting for most of the evening. He was completely off his face by the time that he gave up and staggered to the door, and it was all too easy to jump him from behind, drag him into the car park at the back and administer the drug. Then I called the number that I'd been given.

When I awoke after the operation, I felt groggy, but, wow, was that body hot or what? I had made an excellent choice. Underneath his clothes, my donor was in superb shape. Muscular, fit and (I double-checked) the possessor of a somewhat larger-than-average penis. Which was palpably stiffening as I noticed the nurse bending over next to the bed. Now that hadn't happened for a while.

I checked myself out later on that day, and went home. I spent the rest of the day wondering how I was going to spend the rest of my life. Or, to be accurate, the rest of this particular one. The knock on the door was unexpected. There was no-one due to be visiting me.

"Good evening, Mr Lancaster," said the officer. "We were wondering if you could answer a few questions."

"My name's not Lancaster," I replied, beginning to feel slightly anxious.

"Oh no? This is you, is it not?"

I agreed that the picture did indeed look like me.

“And this one?”

This one was a little different. I was in it again, but this time I was naked. So was a young boy. There were more. They got progressively worse as he went through them.

“Bit of a mistake to put these on the net, wasn’t it?” he said. “Thought that a bit of digital trickery would mask your face? Man, you are in deep, deep shit.” He emphasised this by kneeling me in the balls.

Well, there it is. Unfortunately, my doctor and the chemist and my insurance company are now denying everything, and apparently there never was a Mr Parkinson at my address. You’d almost think that I’d made the whole thing up, wouldn’t you?



## ***DARK MADONNA***

**JOYCE RICHARDSON**

I stay awake each night until my head drops  
surely upon the pillow of my dreams, my eyes  
shut. The stage is set and my hopes darken,  
for we are no longer heroines in this universe we cannot fathom...  
We commit murder, incest, betray friends, have affairs  
on our fathers’ graves and other wild

imaginings. I bear a child fathered by Edgar Poe’s wild  
sperm, frozen, administered to me in lethal drops.  
They say the baby has my red hair, a fair  
replica of her father. The changeling is bright, her eyes  
his eyes. And why I was chosen for this no one can fathom  
in this shadow world of darkened



desires. I do not wish to wake. I am pleased to become this dark  
madonna. Our love child, Edgar, will live past forty, write wild  
songs of murder, incest, betrayal... help us to fathom,  
as you tried to do, the nether side, the nada, dew drops  
of blood raining on the lashes of our eyes.

Who could have guessed that our affair,

Beloved, our night of lust, across time and reason—would be *the* affair  
of this, the new millennium? We give the world a wonder whose  
darkened

verses of her father become the sestinas of her mother and the eyes  
of a new generation. We are not surprised at the wild  
issue of our love, who even now drops  
hints of a new world no one can fathom.

Nor can I, forgive me, fathom  
why my breast milk blossoms, as I begin the affair  
between heaven and hell; she, the child who drops  
from my mouth woeful stanzas for a darkened  
time; he, the lover I would meet again in the wild  
place I have harbored on the raven side of my eyes.

I awake, my body damp, just as you left me, Edgar; eyes  
still weeping. I know only a little now, I can fathom  
just this: that whatever wild  
poems I might compose as a result of this affair,  
this dream, are nothing, less than lemon drops  
in a new universe of black holes that suck our spirits in the dark.

The wild affair of the morning is breaking eggs in sunlight;  
I fathom one thing and one thing only as I watch the drops of coffee fall:  
I long for a child with dark eyes.



*There's plenty of room here for you, too*

## *I MISS YOU, AND OTHER WORDS*

REGAN BLAIR

Mindy wasn't one for titles, so she didn't use any. They sounded tacky and suspect to her. She wasn't only for the theatrics either—like bead-curtains, incense or sage to burn, crystal balls or charms, but those she couldn't do without. The people that came to see her *expected* those things. She could do what she could do at a table in Taco Bell, but no one would believe. Surround yourself with all of this crap, and they look at you with wide eyes and accepting nods. It was ridiculous—legitimacy through illusion. Isn't it usually the other way around? And maybe she use to understand people's fascination, but now she thought that it was sad. The dead were dead. They certainly didn't like being bothered. Let them go.

She sat at the round, wood table (another requirement) when her one o'clock came in. The woman was in her late thirties, followed by a friend. Older than she was. She stood at her side of the table, a small crystal ball at its center, and invited Mrs. Doyle and her friend to sit. It didn't matter who made the appointment, they always bring someone with them. Friends more often than family. Mostly, the guests just sat there with the same rapt attention as the person Mindy was focusing for.

"Thanks for having us," Mrs. Doyle said, sitting. She smiled, but she had the eyes of a crier. Her hands went to her lap.

"My pleasure," Mindy said. This was her first contact with Mrs. Doyle. Most of her appointments were placed over the computer now, with a credit card. If Mrs. Doyle hadn't made it, there would still be a hundred dollar charge for the time slot.

“I wasn’t sure what would work the best, so I brought this,” Mrs. Doyle said. Her hand placed a gold pocket watch on the table. It had a short chain attached to the top, and the front was engraved with a few ravens taking flight from a tree top. The gold looked old, tarnished. “It was my husband’s. His dad gave it to him, and his to him. It is supposed to go back seven generations. Steve liked to say that it was won at a horse race.”

“This should be fine,” Mindy said. She picked up the watch. It wasn’t very heavy, but it did carry the weight of age—nothing that would show up on a scale, but in your hand, you can feel the years that have passed this by, all of the moments it saw from table tops and pockets. The chain was newer. She could feel the parts alive inside of the watch, making seconds tick. Mrs. Doyle was watching her face and the crystal ball, eyes expectant, like a miniature of her dead husband would appear within the sphere, ready to speak deep words and express his need for her with his eyes. People want a cold gust of wind or a flash of light. Let the table shake and levitate; that would be the best climax.

What happened when Mindy held the watch was only seen by her eyes and eyes like hers. *Seen* wasn’t quite the right word and neither was *eyes*, but that was how she would explain it so that it sounded simple. Her heart was involved as well as her mind. Not so much the eyes.

Holding the watch was like being in a crowded phone booth. It *was* old, and it had been a treasure to many more men than Steve Doyle. Mindy could sense the lingering connection left by each of them. The strongest one, thankfully, was the most recent. With antiques, that isn’t always the case. You may love the tea set handed down to you, but did Aunt Patty love it more? Longer? Stronger?

Oddly, a person can be just as strongly connected to something that they deeply hate, but Mindy didn’t use that. She thought that people might be taken aback if she asked them to bring in an item that the departed dearly despised.

“I miss Steve so much,” Mrs. Doyle said, voice low. Mindy’s free hand held the smooth top of the crystal ball for how, while the real work was being done inside of her.

“What will you ask him?” the friend asked Mrs. Doyle.

“Oh, I don’t know. What is it like, I guess. See if he is at peace. Tell him that I miss him.” She went quite, looking down at the table. “Should we hold hands?”

“That might help,” Mindy said. It wouldn’t.

Mrs. Doyle took her friend’s hand.

Speaking with the dead was not like having a conversation with a friend. They didn’t appear beside the table with words and expressions. It might be nice if they did that. Mindy had never seen a ghost or a spirit. Whatever this was, it was more like being inside of the dead person’s mind. Their thoughts were spoken to her, and she could absorb obtuse notions of memories, feelings, existence. She had to take the things given to her and filter them for the family sometimes, but first she had to find her target. It was like swiveling an antenna around to get a less crackly reception, until finally, the object, this time the watch, leads her to who she is looking for.

“Was his middle name Andrew?” Mindy asked.

Mrs. Doyle’s reaction was enough to tell her that she had found the right one. “It is—was,” the woman said softly. The anxiety and wonder was still shining in her eyes, but there was a newer thing beside them. Fear. This was not a game and not a trick, and that made whatever Mindy had to say worth something. It gave her words weight. And things with weight—a brick, for instance—can hurt you when they fall.

“He died by accident,” Mindy said.

It was not a question, but Mrs. Doyle’s friend answered it like it was one. “Yes.”

*Who are you? God?*

Only Mindy heard the questions. She was in the man's mind. His thought raged around her with cyclonic violence. No, not God, she thought back. Her eyes were closed and heat pushed against them. The heat was not pushing in toward her brain, but pushing out against her eyelids like her eyeballs were searing points of metal from a metal worker's fire.

"What do I say?" Mrs. Doyle asked her friend. She looked at Mindy, sitting there with her eyes closed and twitching, one hand on the crystal ball like it were a melon, and the other gripping the watch so tight it wouldn't be a shock to see it fizzle to dust.

"I—don't know," her friend mumbled. She looked tired all of the sudden. Neither one of them had thought that this was completely counterfeit, but now it felt so real. More real than they had expected.

Mindy could hear them discussing what to say, to ask; she could also hear Steve Andrew Doyle ranting and thrashing. Part of it was his attempt to dispel her, the remaining—but more profound—was the pain coursing through his—body? Soul? Whatever receptacle the human remnant forms as.

She could not see out of his eyes—if he had eyes—but she could picture the state that he was in, see it through the way he formed it in his mind. Boiling heat whipped around him in vicious blasts. The picture she got was of a man standing in a platform above a black pit. He was naked, screaming in pain and anger like a madman. A discordant chorus wailed and screams shouted out around him from millions of platforms on the red hot rocks, the shimmering heat distorting the actual forms of them. When Steve stepped forward in the small space he'd awoken on, a small black footprint existed for a nonce before the surrounding heat erased the bare print, the way a neap tide will erase a single trail of footprints on the sand.

If there was the sense of smell here, it would be the stink of filth and burning flesh. Puss and blisters and caramelized blood. Meat cooking. There was no smell that Mindy could discern, but to her it translated as a taste. Her mouth was dry and nasty; she withheld the grimace from her face. This wasn't a skill that she had always possessed.

I'm with your wife and her friend, Mindy sent to the man. A picture of the women went with her words. This picture sharing went both ways.

*Jessica*, he sneered. *I fucked her right in the ass two days before I died.* Maybe this was true, maybe not. The agony could make them say nasty things. *I'm dead? How long have I been dead? What is this place?*

"Tell him that I miss him," Mrs. Doyle said. Mindy did.

*Fuck her. Who is she? A wife? I had one of those. All she ever did was complain. I want a beer. I had to work late so I wouldn't come home early. Where is home? Who am I?* he asked sadly.

"He says that he misses you, too. He said that he is sorry that he always worked late, missing the time that you two had."

Mrs. Doyle smiled, touched. "Is my mother with him?"

*Everyone is here. All of us, and there's plenty of room here for you, too. Burn with me, whore! Are you a witch?*

"He said that there are a lot of people with him. Loving him."

Mindy watched a tear fall from Mrs. Doyle's face. "I miss him." It sounded true.

*You'll burn with me. You, Jessica, and our kids. Ha! Rip your fucking heart out and eat it. They'll tear you flesh and gnaw on your bones forever.*

"He misses you, too. And your children. He's been watching you all."

"It had been hard on them," she said. "Our daughter—"

*A slut*, he said.

"—wouldn't come here today. She thinks that this is stupid, but I had to see, you know? I had to see if I could ask him something?"

"Ask him what?" Jessica asked.

"Ask him if he was happy," she said softly, like she suspected that the response would be the one to crush her. "With me. With his life."

Mindy did ask. What she heard was: *Whore, slut, frigid cunt! She bored me, holding me at home, reading and watching TV. I use to play pool. Fat-ass cow. She couldn't turn on a lamp. Where are the worms? God this hurts. Oh, God, kill me! Let me die! Get out of my head, you bitch. I'll kill you I swear it!*

This is what they pay me for, Mindy thought. They didn't pay to hear the dry words of a lost love; they paid her to give them peace, to help them sleep. It's easier to float into tranquil dreams if you believe bright lights of warm love and cherished family blanket what is gone. Who could close an eye for more than a blink knowing your heart is boiling in the unwavering of hell?

"Of course he was happy," Mindy said. "He said that he wouldn't have done it another way. You were his life. He said that he didn't know how to show it when he was alive. But, he said he use to like watching you read. That he never told you that."

Mrs. Doyle was all tears now. So was Jessica.

"And he is at peace? He's happy?"

*Tell them that I'll be waiting for them, witch. Tell them that it gets hot. Real hot. Bogie time hot.*

"He's at peace," Mindy assured them.

The two women asked more questions, and Steve continued to get more and more belligerent. He was trying to focus his pain at Mindy. That pain grew as the conversation drew on. When they finished, said their good-byes and I love yous and I miss yous, Mindy handed the watch back. It was very warm from her moist palm. Both of the women were crying, leaving.

No more bitch

Or slut

Or cunt



Not for now. She brushed her dark brown hair out of her face at the bell to the front door dinged, the women gone. Her next appointment wasn't for over an hour so she could take a walk. Get some orange juice to drink. Hopefully this next one was a spirit in purgatory or one lost, roaming the earth still. The others were always so loud and mean. She had noticed that she was getting more and more of them lately. And who wants to hear that their loved one is in hell? What can you do but lie?



