

Ménage à 20

Tales with a hook

A close-up of a golden, metallic face. The face has a green eye with a black pupil and a red, fleshy mouth. A silver hook is inserted into the mouth, and a single red drop of blood is falling from its tip. The background is a warm, golden-brown color.

Get hooked
San Diego Dispatch

An orgy of many-splendored prose
Pocatello Times

Twenty goodreads® authors

International acclaim for *Ménage à 20*

‘Astounding... awesomely crafted... desperately readable.’

Mike Raffone, *Tikka Journal*, Rajasthan

‘Mix twenty parts variegated author bits, ten parts humor, twenty-nine parts imagination, ten parts suspense, a good sized dash of surprise and a pinch of biting wit. Stir with a large fork. Serve hot with a cup of tea or coffee. Feeds imagination.’

Inga Hootz, *Bertreville Review*, France

‘In the dark crevices between feathery pages twenty-nine stories by twenty authors come together and intertwine. The culmination of this union is murderous, sweet, terrifying, tender and hilarious. What initiates this twisted intimacy between such dissimilar stories? That they will each leave you astounded.’

Harden Thicke, *Arcata Clipper*

‘Twenty Goodreads authors come together in this short story anthology running across the genre spectrum. Each story has a surprise ending; the reader is lured in unawares until... watch out for that hook!’

Douglas Furr, *Osbaston Free Press*

‘An instant classic...’

Anita Morehead, *Malvern Post*

‘Brilliant! A tour-de-force by unknown writers who deserve, all, to be household names. Bravo to you all!’

Ivor Bigune, *Guangzhou Post*, China.

‘Twenty authors, twenty-nine stories and one big surprise created by some of the best writers you have never heard of, and a couple of old-pros. Every story has a surprise ending, showcasing the talents and ingenuity that only a ménage can bring.’

Ann Inch, *Long Beach Times*

‘Brilliant, hypnotic...’

Al Beback *Chattanooga Voice*

‘In a world where chaos reigns and creativity wreaks havoc, twenty writers have twisted tales to tantalize and shock. In a never-before-seen compilation, thirty stories written by Goodreads authors and each with its own surprise ending. From fantasy to horror, science fiction to comedy, Ménage à 20 hooks and traps its readers in the pages of imagination.’

Boadicea Basher, *Punjab Gazette*, India

‘Powerful tales... twenty writers full of narrative power and abiding humanity.’

Annie Howe, *Oshkosh Reveille*

‘Twenty Goodreads authors... thirty tales with a twist, each with its own surprise ending. From fantasy to horror, science fiction to comedy, Ménage à 20 tantalizes with each turn of the page.’

Kenya Dewit , *Chicago Sentinel*

‘A unique collection of different genres and writing styles. Be a guest at a rousing round table; feast upon scrumptious morsels of literary delight.’

Estelle Hertz. *Everett Times*

‘Twenty writers. Thirty tales. I dare you to join the Ménage...’

Brandon Cattell, *Aguascalientes Dispatch*, Mexico

‘Ménage à 20 is the prized possession, the pearl of all stories, the wind painted in the spring. Twenty lonely writers have dreamed a song to remember, of justice with knights and their ladies Emily and Elizabeth, of nightmares with yellow-fanged monsters and demons crawling through the fine print, of love for Valentines and donuts, of chaos where she couldn’t let go of her elderly cares, and of horses who were never harmed in the making of this book. Come peer into the window to view a room of idle commitment and foundational faults. You could have joined the fun if you had but please, drop by for supper.’

Lotta Rump, *Tweed Gazette*

‘A masterpiece of literary seduction.’

Raynor Schein, *Lakeview Tribune*

‘Stephen King, Iris Murdock et al, move over. There’s twenty new kids on the block. They’re bratty, breezy, brash and brilliant! If you read one book this year, make it Ménage à 20. Better yet, it’s free!’

Senta Message, *Ouagadougou Courier*, Burkina Faso

Journey within these pages to laugh, cry, shiver with fear, and reel in shock as twenty authors lead you on a merry chase that will tease you into their world, only to hook you in the end.

Elle Vader, *Barcelona Sun*, Spain

Twenty Goodreads™ Writers

Ménage à 20

Tales with a hook

First published by Carlos J Cortes in 2009

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This is a collection of works of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the authors' imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

The Library of Congress has not catalogued this edition. In fact, they don't even know it exists.

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If you hold in your hands a printed and bound volume, it was done by Lulu.com. If you have a stack of loose pages, someone else did it, probably you—when inebriated or high so you don't remember—or Aunty Gladys. If you're staring at a screen and it looks blurry perhaps it needs a wipe over.

ISBN we couldn't afford, but 073 953 9984 is the phone number of a most accommodating lady. All major credit cards accepted.

The publisher's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin. But neither the publisher nor the authors are lumberjacks or forest inspectors (Glenn, Sue's husband is, but he's busy trying to patent Canadian 'paella') and have no idea what people will use to print this book. So, your guess is as good as theirs.

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To writers born and yet unborn, published and ignored.

Acknowledgements



The Authors of *Ménage à 20* would like to offer our heartfelt thanks to Carlos J Cortes for being courageous (or masochistic) enough to bring this book, his brainchild, to fruition. Without you, Señor, none of this would have been possible.

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A round of applause goes to Goodreads™ as well for creating the web space for our creative genius to flourish in the group On Fiction Writing. Goodreads™ is an invaluable resource for writers and readers. Principals, webmasters, and the cleaning lady supported this project and granted us permission to use their name. We are in your debt.

We could never repay everyone who has helped us to produce the work; not restricted to reviewers and unpaid editors but friends, families and passers-by; those who kept us nourished with tea, coffee, the odd seven-veil dance and alcoholic beverages in a timely fashion.

You know who you all are. Our thanks to each and every one of you. This work would not be possible without your contributions.

The Authors of *Ménage à 20*



Foreword

Thirty stories. Twenty writers.

In *Tales with a Hook*, you will find demons and gods, heroes and housewives, knights and robots. They will range through corporate offices, suburban homes, netherworlds and hellholes. Thirty stories, never before published, with one thing in common: they all end with a shocker.

The stories are as diverse as the writers. We come from Europe, from Canada, from the United States, from South America, and many other places. Some of us are young, some are old; some are published, some are unpublished. But like our stories, we share something in common: we are all driven to write. For some that means giving up our lunch hours to grind out a story in the soulless box of an office cubicle; for others it means getting up at four in the morning to hammer out a chapter on the typewriter before the kids or the livestock awake. We curse deadlines, we debate word choices, we moan over plot snags. “Why do you do it?” we have all been asked.

Because it’s what we do.

Before you is the fruit of our labors. Enjoy our stories—our reward is your gasp of shock at each new ending.

We hope to get you hooked.

Kate Quinn

Soon-to-be bestselling author of *MISTRESS OF ROME*



INDEX

PLAIN DOUGHNUTS	Diane Condon-Boutier	17
A GIFT HORSE	Susan Curnow	25
BORN IDLE	Isabella Erlenmeyer	35
THE PAINTER OF WINDS	Isabella Erlenmeyer	49
MY VALENTINE	Carlos J. Cortes	61
SPRING SPRUNG	Carlos J. Cortes	71
ELIZABETH'S HEAD	Michael Keyton	81
THE KNIGHT AND THE DEMON	Henry Lara	99
THE CRAWLER	Andy Love	119
A ROOM WITH A VIEW	Gwendolyn McIntyre	135
A SONG TO REMEMBER	Gwendolyn McIntyre	143
RECONSTRUCTING EMILY	Minnie Estelle Miller	151
THE FINE PRINT	Renee Miller	167
LONELY	Renee Miller	177
YELLOWFANG	Paul Mitton	187
VACANT POSSESSION	Paul Mitton	207
THE LADY WITH GREEN HAIR	D.B. Pacini	219
DOUBLE FAULT	Roy L. Pickering Jr.	235
THE SUPPER	Kate Quinn	249
STRING OF PEARLS	Kate Quinn	257
SHE	Kelley Roby	279
COMMITMENT	Lauren Stone	293
JUSTICE	Lauren Stone	299
MONSTER	Rita Stradling	309
LETTING GO	Wendy Swore	319
FOUNDATION	Wendy Swore	329
ELDER CARES	Jeanne Voelker	339
PEERING IN THE WINDOW	Rita J. Webb	357
WRITER'S DREAM	Rita J. Webb	367
A WRITER'S GIFT		381



DIANE CONDON-BOUTIER

As an American residing in France for the past pair of decades, I find myself to have morphed into a hybrid of a Franco-American, rather like ‘spaghetlios.’

My studies at the University of Central Florida floated me across the pond from my hometown of Bay City, Michigan, where I grew up the daughter of a librarian and a junk-food factory manager, which probably explains why I love to read while eating potato chips.

My day job consists of writing blurbs about life in France and travel tips for Americans wishing to visit here without any of the requisite trip from hell incidents to darken their scrapbooks. I have a small B&B/travel service located in Normandy where I contentedly drive my fellow Americans around the back roads of Normandy, showing off my choice of habitat, while plying them with French food and wine.

I have two beautiful (they truly are) adult daughters, Rebecca and Abigail from a previous marriage to a Frenchman and am now happily living in an unconventional fashion with Jean-Pascal who shares my enthusiasm for oysters, scuba diving and motorcycle road trips.

I am currently working on my first novel, a historical saga set in Normandy, which has yet to find an agent to represent it.

PLAIN DOUGHNUTS is the product of my indecision when faced with the display of decadence at any American donut shop. I am not the only one, but sometimes there’s a good reason for it. Some of us have a wider agenda when it comes to consuming sugar.

<http://france-vacations-made-easy.com>



Plain Doughnuts

Diane Condon-Boutier

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She always bought the plain ones.

But she could spend ten minutes or more in her inner struggle between the sparkly kind, the exotic Coconut-Pineapple, the sophisticated ones with foreign titles like: French Cream, Cherry Danish or German Strudel, or even the truly voluptuously sinful Double-Chocolate Cream; an agonizing torment. Decisions, decisions...

In the end, she was afraid to choose, fearing that she wouldn't live up to their expectations.

Because it was offensive to imagine eating a French Cream in the car, while sipping a cup of take-out decaf. Such a decadent treat would expect, at the very least, to be savored with a Café Crème in a sidewalk Parisian café, complete with a stunning view of Notre Dame Cathedral.

And who knows? A suave Frenchman could slip into the opposite chair to introduce himself. Ahhh, Paris in the springtime, or summertime, or even in the winter for that matter! She was sure romance always blossomed in Paris, no matter the season. And what could be better than indulging in French Creams with a generous helping of *l'amour* spiced up à la French accent, on the side?

The Double-Chocolate Creams would taste best if enjoyed in a bedroom, with a rich liqueur—while dressed in lovely, somewhat naughty lingerie—in the company of a romance-novel-cover-model type of man. She would anxiously wait for him to appear in her rearview mirror and invite her to his penthouse, a box of Double Chocolate Creams in hand. Probably unlikely. For today, anyway.

Whereas the Coconut-Pineapple should be consumed at breakfast in a paradisiacal singles resort, under a Tiki umbrella—the sound of crashing surf drowning out her chewing. Washing down her delicate bites would be the freshly

squeezed mango juice brought to her by a bronzed waiter—who always seemed to be at hand when she needed him—so pleased to ogle her gracious smile of thanks for his attentions. The hot sun, shining on his warm skin and reflecting off his pristine teeth, would be an unforgettable image, forever linked to the taste of the exotic-fruit jam filling. Well, unfortunately, that didn't seem to be on this month's agenda either, she mused sadly.

German Strudel? It should be partaken on a Rhine river cruise while watching romantic castles drift lazily by. The drizzled sugary topping would melt in her mouth, to give her face a sensuously satisfied air—which would draw lots of intrigued attention from the masculine passengers. But they would be forced to simply look at her with longing frustration because, as luck would have it, the cruise director's seating arrangements would have positioned her next to a recently widowed millionaire.

He, as a matter of course, would find that he absolutely loved German Strudel doughnuts and they would fall crazily in love at first bite. They would disembark at the landing in front of his own fairy-tale *schloss*, alighting hand in hand, extra German Strudel doughnuts tucked away in his Louis Vuitton matching luggage.

Or the Cherry Danish, then? There just didn't seem to be any point in eating one of those unless she was near the Arctic Circle, enjoying a breathtaking display of the Aurora-Borealis, while tucked warmly underneath thick fur robes on a bobsled pulled by ten huskies, ready to whisk her back to the snow covered chalet.

It goes without mentioning that Lars, the bobsled driver, would have thoughtfully warmed the Cherry Danish as well as some delicious hot chocolate, served up with a sly, sexually promising wink thrown in for good measure. Back at the chalet, on a furry rug in front of the blazing fire the Cherry Danish would soon be a memory. Torrid sex is, after all, simply good survival sense in such a rude, unforgiving climate. You have to do what you have to do...



"Excuse me, lady, but do you know what you want yet? There's a line, ya know."

"Oh! I'm very sorry! Umm, let me see...two plain doughnuts and a decaf to go, please."

"Geezzz.....OK, that'll be four twenty-five."

"Here you are... and.... thank you."

"Yeah, right...bye! Ok...next please!"

The doughnut shop assistant manager came out of the office just as she smiled apologetically to the impatient line of customers which had accumulated during her lengthy scrutiny of the doughnut display. "So you got to wait on the plain-donut-decaf-chick, hey?"

"Yeah! It took her like *forever* to decide! What's wrong with her?" the spotty chinned, paper-hatted employee complained. "She comes in here every day. Ya'd think she'd know what she wants by now!"

The assistant manager rolled his eyes.

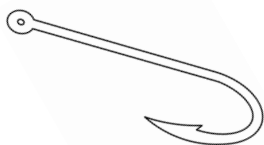
The young employee added: "Well, I hope I don't have to serve *her* every day from now on! She seems like a real nut! Next please!"



She halted in her tracks, turning to look at them, incredulous. They were both so very wrong!

Nuts she had reserved for next week and an African safari, dunked into some really strong, local coffee before hitting the trail with her cameraman, Clint. Off they would trek across the scorching savannah, sweat glistening on their upper lips. Heavily muscled Clint would set up their camp under an enormous baobab before preparing her dinner while she reviewed her notes. After dinner.... a satisfying *teamwork* of sorts would burn off some calories. Come morning, Kenyan coffee with Nutty doughnuts would be the perfect start to her day.

They'd be inspired and ready to film an award-winning documentary on the last of the white rhinos...





SUSAN CURNOW

Born in England, a mad whim made me pack five suitcases and drag three children and an Irish Wolfhound onto a plane to Canada with my husband ten years ago. I now live in Alberta and love it, unless the wind chill is -40.

Living with mountains to the left of me and prairies to the right and with my English background, how could I write anything but fantasy? The myths of the past collude with the mundanity of life to become reality in my mind.

When not wrangling sons I wrangle horses and dogs during my day job. Writing to me is akin to breathing. One just has to do it, and fortunately I have a husband who cooks.

A GIFT HORSE is a parable. Josie's grandmother always taught her never to look a gift horse in the mouth, but Josie does when she buys a crazed but beautiful black stallion from an auction. Gifts often arrive with agendas. From the moment she sees the horse, Josie knows he is much more than a lucky find.

<http://makoiyi.livejournal.com>

<http://www.facebook.com/home.php?&rt=2#/susan.e.curnow?ref=profile>

A gift Horse



Susan Curnow

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So long. Too long among humans, eons long, or so it seems. Smells choke him, the ugliness around him dulling his heart, voices arrive without poetry to ease his mind. Shoes turn steps to a clumsy gait, buckles sear the flesh of his face, and this clanking, metal vehicle makes him drip sweat like any common horse.

He fights their ropes until they beat him with a long stick that breathes agony and jolts his heart. Now he's herded into a corral, separated from others, surrounded by more metal to sap his strength. A patch of dirt without a blade of grass; food is a memory long forgotten, long tasted.

So tired. He is so, so tired.

A metallic clang precedes the smell of yet another human. He spins, ready to do battle. Not men with sticks and harsh voices but a female smelling of sweet scent and more. The tang of horse clings to her clothes and waltzes through her hair. She holds out a hand.

He snaps at it half-heartedly, wanting none to touch him, no more human flesh.

She sings sweet nothings, unafraid as she rubs a sore spot on his neck. He thinks to sleep as she mesmerizes him with sound and touch, until he hears the voices again and the thump of their boots, the smell of their manly scent. He will go nowhere with them. He would rather die.

With one last effort he cries challenge, forcing his body up and up, his hooves to strike out, his teeth to snap.

Laughter and curses greet his courage and then a high-pitched scream of anger sounds as a metal rod begins its descent toward his head. A mare defends her herd fiercer than any stallion. The defense startles him so that he looks at the woman, at her face screwed up in rage, and listens to her furious words

of denial. The males back away, their body language both irritated and ashamed, their words uncertain.

Kick and bite and stomp are all he can manage, but here is something else. Instinct makes him wish to follow her feet, to trust, anything that might lead him to safety. More angry words lace the air.

“Josie, you’re a fool. Not this one.”

“You do as I say, Pete. You don’t let the meat man have him.”

The gate closes with an annoyed clang, stomping feet fading into oblivion. Sounds retreat as he turns his back on this world, expecting death until that gentle voice comes again, free of anger, promising so much. In the distance an auctioneer’s hammer falls. He flinches at the sound, waiting. A male voice calls.

“A hundred and fifty bucks, Josie!”

“Fine!” she calls back.

Is that all I’m worth? A part of him still finds bitter amusement.



Fresh straw in a wooden barn is better than ambrosia. Water smells fresh and clean, drawn from a well without taint. He takes several mouthfuls before she pulls the bucket away and hangs hay in a net. It isn’t hay he wants but he can’t tell her this. He’s taken drink from her hands and this obligates him. If he takes food as well he wins nothing for his hopes.

He rests in the clean straw. She sits by him, talking, stroking him until his eyes close. She teases burrs from his mane and tail, delicately parting strands. He widens his nostrils, drawing in her scent, the very female scent of her, the musk of fertility, the sweat beneath the perfume. Even as sleep calls, he wants her on his back, to ride between the worlds. For the first time in eons he feels safe.

A man’s voice intrudes into his dreams, words echoing above him.

“He’ll be all right with plenty of rest and good food. He’ll need supplements for a while—teeth floated, feet trimmed, wormed—you know all that. Heart and gut sounds are good but I’ll take some blood to test. Get his strength up and then we’ll geld him.”

Not in the Seven Hells.

Has he merely exchanged one nightmare for another? At least in the pens he might have died a courageous death fighting to the end. Here, kindness could be as dangerous. He will not allow his blood to be taken. The little rest he’s gained gives him enough strength to avoid the needle. The male backs away when Josie tells him to.

“Come back another day when you’re passing. Let him settle. There’s no rush,” Josie says from outside his stall. For a moment their eyes meet—is there amusement written in hers?

A vehicle drives away and the door to his stall re-opens and she stands there, arms akimbo. “If I didn’t know better, I’d swear you understand every word, but I’ll give you the benefit of doubt. I’ll make you a bran mash. You gotta eat, boy.”

The bran mash smells of earth and sweetness. What he wants is a side of venison, fresh river greens, and a glass of wine scented with oak.



Sun shines through a skylight within the barn. He watches motes dance among the beams and catch the light. His bones tell him the moon will be full tonight. With luck and cunning he can escape this stall and find his way to a river. If he dives beneath the surface he’ll find a path home.

He sleeps, nose in straw, until the sun begins its descent. The girl, Josie, comes to check on him from time to time, always speaking softly, always touching him tenderly. She makes his skin shiver and his heart race, but she is human and he does not forget the promise of a knife to his genitals.

Her eyes are green, her hair as black as his coat. She tilts her head and watches him in a way that no other human ever has,

looking more deeply than his skin; as though she knows. And when she removes his shoes he wonders even more.

Daylight fades. Birds find their roosts and beyond the barn all he hears is the rustle of trees as they whisper goodnights. He climbs to his hooves, light of foot, and investigates the bolts of his stall. Though they burn his mouth, it's easy enough to pull them back with his teeth. He is halfway down a gravel path with the tang of a river to guide him when Josie appears. She stands before him, arms akimbo, hands on her slender waist.

"I wondered if you'd try it. Come here, silly boy," she says.

He has some pride left and knows he can escape her. He stands as she approaches him. It will not hurt him to have those tender hands caress him one last time. She reaches him and strokes his nose, then shares her breath with him. She tastes of honey and cinnamon. He barely notices as she slips something over his head. Only then does he back away, aware he's been a fool yet again.

Light as gossamer, the halter might barely hold him except for one thing. He stares at her, wondering how she knew, what gave him away.

She smiles. "I wondered many things about you. You were too beautiful, even filthy as you were, to have been abandoned by anyone. I thought perhaps you were too dangerous to be handled, but you reacted out of fear, not anger. I have a feeling you are a long way from home."

The halter is made from his tail and mane, braided together and shaped to fit.

"Isn't it true that if I ride you in a bridle made from your hair, you won't kill me?"

The moon is full and it is *Samhain*, a time of power. A shaft of moonlight falls on the path. He steps sideways into it letting the rays fall upon his back. He calls a challenge to the night and to the powers of the Earth, and then he changes.



“How did you know?” he asks when he stands as a man before her.

“Small things. You didn’t quite behave as a normal horse and you understood me far too well. You shied away from anything metal. Your expressions were, well, too expressive. The way you watch things...

“You should have seen your face when George mentioned gelding you. You understood.”

The halter hangs around his neck, as secure as any chain. He fingers it. “You want a ride, do you? I’ll give you the ride of your life!” He means it in more ways than one and three or four others besides.

She laughs. A sound holding promises of lust and love and hope until she asks, “What is your name?”

He pauses. Giving his name commits him to so many things. It will give her yet more power over him. If she were Fae he would never consider it, but he owes her his life and knows it.

“Aiellessen,” he says softly and prays he is not wrong to trust.

“I’m Josie, but I guess you already know that. Come inside and we’ll talk and I’ll make you a proper meal.”

She walks forward and lifts the end of his halter. She tugs and he follows, skin shivering at the touch of her hand.

Aiellessen stops at the threshold. “I can take you to so many places.”

She stops with one hand on the door frame. “I know. My grandmother told me so much.”

Still he pauses, a thing remaining to trouble him. “And you’ll promise to keep the knife away?”

Laughter highlights her face again. Her eyes dance as she rakes his body. He knows he is handsome and straightens his shoulders. He nearly stamps his feet until he remembers.

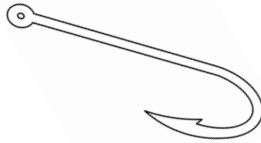
“Looking like that? I’m thinking there is more than one way to geld a man and a knife isn’t one of them. If I know my legends, you owe me at least seven years. So if you behave...”

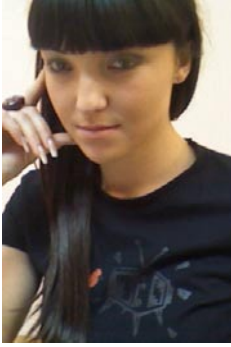
It isn’t in his nature to behave. As long as he wears the halter he cannot run. Seven years is a long time to plan, and if women have got him into trouble before, no doubt they will again, but

the in-between is always worth it. Besides, times passes differently on Earth from what is does in *Sithein-dhu*. He might even return a hero, especially if he gets this girl with child. He steps across the threshold with a smile on his face ready to do battle for his manhood.



The door remains ajar and Josie stands in the path of the moon. The light burnishes her skin lending her an unearthly glow. Her clothes lie in a puddle at her feet. His smile broadens and then fades as she steps out of her skin.





ISABELLA ERLENMEYER

Though born in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, (down Mexico, bear left and carry on), I live in Iriona (same country but by the ocean).

I graduated in Marine Biology and hold a number of patents relating to fish husbandry, in particular hatching techniques encompassing egg, larvae, post-larval, and juvenile stages.

I'm 32, divorced, no children or pets. Two live-ins: Gus and Paddy, twins, expert divers and a bit on the hulkish side, but nice boys and unencumbered by high IQ's. They run my fish farm, and look after me with their sandwich games. To humor them I often play at being ham.

I write mainstream. My work is unpublished and I'm not seeking publication until I learn more about the craft and intricacies of good storytelling.

BORN IDLE and THE PAINTER OF WINDS are vignettes, snatches of two tragic lives with dissimilar endings.

The inspiration for BORN IDLE arose from a laboratory technique I use to coat the water-soluble particles in fish medicines. For THE PAINTER OF WINDS I drew from personal experience. My late ex-husband was a painter. Bless him.

croselt@gmx.com

Born Idle

Isabella Erlenmeyer

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“Would you like a cup of tea?”

Before answering, Officer Jones glanced around and wrinkled his nose. “No, thank you, Ma’am.”

Detective sergeant Elliott darted a sharp look to the officer and stepped toward Barbara Tatum, a small and mousy-looking woman. “I would love one, thank you.”

In the kitchen, Elliott perched on a stool, his back to the wall, watching Mrs. Tatum as she reached for a dented aluminum teapot. From a top cupboard she picked a tin. The cupboard was bare but for a box of cornflakes and a glass jar with a white powder, probably sugar. She placed the jar on the countertop and hunched her shoulders, waiting for the water to boil.

Elliott followed her movements, his feeling of strangeness deepening. Mrs. Tatum’s seeming lack of emotion wasn’t surprising; he’d seen similar reactions before, but there was something odd in her behavior. He lowered his gaze to her carpet slippers, worn, deformed and carefully darned in several places with minute stitches.

While the tea steeped she opened the fridge and produced a carton of milk. Other than a water jug and a dish covered with a pan lid, the fridge was empty.

Elliott nodded thanks for the mug of hot tea and sipped, wondering why she’d added milk but never offered sugar. Outside the door, in the corridor, he eyed a dozen crates of beer before clearing his throat.

“Would you mind if I ask you a few questions?” He produced a small notepad and a pencil.

“Of course.”

“Just let me check again. You discovered your husband’s body at seven?”

“I found his corpse at six forty, when I woke up.”

“How did you—” Elliott penciled the time, searching for a euphemistic formula.

“He was silent.”

“Couldn’t he be asleep?”

“He snored most of the time. When he didn’t, his breath was labored.”

“Did he suffer from a heart condition?”

“Look sergeant. My husband was one hundred pounds overweight and often didn’t move from the sofa for weeks. He was on medication for high blood pressure, constipation and ulcers. In addition he had bed sores, varicose veins and a chronic *hydrocele*.”

“You said chronic...?”

“*Hydrocele testis*. He retained fluids in his scrotal sac.”

Elliott wrote it all down.

“You said before he hadn’t moved from the sofa in weeks.” He had already guessed the answer but he had to ask. “How did he—”

“He didn’t. I brought him a bedpan, gave him enemas, cleaned his sores and drained his sack.”

Before he could ask she continued.

“I would puncture his scrotum to draw liquid. I used to be a registered nurse.”

James Smith, the medical examiner, popped his head around the kitchen door, peeling a latex glove. “Er—sergeant. Have a minute?”