## ***MY FINAL MASTERPIECE***

**RICHARD H. FAY**

Naked,  
bound together  
by rusty razor wire,  
our bloodied bodies cry passion  
and death.



*He had wanted an artificial tree*

## *OH, CHRISTMAS TREE*

S. ALAN FOX

“Honey? Can you look at the Christmas tree?”

Jake Powers had just stretched out on the couch. Every time he lay down for a Saturday afternoon nap, his wife would find something for him to do. “What’s wrong with it?”

“It’s making funny noises.”

He snorted. “It’s a tree, Margie. It doesn’t make noises.”

She stood in the doorway and folded her arms. “This one does, smarty pants. Can you look at it?”

“What kind of noises? You think a mouse or bird got in it?”

She considered his question. “Nooo. It’s not that kind of a noise. Just look at it for me. I’ve got to run to the corner for some milk.”

“What do you want me to do?” he asked. “Kick the tires? Adjust the carburetor?”

“Don’t start with me, Jake,” she warned. “Just look at the damned tree.”

With a sigh he got up and ambled into the family room.

They had decided to put the tree in the family room this year, so the needles wouldn’t get all in the living room carpet. Last year he had been stepping on the damn things until Easter. And in his bare feet. Well, not this year.

He had wanted an artificial tree. For two hundred bucks he could get a tree you couldn’t tell was fake, and use it over and over again. But n-o-o-o. Every year his wife made him go out and spend hours in the cold, searching for the “perfect” tree. Then they had to lug it home and spend more hours cutting it so it would be just below ceiling height, trimming the lopsided

branches, and making it balance in the tiny stand that claimed it was designed to support it. And all this when he could have been watching the playoffs on his new thirty-seven-inch screen TV.

Jake sighed again. No sense putting it off. When Margie got in this mood, nobody was going to get any rest, or anything else, until she was satisfied.

Ambling over to the tree, he looked it over. They'd picked out a real nice one this year. The limbs were full and nicely spaced, and the shape was perfect. He hadn't even had to cut any off the bottom. Just slid it into the stand, tightened it up, and the tree fit into the corner like it was made for it.

Jake shook his head. The best tree they'd ever find, and Margie wanted to spoil it. He snickered. The tree was making noises. Really, what did she take him for?

With a start, he cocked his head. Did he just hear something? Was that a hiccup? And now there was a rustling sound, coming from...

He gave his head a shake, trying to get rid of the stupid suggestion his wife had put there. It must've been the TV. Or the third beer. It couldn't have been... Still, he bent over and studied the bottom of the tree. Stupid, really. What did he expect to see, Santa Clause? A little teeny manger?

Wait a minute! What was that in the bark, just below the branches? It almost looked like a pocket. That brought a chuckle to his lips. A pocket in a tree. He started to sing to himself. "Two turtle doves, and a pocket in a pine tree."

He giggled and shook his head to clear it, thinking he never should've had that last beer.

A thought flitted through his mind. If he reached in, what would he find? A wallet? With a little driver's license and a picture of a tree?

Lying down, he slid under the tree as far as he could. It still appeared to be some sort of pouch. Tentatively, he stuck out a hand and touched it. It

didn't feel so much like cloth as it did skin. Bumpy and rough, and dry, like a lizard. With a slow, cautious motion, he slid his hand into the opening.

The tree bucked. Jake gave an unwanted yelp of fear. He tried to pull his arm out, but the hole had clenched and held his hand securely in place. As he struggled, a branch whipped across his face, leaving a bloody welt.

"Ouch! What the hell?" He continued to struggle to free himself as the branch hit him again. Grabbing the limb, he tried to hold it back, but more branches joined the fray. With only one usable arm, his defensive efforts were futile. Blood was streaming now. His legs numb, his one free arm in ribbons, he managed a yell, hoping someone would hear him. As he slipped toward unconsciousness, he heard his wife open the garage door, calling out in a carefree way, "Groceries!" Her horrified scream as she took in the scene before her was the last thing he ever heard.

Arglunk hadn't minded when the alien creatures had trimmed his beard, and severed his beautiful toes that helped him drink the precious nutrients from this planet's rich soil. But when that fiend stuck his tentacle up his... well, even a Rigelian could only take so much.

# ***ANONYMOUS ADVICE TO PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS OF THE NORTHERN WITCH***

**DONNY WANKAN**

southern charms work  
    upside down on her  
never bring lizards as gifts  
    she only sacrifices demons  
little Tom Thumb men  
    who steal acorns from her garden  
  
you can tell them by the bare spots  
    on dust-covered cabinets  
she reaches a scooping hand only just more solid  
    than what she drops into boiling dandelions  
  
most people consider them weeds  
    but she—  
who can't smell flowers  
    loves to press the tips of petals  
to the edge of her tongue  
    townspeople say she'll poison herself  
but against their predictions  
    she writes the word *life* a magic command  
with the quill of an oleander  
    on bottom left gum  
and she loves dandelions

pick them from the road to the east woods  
only petals at first light  
when the yellow is sun fresh  
write your life on them  
one word per petal  
only nouns and verbs

of tingling things like the first wolf you saw  
what blood  
you could smell on his teeth  
the forgotten home of dreams  
that comes back only when asleep  
the names of tea  
and leaves of scent  
that cloud in steeping  
stain the kitchen with incense

never write your own name  
or the name of your mother  
never pick the breath balled  
afternoon dandelions  
to blow your secret wish

but carry your book  
of sun-toned spells  
printed in cranberry ink

from these she'll make a wine  
a tart, sugar draft  
don't drink it  
pour it on her lawn  
and she'll call you back to study  
in three years' harvests  
of green wines  
and yellow weed resurrections



*His research would prove beneficial in time, long after the pain had gone*



He said it was for research.

Ten-year-old Peter had always been a shy, quiet boy, one who liked to write. Best friend Lucy said it was cruel to treat animals like that. Especially when he was only living out some stupid story he had written.

Like the time she caught him with the frog and the cat, the frog with its back legs horribly mangled. Peter said he was being good in holding off the cat, keeping it from killing the frog *all at once*. She told him it was naughty, and had felt compelled to stamp on the frog to end its misery. "Look who's naughty now," Peter had chided, and Lucy had run home in tears and not spoken to him for a whole week.

Later, he had gone to see her and apologised, bringing with him a thin exercise book, which, he explained, was why he had performed the 'frog-and-cat experiment'.

She had not wanted to look at it at first, but her curiosity had won her over and Lucy had peered with fascination at the neat pages of handwriting, telling the horrible story of an unfortunate frog, caught by a cat after first having its back legs crushed by a passing car.

"I wanted to see what would happen," he told her.

Lucy was unimpressed, and she hit him before telling him to go home and take his horrid book with him.

But that night she had lain awake for hours, her thoughts swamped by the strange story he had shown her, despite the grotesque images it conjured in her mind. By the time she finally fell asleep, her curiosity was snared.

The next day Lucy apologised for hitting Peter and asked bluntly if he had any other stories she could read. Not that she wanted to, of course, it was just that being his best friend she had an obligation to him.

\*\*\*

They had met a year before, after Lucy had moved to the country to live with her grandma, because her parents Weren't There Any More. Peter was the class outsider, the one none of the other kids liked, "because he was weird". She was the tough nut, the girl *no one* picked on, or *dared* ask about her parents. They struck up an unlikely alliance with one another, outcasts together.

Three weeks after the frog incident, the holidays arrived. One evening in late July, Lucy walked the two streets to where Peter lived, the summer holidays boring for her without her best friend. As she approached she saw him; he was hunched over the flower-bed that encircled the front lawn, staring intently at something. It was not until she called his name that he seemed to notice her. With a wide smile that immediately aroused her suspicions, he beckoned her over.

As she reached him she could see a rock overturned at his feet, a plastic bottle standing open behind him, while the ground below him looked freshly wet, uncharacteristic in the drought conditions of the summer. The town had not had rain for over a week now, and all around the ground was parched and dry. Lucy had seen reports of dust storms on the news. She didn't know *exactly* what a dust storm was, but it sounded important.

"What are you doing?"

Rather than answer, Peter crouched back down and pointed at the earth. Lucy's gaze followed his finger, and saw for the first time the swarm of tiny insects by his feet. She knew what they were. Her grandmother often complained about them ruining her bedding plants.

Ants.

But instead of doing what ants usually do, which from Lucy's point of view was wander about and look busy, they were floundering about in a clear liquid which pooled in the dry bowls of crusted earth like their very own customised swimming baths. Lucy almost sighed with delight at how nice Peter was to provide this for them, before suddenly realising that most were *not* swimming, but drowning, their legs curling up sickeningly as they floated dead on the surface.

"What have you done?" she asked, repulsed.

"I wanted to see what would happen," he explained, "if their homes were flooded. I tried to use water but they could swim in that. Instead I used turps, the smelly stuff that dad washes the paint brushes in. It makes them go all strange so they can't swim. Look."

Lucy grimaced as he pointed again, this time at a specific insect which had shrivelled up like a small raisin and lay dead by the side of the improvised swimming pool.

"You're horrible!" she exclaimed.

He shook his head. "I wanted to find out something," he said. "There's nothing wrong with that is there?"

But Lucy was shaking her head, disgust apparent on her face. "You can't just kill things, Peter!" she exclaimed, furious. "It's... it's... *wrong!*"

"They're just ants!"

"Peter!"

He knew there was no point in arguing with her. He'd known her long enough to know that when she put her foot down on something, there was little chance of budging it.

"Okay," he said. "I won't kill anything anymore."

"Promise?"

He sighed. Shook his head. "All right."

“Good.” She started to stalk away, still angry with him.

“Do you want to read the story?” he asked to her back. As she began to turn, he pulled a wad of crumpled pieces of paper from his pocket and began to smooth them out with his fingers.

Lucy said nothing, just strode over to him, snatched the paper from his outstretched hand and retreated to another patch of lawn to read it.

The story was about the end of the world. Lucy found herself cringing as she read an account of the world vanishing under a giant flood. The tale had no particular plot, instead Peter just described people drowning in gruesome detail. Lucy felt sick, but she couldn’t take her eyes off the story. She hated what she was reading, but found she wanted more. She was fast becoming addicted to Peter’s stories and it was with reluctance that she handed it back.

\*\*\*

Over the next few weeks Peter gave Lucy several other stories to read, each one measurably worse than the previous one. They ranged from things such as an injured fox dying of starvation because a nail in its foot made it unable to hunt, to a deer caught fast in an animal trap and providing living meals for a host of forest predators until it eventually died from horrific wounds.

One of the most gruesome concerned a small domestic dog dying alone in darkness and solitude after falling down a disused mineshaft hidden in the middle of a wood. The sheer detail Peter had used brought tears to Lucy’s stoic eyes, for the first time in as long as she could remember. She found his stories were gradually gaining realism and Lucy found herself plagued by increasingly terrible nightmares. Yet still she could not stop reading them.

Although his literary skills were improving fast, Lucy never caught Peter tormenting any more animals. She hoped he had given up the vile practice, and she told him so. Of course he claimed he had, but Lucy remained dubious.

\*\*\*

Peter stood alone in the darkness of his bedroom, his shirt sleeve rolled tightly to the elbow of his left arm, a rectangular object in his right hand. Although in the darkness his face was an amorphous smudge, a steel hardness emanated from him. His features were tensed to breaking point with intense concentration and not a flicker of fear danced across them.

He flicked his right thumb across the rectangular object and a small flame appeared, illuminating Peter's features in an eerie half-glow. His face appeared almost ghostly, his sinister countenance a world away from his daylight exterior.

He had stolen the lighter from his father's coat pocket that afternoon. He intended to replace it before the theft was discovered. He only required it for a couple of minutes, as part of his latest research vein. His experiments lately were getting lame, covering no new ground. He needed to push himself further, expand out into uncharted territories like a heroic space explorer. Pain and agony inflicted on other creatures did not exist in any meaningful sense; he had to take that one step further, make it real for *him*.

He clenched his left fist in preparation and then moved the flame until it licked at the underside of his arm. Almost immediately his eyes squeezed shut and he gritted his teeth against the pain, muscles tensing but refusing to pull the flame away. The seconds passed like years: one... two... three... four... five... six... seven... eight... nine... ten—

His fingers twitched and the lighter fell to the carpet, taking the light with it. The room fell dark once more, only Peter's moans of pain splitting the darkness.

After a moment he hobbled painfully to his bedside table, locating it through memory and switched on a lamp. He slumped on to the bed and lifted his arm to the light to inspect the wound. He smiled through the agony at the success of his experiment. His research would prove beneficial in time, long after the pain had gone, leaving behind only its memory.

On the underside of his forearm a vague circle two inches in diameter blazed a deep red, and he could see the glistening of body fluid as it oozed

glue-like from the scold. Soon it would blister and fill with pus, and a few days after that only a scar would remain to hold the memory. But for now the pain was like nothing he had ever felt before.

He lifted his head and regarded himself in the wall mirror opposite. His face shone with a cold sweat and his features appeared haggard and emaciated. His eyes looked sunken and reminded him of those children he had seen in countless charity advertisements and on the evening news.

Peter looked back down at his arm. Suddenly the pain seemed to bloom, and sobs slipped from his tightened throat, short choking expulsions, and as the delayed shock took hold of him he buried his head in the pillows and wept.

But through it all he forced an acidic smile.

\*\*\*

On the first day of autumn term, Lucy met Peter at the school gate. She hadn't seen him for the last few weeks because she had suffered from a late dose of mumps and her grandmother had not allowed anyone to visit her. Lucy was still a little angry with Peter but was happy to see him again.

He seemed different. There was something in his eyes that had not been there before, a dark look that scared her a little. There was something different in Lucy too, but she put that down to her illness and the fact that she was still not sleeping well. It felt like a rock lodged inside her brain.

Peter's stories had become part of her. Every night her sleep was shattered by nightmares, and each morning she woke early, her pillow soaked with sweat, her eyes red from lack of sleep. During the day, while her illness had held her incapacitated in her bed, the nightmares had returned, filling her head with terrible visions that kept her cowering beneath the covers in the hope of hiding from them. She had become increasingly withdrawn, even after the mumps had subsided.

Peter and Lucy sat at the back of the class together, as lessons began. Lucy's eyes were glazed, and she stared vacantly towards a point in mid-air

where she watched a scene from one of Peter's stories. A sparrow with a broken wing was plummeting towards the ground, pirouetting like a falling leaf in the wind. How it had broken its wing she didn't know. As it impacted sickeningly with the rocky ground that floated ephemerally at the level of her eyes, Lucy jerked in horror, one arm flying out to strike Peter on the arm. The hallucination dissolved and her wide eyes turned to Peter in answer to a grunt of pain.

"Sorry," she whispered.

Peter ignored her, clutching his arm and grimacing in pain.

Lucy frowned. She hadn't hit him that *hard*. Before Peter could react she reached across, pushed his hand aside and wrenched up his shirt sleeve. She gasped in horror and Peter hastened to cover up his arm, but it was too late.

"Peter, what have you done?" she asked, shocked. "That's *awful*!"

His arm was littered with round, red scars, like giant freckles or birthmarks. Some were almost healed while others were still raw or partially covered by plasters. Lucy was appalled at Peter's self-mutilation; his experiments had gone too far.

\*\*\*

In the playground later he refused to say anything other than it was research for another story, and had then offered her the story to read.

"No!" she exclaimed, horrified, but later she did read it, and the screams she awoke with that night were enough to make her grandmother book a short holiday in Brighton in order to give Lucy a chance to forget her recent traumas.

Peter wouldn't say much to Lucy for the rest of the week, although she urged him to stop hurting himself. She told him his experimenting had gone too far, but he wouldn't promise one way or the other.

At the end of that week Lucy went away.

\*\*\*

Lucy and her Grandmother stayed in Brighton for two weeks, playing on the arcade machines and making sandcastles on the beach beneath the warmth of the late summer sun. Lucy's worries eased, and the nightmares became less frequent and less intense.

The games of crazy golf and sticks of candyfloss helped take her mind off Peter's tales of death and mutation. She thought about Peter a lot, though, and with a clearer perspective was able to see just how twisted he had become. His experiments were becoming too real now. Hurting animals was one thing, but hurting himself was quite another.

The two weeks passed quickly, and Lucy was sad to leave the sea air behind and board the train home. Where, for Lucy at least, a confrontation awaited.

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Peter let the flame die. The burn still hurt as much as the first time, but the shock had gone. He knew that this line of research was exhausted. He frowned, irritated, his young eyes puzzled. He needed a new line of research to explore.

He tossed the lighter aside and picked up a damp cloth from the bedside table. Then, holding it against the burn to ease it, he lay back on his bed. His arm stung, but he ignored it.

He was troubled. Self-mutilation held no further frontiers, and he was bored. He couldn't write any more stories because he had run out of new ideas. He stared at a Batman calendar on the wall, and remembered that Lucy would be back soon.

Maybe she could help him.

A smile spread across his lips. He jumped up from the bed, the cloth falling away from the most recent burn, but he didn't notice. He had no time for it anymore. He had work to do.

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Lucy began to fret.

She had returned from her holiday ready to confront Peter over his behaviour on her first day back at school, yet he was nowhere to be found. She searched for him everywhere before the bell went and couldn't find him, and when she went into class the seat next to her own remained empty the whole day.

He did not appear on Tuesday. Or Wednesday, or Thursday. When she arrived at school on Friday and there was no sign, she began to worry. Had his experiments gone too far? Had he hurt himself badly this time?

When school ended that week and Peter had not shown his face, Lucy reluctantly decided to go round and see him. Maybe he had gone on holiday too, but there was a bad feeling at the back of her mind which thought it unlikely. She feared the worst.

She wanted to ring him, but somehow that seemed too abrupt for her, so she went over to see him after school. Face to face he couldn't lie, either.

A heavy grey cloud hung over her as she walked. Her heart was heavy with anxiety as she turned into Peter's driveway.

She hadn't wanted to come. Once Peter's house had seemed friendly, but now, after everything that had happened, it had changed.

It looked empty. Alarms sounded in her brain but she ignored them and carried on. As she lifted one hand and pressed the doorbell, she didn't really expect anyone to answer.

After a short wait, a shadow appeared on the other side of the frosted glass and the door swung open.

Lucy was surprised to see Peter himself open the door. He looked much the same though his eyes were bloodshot, and she wondered if he was getting any sleep these days either. Then he smiled in greeting, and her mouth dropped open and her skin prickled with goose pimples. The smile was cold, and Lucy did not like it one bit.

“Lucy,” he said, his voice hollow, emotionless. “I’ve been wondering when you would come over.”

“Why weren’t you at school?” she demanded, and for a moment the old Lucy returned as she dominantly shouldered her recessive underling aside and trooped into the house.

Immediately her blood cooled. The house carried an almost tangible atmosphere, a feeling that floated through the rooms like a pestilent smoke. Lucy tensed, her eyes growing guarded as she looked around warily.

“Why weren’t you at school?” she repeated timidly, with the voice of a shy child half her age.

He shrugged. “Didn’t feel like going.” With a wave of his hand he let her through to his bedroom.

A pile of handwritten sheets of paper lay on his bed and Lucy sat down next to them, eyeing them with both suspicion and curiosity.

“Drink?” he asked.

She looked up and nodded.

“Where are your parents?” she asked as he reached the door. Lucy knew Peter’s dad worked from home, selling things over the phone or something like that. His mother was a housewife, and was always fussing around when Lucy was over. The house wasn’t the same without her cheery head popping round the door every minute.

Peter looked at her for a moment, and Lucy found herself unable to meet his gaze. Then he smiled, and it was cold and menacing. “They’ve gone away somewhere,” he said, and then went out and left her alone.

Lucy sat on Peter’s bed and waited. She looked around awkwardly, unsure where to rest her eyes. Eventually, inevitably, they came to rest on the pages beside her. Immediately she looked away, stubbornly refusing to allow her curiosity to grow. It had taken weeks to get over the trauma Peter’s

stories had caused, and here she was, about to give in to temptation once more.

As though magnetically, her eyes were drawn back, and as Peter showed no sign of returning, she scooped the pages up and flicked through them until she found page one.

She knew it was another gruesome horror as soon as her eyes scanned the first few lines. She wanted desperately to screw them up and toss them on the floor, but her curiosity forbade it.

She hadn't read this one before, so she assumed it was a new one. She sighed as she realised new nightmares would come tonight, but it was too late to turn back. She was hooked.

The words sucked her in, capturing her attention. The story was horrible, and Lucy was not surprised when tears formed in her eyes and dropped on to the paper, blurring the hastily scribbled words.

The story was about an autistic child who had a grotesque craving for pain. It was standard horror fare, little different to Peter's previous offerings. Only this time the alarms were clanging wildly, but Lucy was so engrossed she ignored them.

The story continued with the child creating all manner of crude torture implements in his cellar and then sacrificing those close to him to his evil desires. His parents, his best friend...

Lucy's eyes jerked from the page as the door opened and Peter stood there. His eyes gleamed and his smile was chaotic. In his hand he held something wooden. Lucy thought—*hoped*—it was a cup containing her drink but as he advanced towards her she gave up trying to convince herself of what it was, and instead started to scream.

As she backed away across the room and her lungs cleared, she started to say something, but her voice was severed in a second as Peter suddenly leapt forward and rammed the wooden device into her face. Two barbed, metal nails punctured each of her cheeks and a rounded block of wood thrust into

her mouth. As she stared in horror at Peter's maddened eyes she realised he held the end of a cord which was attached to her makeshift muzzle.

He tugged it hard and Lucy was jerked on to her front, blood gushing on to the floor. As Peter tugged again, pulling her towards the doorway and the hall, along which stood the cellar door, Lucy tried one last time to shout to him, but her words were lost, swept away in a maelstrom of pain and terror as her mouth filled up with blood.

As he dragged her through the open cellar doorway and down the stairs into the darkness, the lost words vanished behind her like angels drifting away.

*It's not fun any more, Peter. It's too real, too real...*



The taste of graveyard dirt on my lips  
a thousand goodbyes against short shorn grass  
as I lay against the bed you made me  
the granite pillow - carved in serif.

Ragged satin, blood stained lace  
a body decayed and yet the same  
I called at the crows as they watched  
each a black robed judge to my birth

Hunger, flush through rotten flesh  
I ambled through the marble minefield  
and caught the scent of society  
Teeth gnashing, I went out—  
to search for brains.



*Still the unholy creature moved, unaffected by his pleas*

## *FORTHWITH FOR SERVICE*

CHRISTINE LUCAS

*“...O mistress Hekate and Lord Anubis*

*Lord of the crossroads, and you, Black Bitch...”*

Nikanor raised his nose from the parchment and stretched his back and arms to soothe his sore muscles. Glancing out of the window, he saw that night had fallen over Antioch while he had hardly copied half of the commissioned manuscript. With sepia-stained fingers he rubbed his temples and struggled to concentrate. He *had* to finish copying these scrolls tonight—Justus had insisted on that—otherwise he would not get paid. A whiff of air brushed Nikanor’s face, carrying the scent of honeysuckle. Amidst the high shelves of dusty tomes and scrolls, summer seemed to him like a distant memory. The thick walls of the bishop’s library muffled the sound of the crickets outside.

Sighing, Nikanor rolled up the sleeves of his thick brown robe, careful not to stain the linen fabric of his last presentable outfit. He dipped his quill in the ink and resumed his scribbling. In the stillness of the library, under the flickering candlelight, his tired eyes tricked him, making the snake-like signs of the Greek words curl and swirl on the scroll in an unholy dance. Why would Justus wish such a blasphemous book preserved? Theodosius, Emperor of the East, had issued the destruction of all things heathen. Everywhere in the Empire the faithful smashed the pagan statues to pieces and lit bonfires with the false writings of the past.

Nikanor shook his head. Questioning the motives of the bishop’s brother could easily get him in trouble. Although rumours—spread by his enemies, no doubt—implicated him in the recent attempts against his brother’s life, Nikanor assured himself that Justus had good reasons to desire these scrolls copied; testimony, perhaps, against heretics and followers of the dark arts. Still, the phrases he copied with his now stiff fingers made his skin crawl.

*“O Scale Holder, Dark Master  
Of those untimely dead,  
Lord before the divine booth  
Weighing the hearts of all mortals...”*

He flinched at a noise behind him. Turning, he met the beady eyes of a rat staring back at him. The rat rose on its hind legs, twitched its muzzle and squeaked—an insult, perhaps—before running off. As it vanished in the darkness between the narrow corridors, Nikanor thought he should inform Justus’ librarian about that pest on first light. Even at that moment, the rat could be feasting on the words of Homer and Plato. His writing hand stopped mid-phrase, as another thought dawned in his mind. Should the rat destroy scrolls and parchments, they would need new copies, would they not? Grinning, Nikanor continued his work. The rat could go about its business.

The candle flickered in the evening breeze. Nikanor hardly noticed it, engaged in a futile effort to will away the taxing pain of his neck and shoulders. He had just copied a few more words—unsettling words—when the sounds of some fatal struggle behind him made the hair on the back of his neck stand. Amidst hisses and growls, bones snapped like twigs under foot, flesh tore like cloth. Images of malformed creatures flashed in his mind, beasts tearing and devouring freshly killed prey with sweet delight. His stomach churned as Nikanor slowly turned to face the monster that lurked behind him.