Elliott nodded to Mrs. Tatum and followed Dr. Smith to a small bathroom crammed with odd-looking utensils, a basket full of bandages, gauze pads and the paraphernalia of an infirmary.

“Anything I should know?” Elliott gestured toward the

living room.

"Too early to say, but my bet is thrombosis or an embolism; clogged arteries. He was in dismal shape. I'll know more after postmortem."

"You reckon natural causes then?"

"That's my bet and I wonder how he lasted so long."

"Seemingly, his wife was a nurse."

"And damn thorough at that; he's been cured and bandaged often and expertly."

"You could have fooled me."

Over a blackened can, Elliott peered at a pot half-filled with water. Inside were several large glass and chrome syringes and hypodermic needles the size of soda straws. Everything looked crummy and pitted. He reached for the pot and moved it aside, peering inside the can at burned paper ashes.

"That's an alcohol boiler; you pour alcohol in, set it afire and boil the water to sterilize the syringes. My grandfather used to sterilize instruments in one like that. Poor bitch. She must have run out of alcohol and burned papers instead. This stuff is ancient, but clean. I had never seen cheap bandages and gauze pads washed. These things," he pointed to the basket, "must have been through the washer a dozen times."

Elliott checked his notes.

"She said something about Hydrocele."

"Right. His balls were the size of a small cantaloupe."

"Painful?"

"Could be. He should have had surgery ages ago."

"They didn't seem to be rolling in it."

"I would have never believed it. You never heard the name?"

Elliott frowned. "You mean *the* Tatum?"

"Right. A long time ago I met his father, one of the old

pirates. See that tract of land out there?”

They neared a small window overlooking a trim yard and beyond a huge swathe of barren land stretching into the distance.

“It belonged to the deceased, and now I suppose to his widow. You know Pffalzer Merris? Well, go figure. One of the largest pharmaceutical companies in the country and they’re planning moving to another state. He wouldn’t sell them a single acre to expand their labs.”

“Why didn’t he?”

“He must have felt he didn’t need it. They would have paid top dollar.”

“Then why the squalor?”

“Search me.”

“That’s all I could do on eighteen dollars a week.”

They both turned toward the voice. Framed under the door, Mrs. Tatum looked smaller, and mousier than ever.

“His bank paid every bill, even car service and gas would be settled by them after I signed a receipt. No credit cards or checking account. He used to give me twenty dollars a week for housekeeping.”

She paused as if ashamed to continue. “A year ago he lowered it to eighteen.”

Elliott pocketed his notepad and darted a look past Mrs. Tatum to the boxes of beer.

She lowered her head. “He drank a crate a day, but I didn’t buy it. A truck delivered it once a month.”

“Mrs. Tatum, who was your husband’s physician?”

“Dr. Dooley of Maple Crescent. He came once a month to fill his prescriptions.”

After fishing his notepad once more from his jacket pocket, Elliott jotted the doctor’s name as he considered someone should be sued for incompetence, malpractice or worse. He couldn’t bring himself to ask why Chester

Tatum had reduced his wife's housekeeping by two dollars.



She drank iron-tasting tap water from a tick-bottomed glass and glanced at the mirror to push at her tangled hair. *I am the ghost of Barbara, an ephemeral passerby, in whose mind dreams have power.* From under a drawer liner, Barbara rescued a thin sliver of white soap, LUX, her last, saved for the occasion.

Chester had hated the smell of soap. She let the water run comfortably hot and rubbed the soap between her hands until she managed a thick lather. Then she rubbed her face all over, massaging her temples, cheekbones, nose and mouth before rinsing it and starting again until the soap melted into nothingness.

A year ago, Chester had reduced her housekeeping allowance from twenty dollars to eighteen. She stared through blurry eyes to a bare narrow shelf. Bare of her babies, the delightful creatures Old Elmo Calhoun had crafted for her.

In the mornings, she would lock herself in the bathroom; forget her existence and toy with Nena, the little squirrel and Tim the mouse. Barbara would dash and sprinkle herself with the bright waters of childhood greeting Bobby, the cantankerous-looking owl, a gentle soul, really, and line up Jeremy, Nicholas and Emma; the three white geese. Then, she would fortify her soul with Ernie, the robin, dream of deliverance caressing Douglas the dolphin and share the loneliness of her soul with frisky Jemima, the colt.

Every day she would escape for an hour. On her way to the grocery store for limp vegetables or the damaged fruit

Mr. Lundkist would let her have cheap, she would stop by Old Elmo's window and watch mesmerized how the little magician crafted glass animals with a gas torch and thin glass bars.

In winter, Elmo would blow glass bubbles with chubby Santa Clauses inside, complete with pointed hats. On Sundays, Elmo would set a tray with his precious creatures outside Church and offer them for five dollars to passerby's. Barbara couldn't afford five dollars, but one day Elmo gave her Nena for two. After that, she would save every penny to add, every few weeks, another morning confidant to her menagerie.

She had told the sergeant Chester often didn't get off the sofa for weeks. But sometimes he did. Like the day he discovered her treasure, and dropped them before her eyes down the trash grinder, and reduced her allowance by two dollars.



Sonia Tatum, a fleshless spinster of fifty with a pronounced limp, marched across the marble expanse of the funeral home's lobby, her sister Edna in tow.

"Thank you, Barbara, we'll take over for the family."

Barbara rested a plastic carrier bag on the floor and dug her hands in her pockets. "You'll take over?"

"That's correct." She gestured a curt dismissal to two men standing to a side. "I'm Sonia Tatum, we'll hold the funeral services at St. Patrick's for entombment at the family pantheon."

One of the men, clad in a raven suit and tie, frowned before composing a face of dire toothache. The other man, sober-faced, remained in the background.

"There must be a mistake, Mrs. Tatum. The decedent's

spouse, Mrs. Barbara Tatum here, ordered cremation.”

“We’ll have none of that!”

“And... how do you propose to stop me?”

Sonia didn’t turn around. “Mister...?”

“Purvis, Oscar Purvis.”

“Oscar, until I return with Judge Martin, I order you to ignore anything affecting my brother’s remains.”

Mr. Purvis pouted his lips and stared pointedly to the carrier bag at Barbara Tatum’s feet.

Sonia froze.

The other man, in corduroy jeans and a knitted jacket, produced a small card rectangle and offered it to Sonia. “I’m Philip Strout, from Strout, Buckleworth and Perry of New York City, acting for Mrs. Tatum. We have correctly filed all documents. My client, as the decedent’s spouse, has acted within her rights, requested cremation and taken possession of the ashes.”

“I see.” Sonia turned around and lowered her glasses a fraction. “Have it your way, dear. I will ensure we contest my brother’s will till kingdom come. You’ll be old before you touch a penny.”

The lawyer was about to retort when Barbara collected her carrier bag and stepped forward. She ran her eyes past the thin, flat chest and narrow shoulders, the angular elbows and prominent shoulder-blades, the sallow skin and sharp features, the deeply set, pale blue eyes, and the lusterless, ashen hair of Sonia Tatum. “Without a will, Connecticut intestacy statutes prescribe that after payment of debts, taxes and administrative expenses, the surviving spouse takes the entire estate of the decedent, if there are no surviving children. There are no children... surviving or otherwise as your brother was too lazy to engage in the necessary maneuvers to promote such an event. I have a deposition from my late husband’s lawyers to the effect

that he died intestate.” She blinked twice at her lawyer. “Have I said it right?”

Mr. Strout smiled. “You’ve added enlightening details, but the gist is there.”

Barbara gripped the carrier bag handles more tightly and then darted a look at an overhead clock. “How the time flies!” With quick steps she marched toward the exit.



Sheldon Klein, CEO of Pffalzer Merris, wrung his hands once and stepped over to Barbara Tatum, nodding silent thanks to his secretary. Just a few minutes before, the widow had driven to the gates and a sharp-witted security officer had immediately raised head office.

“Please, accept my condolences.” He tried for a mournful face but a sparkle in her eye hinted at his failure to make an impression. He drew two fingers to her elbow and gestured to a low table and easy chairs. “We’ll be more comfortable there. Can I offer you some tea, coffee, perhaps juice?”

“Tea will be fine, thanks.”

When Mrs. Simmons left after serving the tea, Sheldon leaned forward, fingers cradled in his lap. The woman appeared a little vacant, no doubt still shocked by her loss. “How can I be of help, Mrs. Tatum?”

“I believe you needed land to expand your business.”

Sheldon repressed a strong urge to bolt upright, jump up-and-down on the chair and yell. Then, a little warning sounded deep in his mind.

She hadn’t used lawyers or go-betweens. She must be confused and he would be taking advantage of a defenseless widow. “We had considered—”

“How much?”

A hundred acres would be beyond his wildest dreams.
“Two hundred acres.”

“Forty million.”

Sheldon jerked straight. That was twice market value.
“I’m afraid—”

“Fifty million.”

“But—”

Mrs. Tatum moved to stand up.

“Deal!” Sheldon slammed his open palm on the table.
The crockery danced. *Damn, she’s taking me to the cleaners.*

She beamed and reached into a worn handbag. “I believe you operate in your factory a sophisticated coating process; am I right?”

Sheldon nodded, the sudden void in his stomach deepening.

“You can give a hard coat to particles of almost any size?”

He nodded again. Now what? She was closing in for the kill?

“You can coat a particle to; say the size of a mustard seed?”

Mustard seeds? More confused than ever he continued nodding.

“And smaller? Like a grain of sand?”

“Mrs. Tatum, perhaps if you told me....”

“Can you?”

“Yes.”

“Durable coating?”

“Very.”

“Excellent.” She drew a folded sheet of paper and offered it across the table. “That’s what I want you to do for me. In exchange you can have the land....”

His heart skipped a beat.

“For fifty million.”

He read the lines and the painstaking specification of Granulometry: the size and shape attributes of individual granules and other particles, density and hardness. It had been drafted by an expert and the order was preposterous. Sheldon swallowed and was about to complain when he heard in his mind her calm voice announcing ‘sixty million’. He pushed the folded page into his top pocket and took her firm handshake.



Barbara leaned back and rested her head on an improvised pillow made with a new Egyptian cotton towel, folded over the bathtub's edge. Through wafts of steam she gazed at the narrow shelf by the hand basin and the tiny figures of Nena, Tim, Bobby, Jeremy, Nicholas and Emma; all lovingly recreated by Elmo Calhoun. They were soon to be joined by Ernie, Douglas and frisky Jemima.

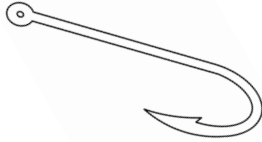
She reached lazily to a cup propped on the bath's ledge and sipped a little champagne; she'd been so busy all-day that she forgot to buy a flute glass. Her mind flew to Elmo and his magical talent, her hand brushing the lozenge-shaped hollow glass medallion resting between her breasts. Elmo had encased it within a web of silver wires. She blew a little foam from its surface to admire its dense black contents: the ashes from Chester Tatum's holographic testament, lovingly rescued from her alcohol burner.

She whistled *'Du soleil plein les yeux'*, felt happy and foolish, giggled and drank a little more champagne. Then she turned her head to the ledge just above her head. Yes. Elmo was a master artisan and today he'd given ample proof of his uncanny talent with his latest creation.

She reached a hand coated in fragrant suds to heft her new beautiful hourglass, turned it upside down and stared

mesmerized as Chester Tatum's ashes—expertly transformed into perfect grains of the right size and consistency by the scientists at Pffalzer Merris—streamed down to form a pretty little cone.

“Now, my dear, you must exercise a little.”



The Painter of Winds



Isabella Erlenmeyer

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There was a sea of rye with a dimple to one side, a shallow depression like the hollow a smile makes on a happy baby's cheek. Brackish water filled the dimple, its margins a blur of cottonwoods. Lionel Davies relaxed his gaze into a horizon of wheat fields punctuated by shadows and inspected the brush strokes. In the brownish haze surrounding the water's edge, the paint seemed to ripple.

It had become a raw, blustery day on Walton Bay. Heavy clouds, smudged like thumbprints, moved in after an almost perfect dawn. There was a taste of cooler weather working its way up from the valley and grimy clouds pressed down as if trying to bow the reeds into submission. In a field, tall flowers are tossed everywhere in a gale, but rushes are stronger and bend with the wind to stand erect once again after the storm.

The canvas was finished; another brush stroke would spoil it.

With a sigh, Lionel scraped a little unused paint from his palette, cleaned the spatula on a clump of grass, and rearranged the oils in a large box, making room to one side for a jar of turpentine.

Most people feel compelled to add something more to an already well-balanced scene; another piece of furniture to a pleasant living room; another paragraph to a vibrant chapter ending; another kiss to a fatigued lover yielding to slumber.

Out of the gloom and the wispy fog, wings flapped, a gull swooped past Lionel in a blur—and landed next to the water. It strutted for a moment, pecked at something on

the ground, peered at itself in the murky water, and took wing as if frightened by its reflection. Lionel knew how it felt.

With precise movements borne of constant practice, Lionel gathered his folding seat, secured canvas to easel for the short walk home, hefted his paint box, and plodded through a much-trampled path cutting across the rye. It had been a perfect day to capture young winds dashing through fields like frisky colts testing their legs before the elders called them to heel. Overhead, clouds massed and the pubescent gale matured by the minute. A wonderful day.

Lionel reached the barn as the first rain painted the old wood a darker color. Soon, slanted sheets would rake the fields and the wind, swallowed by the gale, would be no more.

Under the struggling light from a fly-spattered bulb, he propped the paint box and the seat over planks resting on trestles, removed the canvas from the easel, and after locating an empty space on the crowded walls, hung it from a twine thread he'd fitted earlier. Back by the trestles, he leaned back and gazed at his work; hundreds of canvases of wind cavorting through impossible fields, his lifeblood painfully drawn from his body and pasted on cloth. Tired older breezes jostled for space with puffs, gusts, and intermittent wafts of teasing young winds as the storms and gales—judiciously sent to the rear of the barn—roared with overwhelming tenacity.

Winds, beautiful winds, his winds.

Twenty years of toil and despair and he'd never sold a painting, had never basked on critical praises, nor drunk the marvel in an admirer's eye. To share his work with others would be like seeking tenderness from hookers; only meat is fit to barter, the soul is for gifts. He touched

his fingertips before him and tapped all ten against one another.

Outside, the storm raged, timber creaked, and a clod of mud carried by the gale hit the doors with the sloppy sound of an arrow on a wet target. Inside, his winds rustled the canvases.

He had set to distilling the essence of wind through countless tries to capture its fickle nature, and in doing so, he'd learned about wind, loneliness, and self-denial.

Yes, Lionel mused, you tell yourself you've learned a lot about life from misfortune and maybe you have. But it's all an illusion; you only learned about pain, about the wild-eyed crazy bastard down in the silt at the bottom of your psyche. You were never able to force the cuddly little lamb of idealism to lie down with the fierce lion of realism and make nice-nice. No, and he never would. He had tamed idealistic painting and shared its secrets in a world inured to magic.

His stomach rumbled. How long since he'd eaten? Two days? Three? It was difficult to keep track of such things.

He reached to the floor and fingered a blanket, slightly damp and uninviting, all that was left from the house now mortgaged to the hilt, empty as a husk and as useless. The barn had been his home for years, close to the wind in his canvases.

After the necessary visual rest to take the scene afresh, unencumbered by memories, he stared at his latest work. Yes, there was wind there.

Without looking back, he reached behind him to a cookie tin, the only object on the shelf. With smooth movements, his eyes never deserting his last canvas, he hefted his old well-oiled revolver. Lionel Davies pushed its snout into his mouth and pulled the trigger



Anyone watching Bernard O'Hara may have maliciously assumed the roaring fire rising from the pyre stirred memories of Torquemada or the *Autos de Fe* from The Holy Inquisition.

It didn't. Parson O'Hara pondered—his eyes unfocused past the dancing flames—the folly of human existence and how the product of a man's life could reduce to ashes in minutes.

When Matt Benson from B&B Dairies had found Lionel, the man must have been dead two weeks, his body ripe enough for Matt to catch a whiff when he passed the barn with his truffle dog looking for the rare fungus.

A coroner from the city arrived in a van with a bunch of young helpers, probably students, held a conference with the sheriff and the judge, packed the corpse in a stout bag and left the way he came. Then the vultures from the bank took over. The land was the only valuable thing in the lot, they decreed, the barn and the house beyond recovery.

Ernie Welsh, from the farm just below, had inspected the rafters and kicked here and there before offering a thousand dollars for the lot. The judge, old Silas Miller, jumped at the offer and that was that.

Ernie called at church and asked O'Hara to drop by, in case a few items of decrepit furniture could be of use to the parish. That was in the morning. Now, the setting sun competed with the pyre. The scant contents of house and barn had been piled high and set ablaze. Scores of drab canvasses, flea-bitten mattresses, furniture and the pitiful belongings of a deranged soul went up in smoke.

"You knew him well, Father?"

Ernie dragged his feet before flopping down on an upturned bucket by the pyre.

"Very little. I never saw him in church."

"Care for a tot?" Ernie offered a half-full bottle of

bourbon.

“Aye.” O’Hara took a swig and handed the bottle back.

“I couldn’t make head to tail of the paintings, could you?”

“Not really. The same color daubed repeatedly over the same spots. They look all the same to me.”

A little later, just before nine o’clock, while the sunset glow still brood on the fields Ernie stood, finished the last of the bottle and tossed it onto the embers.

“What will you do with that one?” He gestured to O’Hara’s pick-up and a large canvas wedged between a chest of drawers and a few chairs.

“I don’t know. It occurred to me he couldn’t be a real artist until someone hangs one of his canvases.”

Ernie frowned. “I don’t follow.”

“It’s like writers; unless they publish they don’t exist.”

“I see.”

O’Hara doubted it but didn’t comment.

The fire died down, the flammable bits reduced to embers, as the last glow of the dying sun fizzled on the horizon. Shadows skulked in and out over the mountains as the wind rose and fell. A flurry of sparks rose from the embers followed by gentle sizzling taps. O’Hara drew a hand to his forehead and inspected his fingers.

“It’s raining.”

“Aye, and it will pour down before long. You better be gone with that lot.



When O’Hara made it to his house and backed the pick-up into the garage, the roofs glistened with moisture and the eaves dripped. A crow cawed somewhere. Soon it would rain in earnest. He hefted the canvas, brought it

into the house, propped it at the end of the corridor and went into the kitchen to rustle a light dinner. He would think what to do with the painting in the morning. Perhaps he would hang it in the laundry room, to hide a wall discoloration caused by a leaking water heater.

Over a salad made from leftover potatoes, a tomato and a boiled egg, he thought of Lionel, loneliness, paranoia and the thousand-and-one-things he had to do the following day, preparing the church for the Decker's wedding and filling up several long overdue reports to the bishopric.

What drives a man to eat a gun? The question had nagged him all day, and made him feel inadequate because he didn't know the answer. As a shepherd of men he should know. Mental illness was obvious, but inadequate. O'Hara sensed something deeper.

The trick to defuse depression is to identify its onset in the early stages. O'Hara poured himself a decent portion of straight Jack Daniels, adjourned to his study and reached for a much-thumbed copy of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, not a reading most befitting a priest, he thought. With the noise of slanted rain pelting the windowpanes as background, and the warming comfort of the liqueur, O'Hara sat on his favorite and only easy chair and relaxed. Soon he was immersed in the lust and greed of the clergy and the dangers and adventures of traveling merchants.

He must have dozed off because he jolted alert and dropped the book. It had stopped raining, its noise replaced by strange clangs and creaks outside the door, like someone stumbling in the dark.

O'Hara stood and looked around for a weapon, though he knew he had none. The noises eased and then intensified, as if the prowler had lost his bearing. From

behind a pile of books, O'Hara rescued an old baseball bat he'd confiscated from a DiMaggio wannabe, after he'd shattered his garage window with a dismal lob. Then he remembered his flashlight was in the garage. He paused at the door and listened. The noises stopped.

Perhaps the intruder had heard him and fled. Hefting the bat, he grasped the handle and opened the door a couple of inches. Silence. O'Hara closed his eyes, recited the Lord's Prayer in fewer than twelve seconds, and pushed a tentative hand through the door gap to reach the light switch. Still nothing.

Feeling a little foolish, he yanked open the door. With the bat at ready, he stepped forward.



The first thing he noticed was the light. It moved. O'Hara jerked his head to the overhead corridor lamp, a dusty wrought iron affair with amber glasses. It swung like a departure light in a stationmaster's hand. Then he saw the air ripple.

At the end of the corridor, the brown paint in the canvas resolved in concentric whorls, stealing glints from the dancing light.

O'Hara felt a groan welling up inside and dropped the bat when the passageway darkened abruptly, as though a great hand had smashed the light against the ceiling. Then, angry wind howled in the corridor.



CARLOS J CORTES

Although born in Madrid, Spain, on a wonderful 14 February, I've lived in a handful of countries: England, Brazil, Africa, you name it. Hang on a minute... but Africa is not a country, someone will say. Right you are, and I wouldn't call countries some of the places I've lived, so let's leave it at that.

I've spent most of my life enlightening the lives of others. No, I'm not a man of the cloth, rather a lighting designer, light scientist and fiber optics systems design engineer and writer. Now I live in Barcelona and tomorrow... your guess is as good as mine.

Besides ten non-fiction titles in light physics, lighting, fiber optics and bridge (excellent to use as door-stops or to save your life in a cold winter night if you run out of fuel) Bantam, an imprint of Random House, has recently published two of my novels.

PERFECT CIRCLE Bantam Spectra 2008 ISBN: 0553591622

MY VALENTINE and SPRING SPRUNG are from a collection of fifty short stories titled THE FOLKS NEXT DOOR and prefaced with:

'Whenever the news unveil a new horror to afford us a glimpse into the darker aspects of the human soul, we often forget the actors in these tragedies are people like you or me; the taciturn bus driver, the affable hotel porter or the prim lady walking her poodle. People who awake under the same sun, dream under the same moon and harbor secret yearns. The folks next door is a collection of short stories about ordinary people; someone's neighbors, mine or, perhaps, yours.'

<http://www.carlosjcortes.com>



My Valentine

Carlos J Cortes

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...and everywhere, rough concrete walls, damp—as if weeping with insufferable sadness. Irregular pillars, crowned with rusted and gnarled steel bars, jutted from the ruins like avid fingers. Weeds forced their way out through the rubble in a forlorn bid to lick the sunlight seeping through low clouds. The bleak landscape begged mercy from the heavens...

Brenda paused; Mr. Schatz knew how to paint depression. After inserting a bookmark, she closed the volume. ‘Loud Silences’ by Bernard J. Schatz. I wonder what the ‘J’ stands for, Brenda pondered. Joshua? John? No, not John, perhaps Jason or James. She sighed, deposited the book on the side table, and stood. “Tea, dear?”

John lowered his newspaper a fraction, and peered over his reading glasses. “Are you having some?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll join you.” He puffed at his pipe and continued reading the paper.

In the kitchen, Brenda filled the kettle and set it on the range. From a low cupboard, she drew a small rattan tray. After fitting a gingham cloth on the tray she prepared a tin of Earl Grey, spoons, teapot and two cups and saucers.

During the liturgy, she had avoided looking over the sink. Now, with anticipation, she narrowed her eyelids and raised her gaze to an explosion of color on the window ledge. Bunched in a crystal vase, Sweet Violets and Wild Columbinas competed for space among Solomon Seals, Baneberries, Turtleheads and Jack-in-the-Pulpits, cradled in White Woodland Milkweed and Wild Ginger.

She stared transfixed at the humble wild flowers she had lovingly arranged in her best vase.

For the past six years, every February 14, an Interflora van would deliver a bouquet to her doorstep, no card, and no details of the sender. Brenda smiled, peering at the bottom of the vase where a fragment of aspirin had crumbled into white dust. *They will last longer.*

Anonymous Valentine? Six years, six bunches of flowers and over two thousand love-letters ago she had met Antoine. *Hardly anonymous; my sweet Antoine, love of my life...*

When the kettle whistled, Brenda poured boiling water in the pot and returned the kettle to the range. After sloshing the water around to warm the pot, she emptied it in the sink and dosed three teaspoons of tea leaves, filling it afterward with boiling water from the kettle.

With a last longing look to the flowers, she carried the tray to a low table between the easy chairs.

Brenda poured the tea and sat again at her chair, opening her book once more.

John, glanced at her, puffed his pipe, and smiled. "Thank you, honey."

After Marcia and Fiona—their twin daughters—had left home to work in Europe, Brenda had plunged headlong into a tunnel of depression. In her early forties and with little hopes of planning a new career, she retreated into her rockery garden and joined 'Astilbe', an Internet wildflower group. Corresponding with unknown gardeners on the best mulching for Lilys-of-the-Valley or the demands of Ligularia had done little to ease her despair. John, her husband, had doted on her in his own clumsy ways at first.

Later, as if he understood she needed breathing space, he had retreated into his sempiternal newspaper and pipe. He would drive home straight from work. After dinner

they would share a silent interlude, reading, before retiring for the day. On weekends, he would watch her potting about in the garden from the porch's shadow. Later they would attend the services together at the local church and resume reading.

She didn't question his lackluster. John had always been a quiet man, drawing a word from him took considerable effort. Brenda supposed he was happy—in his limited way—to vegetate and enjoy a monotonous existence with an eye on retirement.

One day, she saw a glimpse of light at the end of the tunnel; in her inbox there was a letter from a new flower-lover. His name was Antoine, from Lebanon and his lines oozed passion *'why am I so cursed? I've chased sisters and cousins by the side of Ba'lül Lake and raced them to Al Habbäriyah, admiring along the way Toad Lilies behind every clump of rock. Now that I no longer chase or race, I long for their mysterious orchid-like blossoms in the fall, when my garden takes a barren look.*

I planted my lilies a few years ago. Their unhappiness was evident by late spring: ratty looking sad foliage. Next year I persevered, and provided company to soothe their melancholy: Hostas, Hellebores and Erythroniums. All seem happy but my lilies. I have heaped kindness and attention upon them, I've read to them Omar Jayyam's 'Rubai' and sung Fairuz Rahbani's melodies, to no avail.

Forgive me if I appear forward. Can you help me raise my lilies?

She recalled his first letter literally, like most others. The following day she had gone to the local library and looked up the little town of Al Habbäriyah in the southern reaches of La Bekaa valley. After browsing through the tiny 'Rubaiyyat' by the ancient Persian poet Omar Jayyam she had ordered a copy.

Naturally, she had answered his query, and advised deep shade, and a good, moist soil rich in organic matter. Every day there would be a letter waiting in her in-box. He hadn't missed a day in six years.

Four months after their first communication, on February thirteen, in Antoine's letter there was a George Herbert poem.

*I got me flowers to strew thy way;
I got me boughs off many a tree:
But thou wast up by break of day,
And brought'st thy sweets along with thee.*

The following morning a wonderful bouquet of wild flowers arrived at her doorstep.

Brenda had felt a turmoil of confusion. She tried to delude herself with the innocent nature of her letters, they had written solely of gardening. As she arranged the flowers in her prize vase, Brenda smiled. Antoine had reached halfway around the world with a bunch of flowers. Of course, she knew the flowers would be local, but the order had traveled from Lebanon, the Phoenician land of milk and honey.