A cat.

So the librarian, obviously aware of the rat infestation, had employed the hunting skills of a cat to deal with the matter. Amber eyes gazed askance at him, as the black cat licked the blood off the carcass of a rat, most likely the same rat Nikanor had seen moments ago. Nikanor’s face burned by his cowardice—it was just a cat, after all. Letting the animal finish her meal, he bent over his parchment once more.



*“Lord of the Underworld, gatekeeper  
Of the eternal bars, now open quickly,  
Key-holder, guardian, Anubis.”*

He sighed; at last, the copy had almost reached completion. Nikanor steadied his quill with both hands. One false move in the last lines would ruin the whole parchment. He could not afford another setback, for he would have to start all over. *Hold on, just a few lines left.* Then he could leave this dark library and visit the tavern with some coins to spare on a cup of wine and a decent meal.

The cat jumped on the table and Nikanor caught the inkstand from falling over at the last minute. While his heart raced inside his chest, he glared at the cat, who seemed fascinated by the way the breeze ruffled the corners of his parchments. Glancing over his shoulder, his eyes narrowed when he saw that the cat had abandoned her prey and now, tail wagging, pawed the scrolls he had spent hours copying.

“Go away, filthy creature,” he spat, but kept still. Nikanor had parchments and fingers shredded in the past by others of her kind.

The cat sniffed the air and Nikanor saw in the candlelight the fresh blood smearing the ebony fur around her mouth. His stomach churned with disgust, as the cat inspected the table he worked on. Her amber eyes studied the scrolls and, for a moment, Nikanor could swear that the cat read through the heathen words. Then the animal arched her back and hissed at some unseen threat, her foreleg raised and clawing the air.

Nikanor lost the last of his patience and tried to knock the cat off the table. “Be gone, monster!”

The cat hissed again and moved away fast. Nikanor stood and followed her around the table, adamant in kicking a lesson into her skull, but the cat moved faster. She leaped on the windowsill and vanished into the night.

“And good riddance!” Breathing hard, Nikanor returned to his seat and his work, hardly glancing at the dead rat on the floor. He sat with his eyes

closed for a moment, clearing his mind of disturbing images of bloodthirsty cats and disembowelled rats. Letting out a deep breath, he focused on cheese and ale and plump tavern girls. His hand no longer shook when he picked up the quill and copied the last two verses.

*“Send up to me the spirits, send the dead*

*Forthwith for service in this late hour.”*

As he scribed the last letter, Nikanor let out a long breath. Finally finished, he already felt the warmth of the tavern and the crisp taste of roasted meat, followed by a good night’s sleep to drive the pain away from his neck and shoulders. Although the words disturbed him, he carefully read aloud through the whole parchment, making minor corrections here and there. He had just finished when another sound behind his back made his skin crawl. Perhaps the cat had returned. He snickered and turned. This time, he’d kick that filthy cat.

No cat stood there.

Nikanor only saw the broken body of her prey and the dancing shadows of the library. The remains of the rat lay in a small pool of blood, entrails scattered, skull crushed, bones protruding from torn flesh. Nauseated, he averted his eyes. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something move.

The dead rat had moved.

For a moment that lingered on, Nikanor sat frozen. Surely, this should be a trick of his tired eyes and mind; dead things don’t move. They *cannot* move. And behold, the rat moved again. Turning its bitten head with an unnerving sound of grinding bones, it stared at him through a single bloody eye and sneered with its missing jaw. Legs in unnatural angles shifted and it stood up and started walking, dragging behind it a mass of raw flesh.

Nikanor stifled a scream and climbed on the bench, clasping his parchments to his chest, muttering prayers. Still the unholy creature moved, unaffected by his pleas. Feeling his heart racing inside his chest, his eyes darted around the room for something—anything—to use against this

devilish manifestation, a chair or a stool. *Dead or not, it's still only a rat*, he tried to reason with his fear.

And fear laughed back in his face.

From the shadows of the library, dozens of shapes came forth, shapes of people—of *dead* people. People burned and cut and rotting, people with holes where their faces should be, people with heads missing and necks broken and ivory grins of eternal hunger. *Have I lost my mind?* Nikanor paced backwards until he felt the wall behind him, and still he tried to retreat even further, struggling to blend in with the stones and the bricks and escape the claws that reached for his throat.

When the monsters closed in, he shut his eyes, hoping to will them away. *Oh God, I will never again think ill of my neighbours*, he vowed. *I will never pinch the tavern maid's bosom, or drink ale until I pass out! Just deliver me from this evil!* But none answered his prayers and their stench waxed stronger until their fetid breath caressed his face, and he felt the prick of countless scorpion stings everywhere their putrid hands touched him. The last thing Nikanor heard, in the cacophony of hisses and hungry moans, was a distant mew. Then everything broke into a fiery sphere of pain, as the untimely dead tore him apart.

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He stepped out from within the shadows—an olive-skinned man dressed in a white robe with the head of a jackal. He approached the dark horde and the ghouls crawled around him, seeking comfort, their bloodlust temporarily sated. Lovingly, his large hands caressed each one of them, tender brushes against crushed skulls and scorched faces and slow, affectionate strokes. Crimson eyes sparkling, Anubis faced the other man standing at the threshold.

“The price has been paid, mortal,” growled Anubis, the Key-holder, his voice carrying the echo of a distant thunder. “You can command my children as you see fit; for the time being.”

“Always your faithful servant, Great God Anubis.” Justus bowed his head and grinned. At last, where poison and dagger had failed, he had the means of the convenient demise of his fat, rich brother and his lackeys. The old scrolls had not lied - a man, clueless and foolish, reciting the incantation by voice and writing had summoned the jackal-headed god and, with his own blood, had quenched the thirst of the untimely dead.

And the dead had come forthwith for service.

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One by one, mortals, immortals and those between—or beyond—left the library. The black cat sat on the windowsill, amber eyes searching through the darkness. The rat she had struggled to kill earlier had joined the legion of the walking dead, and she was still hungry. Then she spotted the disembowelled body of the scribe by the wall and licked her lips. Purring, she jumped on the floor and ran to the pile of fresh meat.

It surely tasted better than rats.

## *THE SANDBOX*

ANNA DEVINE

I wouldn't see her every time  
When I went out to play  
But I could sense that she was near  
And smell her foul decay

She always wore a dirty dress  
And never seemed to grow  
But who she was and how she died  
I doubt I'll ever know

There were days I'd hear her speak  
In tones which sounded kind  
While other times she'd frighten me  
And terrorize my mind

When she'd say to follow her  
To find forever shade  
I'd hear whispers in her smile  
And knew to be afraid

Once I thought to be alone  
While digging in the sand  
Until my buried feet grew cold  
Then felt her clammy hand

But when I screamed and tried to run  
Her nails clawed at my skin  
And since that day I've never played  
In any sand again



*The alcohol brings out the tears I can never shed when sober*

## *DEATHBED CONFESSOR*

DAVID PRICE

I slouched over the table, gazing at the ice cubes sprinkled over my Malibu like so many carelessly tossed-aside diamonds. It was after midnight in the seedy, smoke-filled club. I liked the decadent, bluesy atmosphere, the way people generally kept to themselves.

It was a jazz club at the lethargic stage of the evening. A lone singer crooned slow ballads to an indifferent audience, her voice husky and relaxing. I was drunk, lulled into a state of contentment. The lights were down low. I felt securely invisible, and for all the attention I was being paid, I might well have been just that. I was lingering over my drink. One more would have been too many and that would have ruined the perfection. Now was perfect. The sound was right and my mood was good.

I took out a Havana cigar, clipped the end off and took the time to get it drawing evenly. I could now immerse myself in my own private world, observing all around me and taking inspiration from what I saw: four men playing poker around a table; dollar bills being tossed into the pot like so much confetti; a young couple holding hands across a table, gazing into each other's eyes. Love in its infancy, a time when you think life is never going to end. I remember just such days, and being just as much in love. I am a romantic at heart. In my early twenties, untainted by life's bitter experiences, I'd yearned to visit the New Orleans of the 1880's and steep myself in its rich history.

Now? Now I write to pay the bills, to earn a living. The days when I could live in the fantasy world of my novels are long gone. Success didn't come easy, but when it came, a little part of me died. So I just relax in smoky surroundings and allow the world to take on a surreal appearance. For a short time, at least, I can imagine perfection in an imperfect world.

An hour later I am walking down the brightly lit street, the gaudy pre-Christmas decorations reminding me of Las Vegas. I feel good, and in my drunken state I imagine myself walking through a wonderland of perfection. It's a perfection we all seek, but never find in harsh reality. I think positively. If I remember the pain in my life I will start weeping, for the alcohol brings out the tears I can never shed when sober. But sometimes you have to let them go, and on several occasions I had drunk heavily in order to release the emotions. In the mornings I would despise myself for such displays of self-pity, even though I knew I would have exploded without them.

I arrive back at my rooms. The old house is a picture of downtown redbrick squalor. At home I live in luxury, but away I choose to slum it. The rooms are unclean, the residents made up of drunks, whores, drug addicts. They are real people with real problems. I avoid them, but I need to be near them, to feel for them. Like most writers I observe people. They do not know that I am any different.

I enter and the landlady greets me. Her name is Ellen. She used to be beautiful, something you can see in her now. She is tall, still slim. Now in her fifties, her beauty has faded. But she is still poised and elegant. Her eyes still sparkle; her neck is still gracefully swanlike, although her chest has a sagging, wattled appearance. Her hair is styled well, but her dress makes her look like an aging prostitute. She yearns daily for the youth she can no longer recapture and takes to the bottle a little too often; but tonight she is lucid.

"Come dance with me," is her invitation.

The needle of an old record player glides across a scratchy recording and we move to the music of James Last, my hand gently caressing her neck. Closing her eyes she dreams the years away, imagining herself the beautiful young woman she had once been. Over coffee I do not see the wrinkles in her skin or the grey in her hair. I flirt with her a little and she forgets her age. 'Find a perfect little acre of the world and retreat to it every now and then.' This was the advice I had once given her. I told her that in that corner she



was twenty years old, her youth was eternal, there was no violence or misery ...that life couldn't touch her there.

I kiss her on the lips and leave her to her memories and delusions. She will die in this building, remembering what was and what will never be again.

Outside my room I pause for a moment and listen. A girl named Rosemary is gently playing a violin. I walk to her door, which is open, and look in on her. She is in her own little world, head cocked over the violin, bow moving back and forth, sweet music filling the air. One day she will be somebody. At twenty-two she has a childlike face and the sweetest smile I have ever seen. She gives that smile to me. When Rosemary plays, she is in the only heaven that matters to her. I envy her this simplicity: for her, perfection is, quite literally, at her fingertips.

In my room I open the window and look out across the city, dwelling on my life and giving into the melancholy which has been building up since early evening.

Dawn. Always my thoughts return to Dawn. She had wanted everything to be so perfect.

Yes, it had seemed so. Married for six months, working on a project together and expecting our first child. She'd been attending a dinner on the night of the accident. It is little consolation that the drunk who rammed her is now in prison. My child is dead and Dawn, the most vibrant and happiest of people, now lies in a coma from which she is never likely to recover. I would gladly give my life for just one more night of her company. The woman who'd crashed into her taxi had written to me, trying to express her remorse. How could she ever hope to apologize for tearing my heart out?

I lie on the bed and the tears begin to roll down my face. I fall asleep thinking of Dawn, just as I have thought of her every night for the last six months. I try to remember her laughing, crying: I try to remember the colour of her eyes, the sound of her voice. But all I can see is the white

nightdress, the wan complexion and the tube in her mouth. It's the only memory I have now; Dawn, my very own sleeping beauty.

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The next morning I was in a depression as crushing as any I had ever experienced. All the cares and misery in the world had settled on me overnight. I had been on a high, but as always, the come down had been hard. I got out of bed and ambled about the room. This was worse than mere melancholy: this was full-blown misery.

I left the building and crossed the road to a nearby deli, craving a club sandwich and a coffee. The ham and cheese tasted good, but the coffee was bad for my depression. I thought to head for Jack's Bar at a later time for a pick-me-up, but all depression was forgotten as I left the deli and found myself in the middle of a deluge.

The heavens opened up, but instead of rain it was blood that flooded down from the skies, a tropical storm of gore that ran down the buildings and into the gutters. I stood there in shock, but no-one else seemed to notice. A Cadillac rolled down the street, its wipers contemptuously swishing the blood aside. A woman hurried past me, covered from head to foot in the vile substance, struggling to get her umbrella up. It was a scene from hell. I looked up at a gargoyle and saw the blood pouring from its mouth. I sprinted across the road and dived back into the building.

It was at that moment that I began to doubt my own sanity: this was the house that I stayed in, but at the same time it wasn't. There was no damp musty smell, no aroma of hot dogs and fried onions invading the atmosphere from the street. Everything was clean, the wallpaper and carpets new. I was still covered in blood, yet I left no footprints. When I put my hand on a table, no smear remained after I removed it.

Then Ellen stepped into the hall: young and beautiful, with almond-shaped eyes, honey coloured skin and lustrous auburn hair. Yet there was coldness in those eyes, a hard set to that mouth. I called her by name, but she didn't answer. I just wasn't there to her.

She began to climb the stairs, and for the first time I noticed the gun in her hand. I followed her, but there was nothing I could do; I was here in time, but only peripherally. A tragedy had taken place and there was nothing I could do to prevent the events being replayed, frame for frame, before my eyes.

She entered my room and I followed her. A young couple lay on the bed, naked and in each other's arms. The room smelled of cheap whiskey and the young couple had obviously passed out in a drunken stupor. I watched Ellen approach the young girl, who could have been no more than seventeen, and place the gun on the dresser beside her. Then she picked up a candleholder and struck the girl behind the ear. The blow would not have killed, but it was hard enough to render her unconscious, something that seemed completely pointless under the circumstances. She pulled on some gloves, wiped the gun, put it in the girl's hand and placed her finger on the trigger.

I shouted, but there was nothing I could do. The man's head exploded, blood spattering the walls and dripping off the curtains. I couldn't believe what I was seeing as Ellen dragged the girl out of bed and across the floor; threw her down, calmly removed her gloves, picked up the candleholder and then struck for the second time; harder than before, drawing blood.

She slipped the gloves into a dresser drawer and began pacing the room, waiting. I heard the police sirens a few minutes later.

I walked out of the room, stunned, still dripping blood. I descended the stairs in a trance, wanting nothing more than to wake up from this hideous nightmare. At the bottom of the stairs I saw a newspaper, its headlines glaring up at me:

### 17 YEAR-OLD GIRL GETS LIFE FOR MURDER

The picture on the cover was of the young girl I'd seen Ellen strike not five minutes before.

A scream made me jump and I spun around, suddenly back in the present day and no longer covered in blood.

I ran in the direction of the scream, into Ellen's room where I found Rosemary standing over her. Ellen had been shot in the stomach at close range during the night and now lay in a river of her own blood, her face contorted after hours of suffering, drained of all colour. She was still alive, just.

I left the room, called an ambulance and the police, then returned to the room. Rosemary threw herself into my arms, finally breaking down now that she had gone beyond the point of hysteria.

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Ellen passed away before the police arrived. It had been so many years since I had had this experience. It's a curse. You can call it telepathy, although it's nowhere near as simple as that. When I am close to death, I get these visions. It is as though I am drawn into the very mind of a person who is on the very edge of death, bearing witness to their most terrible secrets. As Ellen's life ebbed away, I had been drawn into her darkest world, witnessing her greatest shame. She was a cold-blooded killer.

Ellen. God, I'd thought the world of her. A Southern Belle growing old gracefully, like Scarlett O'Hara might have been upon entering the twentieth-first century.

The sandwich I'd eaten for breakfast lay uncomfortably in my stomach, but the sickness I felt had nothing to do with food.

I was alone in my room, sent there by Lieutenant Jackson. "We'll be wanting to question you," he'd told me, "so don't be leaving the building."

He didn't have to tell me that I was heavily under suspicion. They knew me as a loner, "a guy who keeps to himself."

I'd just nodded and retreated to my room, leaving a young police officer to comfort Rosemary. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't nervous: if anyone fit the profile of a killer, it was me; and the police in this country are keen to make an early arrest, sometimes at the expense of justice.

On the other hand, there were few people in this building you'd trust your sister with.

When Jackson finally came to me, he brought coffee.

"Lousy business, huh," he said.

He sat at the table, placing himself at a higher position than me. I sipped my coffee, deciding to say no more than I had to. The rain ran down the window in depressing rivulets.

"Know her well?" he asked.

I shrugged. "I hardly knew her at all."

"Nice lady."

"I thought so." Damn this small talk, I thought, get to the point.

"Strange that no-one heard anything. I know the killer used a pillow to muffle the shot, but he must have had to break in."

"Maybe she knew the killer."

"Maybe." He took a sip of coffee. He was fishing and I knew it. I said nothing.

"Now, Mr..." he consulted his notebook, checking my name, "Bairner."

"Yes."

"You were out late last night?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"The Marvel Club."

"On your own?"

"Yes."

"And you got back at ..."

“About half past midnight.”

“Did you see the deceased?”

“We had coffee.”

“Ah.”

“Then I went to bed.”

“I see.”

“I’m afraid that’s all I can tell you.”

All I dared to, anyway. I, too, had believed Ellen to be a nice lady. Then I had seen her kill. She would not sleep with the angels tonight. This insight churned my guts. How many neighbours had said of an evil killer, “But he was so nice.”? How gutted did the families of Jeffrey Dahmer and The Yorkshire Ripper feel when the truth came out? I’d loved a monster.

“Mr Bairner, is there anything you want to tell me? A violent killer is at large and he may kill again. If you can think of anything, no matter how trivial, that may give us a clue as to the identity of this killer, then please tell me. For Ellen’s sake as well as ours.”

I placed my mug to one side. What could I tell him? At the very least he’d think I was a crank. I looked at him. He was the very picture of a cynical, streetwise cop. How could I tell him of visions, bygone images transmitted to me from the brain of a dying woman? I had to tread carefully here.

“She did mention a name,” I offered tentatively.

“Trudi Southon.”

In naming a girl on a bygone newspaper headline, I’d committed myself.

I’d thrown up a name, hoping that would be it: but it couldn’t be. I’d have to explain why she’d been mentioned, in what context; I’d stepped over the threshold now and there was no stepping back.

“When I was eighteen,” I began, “I witnessed a car crash. I pulled the man out before the car exploded, but he was seriously injured. I tried to keep

him alive until the ambulance arrived, but he was bleeding badly. I tried to comfort him. But as I held his hand, something very strange happened. I was suddenly in a room, watching this man abusing a young girl. I later found out that this was his daughter. It was a fleeting vision, but a powerful one. I knew that I had been witness to this man's darkest secret. He died within minutes of this vision.

"I tried to dismiss it. I was shocked, and I thought that this was the explanation. Then, two years later, a friend of mine was fatally injured in an explosion. I was at the hospital, by his bedside, when he passed away. Before he died, I saw him stealing a car when he was a teenager. If I am around someone who is on the brink of death..."

"I get you. Ellen was still alive when you found her. So give, Buddy. What did you see?"

I told him the whole story, not even omitting the blood rainstorm. When I finished he nodded slowly and left the room. I remained in my seat, waiting for the men in white coats to arrive. It had been foolish to open up, but if I hadn't talked, I could never have lived with myself. I could only ponder my own fate, my own future, now that I had finally told someone my own innermost secret.

He re-entered the room less than ten minutes later, a grave expression on his face.

"Mr Bairner, we have located Trudi Southon. Would you come with me, please?"

We crossed town in a police car, arriving at the hospital where Trudi Southon was being kept. She'd been admitted less than an hour earlier, suffering a drug overdose. We walked down long bleak corridors, our footfalls loud enough to wake the dead. When I finally saw Trudi Southon, I couldn't believe it was the woman I had seen in the vision.

I took a seat by her side, held her hand and was almost overcome with the feelings of despair coming from her.

I willed her not to die, not to expose her darkest secret to me. But as she faded, I witnessed the whole thing: she'd approached Ellen as a woman seeking a room. Invited into the house, she'd produced a gun and fired through the pillow.

"A life for a life, bitch!"

When I opened my eyes, Trudi Southon was dead, her misery finally at an end. Ellen's final suffering was as nothing compared to this woman's.

Jackson placed a hand on my shoulder, said something I didn't quite catch, then led me out of the room. My mind was in a turmoil trying to take all of this in. A name brought me around and I was aware of a man standing before me, offering his hand. I shook the hand, just catching the name Barker.

"Tell me everything you saw, son," he invited. Barker was a stocky man of about 70. He had a hard face and a shock of grey hair. I turned to Jackson.

"Don Barker. He was the detective in charge of the Adam Monk homicide investigation. He always had doubts about the verdict. Now tell him everything you've seen. It won't be enough to clear Trudi Southon's name in a court of law, and we'll never give her back those years she spent in prison. But we'd still like to know the truth."

I went through the whole story again, hoping it was for the last time. It must have sounded like a flight of fancy, but Barker seemed convinced; it was as if I was confirming his long held suspicions. When I'd finished, he smiled, placed a hand on my shoulder. "I'll say a prayer for her on Sunday. I guess justice can take many forms, huh?"

He shuffled away from us, a very tired man. 40 years on the streets had certainly taken their toll.

"You don't have to stick around," Jackson told me. "We found the gun in her apartment. Come on, I'll drive you back."



Later that evening I took several drinks, and then walked the streets trying to clear my mind of the terrible images that were filling it.

I knew I could never return to this city; I could no longer imagine perfection here. I had seen the streets awash with blood, had peered into the cracks and seen the evil hearts that beat within angelic bodies. And I looked anew at everyone who passed me, wondering what dark secrets they harboured.

The street singers who harmonized so well: did one beat his wife while another seduced his sister? Was the old shopkeeper as jovial as he seemed? Had the woman loading the shopping bags into her car smothered her baby?

My peace of mind had been breached, my illusions shattered. In a bad world, I had wanted to see the good. But the good I'd seen had been nothing more than surface gloss; a bright skin under which a colony of maggots festered.

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I stayed for the funeral, then flew back to Britain, deciding to get back to my writing. For six months I buried myself in my work, occasionally taking prescribed anti-depressants. I did the only thing I could think of and turned fact into fiction, putting more of myself into the novel's protagonist than I had ever done before. My publisher was shocked at the unusually dark nature of my writing, but impressed by the story. I told him not to try and contact me until it was time for the book's release.

I spent a lot of time driving around in my car and visiting my wife in the evenings, taking her fresh flowers every night. There was now no hope of her ever recovering. I resisted all pleas to switch off the life support system, unwilling to let her die. I still had hope, whatever else had died in me. You see, I never lost my dream of a perfect world. I sought it out through fiction, through delusion, through faith. Now that faith was dead and Dawn was the only part of my life that made any sense. I was cursed in my visions, visions that made me see more evil in the world than anyone ever should. But surely Dawn, the one thing dearest to me in life, could never leave me.

The release of my book brought me the greatest accolades of my career. What an irony that I could no longer enjoy them. Then, with my novel topping the bestseller list, the 'phone call I had been dreading finally came.

I drove to the hospital in shock, expressions like 'cerebral haemorrhage' and 'fading fast' running through my head. I drove slowly. Maybe, subconsciously, I was hoping she would pass away before I got to her. When I am around dying people, I unwillingly accept their deathbed confessions, unburdening their souls on the point of death. Would Dawn have terrible inner demons, secret shames that would reveal themselves to me in her final moments?

I really didn't want to think so, but there'd be no keeping secrets from me tonight.



## ***OUT BY THE SHED***

**GREG SCHWARTZ**

something moved in the darkness  
his wife saw it too  
at the edge of the grass  
out by the shed  
  
with Slugger in hand  
suburban weapon of choice  
he crept through the yard  
like a sniper in 'Nam

it sat in the grass  
watched him approach  
with dewy round eyes  
and soft downy fur

with his wife keeping watch  
from the faraway house  
he knelt down to pet it  
whatever it was

razor teeth took his fingers  
then it hopped away  
strands of broken tissue  
dangling from its mouth

he looked at his hand  
spraying blood like a hose  
more creatures appeared  
to join in the feast

his wife screamed behind glass  
as they dragged him down  
torn limb from limb  
out by the shed.



*In a way, it's a dream come true*

**F**ive years after Y2K, I return to the Silicon city, summoned by our civil contractor. You're in great demand, he says. How? I ask. They're rebuilding the city, he says. Who? I ask. Who else? Digital angels, he says.

We all pack up and leave for the silicon city.

Huge trees have disappeared from the old boulevards, and dwarf ornamental stereotypes have taken their place. New glass towers where once Victorian buildings had been. More dotted lanes for widened roads, and flyovers at every crossing. Air-conditioners stick to concrete high-rises like leeches. We've come seeking jobs, we get them.

I precariously balance myself on scaffold platforms, place concrete blocks side-by-side, row over row. Endlessly. I help the giant machines pour concrete slurry into huge steel meshes: horizontally and vertically. Escalators take me higher and higher toward the sky. What I see from those dizzy heights? Below, nothing. All around, concrete cousins of what we're now raising. I reach such heights, I never ever dreamt of. Some of my pals fall and lose lives. Those who survive keep climbing like me, rising to new heights every surviving day. In a way, I'm sky-bound. In a way, it's a dream come true.