Afterward, truth fought its way, crumbling her hurriedly piled defenses. There was nothing innocent in their letters. Brenda sat at her computer and opened the files where she stored his mail. It was all there. Between the lines, passion, subtle lover's play, and carefully contrived innuendo played hide-and-seek in prose's lyricism.

...yesterday Oconee Bells bloomed, like foam over waves of lavender, and my soul foamed other waves across the ocean...

It suddenly dawned on her she had been unfaithful. She had cheated on John.

...crossing the desert from a cousin's wedding—there had been wine and song, joined by the wind rustling the tents' canvas—I stopped and lay on the sand, my eyes pregnant with stars, as I dreamt of flowers in distant lands...

The discovery left her speechless because she had refused to acknowledge the obvious. It was all there, in black-and-white. Flirting, gentle teasing, and above all other consideration: desire. Her ensuing reaction had been even more surprising. Suddenly she laughed and felt warm and deliciously wicked, wanted, desired, worthy of arousing platonic passions with her words. The lunacy of a metaphysic affair washed over her like warm water and left her unsoiled like a naiad. Then she wrote like a woman.

Brenda turned the page with an automatic movement; unawares to how long she had sat with her eyes staring at the page before her. She reached for her tea and sipped. It was stone cold. Sudden staccato noises issued from John's direction as he tapped his pipe on a wooden ashtray. He relit it and puffed contentedly, a cloud of blue aromatic smoke spreading through the living room.

She could never leave John. He was a good man; different, but a good man, a solid companion for a long trek. A long time ago, she had wished John could metamorphose in Antoine, her suave Antoine. But they were like oil and water; like a thoroughbred Arabian stallion and a shire horse.

John cleared his throat and stood. He donned his sleepers and folded the newspaper, depositing it on the magazine rack by the floor lamp. "I'll turn in. It's getting late."

She nodded and stared for an instant into his gentle, cognac-colored eyes. John leaned over, caressed her hair once, and pecked her forehead lightly. "Goodnight, honey. Don't stay up late."

She gazed at John's retreating silhouette, a faint haze of smoke trailing behind him, his slippers dragging slightly on the polished wooden floors. Yes, a shire horse, an old tired horse. His shoulders slumped. She felt a pang of guilt and bit her lower lip.

Her love affair was a chimera, the stuff from which dreams are made. She knew next to nothing about Antoine, not his age or appearance or marital status or religion. She had hinted a couple of times at the beginning but he never answered or asked anything in return. Theirs was the perfect platonic relationship, a communion of the spirit. Antoine had opened to her his poet's heart and bared his delicate soul. At times, she'd been speechless at its beauty.

I walked on the beach and sat on an overturned boat. Fishermen ground their boats upside down on the sand, over their nets and oars, away from the sea's undertow. It occurred to me the boats looked like beached feelings, secure in their anchor but yearning to meld into the water's embrace.

Under my fingers, I felt a limpet, solidly stuck to painted wood. Dearest, I would to lay at anchor with you in timeless sands, impervious to the seasons, enmeshed in your hair, drunk of long kisses...

Probably he was married, with many children. Perhaps his wife ignored his sensitive spirit, a trait men hid jealously like bad teeth, fearful of baring their frailty, worried about their masculinity. Brenda had fantasized what it would be to live with a man like that. An intelligent, suave, and perceptive man; a man with a fragile soul and unafraid to share it with her. Heady. Delirious. The thought peopled her waking dreams often nestling in her chest, leaving her breathless.

Carefully she deposited the book on the table and dipped her parched lips in the cold tea, the bitter liquid

surprisingly refreshing. *Antoine, my love, how can a yearning be so painful?*

Tomorrow there would be another letter, even on weekends or holidays; his mail would be there. At first she had pondered how could a married man, if he indeed was married, take time everyday to write long letters. She was at home all day, and could sit at the computer any time, but a working person would be different.

One day, a Thursday, she had asked a simple question about Lebanese flora. Not until Monday did he address the issue, although his daily letters didn't fail to arrive over the weekend. It had happened other times. Brenda deduced he wrote his weekend letters during the week and programmed his computer to send the mails at predetermined intervals. Once she had suggested they speak on the phone. His answer had been unequivocal.

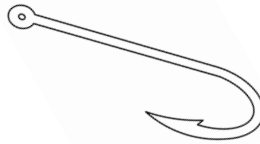
...We both have our beds to sleep in, dearest, beds of our choosing, at times uncomfortable, even inhospitable, but our beds they are. Everyday, a string of nothingness reaches us, to shape feelings and thoughts, on windows of unreality. Oh, I know we can print our letters, and hold them in our hands and enjoy a fallacy of reality, a corporeality accomplished by us because they didn't exist until they were on paper. A voice is real. It would follow an image. Suddenly we would exist. Existence brings pain, my dearest.

An aroma is close to being virtual. We can smell, and take it with us, treasure it forever. We can add shapes and colors in our mind, build a fantasy flower in a dream garden. The fragrance is perennial but dreams... are only dreams.

Brenda stood, her heart heavy, collected the tea service and made for the kitchen. She would do the dishes in the morning. It was late. John would be asleep, but his breathing would not slow and deepen until she lay by his side.

As she bent over the low table to switch off the floor lamp, she noticed a small folded paper on John's seat; it must have fallen from his pocket. Brenda picked it up to leave it on the breakfast table. She unfolded it and glanced. It was a cash receipt. As she placed the paper on the table, something caught her eye. Back at her easy chair, Brenda switched on the lamp and froze. She couldn't make most of the text because tears blurred the paper, but a line shone like a branding iron.

One large bouquet of wild flowers \$35.95





Spring Sprung

Carlos J Cortes

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First, he was aware of his body; but besides volume, darkness and time, Jonathan did not feel anything in particular. He sensed his chest rising and falling at intervals. Later, reddish light seeped through his closed eyelids; a pleasant sensation. As his awareness sharpened sluggish senses, he heard faint pattering sounds from the window.

A faraway tap dancer launched into a Double Buffalo, paused, and burst with a Cramp Roll. Jonathan kept his eyes shut. He lay savoring the new day, as a miser would his treasure, absorbing the perception of his surroundings, opening his eyes, a little at the time: first, a slit to let in a trickle of light filtered by thick lashes, then fully to shapes, colors and shadows. Then he saw the bird.

Jonathan smiled.

The robin was busy on his window ledge, pecking at seeds on a tin can lid, oblivious to anything but his bounty. Jonathan gazed past the feathered harbinger and, for the first time in many months, felt a clear impression of happiness. The air through the half-closed window was crisp, with a tang of new life and damp earth. Past wrought iron grilles, he peered at a clear blue sky and the trees' incipient greenery.

Spring!

Spring sprung....

Jonathan chortled, recalling a preposterous verse:

*Da spring is sprung,
da grass is riz;*

*Ah wundah where da boidies iz.
Da little boids is on da wing.
Ain't dat absoid?
Da little wings is on da boid!*

He tried declaiming it aloud—in his finest gangster's voice—but laughed himself to tears before the second verse.

When his eyes cleared, Jonathan gazed with a pang of grief at the abandoned lid, the spring messenger startled away by his laughter. He frowned, looking in turn at the lid, the half-open window and the drawn curtains. Then his face broke into a grin. *Maria*. It must have been Maria. She must have laid the seeds on the windowsill.

Jonathan closed his eyes and relaxed, filling his mind with Maria's image, her shapely lithe body, her *garçon* hairstyle and her gorgeous legs. The tip of his tongue licked parched lips, as he thought of her legs, smooth, soft, and with delicate clefts behind her knees.

A long time ago, in a Victorian novel he'd read, the hero would stand for hours at a tram stop, to catch a glimpse of his love's ankle. Ankles are important, Jonathan thought. From the shape, texture, and grace of an ankle, a shrewd observer could gather a wealth of information about a leg's evolution all the way to the waist. He chuckled at his lustful thoughts. Fillies could also be appraised by their ankles.

Maria's ankles were slender but shapely. *How can something be slender and shapely?* Jonathan frowned. *Well, perhaps not slender as in bony, slender as in nice.*

Jonathan sensed that something strived to stir underneath the sheets and reddened at the thought. Spring.

An idea nibbled at the edges of his consciousness, vague

at first, slowly focusing, like shapes seen through gauzy silk. When the concept gathered substance, it whisked away his last vapid threads of sleep. Jonathan pursed his lips. Maria. “The difficult we do immediately; the impossible takes a little longer.” Wasn’t that the army proverb?

She had been around for... yes, six months, or so. She had a gorgeous smile and her eyes sparkled. There was laughter in her eyes. What if—? He put his idea to the test, to find flaws in his reasoning. Maria was young, he was young, and spring was all around. Fine, the concept was intriguing and so far it made sense, at least to him. She was single, he was single and sap rushed through the trees. The conclusion was obvious: no time like the present for seduction. Aristotle would turn in his grave at the syllogism’s logical structure but Jonathan felt deliciously wicked. Yes, seduction sounded fitting.

He looked over to the window with a fleeting pang of nostalgia for the departed bird and set out to concoct a suitable strategy. Victory favors the daring.

As soon as she stepped into the room, he would open with small talk: the morning, the weather and spring. What a wonderful morning! It was nice of you; I mean the tin and the seeds. Thank you. There was a robin when I woke up. Yes, definitely, a robin. Spring is here. Can you smell damp earth? See the new shoots? Beautiful, aren’t they? My, but you look radiant. She would smile, wide, and the dimples on her cheeks will light her elfin face.

“Maria.” Jonathan feasted on the sound, rolling the ‘r’ in the Spanish pronunciation. Other women could be painted in sounds, shapes or sensations. He dreamt Maria in dimples: behind her knees, on the crook of her arms and her cheeks, where his wandering eyes nestled when she was around.

Afterward he would ask her about her job. Dedication and proficiency—coupled to awesome responsibility—were demanding issues in her chosen profession. Jonathan pondered that other than working and studying she did little else; too much work and no play.

Having positioned his brigantine—under the cloak of witty conversation, he would fire his broadside. What about dinner?

She would open her eyes wide, blush a little and nod before smiling. Her dimples would take over her face and the sparkle in her irises would put the sun to shame.

Dinner, however, would be only the beginning. In reality, it would be a night out. Jonathan pouted. These things needed careful planning. Like a military operation, it begged discipline and flawless tactics.

The first item on the agenda would be dinner at a nice place and Zoltan's was the ticket; table for two, at the rear, cozy. The menu? Now, Jonathan smiled, that would be a vital element in his master plan and required careful scrutiny.

First, a few tidbits and a glass of sherry, perhaps shrimp and Palo Cortado, yes, definitely shrimp... on the shell. The shell bit was important, perhaps pivotal. She would fumble and he would use his nimble fingers to help her. That would set the mood. Jonathan glanced at the abandoned tin lid. He might feed Maria the peeled bits, and she would peck them from his fingers. Nice thought.

The *entrée*. Something light and fluffy, perhaps tiny pastry cases filled with marinated salmon. No; too messy. *Foie*, that was it. He would order *foie gras* with Melba toast and half a bottle of good Sauternes. Perhaps '92 or better still '95, would Zoltan have any left? 95... what a splendid year!

After the sherbet, Zoltan would insist on his Goulash

and a bottle of Bull's Blood. Zoltan, the indestructible Magyar, swore that his forebears—the fierce mountain warriors of Bickaver—eventually sprouted horns from liberal ingestion of the thick wine. Jonathan mused if the legend were true; Zoltan should have had a splendid pair by now. After the goulash, Zoltan would insist they burp. The issue was critical; Bickaver Bull's Blood could have nefarious effects unless the drinkers burped. Maria would blush but they would oblige to make Zoltan happy.

Finally, they would have dessert, perhaps Baklava dripping with honey and topped with ground cashews, coffee and petit fours. He would hold her palm and read it. Naturally, he would run a finger over her long lifeline, then he would point at the head, heart and fate furrows and... There! Tucked at the beginning of the heart line, he would discover a definite, world-shattering romance in the wings... with a dashing palm reader!

Night would be young and they would stroll for half a block—barely touching the pavement really—their hands busy at interlocking fingers. They would cross Fraser Avenue and breathe salty air, mouths redolent of heady wines.

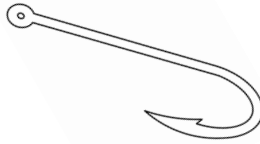
At Bella-Bella, they would nestle into a corner, order Mojitos... or perhaps Margaritas, and listen to the wistful notes of Miguel Canosa's horn. Maria would lean her head on his shoulder, and he would whisper Ezra Pound's choice stanzas. *Do I not loathe all walls, streets, stones, all mire, mist, all fog? All ways of traffic? You, I would have flow over me like water....*

Later, much later, they would walk along the shore and the surf would lick their bare feet. The brisk waves slapping at his ribs would rock more gently and his heart would ride at anchor. Like a sailing boat whose sails slide slowly down on to a deck he would stop. He would draw

her near to swim for an instant in her dark irises; his body would thaw and unseal, almost incandescent before searching for her lips.

Jonathan batted his eyelids repeatedly and smiled. Yes; a splendid program. He would call Maria.

With agonizing difficulty, he twisted his head to the opposite side of the pillow. There he sought—stretching his neck—a slender plastic tube. He gripped it between his teeth and blew twice into the mouthpiece.





MICHAEL KEYTON

I have cooked in hospital kitchens, worked in some of the dirtiest hotels in Wales, and played for a time in a semi-professional ceilidh band. Somewhere along the way I earned an MA in History and English, and taught history in a challenging state school where I learnt the art of turning history into a ‘page turner’.

My publishing record is modest: *Martin Brownlow’s Cat* in ‘Twisted Cat Tales,’ (republished on DVD by Wrong World) *Beside the Sea Side* in ‘Strange Stories of Sand and Sea,’ *Bony Park* in ‘To Be Read by Dawn’ Vol. III, *When I breathed I clinked*. My First Year in the Classroom (Adams Media) *Mr Nousel’s Mirror* in ‘Zahir’ and *Bad Meat* in the forthcoming ‘The Blackness Within.’

ELIZABETH’S HEAD is woven around a historical curiosity, i.e. the death of Elizabeth I. During the short period that led to her death, Elizabeth refused to take to her bed. She spent over two weeks sprawled on the floor in an adjoining room. She didn’t change her clothes and was reluctant to eat or drink. She continued to express great fear of her bedroom. After two weeks on the floor Elizabeth asked her attendants to get her to her feet, but still she did not take to her bed. Instead she remained standing in total silence for the next fifteen hours. Finally she was persuaded to take to her bed where shortly afterwards she died.

<http://baffledspirit.blogspot.com>



Elizabeth's Head

Michael Keyton

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The smoky warmth and crackle of flame on sticks, the occasional crunch of ashen logs lulled her to the edge of the precipice; she opened her eyes for one final look at the fire, its glow fuzzy and indistinct in the now dark room. Her eyes closed ready for sleep, and the whispers began, like a distant hive, each vowel and consonant descending soft like snow.

She felt small, childlike, in a bed that had become frighteningly large. She turned and stared at the empty shadows beside her as first one, then another dark blur shivered into solidity; and above, the now familiar shape of a fine net descended gently upon her.

Like the night before, and the night before that, she tumbled out of her bed and sat, hunched upon the floor, staring balefully at pillows that seemed to be waiting. She sat listless, aware of what would happen next.

They materialised in front of her, trembling reflections in air that appeared briefly liquid; then in a series of sudden, rippling blurs they assumed forms as clear and as hard as ceramic; diminutive monkey-like beings, some scaled or feathered, and others in the form of tiny skeletal creatures with over-large craniums that shone in the dark. These scuttled quickly like crabs around her, blocking any easy retreat to the door. Quietly, almost imperceptibly they edged closer to their victim, all the time staring at her through sightless eyes.

And inside her head, the whispering, sharp and sibilant, never ceased.



“She sees us as demons.”

“The Process has made us so. We appear as she perceives us.”

“This fixation on Hell and damnation, it will make problems.”

“But we’ve left it too late.”

“If she leaves the room...”

“The Neuro-web is here. It cannot be moved.”

“But in her present state – the damage.”

“Zara is right. Even under optimum conditions, the transfer doesn’t guarantee full sensory or emotional stability – never mind those fixated on spiritual salvation...”

“Or those consumed with purpose. You remember the Russian.”

“He is happy now.”

“As a voice memo. He never earned his trip, recouped the investment.”

“A shame.”

“The process left him a mad-man, his psyche so shredded he was unable to voice more than five words, and that was a question.”

“Yet a strangely apt one, ‘What is to be done?’”

“And said so seriously.”

“It proved popular.”

“A passing fad! This Queen must make a return on what we have to offer. She must be persuaded to desire our gift. There must be acceptance...”

“A tranquil mind.”

“We have to over-ride her fear. Zara, you and the N-Scribe, stay close to her. Make a complete and accurate record of what is seen or thought.”

“Our next manifestation will be more reassuring...angels perhaps.”

“Cherubs, offering frankincense, myrrh—and immortality.”

“If she leaves the bedchamber, Zara.”

“She *will* leave.”

“Then urge her return.”

“How? In my present form?”

“Talk to her. As to your form...”

All sense of substantiality evaporated on the instant and I felt myself wafted on air currents high over the polished wood floor, a speck, a spy; a seed to soften and grow in the mind.



The whispering stopped as the images faded and she stared again at the empty bed. She had understood perhaps one word in ten, like a five year old in the company of priests. Yet for how many years and how many times had she sensed in a tone, gesture, or the fleeting glance, messages that were supposed to be hidden? *‘video et taceo.’*

The whispering had stopped but an urgent sense of imminent peril sent her lurching to the door. The room breathed danger; her bed become a carriage to Hell.



“Majesty!”

She allowed herself to be led like a broken swan, her ladies clucking softly like shadowy chickens, smoothing her, stroking, draping robes about her bony frame. She stopped them abruptly and stood stark still, silhouetted in the silver of a star wrinkled window.

I remained vigilant, observing the dusky outline of the Queen, a dark, mottled shadow sprawled across two large cushions. Her sleep was restless, dreams clearly unpleasant, and she fidgeted and stirred, once waking up completely to stare at the star patterned sky before shifting herself into a more comfortable position.

Even when still, her figure subtly shifted and changed, resembling one moment that of a scrawny peacock, then fading into shadow. I watched as the moon struggled slowly from pane to pane, its dappled light playing across the polished oak floor like a fine, silver net.

In the hour before dawn, she awoke and stared at the floor in silence. She remained completely still.

Her ladies stood by, amongst them one keen eyed, more observant than the rest. This was the fourteenth day.



I was witness next to a most extra-ordinary group of men, who having examined the queen from head to toe, were congregated in a tight, conspiratorial group at the far corner of the room. They reminded me of insects, with their bulbous bodies and elongated legs. One, who resembled a bejewelled ladybird, was shaking his head in a doleful manner.

“She is stricken, diminished, shrunken in both face and body. And did you note her eyes, looking through you as though seeing faeries at play...”

“Demons rather, judging by her mewling and howling.”

The speaker, a praying mantis in black, with yellow face and matching teeth, spoke in the manner of a long-suffering parent to a fractious child in need of smacking. He stared at his more colourful rival.

“And what more could be expected in this age of preening gulls, consumed with sumptuousness, feastings and voluptuous attire? Dark angels stalk this land, bringing famine and temptation in their wake.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “Indeed I have heard it said that only recently a great lady was caught in buggery with a baboon, and later conceived by it. This is a time...” he shook his head and stared at each of his colleagues in turn, “... of covetousness, oppression, deceit.”

The one, who up until now had said nothing, brought his mouth midway between his two colleagues and whispered as if he feared for his head. “I was most proximate to Her Majesty. Her smell was rank, her breath like rotten wood.”

There was much grave nodding as if all had similarly benefited from the royal breath. Emboldened, the speaker continued. “The cause is to be found in her gullet. It is raw with corruption.”

The bejewelled doctor nodded. "Aye, she experiences great pains of the face and throat, dryness of the tongue, hoarseness of the voice."

"Then, our sovereign would sleep all the easier if her breathing could be eased, and most often it is the bitterest medicine that proves the strongest tool."

The sour faced beetle seemed to be hissing, whispering fiercely through clenched, yellow teeth. "A syrup made with the flesh of tortoises, snails, the lungs of diverse animals, frogs and crawfish, all boiled in scabrous and coltsfoot water, and for the taste, some sugar candy at the last perhaps."

He looked around, his eyes shifting from side to side before focusing on his antithesis. "She had quiet words with you, I noticed."

His rival smiled smugly and began fondling his moustache; "Yes; you'd left the room—examining her Majesty's piss pot I heard."

I sensed there was little love lost between these two men. Then he lowered his voice still further, forcing his listeners to bring their heads and moustaches in closer communion.

"She wet her lips as one afraid; then looked at me directly. I took her hand, in order to verify what we all suspect. It was dry, lifeless, like a toad long dead. But hot, very, very hot."

"Yes, but what were her words?" The jewelled physician was almost dancing in excitement.

"All the fabric of my reign, little by little is beginning to fail."

"Aye, she said much the same the night before," said his sour faced rival.

After that the whispering became faster and more intense so that it became hard to see who said what and to whom.

"But she will not take again to her bed; in that she is constant."

"For the first time in her life."

"My Lord Secretary made the mistake of saying she *must* go to bed and she turned on him like a viper: 'Little man, the word "*must*" is not to be used to princes. But ye know that I must die and that makes thee most presumptuous.'

“It was no presumption on his part. If she were sanguine, or even leaning to the choleric, a certain lack of sleep could be tolerated...”

“But the phlegmatic need at least nine hours of sleep”

“The melancholic even longer...”

“We are all agreed then, over this pernicious melancholy?”

They each gazed at the other and nodded, then settled on detail.

“You said her hands were hot.”

“Aye, hot and dry, but possessed of a most firm grip. She had a hold of my thumb I may tell you; hanging on to it like it were gold. I thought we were in for another bout of weeping. She was in a tearful mood, but instead she raised her face close to my ear and whispered as if reading my thoughts: ‘Aye, I should weep, if tears could wash away the horrors that afflict me. If you were in the habit of seeing such things in your bed as I do when in mine, you would not persuade me to go there.’ Then she groaned, as if my presence troubled her.”



There was much else that I witnessed but I shall let another, one of those attending the Queen, speak for her self. She was as a shadow, one moment drifting close to the patient, the next quietly observing the conversation of others. She was, in short, almost as discreet as myself. She left the room unobtrusively and I determined to have the N-Scribe follow, hoping it would sense her thoughts. There was intrigue and treachery here. If all else failed we might yet recoup on a good synaptic drama.

N-Scribe quickly proved his worth for it transpired within moments that this lady served two masters, one of whom could prove an embarrassment should he become aware of our presence.

Yes, I’m afraid that the magician, John Dee, still pursues vain dreams of regaining contact, of re-igniting his ‘angelic conversations,’ with us. He may sense, but has no way of

knowing that his purpose has already been fulfilled; with the gateway opened, he is little now but trouble.

Men like Dee are useful in welcoming us in but always they prove meddlesome or over ambitious. If Dee is to be dealt with, I trust it will be done with a little more finesse than Rasputin's demise. In any case, I digress.



The lady moved swiftly. In one hand she carried a small greasy stub of tallow, its flickering light and black sulphurous fumes making the dark oaken wainscoting sway back and forth like a tent in a storm. Her other hand held a small pewter jug.

She all but scurried through the dingy warren until she reached the rear of the house. He was waiting for her, as she knew he would be, a stolid shadow blocking her way. Unable to put down both candle and jug, she could do nothing as his arm snaked round her waist and pulled her to him; pleasure and annoyance vied in equal measure. She felt suddenly unnerved by the pleasure of helplessness and at the same time, irrationally, annoyed by her body's own responsive tremble, which she knew he sensed. She rested her head on his chest, allowing him the quick, obligatory fondle.

"I cannot tarry, my master is impatient. I'll be with you tonight," she whispered. He sensed her panic and reluctantly stayed his hand.

"Tonight then," he growled. "And let me know what comes to pass. Master Dee knows more secrets than is good for him."

She sighed uneasily and slipped past him to the far end of the dimly lit passage way. She could still sense his eyes on her as she opened her master's door.

She entered a room of deep shelves bursting with curling parchments, some scattered on a stone-flagged floor; a room dominated by a dark oaken table upon which were vials that glowed with richly coloured liquids and powders. Her eye was caught by a small window, high in the wall, which shed a

strange unearthly light upon an array of blue hued crystals and brass bound mirrors beneath.

A wizened man who had seen better days paused in his pacing.

“You have it then?” The voice was sharp.

“Yes, master, taken from the queen’s own pitcher.”

“Pass it here, girl. Pass it here.”

The old man poured it into a polished brass bowl hung over a charcoal fire. Into it, he sprinkled a handful of torn cinquefoil, and the two of them stared expectantly.

“How was the Queen? Not so frolicky and merry now, I’ll warrant.”

“All flesh is subject to mortality, master, but hers more so. The great Councillors of state have been summoned.”

“Hah! Court carrion the lot of them, waiting for her to die. But Cecil, is he here yet?”

She looked at him curiously, wondering not for the first time how much the crystal revealed. “Yes, why do you ask? He arrived as I was about to leave.”

“Did he have words with her?”

She smiled at his eagerness, and at the same time with relief at what he didn’t know.

“I stayed as long as I dared and saw as much as I could. Her Majesty was splayed amidst her cushions, but she received him most fervently. She took his hand in hers and wrung it hard; and all the time he was telling her how she lit the room with her radiance.”

Dee chuckled appreciatively. “Oh she’d like that. She’d like that. But she wouldn’t be fooled.”

“You’re right she wasn’t. At one point, she lifted her head, and regarded him for a time, like a cat that senses something in the long grass.”

“And...”

“Nothing. Melancholia once again took her by the throat. She started sighing; forty or more great bellowing sighs.”

“And you were counting of course.”

I noticed a quick smile as one acknowledging a superior wit.

"In between sighs, the queen was wringing his lordship's hands as though they were a pair of cow's udders. 'No, my lord, I am not well. I am not well. By day I'm plagued by physicians.' She pointed to three of them, posturing in the corner. They spoke loudly, as though Her Majesty had the brain of a cushion. 'Look, even now they fight over my sad, decaying carcass, whilst at night, demons quarrel for my soul.'"

"He pretended sympathy, did he? Hah! This is a fawning dog that hides honesty up his arse. He wants an early death and him the first to tell his Scottish master."

"And who is *our* master... Master?"

He looked at her sharply then turned to the bowl. "The dog with the biggest arse of all," he muttered. "And his infernal succubus, Madine."

The liquid, dark in the half-light, quivered momentarily and the first miniscule bubbling spiralled to the surface.

"Is it turning, girl? Is it turning?" She moved her head down until her nose was almost in the bowl.

"A dusky pink, I think, Master." Her voice, muffled in the steam, rose in excitement. "Becoming darker, like blood that's dried."

"Then the Queen must die and before the night is through... Yes, yes, girl, you can go."