*"You need to be taught a lesson."*

## NIGHTMARES

J.E. TAYLOR

I feel the sweat seeping down the small of my back as I strain to see through the mist. My eyes dart back and forth but I can't locate the source of the terrible noise that surrounds me. My clothes are soaked and clinging. My hair, turned black by the rain, mats in wet clumps against my skull. Terror washes over me as I feel the hot rush of breath closing in. I scream...

...and am in the lobby of an old theater. There is a coffin in the middle of the room. I drift to the other side to see what is inside. A scream locks in my throat as I look at the remains of my husband's face floating in a bath of blood. I turn and flee into the theater.

It's empty and dark. An old rotted smell drifts through the theater and into my nostrils, causing me to crinkle my nose. Each step I take toward the stage makes me quiver. A sliver of light passes by me and I spin around. A dark form lurks in the doorway. My lungs constrict as I smell his hideous breath. *Oh God, he found me.*

I can't hear his footsteps over the pounding of my heart as I turn, reaching for the door leading beneath the stage, slamming it behind me and flipping the lock. I am entombed in darkness. The bellow of rage fills the room as he repeatedly strikes the door, each strike sending me back further into the blackness.

Then it is silent. My eyes adjust and I look around. A crack of light invades the darkness, another door is opening. I bolt, throwing my weight against it, but I am not strong enough. The door swings open. I retreat into the far corner, my breath coming in ragged rasps.

He comes closer in his predatory way. I can see what he is carrying and a small sound escapes my lips, as my eyes widen. He reaches for me and I let out a shrill cry...

...I sit upright in bed, my hand covering the scream. It's too late; the light flips on in the hallway.

"Are you alright?" My husband steps into the room.

I nod, swallowing and offering a pitiful smile. "Nightmare."

He smiles. "You've been reading too many horror stories."

"It was a real bad one."

"I could tell. The neighbors must think I'm killing you." He grins. "Either that or you're having one hell of an orgasm."

I blush as the dream dissipates.

He slowly approaches the bed, un-tucking his shirt.

I giggle like a school girl anticipating his touch. My smile freezes as I look in his eyes. I see murder there.

He grabs my feet and yanks me to the foot of the bed. "You didn't tell me you were pregnant."

"What?"

"The doctor called when you were taking a nap." He grabs the front of my shirt, yanking me to his face. "Who have you been sleeping with?"

"Nobody!" I scream momentarily infuriated by his accusation.

"It isn't mine." His voice barely a whisper.

The calmness of his voice brings the terror back. "Of course it is." I can feel the panic ebbing back in.

"You've been a bad girl." He punches me in the stomach, knocking me to the floor. "You need to be taught a lesson." He unbuckles his belt.



I have never seen him like this, he means to kill me. *I'm pregnant!* The scream is only in my head. I watch horrified as he yanks the belt out of the loops and swings it at me. The sting that flares in my cheek catches me off guard. My hand flutters to the side of my face. "Please don't." I try to scramble backwards. The belt hits my arm this time, causing me to yelp in pain. I finally find my feet as he cocks his arm back for a third whipping.

"No one makes a fool out of me! No one!" He advances swinging the belt as hard as he can.

It connects with my stomach, doubling me over. I drop to the floor. Before I can catch my breath he kicks me. The moan that escapes my lips fills the room.

"I'm sterile, you bitch!" He reaches down and yanks me to my feet.

Blood flows from my mouth. "I didn't sleep with anyone else." The tears pour from my eyes, blinding me.

He drops the belt and grabs a handful of my hair jerking my head back. "Don't lie to me." He growls in my face.

"I haven't been unfaithful." I shake like a leaf in his grasp.

"Liar." He smacks me across my face and drags me to the bed, ripping at my clothes. "You are not going to have another man's child."

I almost get away, but he slams me back down, ripping my underwear. I scream as he pries my legs apart. He reaches behind to pull something out of his back pocket.

My eyes bulge, nearly popping from my head and I begin to struggle as he untwists the coat hanger. I swing to hit him, but he is faster, catching my wrist and sharply twisting it. I hear the sick snap of the bone and with it the pain.

He drops the hanger and slaps me twice, letting go of my broken limb.

I yank my arm back to my chest, cradling it as the tears streak my face. I lunge for the discarded hanger, feeling the metal in my grip. I whip it across his face. He falls back, freeing my legs and I kick, connecting with his stomach, knocking him off the bed.

I flee but everything is sluggish again. I reach the top of the stairs, losing my balance and pin wheeling, landing...

...in an alley. I shake my head to clear it. My arm is in a cast. I look around at my surroundings. I'm in a dead end. There is no where to go.

Something is coming down the alley. I can smell its foul breath and hear the low growling. I am frantic as the form steps out of the patch of fog. The beast has come for me and I realize with dawning horror that it is carrying a twisted coat hanger.

I scream...

...and sit up in bed.

My husband flips on the light on the nightstand, looking at me with sleepy surprise. "You okay?" He gently rubs my back; his eyes are full of concern.

I look at the familiar surroundings and burst into tears.

He sits up and pulls me into his arms.

I flinch, glancing at the cast on my arm as the sobs begin to rip from my chest.

"It wasn't your fault. You fell down the stairs." He reminds me and kisses my temple holding me until I stop crying.

"Did I kick you again?"

He laughs a little as darkness flares in his eyes. "I don't know. I didn't wake up until you screamed. Try to get some sleep." He flips the light off.

I stare in the dark listening to his breathing slow to even rhythms as sleep finds him. Was it the really the fall? I can't remember.

Was it?

Eventually, I drift into a restless sleep.



***CRASH***

**N. C. WHITEHEAD**

we should have known  
that helping was pointless  
when code began scrolling  
across the whites of her eyes  
and random digits  
oozed from her pores  
while her mouth went slack  
and issued static.  
but we drug her  
to the hospital anyway,  
the defibrillator  
just delivering the final blow,  
the final electric surge  
as she finally went below,  
her eyes filled  
with a blue stare of death.



*There is...something...in its mouth*

## ***SARAH HAS IT***

**RYCKE FOREMAN**

I want to go home.  
Home.

Back to yesterday. They say that home is where the heart is. My heart is in yesterday. Today I haven't one. Not after what I've done.

How do I face Sarah? How do I explain to her? How do I tell her that I...stepped out on her? An old flame, a good/bad situation. She needed comfort, and I gave...

I gave.

Good for her, bad for me.

...But good for me as well.

Sarah's been sick, deathly sick—like most everybody else—and it's been hard. So hard. The worry. The stress. It's enough to kill you. Weaken you. It weakened me. God help me it did.

Echoes snap off the buildings as my feet slap the sidewalk, ringing hollowly through the empty streets. Not too many people out tonight—this epidemic has them scared. They stay inside, parked in front of their TV's, waiting. Waiting for word that the sickness is over, or that a cure for it has been found, or...

Bodies have been disappearing. People want to know if that's stopped. Two days now, that's been happening—from hospitals, mausoleums, graveyards. Yeah, victims' graves emptied—robbed?—by folks afraid that the disease will mutate, somehow change for the worse (*if that's possible*) in the bodies of the dead? Even animals: three dogs, a cat and a hamster are gone from one of the vet's. More people are sick, now, too, since the first cadaver vanished. And a lot of the new victims have unnatural...lacerations.

Like Sarah.

Other strange things happening. Weird rumors. A guy was arrested yesterday. He burned his wife. Said she was trying to bite him. Sure, maybe—the disease makes you do strange things...but she'd died earlier that morning. Turned out the guy was getting sick. *"Probably hallucinating."* That's what the cops said. Or the screams of the dying—you hear it all night, now, every night. Only four days now, that the illness first showed up; a third of the city is already dead, and three-quarters of those left are shrieking. So people are afraid to come out—partially because of the crazies, like the wife-burner, but mostly for fear of catching the mystery disease.

Me? I was afraid for a while, but... Well, Sarah has it—if she hasn't infected me with it, who can?

Or the crazies? I can see one now, lurching and rambling in aimless circles. Don't think he's seen me yet, and he doesn't look dangerous, just confused, lost. But if he does see me, I'll just pop into Café Joan's. I can see it from here, just up on the corner and to the left.

I think I might go in for a while anyway. My house is only six blocks away, and I don't know if I can face Sarah yet. If she's delirious—couldn't stand that right now; I've just seen too much of it. And if she's awake and aware, she'd be able to read the guilt on my face. How do I explain that I was thinking of myself when she might be dying?

Ahh—who am I kidding? Why try to fool myself? She *is* dying. No one's recovered. No one will.

Besides, the night is cold, the breeze is sharp; it gets into your marrow and solidifies it. I can go in and get rid of *that* chill at least. About the chill inside of me?

Well...

I'd be surprised if there's more than three or four tables in use in there tonight. I'd be just as surprised if as many as half the staff has shown up. Even Joan herself is sick, so I hear.

Glassy, weary eyes stare at me—though no one actually makes eye-contact—as I push through the front door. Hamburgers, chicken fried steaks, French fries, coffee—those smells—along with a warm gush of air—wash over me; good smells, familiar smells, free of guilt and the shadow of death. These odors belong to yesterday and the day before, the week before, and they make me feel better.

I was right: three tables occupied by a total of five people. I see two waitresses as opposed to the usual four, and only one cook—Jim—when there are usually three. Joan isn't here. For some reason that I cannot put my finger on, that bothers me.

“Howdy, stranger.”

“Hi, Gayla,” I say. She looks like she's glad to see me. I think she is. Not necessarily because it's *me*—it's just good to see a familiar face, unmarked by the illness. I know how that goes: I felt the same way earlier this afternoon.

“Good to see you out and about.”

*No it isn't*, I want to say, but instead reply with, “Thanks.”

“Coffee?”

“Yes. Please.”

I nod to Jim while Gayla pours me a mug. He winks, smiles, and goes back about his business. The waitress comes back, sets my coffee in front of me. I dilute it with a few ice cubes and some sugar, drink, and Gayla asks how I'm feeling.

“Like shit.”

Her eyes widen, and she takes an involuntary step backwards. The mild, almost nonexistent conversations stop altogether; a petrified hush falls across all eight people.

I laugh sharply. It's like a dog's lonely bark at 3 a.m. “Not like that, Gayla. Not like that. It's just...the stress, you know.”

“Oh,” she smiles, relieved. She takes a half-step toward me—but only half a step; she doesn’t come up to me like she did before. That’s okay, though; I’m not very comfortable having another woman so close right now, anyway.

As I finish my cup of coffee, it suddenly occurs to me what bothered me a short while ago. Yes, it is good—*refreshing*—to see a few healthy faces all together, but still, the diner is a reflection of the whole town: Without Joan’s gay chatter rising above the dull roar of the patrons, the laughter of a large group in non-smoking, the clinking of glasses, the hustling and bustling, Café Joan’s is...well, sick, too. And suspicious. Afraid.

I really don’t want to be here now.

But Gayla is all ready refilling my mug. I doctor it again.

“You know, I hear it spreads through saliva.”

“Oh, really?” I say. “Guess I won’t share any of my coffee with you, then.”

I mean that as a joke, but again she takes that step back.

“Just in case,” I continue, wearily. “You know Sarah has it. Me? I feel fine—no symptoms or anything. But still...you never know. Some people might be carriers without ever getting sick, right?”

The waitress looks at me with distaste. Now they—the few customers and the fewer staff—want me here as much as I want to be here. Oh well, I simply spoke my mind, and that is something I think is important. After all, you might not be here tomorrow to do so.

She asks me, rather woodenly, how Sarah is doing.

“I don’t know,” I say, “but I’d better get back...*home*...so I can check on her.” But would I go *home*? No. Back to our house? Yes.

After all, *home* is where the heart is.

\*\*\*



Outside again, the cold regains its wicked bite, sinking deep through my flesh and into the bones, though I hardly notice. No—it is nothing when compared to the screaming. I am surprised at how the thin, plate-glass windows had so effectively blocked the pathetic soundtrack that haunts this epidemic. For those few moments, I'd been able to push the whole thing back into a reasonable corner of my mind. But now this reminder comes—like the frigid breeze—as a shrill, biting slap to the face. For one long, despair-filled moment, I imagine that I can hear Sarah's voice among them, shrieking in agony as her final, lonely seconds slip away...

Shuddering at that thought, I push off. I have never been so cold before, and keep my arms tight against my sides, my shoulders hunched. There used to be a spark, a flame inside of me whenever I thought about Sarah. Clichéd, I know, but true. It blazed with such a fierce heat...enough to keep me warm on the coldest of nights, through the darkest pits of depression. Oh, but tonight...

Tonight I betrayed her.

And now that spark is gone.

As is my heart...

Abruptly, I stifle a flood of acidic tears. A single droplet slips through the corner of one eye, sliding gracelessly down my stubbled cheek. It is serenaded by the dying song of the city.

Doubling over, I feel a queasy heat kneading my gut. Freezing though I am, a clammy sweat breaks across my forehead. Oh God, this is all too much. Sarah, Heather, Gayla, Joan, Mom—

Both cups of coffee find a violent conclusion on the cement with a few quick, sharp stomach cramps. Vaguely, I am aware that I'm on my knees. Only after another minute or two of dry-heaves and coughing am I able to find my feet again.