As the door closed behind her, he stuffed his own nose into the still steaming bowl, the candle so close as to threaten his eyebrows. He smiled, grimly. Undoubtedly red.

His smile froze and he stooped even lower, jerking violently back as the tip of his nose skimmed scalding water

The liquid was clear, all trace of crimson gone.

Later that evening he stared again into the lukewarm water. Still clear. This shouldn't be . . . this shouldn't be," he muttered. "How can the queen live, and not live?"



For most of that night I made full use of her dreams, moulding them to suit our purpose. I thought I had been

careful, remembering full well the horror of Lenin's last days; the howling that never stopped; the sheer waste his brief incarnation as novelty represented.

The day that followed, it appeared that my worst fears were to be fulfilled. She stood, as in a coma, holding her finger continually to her mouth, her eyes open and fixed to the ground. Then, first in a whisper meant only for her self, the cataract burst.

"If lecherous goats, sharp scorpions or two faced dogs cannot be damned, why so should I?"

"You fear damnation? Then dissipate in software where you may wallow in eternal opulence." My voice is seductive.

"My Lord has made me, and shall His divine work decay? I do not need fables from the Father of Lies. I do not need this soft attire that you promise."

"What is it you fear?"

"You, hellions... monsters... vile, execrable creatures."

At this point a sudden paroxysm of weeping brought across her ladies, and she, lifting her white parchment face, railed at them for some time, uttering aloud what might have been mine alone to hear.

"I run to my death and all small pleasure is gone from me. Despair and death are my lot ... only thou, sweet Lord are above, and to thee I would rise."

Here she wildly stared around the room as if seeking the voice in her head, or else the sweet Lord she hoped would save her.

"But even now the devious foe so tempteth me with alternate visions of immortality that I would betray this temple of *Thy* divine spirit. Why doth the serpent coil about me thus, despising and yet so loath to let me go?"

"Oh my blackened soul, disease, death's constant courier hath summoned thee, and yet see how I yet hesitate..."

"There is no hesitating on Death or Judgement," I said in what I hoped was a suitably dry and sinister voice.

"Is this then my play's last Act... before the dark tears body from soul? Ah ladies, you say I shall sleep a space before I see that face all fear to love... If only I could be so sure."



"She seems almost resigned to her fate. You have done well Zara."

"Madine, you are back."

"We hope she finds our present mode a little less fearful."

I was caught up in a whirling vortex of gleaming motes, dancing particles of light, darker, more golden than the sun that splashed across the room.

"If she sees us at all," I said. "Her eyes are much decayed."

"And yet she still hopes in Christian resurrection."

"She is equally afraid of death, and damnation, hesitating between hope and despair. See, even now she is being led to her chamber."



Her ladies remained with her throughout that night, their commentary as much for their own ease as the Queen's:

"Still she will not sleep and yet she be not awake."

"Our sovereign is all but done; her sun fading yet still she is without contentment."

"Waiting on Death is not an easeful task."

"Her lips move. Did not our Good Archbishop remind her that she was soon to yield an account of her stewardship to the King of Kings? She is perhaps rehearsing her part."

"You are persuaded then?"

Madine spoke as she had done for most of that night, but the Queen, though all but broken, remained both spirited and hesitant to the last. Momentary acceptance followed immediately by sharp questioning that Madine had trouble avoiding.

"Poor death, for now I see thou canst not kill. One short sleep past, and I shall awake and Death shall die eternally. And

yet would my younger self not recoil in horror if it were to see what you promise me. Will I not be changed?"

"Forgive me, Majesty, would it not equally recoil in horror if it was to see what thou art now? All things change by degree, and all is an imperfect imitation of whatever may have been before."

"I, too, am familiar with Democritus, lady; but you speak of manifold copies and therein I foresee manifold problems. If I be made proliferate, each with unmeasured choice, how will it be that the same 'T', may be damned or saved in many different forms?"

They regarded her in something resembling embarrassed silence.

"You will see things differently in time."

Before there had been sympathy, but now I felt truly sorry for this woman who was to be exploited and merchandised; rehoused in neuro-museums from here to Alpha Centauri and beyond, endlessly cloned, packaged and distributed, catering to every kind of niche market that neuro-splicing and profit allowed. But sympathy, I knew, had no place in the heart of merchant adventurers. Too much had been invested; too much was at stake.

Madine's sonorous tones continued with marble implacability.

"You will leave this life in much the same way as you arrived, as data but with one crucial difference. A new-born learns to love its fleshy prison, but you will be released. Then you'll see your ailing flesh for what it is, a corset, a wearisome farthingale."

"A Spanish farthingale..." interjected an unseen, helpful voice.

"And when my flesh is stripped away, what will become of me...what I am? What I have been?"

"You travel light, in eternity. With immortality, memories that define you lose their meaning. Spitting at your sister, Mary say, or the sense of Dudley's sweet tongue, are but shadows of the mind...everything loses its meaning in time."

"You know much about me, madam! And yet you say there be no danger...even if I had a choice."

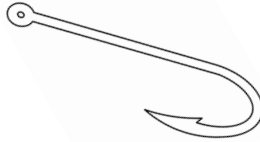
"You are a realist, Majesty. But let me assure you the sentient process continuously cross references neural integrities, seamlessly overlaying even the briefest quark-gluon irregularity."

"You speak like an alchemist, madam."

The Queen looked at us sharply, sensing rather than seeing the neuro-web's slow descent. *"video et taceo."*

Madine's laugh was not a pleasant one yet I cloaked the qualms that threatened both censure and perhaps my continued presence in the venture.

"You will see and say everything, your Majesty. And you will yield an account of your stewardship not to your King of Kings, but to any who'll pay for the privilege."





HENRY LARA

Henry Lara attended the University of Puerto Rico and graduated with a degree in business. After serving four years in the US Army, he moved to the area around Boston, Massachusetts, where he lives to this day. When not reading or writing, he spends his free time drinking lots of caffeine, eating way too much sugar, daydreaming and researching random facts.

THE KNIGHT AND THE DEMON. The lord of the land rushes to save his missing wife. Sworn to protect him, the warrior Alexios leads a band of knights as they fight to keep him alive. A trail of blood, death, and dark magic leads Alexios to the discovery of a terrible betrayal.

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The Knight and the Demon



Henry Lara

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He rode hard to escape his doom. Silent, invisible, a presence followed.

The young soldier sensed its approach, heard its promise of death echo in his mind. It would kill him, just as it killed the others.

Faster, he thought as he spurred his horse on. Even though he rode a hazardous trail, with only the moon to light his way, he risked a glance back. Nothing.

The trail made a couple bends ahead. He slowed down enough to take them without falling. As he did, he cursed the foreign land where he had come to die. He cursed its vast forests, which the heathen locals worshipped as “gods”. His soul longed for his homeland, his people, and his family. To die here, so far away...

I am sorr, father. He pushed the thought away. He had to live, if only a little longer, enough to warn the others.

They must know, for they were all in danger if not warned.

He heard it then; a faint beat of wings over the rumble of hooves hitting the ground. A wave of fear rolled over him, threatening to choke him, to knock him off the saddle.

No. Not yet. I have to tell them.

He was close. After the forest, a stretch of open field led to the main trail that went up to the castle. The night watch would see him then. Even if he died in front of the gates, his mission would be fulfilled. He would be seen. The others would know.

What if he could hide in the forest? He didn't finish that thought. There was no hiding from a being of the night. No, his only chance was to outrun it.

Please, he prayed. I must tell them. They must know about the lady.

The trail made one final turn. The trees thinned. He could

see the moon, the stars, and ahead in the distance, the lights of his lord's hold.

He bent low and gave his mount one final spur. The plains opened before his eyes.

Claws ripped him from the saddle. He watched in horror as he left the ground. Up and up he rose before the claws opened. The ground rose to meet him. A flash of light, then darkness.



He woke to a torrent of pain. His body was broken; he couldn't move.

Something moved and blocked his view of the stars. His body shook in terror as he recognized it. He screamed. Talons ripped his entrails, blood splashing his face.

By the time the sun came up hours later, there was nothing of him left.



Across a road next to a forest, nine knights and their squires rode in silence. The midmorning sun shone on mail armor, polished shields, and silver helmets. Wool surcoats displayed the bright coats of arms of western families on the knight's torsos. A light breeze made the black raven on a red standard flutter in the wind, the same breeze spreading the smell of death across the land.

Bodies littered the ground. They lay on the road, on the grass fields and mingled with their mounts' carcasses. One dozen cavalry and twice as many footmen, to a man, lay dead.

The knights stared at the carnage around them, their faces grim. Not even the ones of senior rank, veterans of many gruesome battles, could find words. Their young squires followed them, eyes wide in horror.

Alexios, former mercenary from the Eastern Realms, stopped his horse to look at a body. It lay on its back, the chest open from neck to groin. The remains of the mail armor it wore kept

its limbs together. Only rags—stained red by blood—remained of the white tabard over his armor.

He studied its face. The eyes were missing, but he recognized it. The design on the broken shield next to it mirrored the one on the flag under which they rode; a black raven on a field of red.

Sir Edric, Lord Oswald's eldest son.

The squire behind him spewed his last meal.

He felt sorry for him. At sixteen, he was of age. But the gruesome scene would not let him sleep for many a night. The kid would take the memory to his grave.

Alexios was the same age when he went to battle for the first time. He was twenty-five now, still a young man, but treated by his lord with the respect a veteran commanded.

"Caelin, you all right?" he asked when the young man recovered.

"The trees," the kid said.

Alexios searched the tree line, one hundred feet away from the road. At first he saw nothing. But then the splashes of white among the leaves betrayed the bodies. The branches of the ancient oaks held them up in macabre positions.

"This is no way for a man to die," one of the knights said. The others grunted in consent. A few rode toward the forest to take a closer look, their lances ready.

Alexios's attention shifted to his lord. At the center of the carnage, a carriage stood empty. Lord Oswald rode ahead and dismounted to examine it. Alexios walked his horse to join him. He kept his eyes alert for danger, a hand on the pommel of his sword.

The carriage belonged to Lord Oswald. His wife, the young and beautiful Lady Mildryth, favored it when she traveled. Last year, tragedy struck the young woman's family; her father and brother were murdered. It was her wish to travel west to see their tombs. Lord Oswald expected her back at the hold anytime now. With her escort dead on the ground, Alexios knew what to expect inside the carriage.

The smell of blood overwhelmed his nostrils. Inside the

carriage was what remained of the Lady's maids; the girl's mutilated bodies' lay everywhere.

Of the Lady herself, he could see no trace.

Alexios motioned Caelin to stop. The boy knew the girls. Better to spare him the sight. He dismounted and approached Lord Oswald.

"My Lord, please come," he said. "I found Sir Edric."

"Show him to me."

He led him on foot back to the body. Lord Oswald followed and then got down on one knee next to his son. Alexios stepped back and gave his lord room to mourn.

Someone approached. Alexios turned to Ian, his friend and fellow protector of Lord Oswald.

Ian stood six foot tall. He had the red hair and green eyes frequent among his people, and kept a long beard, a match for his long hair. Tattoos of runes and other symbols crisscrossed his forehead, arms, and the back of his hands.

In contrast, Alexios, like most men from the East, was not as tall, had black hair, and dark eyes. He kept his hair above shoulder level and his face shaved.

At first glance, the two men appeared very different. But the truth was that they had much in common. They were about the same age, and while they were trained and equipped to fight as cavalry, they were not knights.

When he met Lord Oswald, Alexios had been a soldier of fortune, the leader of an infantry company. Ian was a sergeant. Impressed by their skills and bravery, Lord Oswald befriended and recruited them in to the fellowship of men-at-arms that followed a noble everywhere. They had taken his offer and left the mercenary life.

Alexios grabbed Ian's arm. "Any signs of who did this?" he whispered.

"There are no signs of any men other than our own," the other replied.

He had expected as much. Alexios knew what those words meant. No signs of men. Many a dangerous creature made its home in the wild parts of these lands.

“Is there a creature that...” he started, but stopped when the former sergeant shook his head.

That left one explanation.

“I think something may have crossed over,” Ian said.

For the locals like Ian, the possibility of something dark and sinister being on the prowl for mortal blood was a part of life. Their tales spoke of beings from the Otherworld that crossed over to feast on the flesh of men. To Ian’s people these were not fireside tales. They were sacred knowledge, passed down from generation to generation, warnings of a time when the barriers between worlds were far thinner than today.

“I also found this,” the redheaded giant said. In his fist, he held a piece of fabric. Alexios recognized a scarf that had belonged to the Lady.

“What have you found?” their lord asked.

Lord Oswald stood now. Alexios studied his face. In his youth, the lord had blond hair. Now, strands of gray shot through it and his trimmed beard showed plenty of white too. But it was the eyes that those that met him remembered the most. A deep blue, like the sky on a summer day, they reflected intelligence and wisdom. Right now, they hid his thoughts. They gave no clue as to what was going on behind them.

Nobles don’t show their emotions in front of their vassals, Alexios thought.

“My Lord, we found a trail leading deep in to the forest.” Ian reported. “I found this on it.” Lord Oswald reached for the scarf and turned his back on them.

Alexios respected and admired Lord Oswald. A virtuous knight, a courageous leader, there was much to like about him.

The second son of an old family, he led one of the armies that restored peace and civilized what the West called the Outlands. With skillful diplomacy, and the proven skill of his sword, he stabilized the north regions. He gave and won assurances from the local chieftains, and his presence created a buffer between the other lords to the south and the local tribes.

The men in the trees returned. The others gathered around. None of them dared to break the silence.

Lord Oswald turned to face them.

“Lord, we are ready to search for the lady,” young Sir Dunstan said.

To Alexios, the young man was still a squire. He was just dressed as a knight.

“There are three-dozen armed men dead here,” Alexios said. He had no desire to listen to young blood foolishness. “We should gather greater forces to search the area. We don’t know what did this.”

Sir Dunstan’s eyes went wide. “But the lady is out there! We must save her. It’s part of the code we’re sworn to follow. Knights must protect women. Leaving the lady in danger would be breaking our vows!”

The Code. Leave it to someone just dubbed knight to quote the chivalry code.

“We are knights, sell-sword,” retorted Sir Aelric, one of the older knights. “Unlike you, we serve our lord out of loyalty and the bonds made by our fathers and their fathers before them. Do not dare to soil our honor suggesting we ignore our vows!”

Alexios’s hand gripped his sword’s hilt. Hard.

“Sir Aelric, this is not the time to act in a rash manner. I speak only with the safety of our lord in mind. Surely you see that rushing to our deaths will break the vows to keep our Lord safe?”

“Your words reek of cowardice!”

Alexios stepped forward. In the West, killing a noble meant death for anyone but another noble. But they were not in the West.

Before he could take another step a hand grabbed his shoulder.

“Aelric, I hope old age has not clouded your judgment,” Lord Oswald said. “There is not a man here that can beat Alexios. I can’t afford to lose another knight.”

Lord Oswald squeezed Alexios’s shoulder.

Sir Aelric bowed his head. “Yes, my lord,” he said.

Lord Oswald never chastened his vassals in front of others. Not a knight present missed the warning.

“Ian, you said there was a trail?”

“Yes my lord. A horse went in to the forest. It bore one rider, or perhaps two of light weight. I think it may have been Sir Edric’s horse.”

Alexios thought about this. Earlier today, a peasant returned Sir Edric’s horse saying his son found it on the fields. After assembling a search party, they set out at once. If Edric died here, he must have given his horse to someone else and told him to take the lady with him. “Mount up. We’ll follow this trail to wherever it takes us,” Lord Oswald ordered.

Glancing at the carnage around him, he turned to his knights. “Send one of your squires back. These men are to be taken care of as our customs demand.”

His eyes rested on his son’s body. “Take my son’s body back with you. He is to be prepared for burial.” Alexios considered Lord Oswald instructions. The shrewd commander that he knew never made mistakes.

Then again, the man just lost his eldest son and his wife. He wondered if his first mistake would be his last.

Could it be that we ride to our death? Alexios thought as he mounted. Not that it mattered. His lord gave him an order, and he’ll follow it.

He remembered the vow he took to protect Lord Oswald with his life. Maybe today would be the day that he honor that pledge. They fell into a single line and rode in to the forest. Ian led the way, followed by Alexios, Lord Oswald, and then the others.



No one spoke; the trees around them had a surreal quality. They stood on each side of the trail, silent guardians watching the intruders below.

Not a sound. An unnatural silence that plucked the men’s nerves settled in like a cloak. Their mounts became difficult, and only their riders’ urging kept them going forward.

They sense danger, Alexios thought. He could sense it too.

His skin tingled, as if something got underneath the clothes and armor. He felt eyes on him.

One look at the others told him they felt the same way. Some watched the trail ahead, while others searched the trees. He caught some who turned all the way in their saddles to glance back.

Up ahead, Ian stopped at a fork on the trail. He dismounted to examine the ground; nodded to himself, then stood.

“The rider took that trail. It leads out. But he left the lady here. She went the other way.”

Lord Oswald ordered them to follow the Lady’s trail.

The trees grew denser as they rode. Despite the clear skies, it darkened as they traveled further in; the thick canopy above blocked the sunlight. The tree branches grew ever lower, as the trail narrowed. Soon they had to stop.

“Leave one of your squires with the horses,” the Lord ordered.

The knights dismounted. They tied their horses and left their lances. In unspoken agreement, they drew swords and held their shields ready.

“Caelin,” called Alexios. “Guard the horses and our gear.”

The boy nodded, eyes wide, the sweat on his forehead betraying his fear.

Alexios laid a hand on his shoulder. “We’ll be back shortly,” he promised the younger man. At least some of us will, he hoped.

Lord Oswald nodded to Ian to take the lead. Alexios fell in step behind him.

The atmosphere of dread intensified. Something lurked at the end of the trail.

Ahead, it grew brighter. The trail ended at the edge of a large clearing. Alexios squinted against the light. Large stones stood scattered across the field, some as tall as a man, others twice that. There was no pattern to them that he could see. Instead, they formed a maze through the large clearing.

“What is this place?” he asked Ian, his voice low. “Did your people raise these?”

“No. These were here long before the tribes came east. Or so the tales say.”

“Barbarians!” Sir Aelric said. “You—”

“Listen!” Alexios ordered, cutting him off.

They paused. The sound of stone on stone pounded in the silence. It stopped for a moment, and then started again with renewed urgency. Lord Oswald gestured for the knights to move ahead. Ian and Alexios stayed close to their Lord.

The sound grew as they navigated the maze of standing stones. At intervals the giant rocks were so close that only two knights could walk abreast.

Alexios stole glances at their surface as he walked, noticing the faded signs of an unknown script. After a sharp turn they stood on what Alexios guessed would be the center of the maze.

“Lady!” one of the knights up front shouted.

Lady Mildryth lay on the ground, her ankle tied by rope to a heavy rock. She was in bad shape. Her dress hung in rags on her frail body, barely hiding the pale flesh beneath. She was barefooted, her feet cut and bloodied. Fresh scars on her back glistened as they bled. Her brown hair was a dirty mass that hid her face.

Alexios saw what caused the sound they followed here. The Lady struck repeatedly at the rope with a rock shard in an attempt to set herself free. Her swings missed and struck the rock more often than not.

She muttered as she swung at the rope. Alexios had to concentrate to hear her repeating “free me” like a mantra.

He sighed. She was in shock.

“Lady! Are you hurt?” Sir Dunstan asked.

The girl ignored him.

“Lady Mild—”

She turned to them, eyes open wide in horror.

“Fools,” she said, her voice hoarse. She dropped the shard and clutched her head. “It comes!” She cried in pain.

“Lady, we come to ta—”

“Run!” she yelled.

Something small and round sailed through the air and

landed in front of the Lord. Its contents splattered everywhere.

Alexios looked at the object and cursed the shades of the Otherworld. His squire's head lay in front of him.

Caelin! He thought he saved his life when he left him behind. Instead he killed him. A gush of wind and instinct took over; Alexios jumped back. A wet splash and the knight next to him dropped his sword and reached for his throat. Blood pumped out of his neck arteries. He dropped to the floor and convulsed.

So fast! Alexios had caught only a glimpse of the thing as it struck. It was big, that was all he could tell. But it moved like the wind.

How could a man fight such a thing? Their only chance was for some of them to distract it while Lord Oswald fled with Lady Mildryth.

Two of the squires drop their swords and ran.

"Cowards! Come back here!" Sir Aelric yelled.

"Stay close!" Lord Oswald commanded. "Leave them."

The boys made the turn that led back in to the maze and were lost from sight. Then the screaming started.

Alexios turned around and freed Lady Mildryth with a stroke of his sword. She grasped his surcoat. Her grip's strength surprised him. He stared at her despite himself. She didn't look like the spoiled princess he knew.

Her lips were bloody and cracked. Angry bruises covered the rest of her face. Even the stunning gray eyes that were her pride were bloodshot now.

"It wants to be free..."

Alexios stared at her without understanding.

"Run, please," she said. "It just wants me."

"What have you done, woman?"

Alexios stared at Lord Oswald. The anger in his voice surprised him. Before he had time to ponder it, the squires' cries stopped.

"It's coming!" Sir Aelric shouted.

The large bulk Alexios saw before shot in to the air from behind a monolith and landed at the edge of the clearing. It extended long wings, like a bat's, then it stretched to its full

height. It resembled a man only in that it had two legs and two arms. The limbs were long, tight with corded muscle, and ended in oversized claws that dripped fresh blood. Scales and skin covered its body. Its head was like a man's, but black horns protruded from its skull.

As it examined them with two pairs of eyes, it tilted its head sideways, like a dog.

"Bound demon," Ian said.

"What—" Alexios clamped his mouth shut.

The thing lunged. It struck a knight and sent him flying with a swipe of its claws. Alexios stepped in front of Lord Oswald to block the demon's path. When it struck him, the force of the blow broke his shield and sent him sprawling to the ground.

Fighting exploded all around. The blow Alexios had taken left him dazed. He shook his head to recover. When he did, Lord Oswald was on the ground, the body of one of the knights on top of him. Sir Aelric bent down to help while the others stood ready to defend them.

Sir Dunstan stood next to the Lady, but the creature appeared to have no interest in her. Ian lay on the ground, unmoving.

The fiend stood in front, its back to him. It held a knight up by the throat with one arm. With the other it snapped his neck.

Alexios lunged with his sword. The blade sunk deep. The creature turned and grasped his forearm.

A blast of pain engulfed Alexios's head and he screamed as he had never before.

The demon let go and the pain disappeared. It leaped in to the air and landed on top of a standing stone at the other side of the clearing, an impossible jump for anything mortal. It reached down, pulled the sword embedded on its ribs out and tossed it back to Alexios.

It sunk in the ground in front of him. The demon crouched and watched him.

Alexios got to his feet and then stared down at Ian. His friend was dead.

It was only then that he noticed the silence. Not the eerie

silence of the forest before, but a total lack of sound; as if everything in the world hushed at once.

Around him, wounded men cried in pain while those that still stood shouted at each other. He saw their lips move, but he could not hear a word.

“Free me!”

The voice startled him. It sounded neither male nor female. He could hear it clearly, as if the speaker stood next to him.

“Free me,” the voice repeated.

Alexios stared at the demon. Four eyes stared back at him.

Sir Dunstan said something to Lady Mildryth and grabbed her arm, but she pulled away from him.

“Free me!”

“Who sent you? Who’s your master?” she asked. Her voice was as clear to him as the other one. “Please,” she begged. “Who sent you after me?”

Sir Dunstan said something he could not hear.

“Can you hear it?” Alexios asked. The knight looked at him as if he just gone crazy. He turned, dropped his shield, and grabbed the Lady by her waist. She screamed and cursed but could not free herself.

The other knights closed ranks around Sir Dunstan.

“Bound!” Alexios glanced at Ian’s body. Bound demon, he thought. They had been Ian’s last words on this world.

“Free me!”

“You disobeyed me!” A different voice spoke. It was male, unrecognizable, but human.

“You were to kill her father and brother, then wait for her and kill her too. Instead you let her come here and killed everyone but her. Why?”

Alexios understood. The thing had a master, and their minds were linked. The demon had somehow linked him and the girl too.

Whoever he was, the demon’s master was not aware he was being listened to.

“Answer me!”

The fiend howled. It jumped to the ground and crouched, a

beast ready to strike.

“Stop,” the voice commanded.

Stop? He was here, one of them.

Alexios reached down and pulled his sword out. He studied the men that still stood. Only half of the knights and squires that rode remained alive.

The lady struggled against Sir Dunstan. For the first time since they found her she looked afraid. She understood too.

“Answer me!”

“The price,” the demon replied. It took a step forward.

The knights got ready. Alexios kept his back to it. He scanned the faces in front of him.

“The price?” the master asked.

“For bounding a demon,” the creature replied.

Alexios pondered all this.

“I...see,” the master said after a pause.

“Free me!”

“No. You will leave this world only when I tell you to do so.”

The creature howled in rage. Lady Mildryth freed herself and ran towards it.

“How do I free you?”

“Kill me.”

“Kill you?”

Alexios felt the strain on the creature’s will as it tried to hold off its master. It could not help itself. It was a slave, bound to obey the decrees of the one who brought it to this world.

“I am not of this world. Kill me. Set me free”

“Kill her! Now!”

“Lady step back!” Alexios yelled. He ran as fast as he could to save her.

He was too late. The demon lunged. It got to the girl before him. Her scream, magnified by the link they shared, thundered in Alexios’s head. He struck, a powerful blow that sank deep in to the creature’s shoulder. It bellowed but made no move to strike back. Instead it locked its gaze on his.

The knights attacked. The creature didn’t move or try to defend itself. It went down to its knees, its gaze still set on

Alexios.

“Free me.”

The voice sounded distant.

Alexios pulled his sword free. He took a step back and thrust with the last of his strength. The sword pierced the creature’s chest.

It dropped dead to the ground.

You are free now.

Alexios’s hearing returned. He watched as the knights sank their blades in to the corpse. Above their cries, he thought he heard a faint sigh.

Alexios stared at the Lady. She was dead. Rage surged through him. So many dead, and someone near was responsible for it all.

“Alexios.”

“Yes my Lord” he answered, his eyes still on the girl’s corpse. He looked at the knights. One of them was the creature’s master, he was sure. But it made no sense. None of them stood to gain from the deaths of Lady Mildryth, her father, brother, and Sir Edric.

No, he corrected himself. Edric’s death was not planned.

“My Lord, we failed you,” Sir Dunstan said.

“You did your duty, Sir Dunstan. Your Lord has need of you,” Lord Oswald replied, “and all of his vassals, more than ever.”

Alexios sighed. Lord Oswald’s voice was calmed, the same as always. In one year, the man had lost his father-in-law, brother-in-law, his eldest son, and his wife.

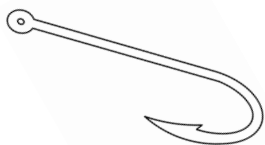
A tragedy.

“Alexios, you fought with honor.”

He found that the others looked at him with admiration and newfound respect. He ignored them. His eyes focused on his Lord’s. The gaze he was so familiar with looked different. Instead of calm, in control, it looked cold. The blue orbs he knew so well hid nothing, for there was nothing to hide.

Alexios stared at the man in front of him as if he saw him for the first time.

The eyes of a demon stared back.





ANDY LOVE

Andy Love was born, raised and lives in Scotland, where he works as a Project Control Officer in Edinburgh. He lives with his wife and two cats. He has two children and three (almost four) grandchildren.

Andy has published his first book titled Short Shocks Volume I and aims for Short Shocks II to be out in December this year.

THE CRAWLER A majority of people have worked beside someone they just can't stand. Most people would like more money, recognition or even respect in the workplace. George craved promotion more than anything and hated everyone else in his life. What would he do to be top dog? His life changing decision made everyone happier.

What lengths would you go to get promotion, what you deserve? Beware of what you wish for.

<http://Stores.Lulu.Com/AndyLove>



The Crawler

Andy Love

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George Cyril Pendleton stood in front of the bathroom mirror. His drab striped pajamas hung loosely on his wire-framed body and the blackness of the winter morning pressed against the frosted glass. George was in the middle of his morning ritual of blackhead spotting. He paused for a second, contemplating how he could best impress his bosses today, what projects he could get his name on without getting his hands dirty; just to have the recognition he thought he deserved.

He scratched his beard which, incidentally, was there only to obscure his lack of chin and pallid complexion. He'd sometimes wished for a beard when he attended school. It would have helped hide the severe acne over which he had been relentlessly teased. Being called "Pizza face" hurt back then. He had also heard himself being referred to as the "Chinless wonder of weirdness," more times than he cared to count.

"Hell, I wish I could get promotion. This lower management thing is driving me nuts. I would do anything to get to the top."

George moved his face to the left, then right, checking his nose for any squeezable spots.

"Hell, I'd sell my Grandmother for a raise. Hell's teeth, I'd even sell my soul for a promotion."

He paused in remembrance, then confirmed in his mind. *'That twice in the dark derelict building doesn't count as selling myself. Those five big guys forced me at knifepoint. I just won't take shortcuts from work again.'* He pushed out his chest and breathed deep.

"I don't need to *act* like I'm an executive hard-nose; I'm already there. Nothing scares me and nothing phases me. I can take it all."

As George continued to massage his ego, the overhead light flickered, like a pulsating dance floor in the wee hours. The light above the vanity mirror flashed on and off. The overheard light emitted a buzzing sound, then popped. George just about

wet his pants and a little girly squeal escaped his lips. He immediately put his hand over his mouth in case anyone heard his moment of weakness.



The light on the mirror dimmed to a dull glow. George's face appeared to change in the mirror. He could see his beard disappear and a chin developing. His eyes bulged, then changed colour. This isn't me, he thought.

George took a sharp intake of breath when the face in the mirror spoke in a gravelly voice, "so you would do anything for a promotion, George? Why should you stop at just being higher management, why not go for the top? I can help you."

George stared at the face in the mirror, blinked his eyes a few times in disbelief and then quickly turned around to surprise whoever was behind him. He was more shocked to find the room bathed in an eerie yellow glow. He was the only human there, with his now weak and feeble mind and his pyjamas trouser leg visibly shaking. When he turned back to the mirror, the face was still there, clearer and grinning.

"Come on George, you know it makes sense to let me help you. I can make all your dreams come true. What have you to lose? What do you say, George?"

"I don't need your help to get on. I'm great at what I do."

The face laughed hard, flexing the mirror and distorting its features.

"George. I can't help if you're not honest with yourself. You know you're incompetent in all you try to do, that's why you use other people, to stop you looking a complete arse. The only thing you're half decent at is lying."

There was a small silence as George thought, then the face urged a little more.

"Come on George. Just confirm my help. I'll get what I deserve, you'll get what you deserve and I won't bug you, ever again."

George pursed his lips. He thought this was all a trick or in his mind. “Yeah. OK, let’s go for it.”

In a flash, everything returned to normal. He wondered if what he saw and said had really happened.

He brushed off this abnormal morning and rushed out the door to his work. He dreaded having someone on the bus fall asleep next to him, then drooling on his shoulder. Common people really turned his stomach.



Kevin Watson was in the office kitchen, reflecting on why he had received a bad appraisal in the last reporting year, even though it was because of him that George completed projects on time. When his boss entered the kitchen, Kevin confronted him about this exploitation. George had replied that he couldn’t give Kevin credit for the work he had done, as he wasn’t meant to be *tampering* with that type of work at his lower grade. He also *implied* he was doing Kevin a favour by giving him better quality work.

George constantly complained to Kevin, that the boy needed a haircut; get his curly, shoulder length blonde hairs chopped off and joining *the world* of men. He should be portraying the appropriate office image, instead of parading around the office with hair like a girl.

Kevin couldn’t contain his frustration any longer. “Why did you mark my report down this year, when I finished your work for you?”

“You didn’t really expect me to credit a plebe with that calibre of work, did you? The best I can do is put you forward for more intensive training in that field of work. Have a look through the available courses and we’ll see if there’s anything suitable. Remember, it has to be free.”

George raised his hand, turned his palm upward and deliberately called Kevin by the wrong name, in a lame attempt to distract him from the confrontation.

“It’s the best I can offer, Karl.”

George opened the kitchen door. “Keep up the good work. We can only try harder the next time.”

George smiled as the door closed behind him.

Kevin bared his teeth and bit down on his lip. “The name’s Kevin, you slimy moron. What an arse.”

Fiona breezed into the kitchen at that moment and saw the look of anger on Kevin’s face.

“What’s the matter Kev, who’s been upsetting my pet poodle?”

Kevin’s grimace turned into a smile.

“That’s better, Kev. Now, tell Auntie Fiona what’s wrong?”

Fiona continued with her morning creation of herbal tea, as Kevin told her of his conversation with George.



Before Kevin and Fiona returned from the kitchen, George had used his bad TV-show-inspired chat up lines and inept body language on Leila Montgomery. She was the only woman in the office he had a chance of bedding, as he was incapable of achieving this in a social environment. Leila was not the best catch, as she smelled of old chip fat, had crumpled and dirty clothes and wore a brace to support her visibly rotten teeth. The girl tried to cover her rancid odour with cheap perfume, which created a more pungent smell that assaulted everyone’s senses. She had an irritating habit of trying to scratch through her layers of clothing, some people would say excessively. Most of the staff that worked beside Leila strongly disagreed when she wanted to open a window, as the draft often blew her stench around the room. The summer was almost unbearable.

Leila was happy and feeling like a young girl again, because George had showed her some interest. This made it easy for him to ask her back to his apartment for a meal and drinks, which she agreed to eagerly.



Next morning, George awoke with a hangover and the sickeningly stale stench of sweat from Leila lying next to him. He shoved her arm.

“Hey, you need to get out of here. Now.”

Leila looked at the bedside clock and groaned, then turned to face George. “It’s only six; we don’t start ‘till nine.”

George thought he was about to puke over the bed, as her breath hit his face. “You’re leaving now. I can’t be seen with you in public. I’m in the middle of a promotion board and you’re a lower grade than me.” George turned around and stuffed his nose into the pillow, sucking in the floral smell.

“But George, I thought we could go in to work together?”

Once the dirty woman’s smell had left his nostrils, he took his face out the pillow. “Get up, get dressed and get the hell out.”

Leila felt the anger swell up inside her as she quickly got dressed. The body lice within her clothes felt her warmth getting closer and became excited to be so close to feeding. The others had been transported on to George’s bed and their new host.

“You know something, George. I thought you were a nice guy; misunderstood, but you’re just a total creep.”

She picked up the hairbrush from the tallboy and aggressively attacked her hair, embedding grey and brown lice into the brush.

“Yeah, well. You won’t be the first or last to find that out. Life’s a bitch. Now, put that down and leave.”

Leila slammed the apartment door hard and George squeezed his eyes shut, as if it would make it quieter for his neighbours. A grin spread across his face, as he scratched his hairy chest and sang. “Another one bites the dust.”



On getting out of bed, George decided that only wearing boxer shorts to bed was not warm enough in winter. He shivered and checked the room thermostat, which was just below body temperature. He cranked up the heat and put his

dressing gown on. His bare feet smacked a little on the tiles of the bathroom floor. His face in the mirror seemed to have turned grey-white.

George opened his robe to discover that his whole body was a corpse colour. When he pressed his cheek, the skin almost felt spongy to the touch. He frowned deeply. "Well, that's not right now. Is it, George?"

He showered in water that seemed to jag his skin with every drop. While he was getting dressed and fastening the top button on his shirt, he noticed the collar was two sizes too large. "Hell, I'm losing weight again." He looked at his watch. "Shit, I'm going to be late." George grabbed the hairbrush and raked it across his head a few times and left his apartment.



George's morning at work was filled with meetings, which he couldn't concentrate on. Every drink of coffee made his stomach turn over even more. He passed on breakfast and lunch and in the afternoon, had already been sick three times. He sat at his desk; his eyes becoming increasingly yellow and heavy. His stiff body kept shifting inside his clothing., He had to focus in order not to scratch, but the sensation became too irresistible. He started rubbing his sides and shoulders vigorously. Ten minutes later, he was scratching uncontrollably at his biceps and forearms.

Fiona looked over at George. Leila and Kevin also peered over the top of their monitors, curious at the grunting sounds. Fiona leaned on her desk. "Are you having a problem there, George?"

"Get on with your work." He replied, then looked up and saw everyone examining his behaviour. "All of you. Work."

He grabbed both arms of the chair with his hands and raised himself up. George felt the sliding sensation of material on his hips, as his trousers dropped to his knees. Kevin smirked and Leila laughed loudly as both hid behind their monitors, but Fiona was disgusted.

“Not on, George. I’m taking this to personnel. I’m also informing them of your lack of hygiene.” She leaned closer and whispered. “You smell, really bad.”

George pulled up his trousers and tightened the belt. “I don’t feel too good” He lifted his jacket from the stand and left the office. He could hear the laughter all the way down the corridor.



That night, before George went to bed, he prodded the hard and crusty skin on his arm. He applied too much pressure and burst the skin. The top of his finger disappeared into his arm, and a creamy-textured yellow pus leaked out. He cleaned up the mess, bandaged what he thought just a simple boil and slept.

His sleep was tormented by visions of working with a team of insects, with one goal. No leaders, any one part willing to die for the common goal of warmth, blood, food and always ready to breed.

What a nightmare for George; no promotion, no looking after himself, no using other people to bolster himself up from the lower class morons. No discussions or lies required, just the uncontrollable instinct to feed on blood and multiply for the forty days of a very short life. He would then have an unnoticed death, where his carcass was washed away in a soapy torrent, but the rest of your kind cling on, to live, feed and breed. The remaining throng would excite an itching frenzy on their host. What an existence for George: the rest of the mass don’t know or care who you are, were, or even when you died. You end up an unknown and insignificant piece of dust.



The Saturday post clattered through the letterbox, but the Sunday newspaper also lay at the door. For George, the time seemed to drift by in another dimension. He awoke to a moist

bed and a massive shell-like thing surrounding him, broken into four rough pieces. He noticed the scattered pile of newspapers and mail behind the front door, but he could hear the rush of workday traffic outside.

He looked at the clock, 09:47; panic set in his head: He must get ready for work. *I need some food. I need to shower for work. I crave food.* His insatiable appetite grew rapidly, but not for bacon and eggs.

George motioned to run into the bathroom for a quick wash to save time. His hips didn't quite work the way he intended. He forced himself forward and heard his feet clicking on the floorboards. They were hard and had hooks jutting from the sides. When he reached the bathroom and looked in the mirror, he didn't see his own face that he'd always hated. A mouth, protruding a long tube and gelatinous saliva dripping from it, replaced George's face.

He lifted his hands and found only hard casings. He panicked and his mind raced. He smashed the hard casings against the bathroom sink, cracking open to reveal two very sharp and twitching claws.

George took a while to find clothing that would conceal his metamorphosis. He used the front door to push his normal life of mail and newspapers to one side and left for work.



He arrived late this Monday morning and unaware that he'd been off work the last six days. George stood outside the office building and looked up at the sky. The clouds seem to rest on the top floor where he worked. The automatic doors opened silently, as if they knew he was trying to approach with stealth. No one seemed to notice him dressed in the long coat, a hat, a scarf wrapped around his disfigured face and his hands concealed under the cuff of his coat.

George saw all the warm-blooded humans begging to be fed upon, as he crossed the marble floor in the foyer. He fought the urge to rip off his restricting garb and fall down onto the floor

and crawl on his new hooked appendages. He tried to resist and make it to the elevator, but his body still craved food. He knew he must feed, now.

He reached the lift and stooped toward the buttons, extended a claw and clicked the up button. The irritating ting sound announced the approach of the metal box.

The thing shuffled into the lift and headed up toward the top floor, standing behind an unsuspecting woman. His juices flowed quicker and his body ached for her warm fluid. He extended his mouth through the scarf, sucked onto the back of the woman's neck and injected his anticoagulant saliva. He sucked her blood into his now primitive digestive tract and began filling his body with rich, warm blood. The being excreted dark red stinking waste all over the floor of the lift as he fed. The woman's neck and face swelled into a red balloon shape, ready to burst. When the doors opened, there were a lot of people waiting to go down and five women started screaming. Three security guards rush in and beat George off his bloody and swollen food.

His appetite raged as he moved toward the security men. His four claw-like arms burst from his coat and buttons flew in all directions. The security guards jumped on George and beat him with batons. He screeched as his hardened body cracked. The compression in his being was released and his body exploded, spraying everybody with partially liquefied human organs and pieces of bug crust. Billions of lice now infested the interior of the lift; from floor, to three feet up the walls. One of the security guards vomited into the white and red mass and the lice begin to search for their first feast.

The last thing that George could see and hear was his boss Jonathan and Fiona his colleague, at the front of the crowd forming around the opening of the lift. Jonathan noticed Fiona standing beside him and nodding toward George's remains.

"Hi, Fiona. That's pretty disgusting, eh? Have you seen or heard from George Pendleton this last week? This absence is just not on, ill or not. He hasn't even phoned in. He should know better and follow the rules for absence."

“No, I’ve not seen him for a while. The last I saw, he looked a little bugged out about something. Maybe you should ask Leila. You know about George and Leila? She’s pregnant and there seems to be a problem. I’m sure George knows. Maybe that’s why we can’t find him? Why are *you* looking for him?”

“Don’t be so damned nosey, Fiona.” Jonathan smiled and leaned closer to Fiona. “Between you and me, his promotion came through and I’d like to hand him the official letter and congratulate him personally. Remember, this goes no further, as nobody else is meant to know until it’s released officially.”

“As it’s off the record, Jonathan.”

Fiona deliberately brushed her ample breasts against Jonathan’s arm and looked up into his eyes.

“How on Earth does someone like him get promotion? He has zero personality and doesn’t get on with any staff. He’s not what we call a team player; he doesn’t join in with everyone else. He’s an arse and everyone, except management, hates him.”

“Better watch what you’re saying, Fiona. You never know who’s listening. Anyway, what makes you think that management like him? He knows what to say and do to the right person, at the right time, that’s all. Simple really.”

Fiona’s eyebrows raised in surprise as she stood back from Jonathan.

“Anyway, Fiona. I think you should be getting back to work and I’ll just leave this on his desk.”

Fiona looked at Jonathan from top to bottom, admiring his dress sense and physique, determining if he was hot enough to pursue a beneficial relationship. She thought how simple the equation was: Jon would get Fiona, she would get a new work position, more pay and maybe end up in management. Everyone would win and besides; it was only business.

When Fiona’s eyes reached his shoes she noticed the little white bugs crawling on the floor toward them, their disgusting little feelers probing the air for warm clothes to cling to.

“Yuk, there’s bugs on the floor.”

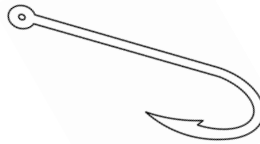
Fiona forced her body against Jonathan and grasped his arms tightly.

“I hope this promotion stops George kissing so much ass from now on.”

“Yeah, well... he feels it’s the only way to get on. It’s not against the law to kiss ass. It should be, but it’s not.”



George’s mind faded with the satisfying thought that he finally got what he deserved.





GWENDOLYN MCINTYRE

Gwendolyn McIntyre was born in the United Kingdom but has lived most of her life either in the USA or traveling the globe, trying to do good works.

Gwen is a writer, editor, educator and business woman who lives with her partner Melissa, their ninety-five pound Staffordshire Bull Terrier 'other child', and a host of other animals and creatures... both real and imaginary.

A ROOM WITH A VIEW In a tale of confusion, Moren Glick awakes to find himself somewhere he neither knows nor understands, yet strives to survive and master not just the place, but himself.

A SONG TO REMEMBER A young musician and her aunt struggle to understand more than simply the notes on a musical score. Will they find their way?

<http://britishimport.livejournal.com>

<http://medicinewoman.wordpress.com>

<http://www.goodreads.com/drgwen>



A Room with a View

Gwendolyn McIntyre

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ONE

A loud metallic clang awoke him. Moren tried to stand and nearly fell as he found himself sprawled at the bottom of a large metallic sphere. As his boots came down on the curved surface, he heard another clang, and realized the noise that awoke him must have been of his own making.

Looking around to take stock of the situation, he saw light coming from the top, but could hear nothing save the beat of his own heart.

"Hello," he yelled out, and was immediately sorry. Covering his ears as his voice rang within the sphere, he squatted and waited for what seemed an interminable amount of time, but when he removed his hands the echo was a memory.

Thank the gods.

Remaining where he was, Moren took stock of his possessions. He still had his clothing, water bottle, boots, rations pack, the emergency medical kit and oddly, his survival knife. Gone was his sidearm, locator beacon and other survival gear, his flight jacket and... and the last letter from Adeline. Removing it from his shirt pocket, he opened it. Enclosed was a picture of their eight-year-old twins, Stacy and John. Both had blonde hair and blue-green eyes, and looked more like their mother, although their daughter's manners and actions seemed more like his.

Adel had written about the children taking part in their school pageant the previous month. The picture showed John dressed as a toy soldier and Stacey as a ballerina. He read the letter again and smiled. The Nutcracker. They'd both been so excited about it the last time he'd spoken with them, and then...

Moren stopped and drew a blank. What had happened after that? He fingered his flight suit. He must have gone on yet

another mission, but what had happened? How and why had he wound up in this strange place?

He stood and tried to walk, but there was nothing to get a grip on and all his effort accomplished was that he slipped down to the bottom of the sphere and his abrupt landing produced a clanging sound so loud he was forced to once again cover his ears.

On the bottom of his prison, he sat upright and opened his canteen to discover that the water inside was fresh and cool. The first sip made him realize he was hungry, so he sorted through the contents of his rations pack for a survival bar.

Sipping sparingly and nibbling, he looked up toward the lights and wondered what was next and how he was going to get himself out of this place and home to his family. If only he could remember what had happened prior to winding up in here.

Had they dropped him in here, or was it more likely that there was a hidden hatch somewhere? As he looked about, he saw that each of the ‘corners’ of the sphere was a flat disc, so perhaps one or more of them opened to the outside. Perhaps even the one he was sitting on?

Moren pulled the survival knife from its sheath and poked around the edges of the disk with no results. He replaced the knife and sat back wondering what to do next, but a sudden and severe headache stopped him. Fumbling with the emergency kit, he managed to find a bottle of pain medication. He took two with a sip of water, laid back and closed his eyes.



TEN

How many days he'd been in here Moren couldn't tell. All attempts to mark anything, even on his clothing or skin, with the knife had failed.

One morning he awoke to discover the knife gone. A bright light shone into his eyes. Even keeping them closed didn't help, so he rolled over and rested his face against the curved wall. The sound of his labored breathing echoed louder within the

sphere, but the light neither went out nor dimmed. Finally he rolled onto his side and curled up in a fetal position, his eyes closed and his head on his chest.

When he awoke again he looked about and noted changes. He was still dressed the same, still had his equipment, and the walls had not changed, but he felt a slight rocking motion. He stood up slowly, took a step and was rewarded by a movement of the sphere.

Moren stepped to the place where the top of the sphere had been, but the source of light had retreated. Muttering to himself, he tried to make sense of this strange form of captivity. Then he froze. *Hamster ball?*

The sudden realization sent a weakness to his legs, He moved until one of the circular ends of the sphere was underfoot and sat, drew a deep breath and tried to calm his mind.

I will not let them treat me like a pet rodent, he decided, and reached into his rations pack. With the sudden urge to eat he almost missed that he still had a full compliment of rations, emergency supplies and drinking water. He paused to peer at a loose wrapper at the bottom of the pack. *How many days have I been eating from this pack and yet my supplies are intact?*

The thought triggered another painful headache. He'd transferred the pill bottle to his flight suit the day before, so he reached for it but the pocket was empty.

In the emergency kit, he found it stowed where it belonged. It too contained a full count of pills, but the pain was becoming so intense that he filed the problem aside and tried to focus on opening the bottle. His hand slipped and the container flew, the small yellow and white discs bouncing everywhere, to slide back down around him.

Moren picked up two of the tablets and swallowed them with a gulp of water from his canteen, then he collected the remainder of the small discs into the bottle and returned it to the medical kit. After stowing the medical bag away, he laid back, closed his eyes, and waited for the pain to subside so that he could think clearly.

A few mornings later, or at least it seemed to him to be morning because it was when the light flooded strongly into his cell, Moren pondered the events of the past week.

Had it been a week?

He'd discovered a suture kit in the bottom pouch of the medical bag. He had sewn a small knot into the sleeve of his suit and snipped the thread, intending to sew one knot for each day of captivity.

The problem was, when he awoke the following morning there was no knot, and the suture kit looked as if it had never been opened. He'd tried it again and again, but each day it seemed as if the day before had not happened.

He came to the conclusion that what was happening was not possible. He was either losing his mind or... or what?

If I were home I'd be exercising and training each day. Why stop here and give *them* the satisfaction?

Having decided, Moren stood, drew a breath and began to walk, at first slowly, but gradually picking up speed until he broke into a run. After a while he felt exhaustion creeping up on him and slowed down, but even as he settled to a walk he felt better for having done it. His mind felt clearer than it had since he'd been trapped in here, and the haze hanging over him seemed to be lifting. He stopped, squatted, then sat and reached for his ration pack. He took out one of the food bars and chewed his way slowly to the end.



ONE-HUNDRED

Moren Glick awoke feeling as if his bed were made of air; so soft and yet firm enough to support his weight. Then the light flooded in and his eyes sprang open.

He was still within a sphere, but this one was decidedly different from the one he'd been in. The walls seemed soft and padded, yet when he stood the surface felt firm. Soft light bled in all around him, illuminating the interior of the room.

What passed through his conscious thoughts he did not

know, but as he stood surveying this new place he smiled. *So now we try the comfy chair.* Then he laughed.

This time there was no echo; this time it seemed as if the walls sucked up his laughter. It vanished barely before he could hear it. He tried belching, then forced flatulence, but neither could be heard longer than a blink of the eye.

The exercise brought up another interesting question. Assuming he had been eating and drinking, what happened to his wastewater and food byproducts? He unzipped his suit and tried to urinate but nothing happened. He tried to squat and defecate, but again to no avail.

Re-clothing himself, he paused to drink some water, and then began to walk. As before, the sphere seemed to rotate, but as this one had no obvious ‘corners’, he was hard pressed to know if he was moving in a circle or if he was altering the arc of his passage.

He slowed to a stop and tried to make an impression in the soft white surface, but nothing would deform it. He poured water on it, but the wall absorbed it and left no moisture in its surface. Why? He didn’t know, but Moren decided to bathe.

Stripping off his clothing, he wet himself with one of his water packs and used the small bar of soap in the medical kit to lather himself. He rinsed off the suds with another water pack.

Because he had no towel, he lay on the pliant white surface and rolled around. As he stood and redressed he felt better, but didn’t know why.

Moren sat, took a ration bar and ate. When he was done with it, he sipped some water and lay back, closed his eyes and tried to remember.



ONE-THOUSAND

How many days passed he could not say, but one morning as the light flooded in around him, Moren Glick opened his eyes and he was laying on a bed in the middle of a square room. His boots were on the floor next to the bed and his kit and clothing

hung neatly from a brass post at the end of it.

He sat up and reached for his clothing even as he examined the room; no doors and no windows, yet the air seemed to move more freely in this room than it had in the spheres.

He walked the perimeter of the room, seeking the source of the airflow, but again this space confounded him.

As an experiment he said, "Hello? Is anyone there?"

This time there was neither an echo nor did the sound seem abruptly cut off. He leaned against the walls, pressing with as much force as he could, but nothing gave way, and yet it seemed as if the walls were made of different matter than the sphere.

Walking over to where his kit hung from the end of the bed, Moren took out a food bar. Not sure why he was doing it, he peeled off the wrapper and stepped over to one of the walls.

With the food bar, he drew pictures of windows and an old fashioned door, the kind with a doorknob on it. The images remained, even as he ate the remainder of the bar.

He returned to the bed, donned his boots, gathered his kit, stood and walked to the wall where he'd drawn the door. Smiling, he reached for the knob.

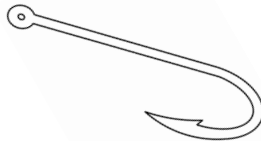


ONE-THOUSAND AND ONE

"Command, this is Recovery Ship Micas. We've rescued the escape capsule in time to prevent it crashing into the star. They've depressurized the unit and extracted the survivor. The medical officers expect the Colonel to live, but..."

The voice and image of the fleet medical doctor interrupted the commander. "One hundred and six days in orbit around a failing star in an escape capsule with a faulty stasis unit? I think your optimism is showing, Stacey."

"Speak for yourself, brother dear."





A Song to Remember

Gwendolyn McIntyre

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The bow, coursing against the strings of the battered, ancient violin produced the most unpleasant of tones that, save possibly the noise made by fingernails on a chalkboard, were only slightly more harmonious than a barrel full of angry, wet cats.

The fumbling refrain halted; replaced by a voice raised in outrage. "Horrid, horrid, horrid!"

The anger in the voice caught Tracy's attention. She rose from her desk, scattering what had been a neat stack of scored manuscript paper and hurried down the hallway to the door of the music room. "Something wrong with the music," she snarled at the child; pausing in startled alarm at her own reaction.

It was unfair to consider her niece a child, for Nora was already fourteen. Although not a beauty like her mother, her agile mind and fingers usually made the old instrument sound, while not like a Stradivarius, a close approximation.

Nora looked up at her aunt, her fingers tightening on the neck of the violin. "I cannot get the fingering right. My clumsy fat hands won't move fast enough."

Violin and bow alike shook as if at any moment they would devolve into fragments.

After a few gentle words from her aunt, Nora relaxed her hold on the instrument and laid it into its case.

Tracy was thankful that the girl had the sense not to destroy a five century-old instrument, not when her talented hands could make it sing like a choir of angels.

That Nora was angry was evident in the way she spat out, "It's not supposed to sound like that."

"It won't; if you keep practicing."

"How can you know that?"