Panting mildly, I look about myself as the momentary heat that had encompassed my body dissipates. My collar is damp now, as is my hairline;

the wind combs it with a slow ice-pick, and I begin shaking uncontrollably. Absentmindedly I attempt to spit the awful taste from my mouth; my throat is now sore and rough. The frigid air penetrates my chest with quick, deep menthol jabs after each sour breath I take.

I curse myself for leaving the car at home.

Not that I was in any kind of shape to drive today. Not after watching how fast the disease sucked Sarah's beautiful life away. And not after the phone call to Mom. I'd called to let her know that Sarah had it. It must have rang a dozen times before finally connecting, though Mom did not actually pick up: it clunked ungracefully onto her mahogany end-table. Then it sounded as if she had begun pushing it around the tabletop, much like the Kintner boy across the street pushes his toy cars on the sidewalk. "Mom? Mom? *Mom?*" I said that over and over, a chanted mantra.

She never *said* anything.

But there were moans...

As I approach the first cross-street, I become aware of a subtle, inconsistent clicking. It takes me more than a moment to identify where it is coming from, separate it from the dark white noise.

*There.*

A dog. A German Shepard, I think. It's dark. The dog lurches down the middle of the empty street. There is...*something*...in its mouth. And the way it's loping...erratic, as if it's drunk. Or sick, too.

For one skewed moment, I'm of the mind to call to it, let both of us forget our problems with a good ear scratching, but...but I can see what is in its mouth, now.

A tattered, bloody doll.

My God, it's so big and...the way the blood dribbles from its tiny, swinging arm—

My eyes snap shut, before anything else in my gut decides it wants back out the way it came in. Pounding heartbeat rocking my body—I can feel it in my temples—I thrust a thought from my mind: How a doll's head does not loll like that—too heavy...

Like an answer to a prayer, the stuttered *click click clack* is already fading. In no time the echoing shrieks swallow the noise, and my breath rushes out with a *whoosh*. I did not realize I'd been holding it.

Too, I realize that my back is crowded up against a high, wooden fence, though I don't recall stepping back from the curb. I can feel my shaggy, damp hair clinging to its splinters like the desperate passengers of Titanic.

In time, I am able to open my eyes.

In more time, I am able to continue on my way.

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Our house is dark. As I unlock the door, I cannot help but dwell on the strange sights and sounds of the few blocks between here and the diner. The screaming seemed to swell with each step, as did the mad, crazy rantings of victims slipping in and out of their delusions. There was a bonfire, too. It was two blocks back. I didn't investigate; I'd thought of that crazy wife-burner, and decided not to stray from the beaten path. At the foot of our block, from the Willis house, I heard Tricia whimpering, "No Bob, no, no...Bob, you're scaring—" Her voice quivered before it broke off. Then a sad, somehow pathetic gurgling slid over the interminable clamor of the city. It made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

Like the thought of that wilted doll the German Shepard carried between its yellowed teeth. It was just so...No.

*No.*

Shaking these thoughts off, I make my way carefully through the dark living room. I've left the lights off—better not to attract undue attention, I think—and navigate past our furniture by memory. I listen for my wife—signs of delirium or of a brief respite—but hear nothing as I ascend the stairs.

In the hallway. Still. Silence.

Sleeping? But where is the harsh rattle of her breath?

A silvery beam, fallen from the ancient moon, invades our bedroom. The white sheets glow eerily in the preternatural, lunar light, as does Sarah; her silken skin seems to be composed of soft phosphorescents. Seeing her, I feel a deep ache—or rather, an emptiness—within my chest. She is so beautiful, so at peace, alit in the cool blaze of the moon. She has kicked most of the sheets off.

Not wanting to wake her, but helpless to stop myself, I touch her. And oh she is cold—so cold. Too cold.

*Oh God no, no...not this way. Not while I was...*

Tears trickle down my cheeks, bitter and scalding. My knees buckle, and I fall alongside the bed. Kneeling, my hands clasped together as if in prayer, my head is lowered, forehead touching my frigid, clenched fists. An icy hand seems to close around my guts, squeezing. It touches what now passes for my heart.

I am shivering; I cannot stop.

I raise my head, to ask silent forgiveness, but she is now staring at me. And smiling.

I don't want to understand, but God help me, I do. It's just like all those movies. But how do you really understand something like this? How do you admit that to yourself without the accompanying mad cackle of your own insanity? How can you admit to yourself that it is not *you* staring over the slick, rotting brim of the abyss, but the world itself?

She sits up.

Oh I understand, now: the empty graves; that dog; the strange, sad gurgling...the wife-burner. I understand what I must do with Sarah.

But I don't have the courage...

*...the heart...*

Ah God, I just want to go home, back to yesterday, where my heart



## ***THE NATIONAL GOSSIP NEWS***

**FRANCIS W. ALEXANDER**

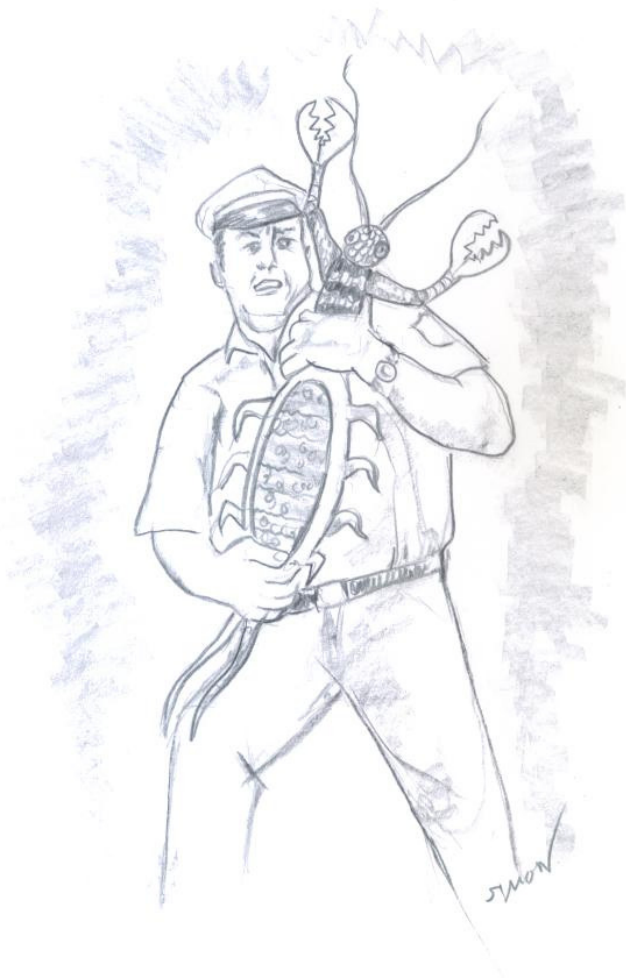
paparazzi  
the count and his lady  
spotted near The Crypt

abduction  
the aliens' beds infested  
with bedbugs

Myspace  
with her victim's nude pictures  
the vampiress phishes

Broadway dreams  
Carl the zombie's waltz  
across the dark stage

werewolf's love child  
presidential candidate's mom  
speaking out



*Nasty-looking thing was hissing and clacking these big pinchers at me*

**D**on't tell me your job sucks. Buddy, you got no idea. You think mine's a cakewalk? Driving around in that truck picking up strays? Sheesh.

People call me "pet killer," things like that. Sometimes kids throw rocks at me. Just the other day, a lady with a bunch of "Meat is Murder" stickers on her car flipped me off. Shot me the bird right there at a traffic light.

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Believe me, I get no pleasure knowing what happens after I pick up those animals. Nope. I've seen the way they're crammed into those cages, waiting for some family to feel sorry and adopt them.

I'll tell you a dirty little secret. Most of the ones I pick up nobody wants. They just go to the gas chamber.

Yep. It's a rough way to make a living.

But the worst part is actually catching the buggers. It's not like you just go, "Hey, Fido," and they come running up to lick your face. No sir. They don't want to go. And you better believe they'll scratch, claw and bite the hell out of you to stay free.

Take the call I got last week over at the Samsa place. Goddamn giant bug running loose in the house. And I do mean giant—like six feet long. Nasty-looking thing was hissing and clacking these big pinchers at me. I bet one of those pinchers could have taken an arm off. Lucky I packed a big enough net.

Week before that, I picked up a couple black panthers. God, those things were pissed off. Brother and sister, I believe. Someone was trying to keep them as pets. Can you believe that? Nametags on their collars and

everything. “Paul” and “Irena,” they said. Then one of those minimum-wage numbnuts down at the pound forgot to lock their cages. They were gone the next morning.

The worst, though, had to be what happened at the Talbot place. What was that, a month ago now? Had to use the gun I keep out in the truck. I don’t like using that thing, but sometimes you got no choice. The Talbots, I guess, were trying to keep this huge wolf chained up, and it got loose. Started terrorizing the whole neighborhood.

Ever seen one of these, right here? Yep. It’s a silver bullet. I carry six of them in my pocket. Boss gave them to me, told me to use them when the normal bullets just aren’t cutting it. I had to pump four of them into that wolf before it stayed down.

Damn thing ended up biting me though. Bled like crazy. But the doctor looked at it and said I was OK. Wasn’t that deep, he said. Stupid quack wouldn’t even write a note to let me off work for a couple days.

But, hey, enough shop talk. What do you say I pay for these beers and we head down the street for a couple of big juicy steaks? I’m feeling pretty hungry.

If you’re up for some more drinking, we can always head back to the bar after we eat. What do you say we cut loose tonight? Do a little howling at the moon?



## *REMEDY*

L.B. GODDARD

Withered skin and yellow teeth,  
Gritty tongue, a stifled call.  
Blinding sun adds injury  
To her rigor mortis crawl.  
Brittle nails, like insect wings  
As her frail hands try to claw  
To salvation she can suckle  
With her chapped and bluish maw.

Shards of mirror in the sunlight,  
Casting shapes across her picture.  
He emerges from the shadows,  
Twisted smile. He can fix her.  
Spider veins and severed limbs,  
It's too late to sew and stitch her.  
Lips strain open; he pours in  
Another dose of the elixir.



*We're going hunting, and that's all Jesus would say*

**D**on't confuse my antagonistic feelings towards Reverend Worly with the kind of godless sentiments you find in the big cities, on television and in the movies. My problem wasn't necessarily with Christianity. Truth of the matter was that I wanted to put my hands on Missy Mulberry and that damned preacher made her parents, my parents, and all the other folks in Sequential, Indiana, make me feel like the devil for wanting to do something I knew'd in my gut was natural. Hell, read the Bible. There's all kinds of tenderness going on. Reverend Worly liked to skip them parts when he barked from the pulpit every Sunday.

"The ways of the flesh," he always reminded us, "is the path to Satan's den."

I once suggested that in heaven you could put your hands wherever you wanted and nobody said word one. It was hell, I told my Ma and Pa, where not being kind with others was enforced.

"That would make Sequential hell," my Pa retorted.

"Maybe so."

And then came the whoopin'.

My attitudes were frequent candidates for dates with my dad's belt. He would put a chair in the middle of the room, tell me to bend over it, loop that belt around his hand and then beat me with it just as hard as you can imagine. Now you city folks who don't take to disciplinin' your kids, don't be so quick to judge my old man. He had a great sense of humor. For instance, when I'd put my hands up to protect my hind-side from that wicked piece of leather hiss'n' through the air, he'd utter something like this:

"Move your arms, son, I don't want to *hurt* you."

That's some rich material, right there. Ain't never heard none of them comics on the late show come up with something that funny.

Anyway, the town, myself sometimes included, wallowed in guilt. The church made us feel it, our parents made us feel it, and even at school, where matters such as guilt shouldn't even have played a hand in the order of things, even those crusty old sons of bitches laid the trip on us.

Missy didn't make it any the easier. She was always sitting next to me at lunch, rubbing her beautiful thighs up against mine, brushing her breasts, which I was told to pretend didn't exist, against my arm. It was torture. Every instinct in my body suggested she and I go someplace quiet and do the Lord's grandest work.

"My Pa assured me he'd whoop me good if he ever saw us together," she said one day, hanging her head in shame. It was by design, this guilt she felt. Missy knew God had given her a body that would inspire an entirely new gospel, should some lucky fella' break through her wall of defenses. The old folks had cornered her, though, made sure she'd never share it until some man had locked her into a legal contract that would make it very difficult for her to leave should that man not know how to put his hands on her in the kind and loving way she deserved.

I tell you all this so you understand why I was so damn suspicious when Reverend Worly announced the following:

"Jesus came to me last night," his arms were spread as though he himself were speaking from the cross, "and told me we ain't done *enough*."