There were many different ways she could have answered, but the one she wanted to give she could not. Instead, she

offered, "Because I helped score this piece."

She walked over and sat next to Nora. "Your fingers are neither fat nor clumsy. Show me where you're having a problem."

Nora picked up her instrument. Although she'd stopped only moments earlier, the girl took time to check, listen to and feel the tuning of the violin before nodding her readiness.

Slowing down the tempo helped, but one measure repeating in each of the following fourteen bars required a level of dexterity that it seemed Nora might never attain. These scores were Elaine's works. *But Nora had never before struggled to play one of them.*

Tracy's memories took her back to the time after her sister and daughter first came from the old country to live with her. Nora would often be sound asleep in a blanket-covered basket as she and Elaine worked out the orchestrations.

Tracy was still, after all the years since her sister was lost to them, working on completing the orchestrations. The collection consisted of over one hundred pieces.

This particular one, when played as her sister had, produced in the listener a sense of near euphoria. She eyed the score, sat down at the piano and played the chord.

The dissonance was electrifying, and Tracy almost jammed the pedal stop to make it end.

What it produced, she realized, was anger.

No wonder Nora was upset. Tracy peered at the score, trying to remember its sound when Elaine had played it. Starring at the penciled score, she noticed something odd about the notes. They were written in a hand other than her sister's.

Someone had tampered with the piece. *Why?* "Have you loaned this to anyone?" She turned to look at the girl.

Her niece shook her head. "I've never taken it from the house. Only my tutor has seen it."

Would he, Tracy wondered.

Ezra, a virtuoso artist now retired, only took on *special* students that had been referred to him. Nora soon became his pride and joy. The old man had even arranged for her audition

at the London Conservatory. This was to have been her audition piece, but now it was useless, unless... A memory flashed through her mind. *The room*. How and why could she have possibly forgotten it?

With only a quick word for her niece, Tracy hurried back up the hall to her office, closing and locking the door before stepping over to the bookshelf in the corner. She closed her eyes and willed herself to remember.

It had been years since she stood in this exact spot, her eyes on a specific object.

Opening her eyes, she focused and hummed the short arpeggio that would open the protection her sister had placed on this special place. That done, she stepped forward and quickly pressed a sequence of small rectangular pegs in the wood trim around the edge of the bookcase before stepping back.

A hidden doorway opened to an empty room. *Empty?*

She stared in disbelief. The shelves behind the panel were empty, the notebooks gone. *How?* How had anyone entered their home unnoticed, snuck past wards set to protect against even the worst of *them*.

Who had done this? Why? To keep one song from being played?

The other pieces in the collection were transcribed and scored. Copies had been stored in the vaults of different banks around the world.

This piece had been the last, the collection's *pièce de résistance*.
Why?

She crossed her office and returned to the music room where she found Nora sitting at the piano, staring at the score.

The girl looked up. "This makes me angry."

"That someone would ruin the score on purpose?"

Nora shook her head. "Well yes, that too, but it's the notes. They made me angry when I tried to play them, and again when you played them on the piano."

Tracy nodded. "I had the same feeling. This piece should make you feel euphoric; almost as if you could fly or sing with the angels."

A thought stopped her. No, she realized with a clarity that made her reel for the shock of discovery. *It could make you sing better than the angels. It could, in fact, make angels cry.*

Another sudden thought came unbidden. *Could euphoria kill angels? Had her sister known that this song was a declaration of war against them?*

Something in that thought brought back a different set of memories. They were memories of a flight through dark woods, of living in fear, and of being taken, *by them*. Tracy knew that only an angel could have done the impossible. Hadn't they done so when they helped her and Nora after Elaine's senseless death?

As she recalled how the angels protected them, another memory surfaced; the feeling of euphoria that had gone through her when the two year old girl child had begun singing in pure, natural tones. Tracy's sister had listened to the notes and then played them on the venerable violin.

As long suppressed memories played in her mind, she felt magic quickening in her blood and bone. She reached out and took her niece's hand. The angel's magic that had protected them from remembering what they were and what had happened was being banished. *Protected by angels? Not likely.*

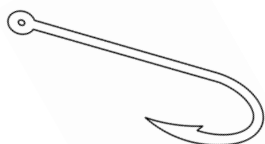
They had killed her sister to prevent the music from being played. Tracy had changed the score around Nora's startling notes to keep the secret from them. But they had killed the wrong ones, and in doing so had left behind the seeds of their own destruction.

She reached for her pencil and the score.

Nora smiled, then sang loudly and clearly those perfect whole tones.

For her sister and all the other "fae" that had been murdered by the winged devils, there would be a reckoning.

It would be a song to remember.





MINNIE ESTELLE MILLER

Minnie Estelle Miller presently resides in Chicago, Illinois, USA. She retired in 1999 from her last full time job with the Office of the Mayor of San Francisco, California as special assistant to his press secretary. For forty years, home was anywhere she hung her hat: London, Paris, Jamaica and many cities in the United States.

She started writing seriously in 1995. CATHARSIS was her first book and THE SEDUCTION OF MR. BRADLEY her second. WHISPERS FROM THE MIRROR, LUCIEN: PRINCE OF DARKNESS and BLUE LADY RISING are pending manuscripts.

RECONSTRUCTING EMILY. Emily Kincaid, a feisty, energetic senior, wants to go back to work. She has been out of the work force for five years. Nothing in her work history equals the world she steps into—*TV Station Six, Chicago*. The place is life in perpetual motion. She reasons that the work will come easy with a little practice. She is somewhat right; however, she has no way of knowing the embarrassing situations that will accompany the tiny paycheck. Emily is also confronted with an unexpected happening that she can barely believe.

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Reconstructing Emily

Minnie Estelle Miller

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Emily joined the crowd of businesspeople walking down the long corridor to their various offices. She was lost in private thought, heard her mother say, “You can do this, Baby.” She had searched her closet and found a black business suit and white shirt enclosed in a clothing bag. She even found a pair of high heel shoes she hadn’t worn in years.

The nervous woman entered the television studio’s secured area. She thought, *We’ve been through this many times over the years and can handle it as well. Shoulders back, head high and show that warm smile.* Still, her nerves had been in a bunch since learning she had been hired, even though in a permanent part-time position. It was a miracle that a woman sixty-seven-years-old was even considered for a job anywhere other than McDonald’s selling burgers or demonstrating food products in a supermarket. When she entered the lobby, her senses were besieged with ten-foot-tall pictures in glowing color of anchors, shows and promotions, which streamed the history of *TV Station Six, Chicago*.

Okay! This is it, girlfriend. Your first step into TV kingdom. Smile, you are on camera. She walked up to the ornate security desk. “Good morning. My name is Emily Kincaid, a new employee.”

A woman dressed in a uniform blue suit and a serious facial expression said, “Yes Ma’am. We know.”

‘Ma’am?’ She chided herself. *Stop it, girlfriend, don’t go there. You can’t escape aging.*

“Mitzy here,” the desk person said motioning to a short, round woman, “will take you inside and show you to your desk.” Mitzy smiled and shook her hand.

The security person escorted her to doors of glass encased in high-gloss silver frames and instructed her to punch in her computer code to open the door to the inner sanctum—only

employees and security knew their code. The new employee had to prove that she indeed had an assigned code.

Emily stepped through the double doors into the world of cameras, lights, hundreds of computers and busy staff in five-by-six foot cubicles. Privacy was only for the titled. And their offices were just a few feet larger, but their reward was windows to the outside world. The station buzzed with live monitors and telephones—life in perpetual motion.

Oh, my! Technology beyond my understanding, that's for sure. And these people have various titles and assignments I'll have to learn. Momma, tell me again I'll be all right. Dead or alive, Emily knew she would need all the help she could get.

Before she could finish her thoughts, Mitzi had stopped at her workspace and waited for her to settle down. Emily stared at the remarkable phenomenon, could think of nothing in her work history that equaled this. Mitzi smiled understanding her excitement, wished her luck and moved on to her other duties.



“Now what? What do I do now? Slow down girlfriend. Need a pen and paper and check out the phone lines on the directory. Ohmygod, five lines! I have to answer all five lines! Stop talking to yourself. People will think you’re a nutty old woman.”

In reality, there were only four that required her immediate attention; the fifth was a personal line for her and desk-partner Dorothy Ross. Emily wrote down the main and extension numbers, knowing it would take forever to memorize them. *This aging brain hasn't been active in five years, she thought. And where's the staff directory? There must be one around here somewhere. And what's all this stuff?* she thought, fumbling through the workbaskets on the desk. Emily took time to determine the priorities for the responsibilities of the desk she was to command. Order was very important; it kept her balanced and her mind from wondering all over the place. First, she had to figure out the phone situation because its constant ringing was

about to drive her to the lady's restroom screaming. She thought, *It would be a calamity for an employee to be in the restroom screaming and waving her new wig around. For sure, it would make the six o'clock news.*

Dorothy Ross, hired in the same capacity, worked the second half of the day. She was three years younger and about the same height and size as Emily. The two women had met during indoctrination and were walked through all floors occupied by *TV Station Six, Chicago*. They agreed on the shifts with Emily taking the early morning. They at least knew what each other looked like. That was all. The rest was yet to come.

Supervisor Sylvia St. John appeared shortly to give Emily additional information about her responsibilities. She would have to repeat this later when Dorothy arrived. She said, "Marlin, when he returns from vacation Monday, will log the both of you into the confidential computer system and teach you how to search the news. The majority of your calls will be questions about broadcasts and some...ur...unpleasant comments you'll learn to handle with respect to the caller. Get the idea?"

"I think so. You mean some folks will curse and scream?"

"Well, it won't be directed at you personally, but yes they want to drop their anger or disapproval of a story on someone and you being the first available ear will be the recipient."

Emily didn't say it aloud but gave a long, silent hum.

St. John continued. "The reporters and anchors will not answer your phone lines. They have their own private numbers. You are *Audience Services*. The reason we hired you and Dorothy is that you are mature individuals and know how to handle most situations."

Emily raised an eyebrow. "You mean there's no receptionist?"

"That's correct," St. John said with a precise stare.

A light went off in Emily's head. *Now I get it. Let the older people handle the time consuming, unnecessary stuff. It keeps the viewers satisfied that they're able to talk to a real person and complain. Not to mention that our salary won't bust the budget. Seniors are happy to get*

out of the house, I am. There's no one at home--no husband, haven't seen him since our divorce ten years ago, no children or pets. What the hell! I'm grateful for the supplemental income.

From her desk, Emily saw eyes darting back and forth, but none resting on her for long. They were about their business, yet she thought, *News people automatically react to change. It was their business. Maybe they're wondering if I'll return on Monday? I'm sure they know the havoc that goes on at this desk. After a couple of days chasing phone calls, she knew the answer. Hell, they're glad I'm here so they can ignore these damn phones that ring like never-ending hiccups.*



When Marlin Martin walked into the studio the following Monday, Emily didn't know his face or office—she had only been on the job two days, not even enough time to win friends and influence people. Marlin went to his office and put away his coat, checked his voice mail and came straight to Emily's desk. She had received no warnings about Mr. Martin, but understood from her supervisor that he was responsible for hiring and training many of the support staff, but not her and Dorothy. They were hired under a different budget and answered only to Sylvia St. John, whose office was on the fourth floor.

On their first meeting, Emily and Marlin flew into each other. He was winning. The man was over six feet tall with seniority. She was new and five-feet-two. There was more to come. Marlin approached her nearing the end of her duty. "You are Emily Kincaid, I presume." He spoke looking down on her as she sat in a too small secretarial chair.

"And you must be Marlin Martin, the one who will teach us the station computer system, I presume." She thought, *Back at ya, Mister! I can give as well as you.* She stood and gave him her hand. His handshake was so limp she only just felt it. Several staff watched the introduction with curiosity. They knew Martin well—he was not an easy person to abide.

"We'll get together first thing tomorrow. When does your day start?"

"I'm here at a quarter to eight and done by one." She replied promptly and gazed into his eyes as best as a short person could.

"I'm in at nine. Have your desk-partner here also. I'll see you then." Martin walked away without further conversation or even a nasty goodbye. All Emily could say was "Huh!" She prepared to give her seat over to Dorothy Ross, due at one.

The desk-partners talked and Emily filled her in on the events of the day.

Dorothy asked, "Well, how did it go?"

"Meaning?"

"Your training session with Marlin," she said, a bit confused at the older woman's attitude.

"Ha, we never got around to it. Mr. Martin is a trip and I'm trying to keep my cool. Good luck with your first meeting. I'm outta here." She grabbed her purse, looked back at Marlin's office and glimpsed his face half exposed behind the computer monitor. "Yeah," she whispered, "I'll be back, Mister," and left for home.



Tuesday morning, true to his word, Marlin Martin arrived at nine. He swung the door wide and strolled in wearing a full-length black leather coat that flapped with each step, and a matching baseball cap. He bowed his head to those close enough to greet him, except Emily and Dorothy. St. John agreed that they be trained together to reduce Mr. Martin's time away from his work.

Emily turned to Dorothy and said, "Okay, so I get that he's important and cool, which, I suppose could translate into handsome. But the man needs an attitude adjustment." Dorothy shrugged but made no comment. She wasn't sure what had transpired between the two while she wasn't in the office. And they were co-workers not friends.

Marlin was not a young man, nor old. You couldn't tell his age looking at his tight body and bald head. But he obviously wasn't receiving retirement benefits as Emily was, not at the salary whispered by jealous staff.

St. John had told the ladies that if Marlin didn't get back to them soon to seek him out in office number eight. Emily took the initiative. She peeked into the office and there sat Mr. Martin. *So, that's what he does. Hides behind his computer telling folks he's programming special programs. Oh well, here we go again. Just calm down, girlfriend this is a job, you receive a real paycheck. Just do it!*

Emily eased up to his desk. He acted as if his monitor had his full attention. But she knew better. He couldn't help but see her standing, waiting for recognition even though the monitor was between them. She was wider and taller and he was taller, even while seated.

For a moment, she was silent out of respect for his territory and surveyed the surroundings. His amenities were a step above the regular office furniture and the computer looked to be the newest model. Shelves stretched the entire length of one wall and held a photograph of a young couple and another of Marlin and a man with authority written across his face. They both wore expensive-looking casual clothes. The background was green grass leading her to conclude that it was some sort of country club. Awards for something or other were positioned with pride on the shelves. She looked at his picture and then at him. She knew the man was no slouch; his taste was obvious. He was well acclimated to his space. Emily could almost hear his unspoken words. "This is my space, tread with care."

Coming back to why she was there and getting a bit pissed that he was ignoring her, she thought, *Mama always said my mouth overloaded my butt. Gotta be on my best behavior, but he's trying me.* She spoke. "Mr. Martin."

"Yes," he responded curtly, eyes still locked on the computer monitor.

"I'm Emily. I work the *Audience Services* desk."

"I heard," he said still gazing into his monitor.

“Sylvia St. John instructed us to have your national program installed on our computer.” She waited again.

“Sorry, was in the middle of a formula and couldn’t stop.” Then he gazed at her. “I assume you’ve been cleared by security.” He spoke with a raised eyebrow that further annoyed Emily.

Now that’s a phony apology if I’ve ever heard one. What the hell is his problem? Why else would I be here? “Yes, I’ve been cleared,” she flung back.

Marlin jumped up from his desk so fast it frightened her. She backed up. He rounded his desk, rushed by her and went straight to her cubical. When she caught up with his long legs, he was sitting at her computer, working his long fingers over the keyboard. And Dorothy stood beside him looking lost. Emily retrieved two chairs from empty cubicles and created a circle around the man.

The lessons began on an uncomfortable note. It was obvious that he didn’t want to grant them time to learn because he moved through the instructions too fast for new students. He set both up with passwords and directions on how to find archived news stories. Most of their phone calls were questions about past broadcasts. They had to be able to answer them as fast as feasible and move on to the next caller. After an hour and nearing lunchtime, Emily thanked the man with as much patience as she could muster. He left.

Dorothy was confused again, this time by his attitude toward Emily. “What’s going on between you two?” she asked Emily as both prepared to leave the office. They had been told to sit through the session together and leave at mid-day.

“Your guess is as good as mine. I haven’t done anything or said anything derogatory to him. I don’t know what his problem is, nor if he even has a problem. Maybe he doesn’t like teaching new employees. Who the hell knows?”



Just when Emily thought she had avoided any more confrontations with Mr. Martin, he was back, aloof and unsympathetic. “What’re you doing?” he asked in a rough voice.

“Printing my document.” She was trying to print an eight-by-fourteen spread sheet. She gazed at him with indignation and thought, *Is he questioning my abilities? I’ve worked in offices and used equipment for years. I know what I’m doing. I will **not** be pushed around by anyone.*

“You’re locking up the printer. Other people have documents in the Queue more urgent than yours. Cancel your document and clear this printer.” He turned and walked back to his office.

“Damn! I guess that’s an order,” she mumbled and gazed after him for an angry half second. Emily decided that since she didn’t know his proper title, she had better shut her mouth. Chagrined, she returned to her desk but couldn’t help taking a sneak peek in his direction. She whispered, “Who is that tall, baldheaded man any way? Theo Kojak? The tough New York City policeman whose catchphrase was ‘Who loves ya, baby?’? Bet he won’t say that to me.” She had to laugh at her silly remarks. Emily learned later that each section had an assigned printer that accommodated several people. Moreover, newsroom staff had first priority. Her work was further down on the scale of importance.

When Dorothy arrived, Emily warned her to watch out for Kojak. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’ve just branded him an angry policeman.”

“It’s obvious that you and Marlin have a personal problem with each other, but what can you do about it, tell the supervisor he doesn’t like you? That he performs his duties minus a smile? I don’t know, girlfriend. You’d better get it together. He could be influential in getting you fired if you keep up this fighting.” Dorothy shook her head, put her purse away and sat at the computer.

Emily understood that her desk-partner showed no empathy toward her. She rolled her eyes, gathered her belongings and left for the day. Nevertheless, Dorothy’s words stuck with her.



Going forward, Emily and Marlin gave wide berth to each other. Yet, silent, probing glances passed between them. He made it a point to pass her desk in a roundabout way to his office, which wasn't necessary. He didn't have to walk down that particular isle. He offered a hello; nothing more. Their conversations, if any, were about business. She got it that he was a professional and began to give him that respect. She was now aware that staff knew him well and he knew their families, a further indication of his reputation. And Dorothy's words were still in her subconscious. Her job at the station was the luck-of-the-draw.

Marlin Martin became ill, passed out in his office and was taken to the hospital by ambulance. When he didn't return to work after two weeks, staff began visiting in pairs of two. No one explained his illness although she was curious. Emily didn't feel she had a right to be in his business. Yet, she asked if she could go with them to visit. While she wasn't a close friend, she had become a friendly staff member. Most thought nothing of her visiting Marlin in the hospital except Dorothy.

"Emily, are you aware that Marlin is married?"

"Yeah. What does that have to do with visiting a sick friend? Are you going?"

"No I'm not. Watch your step, girlfriend," Dorothy said and turned to the computer.

"Why, Dorothy? I'm not going to the hospital to screw the man. There you go again, trying to make something out of nothing." Dorothy threw a guilty smirk at Emily and went back to work.

Emily raised her hands in vexation. "Sorry I mentioned it. I'm out of here."



Marlin returned to the office a month later, a bit weak and ashen. Many members of staff gathered in his small office to welcome him back. Some shook hands and some hugged him. They were big on hugging in the office and as a result, Emily didn't feel too uncomfortable when he greeted her with a hug. Surprised and disconcerted, she wondered, *Is he calling a truce?*

"Hi, Marlin, glad to see you doing better and back to work," she said, a bit embarrassed.

Although the crowd was still milling around and reading his many get-well cards tacked to his bulletin board, he hugged her and whispered in her ear, "Thank you for coming." She didn't miss that his eyes made known his gratitude.

Those eyes...the eyes that first showed me fire are now gentle. They're reaching out to me and I don't understand why. Emily wondered what others thought about their new friendship. She thought, *Oh my, I only visited the sick.*



Marlin appeared to be functioning well enough doing his job, however, at a slower pace. He was like a bird with clipped wings, couldn't seem to rise, just hopped from place to place.

As months passed, Marlin's attitude toward Emily began to change. He no longer spoke to her with anger on his face. He often made silent observations as if drawing a picture of her in his mind. Once, during a slow period in the newsroom, he stopped by a reporter's space across from Emily's workstation. Marlin sat facing her yet conversed with the reporter and Emily watched him in her peripheral vision. They pretended not to see each other.

He's making me nervous. It's been some years since any man has looked at me more than twice. He's exceeded the number. Must admit, however, it's a bit exciting, even sensual that the man finds me...interesting. I'm older than he is, and there are many beautiful, young ladies at the station looking for stardom who will flirt with any one to get the camera's attention. Then there is the other situation.

She overheard Marlin tell the reporter, "Just checking to see

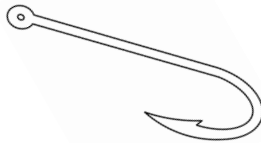
how things are going.”

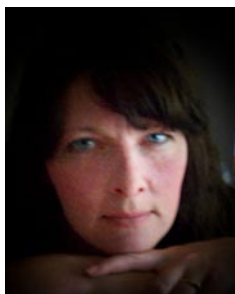
Emily wasn't listening in on their conversation, but happened to hear that part. Because he rose to leave, she thought maybe...he might stop and speak. He gazed in her direction and kept walking. Her feathers fell, but she understood. They had a silent understanding that both were off limits. *Off limits, yes, that's it.*



Six months later, Emily came to work and staff were huddled in a circle speaking in low tones. Not wanting to intrude, she moved on to her desk, brought up her computer and, as usual, checked the in-house messages. She read the following from the vice president of news.

I'M VERY SORRY TO INFORM STAFF THAT WE'VE RECEIVED WORD THAT MARLIN MARTIN PASSED OVER-NIGHT. WE DON'T HAVE MANY DETAILS OTHER THAN HE DIED ALONE IN HIS APARTMENT. PLEASE KEEP MARLIN'S FAMILY IN YOUR THOUGHTS AND PRAYERS.





RENEE MILLER

Born in Ontario, raised in the beautiful but small village of Tweed, writing for me was a hobby, when I had time. (We all know how rare that is when you have children.) My favourite authors range from Dr. Seuss to Stephen King and everything in between. Writing became a passion and an obsession when I took a friend's advice and turned my hobby into my dream.

As a stay at home mother of three children, running a small daycare, sometimes my house resembles a zoo more than the relaxing environment I dreamt of when I decided to quit the nine-to-five insanity. Add to that craziness, two dogs, 1 cat, 1 ferret, and a man whose sense of humor is more bent than my own and sometimes I wonder why I'm not medicated. But seriously, I wouldn't change a thing.

THE FINE PRINT. Have you ever wanted something so desperately you'd give anything to have it? Angie has, and now she must pay the price.

LONELY. Too often lovers forget about the person lying next to them. Assuming they'll always be there, they stop trying and slowly they drift apart, further and further, until one day, they are no more than familiar strangers.

Carly feels forgotten and unwanted, until she betrays her husband's love to scratch the itch he won't satisfy.

<http://www.rjmiller.weebly.com>

The Fine Print



Renee Miller

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Stomach aching, head swimming, she retches one more time. Body convulsing, her eyes feel as though they might pop out of her face. Angie focuses on breathing, so hard to breathe. It must be all of it. God, how much more could there be?

She rests her cheek on the cold porcelain and closes her eyes. What is happening to her? Why is she so sick? Two weeks is far too long for a simple flu.

The phone rings, but Angie can't move. Too weak to do more than curse at the noise, she crawls to the bedroom and collapses at the end of the bed. Reaching up, she pulls the comforter down to wrap her body in it. Then, lying down on the soft but scratchy blue carpet, Angie closes her eyes. Drifting, afraid to fall into blissful oblivion, she struggles to figure out what could be wrong with her.

It began as a mild headache, before the dreams. For two weeks, Angie dreamed of the same man night after night—gray eyes staring into her soul and a full mouth whispering words she couldn't make out.

At first she dismissed it as fever, but that was gone and she still dreamed of him. Rolling on her back Angie stares up at the ceiling. A thin strip of light runs across it. Closed drapes, allow just the sliver of sunshine through; the source of the light that had become so painful only a short time ago. The thought of opening the curtains makes her cringe.

The doorbell rings. She pulls the comforter over her head. She doesn't want to see anyone. No one cares anyway. Only Sandra visited. Sandra, someone she's known a few months. They met when Sandra started working at Matthews & Kline, in the office next to hers. Sad that the only person who cares to check on her is someone she barely knows.

Sandra comes every day. Angie doesn't care how Sandra

knows she needs help. Angie is relieved that someone remembers her.

The doorbell rings again. If it's Sandra, she should use her key. She asked for it last week when she brought soup and cleaned the bathroom. Angie had never given out her key before, but something about Sandra made her trust the woman. Sandra cares about her. Angie closes her eyes tight, willing whoever it is to leave her alone, to stop ringing the bell.

"Angie?" Sandra's voice. "Angie, are you all right?"

She sighs, knowing Sandra won't leave unless she is convinced Angie isn't dying. The past few days Sandra stayed all-night, coming to her side when Angie tossed and turned and cried out in her sleep.

At first Angie didn't want company. She can't remember the last time she showered, her black hair falling in matted strings around her face. Angie can smell her own rotten breath, but imagining the toothbrush against her teeth—like a jackhammer pounding the fillings out of her mouth—makes Angie want to cry; she doesn't like anyone seeing her like this.

The door to the bedroom opens, light spills in from the hallway.

"Close it please," Angie mutters, wincing at her own voice. "Please?"

"Oh, sorry hon. Where are you?" Sandra steps into the room and peers over the bed. "Why are you on the floor?"

"Too far to the bed," Angie cringes at the ache from the sound of their voices. She wishes Sandra would go away, but she doesn't want to be alone either.

"Sweetie, you need to go to the doctor," Sandra says, kneeling beside her.

Hands on her hair make her shrink. Angie wants to push her away but she hasn't the strength to even argue. "Went already; three times," she murmurs. Angie has made the agonizing trip to several doctors, and now she worries they think she is making herself sick.

The last visit, three days ago, resulted in a psych consult. Hardly encouraging.

"Nothing wrong with me."

"We could try a different hospital,"

"No, just want to die."

Sandra gasps.

Why does she care? It's not like they were best friends before this. During her first visit, she asked Sandra why Mr. Kline wasn't more concerned, why didn't he call and demand a doctor's note.

Sandra said she had taken care of it, told him she was checking on Angie and that she was sick. Angie stopped wondering after that.

"Any more dreams, love?"

The woman keeps calling her *honey* and *love*. Why? It's silly.

"I don't know," Angie rolls over and opens one eye. Earlier, she dared to glance in the mirror, to regret it at once. A gray face stared back. A face where her once attractive green eyes showed pale and red rimmed.

Angie had lost weight. Her cheeks appeared sunken and the skin on her neck flabby. She looked more like an eighty year old woman than a young, vibrant thirty something.

"You mean you don't remember?"

"I don't know," she repeats. Sandra is obsessed with Angie's dreams. She wants to know everything: what the man said, did, and how he looked.

Angie indulged her at first, now she is weary of it; too exhausted to care about why she dreams. She only cares to figure out what is wrong with her.

A sigh and a vanilla-scented breeze. Sandra moves about the room, straightening things and making too much noise. She goes into the bathroom and Angie smiles at the sound of Sandra's indrawn breath. Angie knows the bathroom looks as if something terrible happened in there, like somebody died.

Towels strewn about the floor, toilet splattered with vomit and blood dried on the tub where she fell and hit her head the night before. It hadn't hurt. Maybe it had and she couldn't remember. She'd been angry at her clumsiness, and then the sight of her blood had sent her into renewed retching.

“What happened in here?” Sandra’s voice calls, too loud again. “Honey you’ve got to be more careful.”

Toilet flushing, God, that’s an awful sound. Then water running. Cleaning the tub?

Sandra mutters as she cleans up the mess and Angie wishes she’d just leave her alone. When she’d met Sandra, Angie had been jealous of a beautiful woman, tall and lean, with a beauty-queen smile and long lustrous blond hair. She wondered how someone so attractive could also be blessed with enough brains to manage stocks and bonds. But Sandra had proven she was capable and intelligent. She had won Angie over with coffee and doughnuts in the mornings and gossiping about coworkers over lunch.

Angie wants the woman out of her house. A strange itch in her belly makes her sit up. It spreads up toward her breasts and to her neck. It’s inside, impossible to get at, and Angie wants to crawl out of her skin to be rid of it.

She sweats, yet she is so cold. Her mouth waters and she squirms again to the bathroom. Sandra examines the tub, as though it holds the secret to life. Angie brushes Sandra’s leg in her slow crawl to the toilet. She retches, but nothing comes out; there is nothing in there. It must be over. If there’s nothing left to come out then it should stop soon.

Sandra pulls Angie’s hair back and strokes her head. It feels like a rake plowing across her scalp. “Please,” Angie gasps. “Don’t touch me.”

“I’m sorry, I forgot.” Sandra moves away. Angie leans on the toilet, now smelling of lemon that burns her nose, and her eyes water.

Sandra talks in the bedroom. On the phone? Who is she calling?

Angie pulls herself away from the toilet and tries to stand. The room spins and she gives up. Instead she slithers back to the bedroom. Sandra is no longer talking.

“Who did you call?” Angie has only a whisper left in her throat. It’s aching and raw, as if a thousand bees set up house inside.

"No one, sweetie, why?"

"I heard you,"

"Oh dear, you really need some rest," Sandra's hands under her arms; her nails feel like talons on Angie's sensitive skin.

She flinches but allows Sandra to help her into bed. It feels much nicer than the itchy carpet.

"Now close your eyes, I'm sure you're over the worst of it. I'm going to make you more soup."

Angie obeys, happy to block out the world and drift to sleep. If only Sandra would forget the soup and just leave. The woman bangs pots in the little kitchen. Soup making isn't a noisy endeavor. Is Sandra trying to bother her? She doesn't wait for an answer to her question but drifts off into the sweet, quiet darkness of her subconscious.

A noise and Angie opens her eyes. A shadow stands by the window; a man, but she knows it's a dream. She did not open her eyes and he is not really there.

"You look better today," a nice masculine voice.

Even if the man is just a dream, he's crazy. Better compared to what? A corpse? Obviously her dream-self needs as much reassurance as her real self. "Thank you," she mutters.

He moves toward the bed, the dim light dancing about his features. She knows them well, has seen them many times now. She wonders where she's seen his face before the dreams, but then decides she is so used to seeing it that she thinks it's familiar.

"It is time," he whispers, stroking her cheek.

She knows it's a dream because his touch soothes her. If she were awake it would only cause her pain.

"Are you ready?"

"Ready for what? Am I dying, are you an angel to take me away?"

She chuckles at herself. If he were an angel, she'd gladly go to his heaven.

"No, not an angel." He smiles. His face shows no lines. "You are not dreaming Angie; it's time to join us."

"Us?" She is confused.

He leans close to her, his breath cold on her cheek. She looks up and his eyes are no longer gray but white, no color at all in the centers.

A bubble of fear bursts in her belly.

Us.

Sandra is in the room. Angie turns. She must be dreaming. Sandra's eyes are also white and her hair no longer blond but black. Yes, that has to be it. Sandra has been here so much, now Angie dreams about her too.

"Luke, my love." Sandra smiles at the man. "I have missed you."

"And I you."

Angie turns back to the man; he smiles at Sandra, his teeth long and white. What is happening?

"I don't understand," Angie struggles to sit up, again the room spins and she must lie down. Her dream is becoming a nightmare, one that feels too real.

"Please, don't hurt me."

It seems the right thing to say.

"Hurt you? Never." The man brushes a strand of hair from her face. "Relax; you've lost far too much blood to be moving about like this."

Blood? She has lost lots of other fluids, but not blood. Only when she hit her head, but that was hardly enough to harm her.

She turns to Sandra who is now next to her bed. Why is her hair black? It's just a dream. Angie closes her eyes and opens them, trying to wake up. They are still in the room.

"She is frightened love," Sandra takes her hand.

Angie notices how cold her skin is. Why hasn't she noticed this before?

"We must not frighten her."

"I'm already scared." Angie pulls her hand away. "What is going on? Am I dying?"

"Sort of," the man called Luke sits on the bed, but it doesn't dip with his weight, as though he floats above it. "Your body must die, so you can do what you've been chosen to do."

"Are you God?"

Angie knows it's a foolish question, but his laughter stings. She frowns and he takes her hand in his. Angie looks down. His nails are long and black.

"No, I am not God. Even the being you call God is not the only god. Brilliant idea on His part, to imply He is the only one. Humans are so easily led."

The itch flares in Angie's belly again; it crawls up to her neck and saliva pools in her mouth. "I'm going to throw up," she struggles to sit but he pushes her gently back down.

"It will pass," his hand on her belly, she feels its coolness through her nightshirt. The itch fades, to be replaced by a flutter.

"Who are you?"

"I like the name Luke, though I have gone by many others. It's time for me to take over my rightful place. Time to overthrow this grand God of yours."

"You can't overthrow God," Angie laughs, though it sounds pathetic to her ears.

This is a joke, it must be. Sandra must be a crazed lunatic out to destroy her for some reason. She's doped her or something. When Angie awakens, Sandra will have stolen her purse or some other stupid trinket like that.

"I used to be God." Luke's hand clenches into a fist and presses into her belly. Angie gasps and he looks down at her. "He stole my place and claimed the power, but he is nothing. He likes to toy with you, to make you work for his favor. I will never be so cruel. I will grant the wishes of my faithful. I will not let my children suffer to see the light. I will let them live freely to do as they please. Imagine a world where nothing is sinful and everything possible."

"That would be chaos," Angie whispered.

"Exactly my pet," Luke's gaze finds Sandra's and Angie watches them exchange secret smiles. "Now it is time, if you please Sandra; you may begin."

Angie turns her gaze to Sandra, who now holds a long knife. Panic rises and Angie knows she must move but she is so weak. How will she fight them?

“Please don’t.”

“I must.”

Sandra brings the knife to Angie’s throat; its blade is cold and sharp against her tender skin. “You will thank me on the other side. You asked for this after all.”

“I did?”

Angie is terrified, wanting only to postpone her death now. She would be ill for the rest of her life if they just left. Her thoughts stray to God, and she begs him to help her.

“Don’t you remember your interview?” Luke murmurs.

Now she recognizes him. He was the man she spoke to when she first applied for her job. She found the interview strange, but didn’t question it. She needed a job. She never saw him again, but thought nothing of it. “Yes, but I never asked you to kill me.”

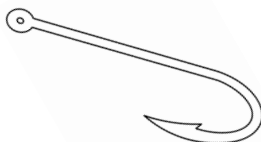
“I would give my soul for this job, those were your words, and I asked you to sign on the dotted line.”

Luke smiles and Angie’s neck feels prickly and uncomfortable.

She tries a desperate tack “That was a confidentiality agreement.”

No one can sign their soul away. She thinks he’s joking. He must be joking.

“You should read the fine print before signing anything, my dear.”





Lonely

Renee Miller

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As Caleb rushes through the house, he breezes past Carly without a glance. She yawns, shuffles over to the coffee pot and lifts it up. Not even enough for a cup.

"Sorry hon," Caleb says, grabbing his keys from the hook by the door. "I filled my thermos. You can make another pot."

"Sure," it comes out as a growl. "When will you be home?"

Caleb flushes and pauses. He will tell her something he thinks she doesn't want to hear.

"I'm not sure," his hand is on the door, ready for a quick escape. "Maybe in time for dinner; could be a bit later."

"Fine," she dumps the coffee filter into the garbage and avoids his eyes. "Jacob has a game tonight. You said you'd be there."

"Shit," he leans on the doorjamb. He'll try to pacify her with more promises he can't keep. "Listen, I know I said I would, but I didn't know we'd be so busy, and I've got practice at five."

"I'll tell him something." She always does. Apparently a bunch of middle aged men struggling around with sticks and pucks was more important than his son's game. When they signed him up, hadn't he said he'd do it?

"I'm sorry Carly."

He's mad. Of course he is. What does she do all day anyway? She knows how he thinks. It's not like she does anything except clean and cook. Why can't she take Jacob to his game?

"Don't be." She runs water to pour into the coffee maker, still not looking his way. "You'll be late."

"Yeah," he opens the door and stops.

Finally she looks up. Caleb lowers his gaze and steps outside without a word.

Carly pushes the start button and soon the soothing noise of coffee percolating fills the kitchen. They used to kiss before he

left, hating that they would be apart. She doesn't remember the last time he kissed her good-bye, or the last time he approached her at all. Sure, if she gave him the right signals, he'd humor her, though making it clear how tired he was. Often she wondered if there was someone else. Could a man really have no desire left?

She worries it might be her. Since Mallory, their daughter, came along, he no longer seems interested. It's not Carly's fault her body isn't as attractive as it used to be. Caleb has forced her to do what she swore she never would; to keep secrets, to tell lies and to cheat. If he'd look at her like he used to; a touch, a word, something to show he still cared, wanted her. She wouldn't need Marc if her husband gave her what she needed.

Marc. Smiling she fills her cup. She has an entire day alone with Marc. If Caleb ever found out...no, he would never. Carly planned each encounter meticulously. She doesn't like cheating, but her body has needs. She has needs.

Carly closes her eyes and thinks of Marc, his hard body, his undying devotion to pleasing her. Marc places Carly above all else. She likes when he nuzzles her ear and murmurs sweet nothings, and purrs against that sensitive spot just below.

She shakes her head and pours another cup of coffee. The kids will be up soon. Carly won't think about Marc until then. Kids are very perceptive. She doesn't want them to sense anything wrong.



Two long hours later, she can barely stand the anticipation any longer. The kids get on the bus, after a minor meltdown from Mallory delays her meeting. Sweet, stubborn Mallory; she doesn't want to leave Mama all alone. Reassuring her daughter that Mama has lots of work to do, and that she will miss her too, Carly gently pushes her onto the bus.

She watches them wave as the bus pulls away, her thoughts already with Marc. She hurries back to the house and strips off her clothes in the bathroom before turning on the shower. She

wants to look her best; two babies and thirty years are hard on a body. Marc doesn't care, but she likes to look nice.

Carly pauses before the mirror; not bad from the side, as long as she leaves her bra on. With Caleb, it always stays on. He doesn't seem to notice and if he does, he's never commented. With Marc she strips, so that he can appreciate her body, all of it. She also leaves the lights on, something she's never done with Caleb. It saddens her that she can be so open with Marc, but not with her husband.

Turning to face the mirror, Carly grimaces. *Is this what he will see?* Her hips have rounded since giving birth, her belly softened. She runs a hand over her loose skin and sighs. Will the tight tummy of her youth ever return? Not likely. When was the last time her husband trailed kisses down her body, to focus on that sweet spot just below her belly button? She can't remember.

John loved to explore her body, every inch of it, but she had to send him away. She became far too fond of him, even calling her husband by his name once. Of course, Caleb said nothing. He never said anything.

She removes her bra and averts her eyes from the mirror. Carly hates to look at what her breasts have become; golf balls hanging in a pair of panty hose. Her once pert little breasts are droopy and limp, her nipples enlarged from nursing very hungry babies. She can imagine what Caleb must think of them. He knew them when they were perfect. Does he miss the way they used to be?

Looking down she thinks they don't look so bad, from this angle you really can't tell how much they have drooped. Eyes closed, Carly moves her hands up her abdomen to her breasts and lifts them, feeling their weight. They feel normal, full. Her nipples harden as Carly imagines Marc pressing against them, murmuring his approval. She loves it when he nuzzles each nipple.

She turns on the shower and sighs. If she doesn't hurry up, she won't have enough time for him. Marc hates to be rushed.

Under the hot spray Carly gasps, water sears her skin and

she moans as her body relaxes. Steam fills the small bathroom, casting a haze over her. Carly imagines she'd look passable in the fog; lines blurred and edges softened; she would look as good as she once did. Caleb doesn't like showering together though; the kids might come in. He always worries the kids will come in.

A long time ago Carly set up a romantic evening, scattered candles around the room and wore a lacy blue teddy, Caleb's favorite color. When he came home from hockey, she waited for him on the bed, a glass of wine in her hand.

He entered the room, frowned and switched on the light. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like?"

"Those candles are too close to the bed. You want to start a fire?"

"I'm trying to set the mood." She set her glass down and sat up. Caleb didn't look at her as he rushed to blow out her candles. "Can't you just enjoy it?"

"The kids just went to bed," he moved toward the bathroom. "They'll hear us."

"No, I sent them to bed early," she spoke to his back as he moved around the bathroom. He didn't bother to close the door; apparently he thought she would enjoy watching him.

"Look, if you want to have sex that's fine." He flushed the toilet, left the seat up, and stepped back into the room. "You don't have to do all this."

"I just wanted it to be romantic," she stood and began unbuttoning his shirt.

Caleb stared at her for a moment before gently swatting her hands away. "Okay, but I've got to be up early." After removing his pants and socks he walked around her to the bed. "Let's not get too fancy."

Stifling the urge to scream, she straddled him as he lay back.

He smiled and Carly thought maybe he was getting the point. "Shit, the light." Then Caleb pushed her off and stepped over toward the switch.

Carly waited for him to return.

When he did, Caleb launched into the same old routine; a quick rub and tickle before the main event.

“Can’t we just enjoy each other first?” she asked. “Like we used to?”

“Sure, if you want to get interrupted before we finish,” he laughed. “Does this thing have buttons or something?”

Toying with the crotch of the teddy, he managed to figure out the snaps. Then, squirming at his touch, she arched onto him. But he ignored Carly’s obvious signal, pushed her back on the bed and moved over her.

A few minutes later he was asleep, as Carly lay frustrated and tearful next to him.

That happened more than six months ago, and she hasn’t bothered since. Now that she had *the others*, she didn’t need to beg Caleb, though *they* didn’t fix everything.

She met her first lover through Michelle, her best friend. At first, Carly pretended lack of interest, but days later she succumbed and invited him home. Michelle asked later what she thought of John, but, after their brief introduction, Carly denied ever considering an affair.

Michelle said lots of women had something on the side, but Carly couldn’t be as open about it as her friend. She felt guilty for cheating on Caleb, for lying to him. If he ever found out, she could never face him again.

Marc is in the bedroom.

Letting her towel drop, Carly moves toward the bed. He waits patiently for her to lie back and she loves him for that. Soon Marc is all over her, nuzzling her neck, taking his time over her breasts, his body busy, electrifying over her, releasing waves of heat to course down her legs. She wants him inside but not yet, Mark hates to be hurried.

Instead she moves so that he’s just against her, barely touching her tender folds. She closes her eyes and imagines his tongue resting there, pulsating, darting, lapping, until she can stand it no more. Colored shafts of light combine into whorls of thick warm air, swimming, rotating into a lazy vortex, becoming denser, tangible, and alive.

Drawing him in, she moans. The wrongness of her mad affair flutters briefly in her mind, but as Marc moves in and out of her, she forgets everything but him. Her muscles contract, as he relentlessly moves inside her, she flexes into him and the color eddy tears into ribbons of pure light fanning out from its center. They dance in an orgy of dazzling colors, bursting against her closed eyes. He legs ache, her muscles knot and quiver with unconscious anticipation. Her back arches.

Just as the first waves wash over her—sweat beading her brow and between her breasts—the door slams closed, like a gunshot in her ears. Carly's eyes fly open to Caleb's figure standing in the bedroom doorway, flowers in hand, jaw slack, and a shocked expression in his face.

Marc carries on, oblivious. Carly grinds her teeth, her body convulsing on the verge of climax, and pushes Marc away from her, hand trembling as she averts her gaze.

“Carly I—”

“Don't Caleb,” she turns the switch at the base of Marc's body and his gentle humming ebbs. “You must hate me.”

“Why? You've done nothing wrong.”

Confused, she looks up at her husband.

He smiles. “John?”

Carly shakes her head. “I threw John away...”

Mark waits.

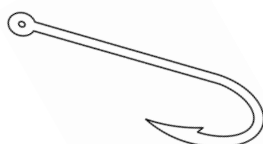
She drinks the gleam in his eyes, a spark she hasn't seen in a long time. “Marc.”

Caleb sets the flowers on the nightstand and sits on the edge of the bed.

Carly doesn't know what to say.

Caleb takes Marc from her hands and switches him back on again. Then he grins.

“You two weren't finished,” he says. “And then it's my turn.”





PAUL MITTON

I was born in Wales more than half a century ago. Or, I'm only 21, but I've had a really hard life.

During the weekdays, I work at a college of further education, masquerading as a mild-mannered teacher, IT guru and creator of learning resources for students.

At night and the weekends, I transform. Fuelled by copious quantities of everything, science fiction, horror, fantasy and action thrillers, both novels and screenplays, flow from my mind to electronic half-life on one of my long-suffering computers.

Married for aeons, I have two grown-up children, if that isn't a contradiction in terms.

YELLOWFANG. In a world of spontaneously combusting vagrants and murderous dentists, Phelps must choose the lesser of two evils. Allow demonic forces to prevail or do the right thing and lose the woman he loves.

VACANT POSSESSION. Evil lurks, amid the stench of boiled cabbage and urine in an old people's home. Phelps and DD must defeat this evil, or there will be hell on earth. Literally.

<http://paul-mitton.blogspot.com>

<http://www.blindsamurai.com>

<http://twitter.com/paulmitton>

The title 'Yellowfang' is written in a large, bold, black serif font. A stylized illustration of a yellow cat's head is integrated into the letter 'f'. The cat's head is yellow with a black outline, and its mouth is open, showing a black tongue. The author's name 'Paul Mitton' is written below the title in a smaller, black, sans-serif font.

Yellowfang

Paul Mitton

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The empty wine bottle twirled out of the darkness, smashing on the wall directly over my head. Broken glass spattered me. Cursing, I crouched lower behind the dumpster, peering round the side in quick, furtive glances. As quick and furtive as the man I was chasing.

There! A movement, reflected in the uncertain light of the streetlamp at the end of the alley. I raised my gun.

And lowered it again. Any second, my partner would be coming down the alley from the far end, might be there already. I couldn't shoot blind. I spat out blood and fragments of tooth. This would have to be done the hard way.

Twenty-four hours earlier, this situation would have seemed unthinkable, ludicrous. But that was yesterday. This was now.

I ran down the alley, my shadow lengthening and fading ahead of me, gun extended in one hand, the other set to block whatever might come hurtling my way.

Shadows shifted and grew to meet me...



"This is ridiculous!" snarled Dean. She tossed a case file across the desk. I snatched my coffee away as the brown folder slammed down on my side.

"What's ridiculous?" I asked, licking hot liquid from the back of my hand.

"We're supposed to be investigating rogue scientists, not murders," she said, aggrieved. "We've enough crap on our desks already without having to do the cops' work for them. First crispy vagrants, now this!"

"Has anyone ever told you you're beautiful when you're angry?" I asked.

The look she gave me would have turned lesser men to stone. Fortunately, I'd worked with Dean for six years. You become immune.

"Do you want to drink the rest of that coffee or wear it?" she snapped.

"Just saying..." I commented, opening the folder and scanning the synopsis. I could feel her eyes trying to burn holes in my skull as I read.

"Whoa!" I gasped. "Look at these!" I waved the black and white photos of the crime scene. "Looks like whoever killed them decorated the room with their blood afterwards."

Dean slammed another file down on her pile of accumulating cases. I could no longer feel her angry look. She'd disappeared behind the mound of paperwork.

She had a point. We had enough work to do without attending to simple homicides. Budget cuts and staff shortages meant all of us worked sixty-plus hours a week. Every week.

And still, we fell behind.

No problem for me; I didn't have a life. Debbie Dean never talked about hers, so I guessed she was in the same boat.

This case had some interesting points though.

"DD," I called. My invisible partner betrayed her presence by slamming a drawer shut. I steadied her pile of paperwork before it could cascade halfway across the office.

"Oh, DD," I coaxed. "Come and see. You'll like it..."

She stood, glaring at me. I smiled and salaamed.

She snorted reluctant laughter and came round the desks.

"What, Phelps? This better be good."

"Says here that something rammed straight through the guy's ribcage. Had to be something hot, 'cos it cauterised the wound. His skull was shattered by lateral pressure on both sides; same with the woman.

"Oh, and their hearts and brains are missing."



Our victims were dentist Peter Simms and his nurse, Karen

Day. Routine digging produced nothing at all interesting about them.

He'd been an average student, an average dentist, living an average life. Home in the cheaper suburbs, a wife, two kids, and two cars. No debts, and no bad habits. He'd never been in any sort of trouble with the law. She'd been arrested once for public intoxication, after graduating from college; hardly a career criminal.



"This guy must have been a barrel of laughs," Dean said. "I bet he was a train spotter at the weekend."

"Stamp collector," I guessed.

We gazed at the pristine front garden as we walked down the path and banged on the late Simms' front door.

If I'd had to imagine an average widow to fit the average Simms, I'd have thought medium height, vaguely pretty, probably brown haired; the sort of suburban housewife who went to flower arranging and Yoga classes during the week.

I'd have been spot on.

Of course, Miranda Simms wasn't so pretty this morning, without makeup, eyes red and puffy.

We flashed our ID cards and made suitably condoling noises as she showed us into the tiny lounge.

"What is the DSI?" she asked.

"Department of Scientific Intelligence," said Dean. "We've been called in to assist the police because..."

She looked at me, bewildered, as Miranda started crying. I made encouraging motions with my hands. She sat on the sofa, putting an awkward arm around Miranda's shoulders, patting and soothing.

Dean had been my partner for six years. She was tough, smart, watched my back and supported me, no matter what. I did the same with her. We had no complaints. We made a good team. We were good at our job. We weren't good with the touchy-feely stuff. Consoling grieving widows was not our forte.

Between sobs, Miranda gasped out a coherent sentence.

"You've been called in... because of the way Peter died," she choked.

"Yes," I admitted. "I know it's a horrible time, but we need to get some understanding of what Peter was like. What sort of man was he? What did he do when he wasn't working?"

Peter Simms, it appeared, was a creature of habit. He played squash at the local club on Wednesdays and Saturdays, and on Sundays did the gardening. He did some do-it-yourself in the basement, which he'd fitted out as a little workshop. Went to parents' evenings, read, watched the occasional film. Did research into things that interested him—his current favourite was Egyptology. That about summed up his life.

"The children are with my sister," Miranda said, slightly more composed. "I didn't want them to be here for all this..." She waved a hand vaguely.

I crossed the little room, smelling of old furniture polish and recent emptiness, looking at a picture on the mantelpiece above the gas fire.

It showed Peter and his wife. Living, he had been perhaps my height, five feet eight, but considerably thinner. He had less hair, even though he was two years younger than my thirty-five. A pleasant, anonymous face; he looked like an affable man, reluctant to cause trouble. Not the sort to have enemies.

Miranda confirmed it.

"What was he doing in Whitechapel?" asked Dean.

"He did his free clinic there on Mondays," sobbed Miranda. "Free dental care for the homeless." She wiped her eyes with a sodden bunch of tissues. "Yesterday evening, he went to the clinic like he had for the last two years. If only..."



Simms's basement was neat. Everything was in place, laid out in orderly fashion. His books and notes on Egypt were orderly, written in a neat hand.

I sat in his seat, behind his desk, reading his notes by the

light of the Tensor lamp on his desk. I read while Dean prowled, tapping walls, searching the room.

Finally she gave up.

"Anything in his notes?" she asked, perching herself on a corner of the desk.

"Nothing original, as far as I can see, although he was raving about some old book he'd stumbled on," I answered. "De Vermis Mysteriis by someone called Ludwig Prinn. Ever heard of it?"

Dean shook her head.

"Nope," she said. "Doesn't ring any bells."

We took his Egyptian research, made our excuses and left the desperate, little house as fast as we could.

"The morgue next?" asked Dean.

I nodded.

She was silent through the car journey, finally exploding as we parked outside the pathology building.

"I mean, who the hell would want to butcher a dentist like that? It seems he was a nice, inoffensive man, didn't drink or take drugs, loving husband and father, never argued with anyone. Why?" She sounded baffled.

"Maybe he was a crap dentist," I suggested.

Dean punched my arm. "I'm being serious."

"Me too," I protested. "I've had a few dentists I'd like to kill. I mean, no one actually likes dentists, do they?"

Dean looked at me, pushing her curly brown hair back from her forehead.

"Perhaps you're right. Perhaps he was killed because he was a dentist, not because he was Peter Simms. And you really need to do something about your teeth before they fall out."

"I hate dentists, and besides, my teeth are perfectly healthy."

"Oh really?" she mocked. "They're meant to be brown and green then, are they?"



We were much more comfortable dealing with the mangled

remains of the dentist and his nurse than we had been with his widow. We bent over the corpses as the pathologist in charge, the unfortunately named Erasmus Slyme, detailed the wounds.

"If I had to guess," he said, in a pronounced Scottish lowland burr, "I'd say that someone took a red hot metal bar and rammed it straight through their sternums and ribs. There was decided charring of the wound edges."

"But then it looks as if someone grabbed the edges of the wound and tore the chests open," I said.

"Aye, that's how I see it," he agreed. "Then they cut the hearts free of the bodies with some sort of curved blade, like a little sickle."

"What about the damage to the heads?" asked my partner.

"Again, I'd say something like a heated metal vice was closed on the temples, and tightened until the skulls just collapsed. You can see the charring there."

Dean sniffed. "What's that smell?"

I could smell it too. A heavy, rotten odour.

"I've sent samples for analysis," said Slyme, "but in my judgement, that would be sulphur. Burning sulphur is still sometimes used as a fumigant."

"I don't suppose there was any trace of a red hot vice, or a metal bar, or sulphur on the crime scene," I asked.

Slyme shook his head.

"Not a trace," he said with the easy cheerfulness of someone who spends his time cutting up dead bodies. "But there was the burned cadaver as well." Dean and I looked at each other in surprise. "A vagrant," Slyme added, "burned down to just bone and teeth. Like your others."