A murmur rippled through the crowd like a small wave on Lake Pomo, over there by the tracks that lead to Indianapolis, Chicago and whatever else concrete labyrinths existed up north.

"What'you mean, Reverend?" Dick Worker, the senile old coot who ran the general store on 7th street finally asked what everyone else wanted to;

"Jesus told me we got to pay with our own blood." His voice trembled, accenting the seriousness of the Savior's words.

Judy Froth, Bill Froth's widow, asked, "Pay for what?"

"Our sins!" The Reverend was clearly annoyed that the flock could not glean an understanding from his scant, ambiguous recount of his meeting with the Lord Jesus Christ.

I, of course, didn't buy a word of it. This man who had convinced the town that a man and woman getting nice with each other was a bad thing was now going to insult my intelligence one step further and suggest that He would send His blessed son to talk with one of the cheapest, laziest, most unbelievably stupid representatives on the planet. Hell, I'd believe the president got to talk to Jesus before that old worthless shepherd of ours.

Folding my arms, I leaned back and closed my eyes.

"Listen to the Reverend, son," my dad elbowed me in the ribs.

"He's full of it, Pa," I told him without opening my eyes.

"Looks like you, me and my belt are gonna have a conversation when we get back home."

Sure enough, I got my butt whooped fierce just as soon as we walked through the door. While I lay on the floor crying and holding my rear where it hurt most, my dad kindly said, "Pick yourself up for lunch. Your mother made tuna salad."

Maybe Dad was feeling some of that extra guilt the Reverend was talking about. That's what I told myself to convince myself that he wasn't being as irrational as I suspected. It deflected my anger from him to the preacher. I knew that slimy weasel was lying about his conversation with Jesus, so I decided to do some investigative work.

As the rest of my family slept, I crept through the hall, down the stairs and out the front door. It was a nice, cool autumn Indiana night. Maybe winter would come this year. It hadn't been around in a while and that was, according to all the old folks who bought into the Reverend's line of manure, the work of God.

I moved from shadow to shadow, making sure I didn't get caught by Sheriff Bumbleworth, who liked to pick us teenagers up at night just so he could hear about the whoopin' we got the next Sunday at church. He drove around in a pick up truck fitted with sirens on top.

Across the entire town I snuck. Right up to the Reverend's big house near Lake Pomo. I could already see, a block away, that there was a fierce commotion going on in his bedroom. Lights flashed, as though thunder was ripping away inside Worly's house. Across the street I could hear a low hum. I began considerin' the possibility that Jesus didn't have very high standards when it came right down to with whom he did and did not communicate.

As I got closer I saw the silhouettes of two figures, talking or arguing in the middle of the Reverend's bedroom. I quietly ducked underneath the window and then, ever so carefully, brought my eyes up over the windowsill to have a peek inside.

I couldn't believe it.

In the middle of the Reverend's room, there was old Jesus Christ. Just like he looked in all them paintings around Sunday school. Glossy, not too dark, blue eyes. It was as if Norman Rockwell himself gave birth to the polished image standing before the Reverend giving him notes. The hum around the house was so loud I couldn't make out what Jesus was saying. I figured Worly would let the rest of us know on Sunday.

Sure enough, the Reverend went right to it the very next service. "Dan Pickletrough," he pointed to one of our neighbors sitting across the aisle, "you know your Great-Grandfather was a philanderer and a drunk."

Mr. Pickletrough, proud father of three of the ugliest girls Sequential ever did produce, cleared his throat. "Um," he tried to speak, "I was unawares..."

"Silence!" Worly pointed an angry, shaking finger at the great-grandson of an apparently terrible human being. His eyes roamed the flock until they rested upon the town's elementary school teacher, Miss Goober. "Trisha Goober!" his voice bounced off the wide church walls, "Your great-great

grandfather was a cannibal! How will you ever shrug off such a shameful legacy?"

Miss Goober cried. She always cried when people yelled at her. Even her little school kids.

"Kenneth Burroughs," the Reverend moved on, "you know damn well your great-grandfather Matthew was a sodomite!"

The church gasped. Matthew Burroughs was the only famous person from Sequential. He was a poet, which lent easily to the belief that he lay with other men, as the Bible so eloquently put it.

Mr. Burroughs didn't need any prompt from the Reverend. The congregation murmured and looked in his direction all the while pretending they was thinking about anything but what Worly just said.

Then that old son of a bitch took a look at my Pa. "Jebedal Page," he said in the grimmest voice, "your great-grandfather is the most sinful of all."

Almost everyone glared at my family. I took the opportunity to see if Missy would notice how cleanly pressed my good pants was. She refused to look at me. Damned if that preacher wasn't putting up more bricks between me and my true love.

"Page," the Reverend shook his head slowly. I believe at one point during his accusation I saw foam drip down the sides of his filthy mouth. "Your great grandfather," he took one more pause, "was a *slave owner*!"

The shock-induced gasps let out by our neighbors had enough air in them to blow off the ceiling. Sequential was known as a main station on the underground railroad back in them dangerous days before the war between the states. To think that the town had harbored a slave-owning family was, indeed, shocking. Even to me.

"Next Sunday," the preacher informed us, "all men are to bring their shotguns to service." He answered the obvious question before it could be asked, "We're going hunting, and that's all Jesus would say."

At the dinner table, I punctured the silence that had oppressed Ma and Pa and sister since service. “The Irish never owned slaves. In fact,” I spoke while eating a heaping of Ma’s mashed potatoes, “nobody in Indiana owned slaves.”

“Obviously,” my father sure wasn’t going to excuse himself from an opportunity to feel more guilt, “gran’daddy lived in the south before he came here.”

Ma started crying. We had considered ourselves kind and caring folk, even dad, who didn’t seem so kind and carrying when he was beltin’ the life out of me. To think that we had slave-owning blood in our veins was too much. She stood up, gave Pa a nasty look and walked upstairs to shut herself in their bedroom.

“If the Reverend says gran’daddy was a scoundrel, we gotta’ shoulder the burden.”

“I might agree,” I was past the point of no return, with respect to the whoopin’ I knew was comin’, so I said my peace for my own sake, “if’n the Reverend knew what the hell he was talking about.”

My daddy just pointed to the living room. “Get the chair ready,” he sighed, pushed himself away from the table and started removing his belt.

I took another beating and resolved to find out exactly what Jesus was telling that stupid, pigheaded preacher of ours.

I fashioned an earphone for listening through walls out of one of Pa’s funnels he used to drop oil in the family truck. Mr. Pool, the town science teacher, taught us that trick my first year of high school. Us fellas’ tried it that very day, puttin’ it up to the door to the girl’s restroom. We heard a kind of chatter we hoped we’d never hear again. I supposed, after hearing how all them girls talked in private, that was why Pa and all the other men in the town had clubs and gatherings and bowling tournaments for every night of the week.



Anyways, I snuck back over to the Reverend's house. His place was buzzing when I got there. I leaned up against the side of his bedroom wall, placed the funnel against it and listened.

Didn't take five seconds for my jaw to drop. The only thing more disturbing than what I heard Jesus telling the Reverend was the way everyone in the town dismissed my warnings the days and nights that followed.

"Boy, you continue making up stories like that people gonna accuse you of being a writer or some other kind of artist." That was, of course, an insult beyond unkind as everyone knew artists was the laziest of the lazy. Only hard work made you important in Sequential. Hard work and a bundle of guilt draggin' your shoulders to the ground.

Pa beat me, twice, once for each time I tried to warn him.

Missy Mulberry refused to sit next to me at lunch.

The whole town considered me a liar and evil and just not weighed down with enough guilt.

It was an odd luck for Pa to tell me he was so embarrassed by the things I said that he didn't want me going to church with the rest of the family. "You tag along a few minutes behind us and then sit near the back, why don't you?"

If I had it my way I wouldn't have gone at all. But I had to see if Worly was gonna follow through with Jesus' plans.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the preacher started, "please rise."

The congregation stood up. Every man had followed the preacher's instructions and brought their shotguns. Even my Pa, even after I told him exactly what was going to happen.

"We must join Jesus on the hill," the preacher walked back and forth, "we must make the sacrifice, all of us."

I made sure the door to the back of the church was unlocked.

“Line your families up,” Worly commanded, “and place a bullet between every one of your sinful eyes.”

Some protested, but it was too late. If they tried to run, their fathers shot them down in the aisles. They blasted holes in their wives, cousins, all their children, and then they ate their guns and fell over on the stacks of bodies at their feet.

I couldn’t get out without the preacher seeing, so I hid myself underneath the Walkers, a large family that never made it to church on time. They felt especially guilty and had no qualms accepting all them bullets.

When the light smoke from all the gunshots cleared, the Reverend examined the piles of bodies. I could see, through the corpses on top of me, that he was nervous. Maybe some of that guilt he pushed on the rest of us had found its way to him. He ran out of the church whimpering the same way I did after one of Pa’s beatings.

Then I saw Missy Mulberry, dead, draped across her little brother. Her eyes stared into space, no doubt wondering, as I did, what life might have been like without Reverend Worly’s conversations with Jesus. I’m sure my face was red, furious. I felt no guilt. I grabbed one of the dozens of shotguns on the floor and energized myself. I was going to pay the preacher his proper dues.

Creeping through the night, which was colder than ever, I snuck, for the last time, up to the Reverend’s window. The hum surrounding his house was deafening.

Peering up over the ledge, I saw Jesus helping the preacher place *his* shotgun into his mouth. He patted Worly on the head like an obedient dog and then nodded. The Reverend pulled the trigger and splattered his narrow mind all over the walls of his room. I would be lying if I said I didn’t feel some relief watching him die.

My joy was quickly quelled, however, when Jesus himself flickered, like an image on the television, and vanished with an electric spark. The hum surrounding the house abruptly stopped.

I looked around quickly, made sure whoever had played this terrible trick on my town wasn't lurking in the shadows like myself, and then I ran to the tracks by Lake Pomo and followed them until I saw the lights of Indianapolis.



## ***BOOK REVIEW: THE LOST EPISODES OF BEATIE SCARELI***

**AMBER STULTS**

When most adults reminisce about the good old days, they often forget most of the unpleasant episodes and think of childhood as the most idyllic time of their lives. Beatie Scareli will not be one of those adults. Ginnetta Correlli's *The Lost Episodes of Beatie Scareli* chronicles some of Beatie's unpleasant childhood experiences. It doesn't take the reader long to figure out this is not the typical coming of age story where the main character has an epiphany that in hindsight makes all of the past events seem less bad.

Correlli's descriptive writing brings the reader into the disturbing home life of Beatie before and after her parents' divorce. Some readers will feel uncomfortable as she puts the reader in the room as a silent observer. Here is an example from the beginning of the book:

Father sits on the red velvet recliner chair. His eyes read the opinion page of the newspaper. Father's hand twirls his ding dong inside his off-white cotton underwear. I'm used to it. He stops to drink his morning coffee from his usual green, broken-handled coffee mug.

Beatie is not an angel. She admits she does mean things and does not know why. Beatie lacks the key likeability factor that allows the reader to feel empathy for her. It is easy for the reader to vacillate between wanting to take Beatie home to make her life better and leaving Beatie's dramatic life behind. Petey, Beatie's stuffed bunny, says all the things Beatie needs to hear to get through some of her rough times. If only a few of the adults in Beatie's life could be more like Petey, Beatie's childhood would be easier to read.

## ***BOOK REVIEW: BITS AND PIECES***

**RHONDA PARRISH**

I should start off by stating my bias. I've been a fan of Greg's poetry ever since I first saw "Hall of Shadows" and "The Pumpkin Man" in my slush pile over a year ago. Greg has a fantastic sense of humor, a dark side and a wonderful talent for balancing the two. That has never been as obvious to me as when I read *Bits and Pieces*.

*Bits and Pieces* is a chapbook of Greg's new and selected poetry. It's published by Spec House of Poetry and is, in my opinion, a must-have collection. Between the eighteen poems collected within Greg manages to cover a vast amount of the dark poetry spectrum. Some poems made me laugh, some caused a groan and a few gave me shivers. One or two pieces managed to evoke all three reactions at once.

Each poem tells a story and a great many of them lingered in my mind long after I'd shut the book and walked away. They lack pretension and will appeal to those who love poetry as well as to those who are usually frightened by it (the form, not the content). Greg's style is one that reaches out to the uninitiated and slowly draws them into his world.

One of my favorite pieces was an unnamed three line poem that begins, "Danny, Danny" which haunted my thoughts for hours after I read it. It niggled at my brain and whispered about the possible implications of the last line; none of them good. Another favorite was 'The Monster in my Closet' which takes a common childhood fear, turns it on its head and dresses it in drag. It made me laugh out loud when I read it. I may even have snorted.

In short, I highly recommend Greg Schwartz's *Bits and Pieces* to all readers of *Niteblade* because if you like what you read on our pages you will adore the poems safely ensconced between the pages of *Bits and Pieces*.

## CREDITS

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