Over the last couple of weeks, we'd been investigating the deaths of five homeless people, who had all burst into flame and burned to a skeleton. No trace of accelerants, no motive, no witnesses. I didn't believe in spontaneous combustion.

"See?" I said to Dean. "It's now the same case as our previous. Aren't you glad I persuaded you to work on it?"

Dean sniffed, but gave a tiny nod of her head.

The last job was to go through the sad, somehow diminished

pile of personal effects. Nothing out of the ordinary - save for one key we couldn't account for.

"Safe deposit?" suggested Dean.

"Left luggage," I countered. "Run the number through the database when we get back to the office."

We put Simms's and Day's effects back into the brown envelopes.

"Crime scene next," I said over the noise of Dean's cell phone, echoing in the tiled acoustics of the post-mortem suite.

She shook her head.

"No," she said. "Croydon. There's been another one. Another dentist, and his staff. Just like this one."



Dean looked pale when she left the charred shell of the building in Croydon High Street. I expect I did as well.

Once, perhaps four hours ago, downstairs had been an optician's shop. Upstairs had been a small dental surgery with a staff of three—dentist, nurse and hygienist.

The optician and his assistant were fine, though without premises.

It was very hard to tell which bits belonged to the dentist, the nurse and the hygienist. All I could say for definite was that they hadn't died in the fire. The fourth body, just cindered bone, had died of the fire; had been the cause of the fire. Another self-incinerating tramp.

There was a survivor though, en route to Croydon General.

Bet he'd have an interesting story to tell.



We had to wait four hours to hear it. Even then, the doctor wasn't too happy about letting us in, but her patient, Simeon Wilkes, insisted.

"You've got to hear this, mates," he wheezed. "I'll go barmy if I have to keep this to myself any longer."

Wilkes was a sparse, wiry little man, probably approaching sixty. Broken capillaries in his cheeks and a layer of grime indicated he'd spent a good many of those years living rough. The spreading bruise that covered the left side of his face emphasized his sallow complexion. When he tried to smile, he revealed a row of rotting stumps, jagged spikes where his teeth should have been. I could smell his breath from six feet away.

"There I was in the dentist's, see," he said. "He was a good sort, was Mister Cole. Once a month or so, he'd do some jobs for free for the homeless and such."

He paused to sip water from a straw. His voice was a husky whisper.

"Anyway, he'd just got me in the chair, like, and he was sticking that mirror thing and the spray in my mouth, when the door comes flying open." He shook his head in bewilderment.

"I swear to God, I've never seen nothin' like it."

Sip, pause. Sip, pause.

"Great big bloke comes chargin' in. Dressed like a tramp, he was; all hair and beard and such. He sort of backhands the nurse, and down she goes. Then he lifts Mister Cole off his feet like he was a doll, and fetches me a right good clout across the side of the head."

Sip, pause. Sip, pause.

"Well, I goes flying across the room and bangs my head on the wall, so everything goes a bit hazy like.

"When I comes to, he's got the women what scrubs your teeth, the what-you-call-it..."

"Hygienist?" Dean suggested. Wilkes nodded vigorously.

"Yeah, that's her. Well, he's holding her by the throat in one hand, and he just rams his other hand into her chest, like you would into a suet pudding. He tears her chest open, clothes and all, and pulls out her heart. And he starts eating it."

Sip, pause. Sip, pause.

"Well, I pissed myself. I mean, you would, wouldn't you." Wilkes shook his head at the memory, shivering. "Then he cracks her head open, easy, like a boiled egg, and starts cramming handfuls of brain into his mouth, champing and

dribbling and spilling stuff all over the shop. And he was growling to himself all the time, see.

“Proper nutter, he was, that’s for bleedin’ sure.”

As Wilkes took more refreshment from the glass, Dean and I looked at each other in confusion.

Wilkes continued.

“He does just the same for them other two. Tears out the hearts and eats them, and splits open their bones, and eats the brains too. An’ all the time, he’s growling and sort of chanting, though I didn’t know what the ‘ell he was saying, ‘cos his mouth was full and he was chewing all the time.

“Then he turns on me. Now all this time, I’m tryin’ to get up and away like, but I’m all dizzy on account of that right hook he’d given me, so I’m falling all over the place.”

Wilkes went even paler. He looked shamefaced.

“That’s when I shit myself. He turns on me, and he’s got burning eyes.”

“You mean he was red eyed?” asked Dean, as engrossed as I was. Wilkes shook his head.

“Nah, I mean there was flames comin’ out of his eyes. His hair was starting to burn, and there were flames shooting off his hands too.”

He looked at us. The laugh he made was bitter.

“Yeah, I know how it sounds. OK, I’d had a bang on the head, so maybe I was imagining it, but that’s what I thought I saw.

“He comes over and lifts me off the floor by the throat, and I think he’s gonna eat my heart as well. Instead, he kisses me smack on the lips. Disgusting it was. I’ve never been that way inclined.”

Sip, pause.

“And all the time, there’s more and more flames coming off him, like he’s a human candle or somethin’.

“Then he goes and throws me out the window!

“Next thing I knows, I’m in the ambulance coming here.”

I looked at Dean. She looked at me. We both looked at Wilkes, who met our combined gaze with defiance.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said. “I know. But look at this and then tell me I’m nuts.”

He lifted his head, exposing his neck.

Plain to see were the scabbed prints of four fingers and a thumb, where a burning hand had gripped Wilkes’s neck.



“What do you reckon then?” asked Dean as we walked down the ramp and out through the glass doors. A chill drizzle hit us in the face, welcome after the stifling heat of the hospital.

“I don’t have a clue. I do know that whoever killed Cole and his staff must have been hellishly strong. He tossed Wilkes a good twelve feet into that dumpster. Otherwise the fall would have killed him. As it was, he landed on all the garbage bags, just got a few more bruises.”

I stopped short. Dean carried on for a couple of steps before realizing I was no longer by her side. She turned to face me.

“What?” she demanded.

“Simms did his free clinic in Whitechapel on Mondays,” I said, excitement gripping me. “Cole did free work on a Wednesday.”

I started walking again. “Work with me here. Simms is treating someone, looks like a tramp, on Monday night. The guy kills him and his nurse, then bursts into flame and dies himself.”

“So, what about Cole,” Dean demanded.

“Another vagrant comes along to him, when he’s doing similar work on a Wednesday, and takes him out too. Also bursts into flame. Hypnotised assassins, with some sort of remote controlled internal incendiary device?”

“Oh, that’s thin,” Dean offered with a sceptical glance at me. “A killer with a vendetta against dentists who treat down and outs? Why?”

“Trial runs for more important victims?” I suggested.

“I’d want a better motive before I’d be happy with that solution.” She turned to look at me. “At least you’ll be happy to

know that I now agree with you about something.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“There are people around with worse teeth than you.”

What could I say to that? OK, I smoke; drink vast quantities of tea and coffee, and my teeth are yellow and crumbling. Nowhere near as bad as Wilkes’.

I gave an offended sniff instead of replying. Dean sniggered as she started the engine.



The morgue stank of sulphur and charred meat. The unknown killer vagrant was lying on the centre slab, still steaming slightly in the chilled air. Other slabs held collections of body bits.

Even curled in the typical foetal position of burns fatalities, his skeleton seemed massive. Alive and extended, he would have been nearly seven feet tall.

His mouth gaped, and I felt a mild sense of justification. His teeth had been worse than mine as well. That made two people in the world.

Slyme whistled something from an operetta as he worked.

“This laddie had the constitution of an ox,” he said as he cut and sawed. “I’ve sent a couple of marrow samples off to the unit.”

Contrary to popular TV-driven belief, it would be months before the DNA analysis returned.

“What caused him to burn up like that?” I asked.

“No idea, yet. No trace of any external accelerants, and I don’t believe in spontaneous combustion,” offered Slyme, echoing my thoughts of earlier. “You’ll get your full screen in time.”

Yeah, about the time my pension was due.



Dean had gone hunting a lock that fit Simms’s key. Everyone

else had left the office. However, there was a note to ring Miranda Simms—marked ‘urgent’.

I got through first time.

“It may be nothing,” she said, “but I found some notes and a gun when I was going through Peter’s wardrobe, looking for stuff to take to the charity shop. It seems important. Can you come and take a look?”



“What do you make of it?” asked Miranda; leaning over me as I read the note Simms had scribbled in a diary.

‘Must warn Cole and Galton,’ the note said. ‘He is everywhere. He uses them. I’ve put silver ball bearings in the bullets. That should stop him.’

I leafed through the rest of the book. It was filled with appointments and reminders to pay bills; typical stuff.

And hieroglyphs everywhere, long passages of them.

“Is this from your husband’s Egyptian phase?” I asked, showing her a page.

She leaned closer. I caught a whiff of her perfume. She looked prettier this evening, more the attractive middle-class suburbanite I had envisioned.

“Yes it must be,” she said. “He did seem quite excited about something he came across when he was doing his reading. Spent some time in the British Library and the Museum on Saturday mornings.”

“Who’s Galton?” I said.

“Peter and a couple of other dentists decided they wanted to—I don’t know—give something back to the community. They started doing a system of free clinics and free treatment with the homeless, those living in shelters.”

She ran her hand through her hair, leaving it pleasingly tousled.

Steady, I told myself. She’s only been a widow for a day and a half.

“Cole and Galton were the other two dentists?” I persisted.

She nodded. Then she gasped, putting a hand to her mouth.
“Oh, God,” she breathed. “Cole was that dentist who was killed this afternoon, wasn’t he?”

I nodded.

“Is Galton in danger too?” she asked.

I wondered that myself.

“Where do I find him this time of night?” I asked, getting up and heading for the door.

“He lives in Bexley Heath,” she said. “Wait, I can find his home address.”

She rummaged through a roll top bureau in the lounge, giving me an address book. I ran through the G’s.

Dennis Galton.

I turned to leave.

“Wait!” she demanded. “There’s this too.” She reached in the pocket of her housedress and pulled out a snub nosed revolver. “Peter had this hidden on the top shelf.”

A Charter Arms Bulldog .44 calibre. I flipped it open. It was loaded with the special Teflon-filled bullets, the kind that, if you shoot someone in the chest, they take out half the spine as they exit.

I promised to keep her informed.

Running down the path, I tried the number for Galton.

No answer. I hoped he was out in a pub somewhere, having a good time.



Galton’s house was dark. The front door was open. Moving cautiously, I approached in a crouch, flattening myself by the side of the gaping doorway.



Dean had rung me as I sped towards Bexley Heath.

“I found the left luggage locker at Paddington,” she said. “Lots of stuff about three dentists treating the homeless. There

was a really old book about demons, and how they prey on people with bad teeth. They need some compound produced by tooth decay to be able to enter a human host. That's why Simms set up his little group to treat the homeless. He reckoned he'd force the demon back into Hell, or wherever."

"Yeah, right," I muttered. "It's well known that demons possess people with halitosis. Happens all the time."

"You need to kill them with silver bullets," she insisted.

"As it happens, I have a gun with silver bullets now. If it turns out to be a demon, shall I shoot it or exorcise it?"

"I didn't say I believed it, you prat," she said. "But Simms, Cole and Galton did and two of them are dead. I'm on my way to Bexley Heath now."

"So am I," I said, swerving past a slow moving lorry, horn blaring. "I'll be there in two minutes."

"I'll be there in five," she said. "Be careful."



So, there I was, being careful.

I peered round the door. Blue TV light seeped from a half open door down the hall. I could see that Galton was dead. He lay in the hall in that unmistakeable sprawl that only dead people had. Besides, I could see his chest had been ripped open.

A shadow moved quickly. The back door slammed, and I was up and racing down the hall, heading for the kitchen.

Wilkes hadn't left by the back door. He waited, clinging to the kitchen ceiling.

As I charged in, he dropped on me, swinging a tremendous punch to my mouth. I felt the acid flare of agony as teeth shattered. He gripped me by the throat but I wasn't a dentist. I rammed a finger in his eye and head butted him on the nose. Blood sprayed in my face as if from a hose.

Wilkes, or whatever was in Wilkes, howled, letting go of my throat and punching me in the ribs as I tried to wipe his blood from my eyes.

I heard brittle snapping sounds as some ribs cracked. He charged, his eyes glowing red as if lit from within.

I whipped up the pistol and fired.

He evaded the bullet with blurring speed. It blew a head-sized hole in the back door instead.

Howling again, this time in anger, he launched himself through the kitchen window, shattering the glass.

I wiped blood from my face till I could see properly. Kicking the back door open, I followed him, really cautious this time.

A long alley ran behind the terraced houses, scattered dumpsters providing islands of shadow and shelter. Wilkes ran into the darkness to my left and vanished.

I could hear the sound of a car engine racing in the distance. I called Dean.

“You go to the far end of the road,” I said. “Wilkes will be between us.”

“Wilkes?” she said in astonishment.

“Yep. Complete with red eyes and super-human strength,” I assured her. “Watch yourself, DD.”

“You too Jim,” she said. “I’ll be there in a minute.”



The wine bottle shattered on the wall and I charged.

Wilkes charged to meet me, howling inhumanly, red flame shooting from his fingertips, licking out of his blazing eyes.

In the narrow confines of the alley, he couldn’t dodge this time.

I put three rounds into his chest. The thunderous booms of the revolver drowned his hellish shrieks. He was knocked back, hurled to the ground.



Dean came sprinting up, Glock at the ready.

She stopped and looked down at what remained of Wilkes, fire consuming him. She looked at me.

“Are you alright?” she said. There was something more than concern in her voice.

Back windows were lighting up all along the alley. I heard distant police sirens.

She wiped blood from my face with a tissue. “Did any of his blood get in your mouth?” she demanded. “Did it?”

“No,” I said, as I collapsed, the pain in my chest catching up with me, shock setting in. “No, it didn’t. Why?”

She helped me to my feet, flashing her tin as Armed Response Units edged their way up the alley. “Suicide bomber,” she said, and “National Security.”

She half dragged, half walked me to my car, getting in the driver’s seat.

“I need a hospital,” I groaned.

“No,” she said. “You need a dentist. You have about twenty-four hours max before you self-combust, if there’s any trace of tooth-decay toxin in your system. Meantime, gargle with this.”

She passed over a half-pint of Jack Daniels. I rinsed and swallowed, hissing with pain as the raw spirit burned my exposed dental nerves.



Hours of surgery later, I was pronounced free of all traces of tooth decay. My mouth hurt worse than ever.

“Now I’m taking you home. My home,” said DD.

Before starting the car, she leaned over and kissed me on the lips, gently, tongue probing the newly repaired edges of my teeth. I pulled away with great reluctance.

“My mouth hurts like hell, DD.”

We drove for a while, me half-doing from shock and pain.

Something nagged worse than my aching teeth though. Through swollen lips, I slurred a question.

“What language was that old book in?”

“It was a very poor translation of the Egyptian original, in what I estimate to be 6th century dog Latin,” she answered. Her eyes glowed red as she stroked my cheek.

“Why?” I asked. “How?”

“The book was obsolete,” she said. “I can infect anyone now. Like I infected you. A little bit of my saliva, a little bit of my soul and they’re mine: my slaves, my subjects, and my children. The dentists could have destroyed me using that book, if they’d ever found the secret. That’s why I had them killed.”



We continued to drive through a night made festive by exploding addicts and Roman Candle vagrants.

She parked the car. We’d stopped outside a disused church.

“So I’m going to be your slave then?” I asked.

She patted my cheek.

“No, it’s different with you. I gave you part of my soul, and took part of yours into me. You’re mine and I’m yours. That’s why I had you get your teeth fixed. Bad teeth equals self-combustion, and I want you with me for a long time.”

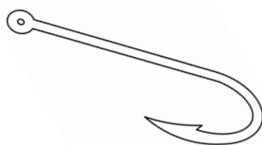
“How long?”

“How does eternity sound?” she said, parking the car.

“We’re home, darling,” said Debbie “Now, are you going to use that last bullet on me or are you mine forever?”

I looked at her for what seemed an eternity, seeing her true form, seeing the love. I recognized her now, knew her true name.

“I’m yours forever,” I said, “Lilith.”



Vacant Possession



Paul Mitton

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“So where are we going?” asked DD as I snarled at yet another bicycling lunatic with important pizza blocking my way.

“To visit my grandmother,” I reminded her. “In the nursing home.” I swerved to avoid the spotty delivery idiot and made the roundabout just as the lights changed. Cursing, I jammed on the brakes. A stream of abuse came from pizza-face behind me.

Deborah Dean (or DD, as I called her) turned in her seat, extending the finger that indicated he was number one. I disagreed. I gestured that he was number two. The lights changed and we continued, round the confusing and ever-changing one-way system that was Swindon. A place where the old adage seemed to be true—you can’t get there from here.

“I didn’t even know you had a Granny,” she said.

I shot her a disbelieving look.

“Everyone has a granny. Two usually,” I reminded her.

“Alive, you idiot,” she said scathingly. “Sometimes, Phelps, I wonder what I see in you.”

“Apart from the charm, charisma and profound intelligence?”

“Well, yes, apart from that,” she admitted, stroking my leg. “But like I said, I didn’t know you had any living relatives.”

“She isn’t really. Not in any meaningful sense. Senile dementia.”

It was true. My grandmother had been a woman of sharp wit, scathing tongue, piercing insights; the outer shell remained, still recognisable, but the essential *her* had gone a couple of years ago. All that remained was a walking corpse, sometimes muttering scraps of old memory, still as vivid and fresh to her now as if they had happened this morning, instead of seventy or eighty years ago.

Of course, she could seldom remember anything about this morning.

I squinted at the map propped on the dashboard. Turn second left at the next roundabout, if I hadn't lost count.

I had.

Twenty minutes later, we found the place. Sat-Nav things didn't work too well around me or DD. Washing machines lost their programs. Radios played static. Even now, I could vaguely hear some politician preening his ego about some advance in the treatment of the elderly, heavily overlaid with white noise.

Bit of a handicap in the electronic age, you might think.

DD leaned over, switching off the radio with a snap of the forefinger.



Oldborne Towers was one of those large Victorian relics that always seemed to end up as nursing homes or halfway houses. Once it had been a mid-sized hotel, but times were hard in the hospitality industry.

DD climbed out of the car, stretching after the two-hour journey.

"I really don't know why you bother," she said. "It's not as if Granny Phelps will know who you are. Ten minutes after you've gone, she won't remember you visited."

"That's a bit callous, even for you," I said. "Besides, it eases my conscience, knowing I'm doing the dutiful family bit."

Driveway gravel crunched under our feet as we approached the double doors. DD might have been going to add another caustic remark. Instead, she stopped, laying a hand on my arm.

"What?" I asked.

"Something's wrong here, Jim," she said quietly.

I looked, senses questing, but I felt nothing out of the ordinary. Even from out here, I could smell the prevalent odour of boiled cabbage and piss that always seemed to cling to these places. It was quiet, but I could see the ghostly blue of television light in several windows.

"It's after six," I said. "The residents, sorry, the *guests*, have probably all been fed and bathed by now. They're just chilling to Weakest Link or X-Factor."

She shook her head.

"It's more than that," she said. "Can't you feel it?"

I shook my head.

"Use your *other* senses," she insisted.

The world took on an eerie hue as I searched again. She was right. A lingering odour of something foul, something that shouldn't have been in this world.

I made sure the .44 Bulldog moved easily in the holster. DD was mirroring my actions.

"Front door?" I asked.

She nodded.

Moving easily, like a couple with nothing more to concern them than a boring duty visit before beginning the weekend's pleasures, we sauntered towards the doors.



Inside the foyer, all seemed normal. A nursing assistant accosted us, all busy in blue uniform, carrying a plate of something that may once have been food.

"Can I help you?"

"Jim Phelps," I said, "here to visit my grandmother."

She looked enquiring.

"Brenda Mitchell," I amplified. She brightened.

"Oh yes, Mrs Mitchell's in the main lounge," she said, pointing the way deeper into the hallway.

I nodded thanks. Together, DD and I moved towards one of the doors where ghost-light flickered from a muted TV.

On the few occasions I'd been there, the scene had been similar. Nurses and assistants with forced cheeriness cajoling their charges to eat slop. Spooning stuff between their lips, wiping the dribbles from toothless mouths with tissues. The occasional shout or moan as a disturbing memory rose from the murky depths to disturb the shallow, sunlit emptiness of the

present. The occasional belch or fart as natural processes continued without conscious supervision, and the occasional innocent voiding of bladder or bowel no longer restrained by ego.

This scene was similar. Not the same. The nurses still spooned and wiped. The inmates still sat in hunched indifference.

And total silence.

The nurses looked strained, anxious, as if expecting the eruption of some monstrous plague.

Granny Mitchell sat stolidly, still a stout figure. She had apparently finished her supper. An empty plate sat on the side table by her, gravy congealing on the spoon. She glanced at us with blank expression as we approached.

“Hello, Gran,” I said cheerfully. Rheumy eyes gazed at me, swivelled to regard DD.

“I told you not to bring that hussy here,” she spat. “And stop letting that dog sleep on your bed.”

I thought she had probably mistaken me for my uncle, possibly my father, both dead a few years now.

There was a muffled thud as one of the other residents rose, upsetting the tray in his lap, pushing the nurse aside with strength unexpected in one so old.

“The time is at hand,” he bellowed, deep voiced and virile. “Our time!”

Granny Mitchell let out a cackle that turned to a howl. I swivelled to face her again, seeing the hooked old fingers, which had been reaching for my throat, restrained in DD’s iron grip. Eyes that had been rheumy were now a feral yellow: predator’s eyes. They glared at me.

“We’re here now,” she/it hissed. “There’s nothing in these shells to keep us out! You can’t stop us.”

Screams fluttered round the room like trapped bats as the twenty or so residents rose, attacking their carers, plunging spoons into eyes, sinking remaining teeth into exposed flesh.

“Think again, Granny,” DD snarled as she rose to her full height, extending metaphysical wings, driving a black and

smoking talon through my last remaining relative's temple, pulverising the malignant entity within.

I emptied the Bulldog into advancing demonic figures, destroying brains, exploding heads.

DD, now fully transformed, let loose a banshee howl that caused most of the possessed elderly to crumble, clutching their heads and howling in feeble imitation. Black, foul-smelling smoke rose from many, remnants of the destroyed demons within.

A handful of the hardier ones advanced on me, talons thrusting through withered flesh, mouths stretching to accommodate fangs, paper-thin skin splitting across their cheeks. Their forked tongues flickered; eyes glowing.

"A little help," I suggested, backing away till there was nowhere left to retreat.

DD/Lilith, her head now brushing the high ceiling, strode forward, tittering and phosphorescing. She clutched demon skulls in her talons, crushing them and tossing aside the husks effortlessly.

"No-one harms my man!" she howled, literally incandescent with rage.

The one survivor stood his ground.

"This is not what was promised!" he growled.

Lilith bent forward, her snout almost touching his.

"Promised by who?" she asked with that deceptive sweetness of hers.

"Moloch," the demon said, gazing up at her in defiance. "He said this world would be ours."

"He lied," said Lilith with contempt. "But tell me who he dealt with in this world and I'll let you return to whatever hell you came from."

"I don't know," muttered the demon. "Some human, some politician. Said he was solving the problem of too many old people."

I flashed back to the static-laden egomaniac with his triumph of new care for the elderly. The Health Minister.

Lilith seized the demon by the throat, squeezing.

“You promised,” he whimpered.

“I lied too,” she said, tossing his lifeless carcase aside. She turned on me, as angry as I had ever seen her.

“You could have transformed, kept yourself safe,” she hissed.

“I can’t afford a new wardrobe every time I go out,” I said.

“Fool! I have enough money to buy you a thousand suits a day, if that’s what it takes,” she said. “Do you think I’ve fought you and loved you for millennia, crossed time and space to find you again, just to lose you because you’re too lazy to protect yourself?”

As she spoke, she diminished back to DD proportions and appearance. Tatters of her clothes still clung to her. Most had exploded away when she transformed.

“Have you?” I asked as her breathing slowed, her eyes cleared. “Searched for me through all time and space?”

She patted my cheek.

“You still don’t remember, do you?” she said softly. “It’ll come back to you in time, my darling.”

Moans broke into our moment of privacy. Shocked and trembling nurses, the ones who lived anyway, crawled and retched. I went into the foyer, behind the desk, spotting a phone. Shouting through the static, I asked for a clean-up squad. DD joined me.

“I suppose you want me to stop this happening all over the world,” she said. I nodded. She smiled with a trace of sadness.

“Why did I ever have to fall in love with you?” she asked. “We could rule the universe, you and I, but no, you have to keep running about trying to save these pathetic humans.”

“I’m human,” I reminded her.

“No, you’re not. You never were.”

“But I think I am,” I insisted. “And that’s what counts.”

She vanished. Seconds later, she reappeared, reeking of sulphur and other, fouler things for which this world has no name. “It’s done. I reminded Moloch who the true rulers of this world were. He’s very angry. He’s going to deal with the Health Minister personally. A tragic fire, apparently.”

She smiled at me, that same slow, loving smile that always

sent shivers through me even though I knew her for what she really was.

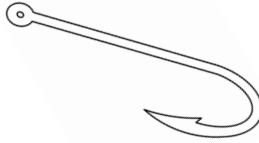
“He sends his regards, by the way. He thought you were dead.”

I gazed at her in astonishment. “Moloch knows me?” I stammered, feeling more than usually stupid.

“Of course he does. And you know him. You defeated him once, long ago.”

We heard the sound of sirens approaching outside. DD glanced down at her semi-nakedness.

“I’d better get dressed before they arrive,” she said demurely. “Are you coming? Michael?”





D.B. PACINI

D.B. Pacini, a California songwriter/vocalist, is the author of two novels, a novelette, short stories, and poetry. Her youth/YA fantasy novel, *THE LOOSE END OF THE RAINBOW*, the first novel in her Universal Knights Trilogy, was published by Singing Moon Press, USA in March, 2009. Her contemporary novelette, *STERLING COURT CUL-DE-SAC*, was published by Turner Maxwell Books, UK in August, 2009. Her poetry and stories are published in *Blue Moon Literary & Art Review*, USA, and in other literary journals. Her contemporary mainstream novel, *EMMA'S LOVE LETTERS*, is seeking publication. She is currently writing a third novel, the second in her Universal Knights Trilogy. Pacini is a volunteer writing mentor to teen and young adult writers

The Lady with the Green Hair illustrates that in spite of irrefutable weaknesses and unattractive flaws, the human race can be saved by the power of love.

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The Lady with Green Hair

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She emigrated from France, aboard the French frigate Isère, an exceedingly tall, fiercely independent woman with mild green-blue eyes. When she touched American soil, she would take Bedloe's Island, later Liberty Island in New York Harbor, as her permanent home. There she became a world-renowned symbol of freedom.

Although she is an older woman, her timeless beauty captivates people of all ages. Millions travel far and wide for a long awaited glimpse of her. For these men and women, their birth countries will always be their mothers, but when they experience her welcoming embrace, they gladly give her their hearts. Though she's had many ardent lovers, she has never married.



Zarey is inside her head, no, not on her mind, inside her head. He opens a window beneath her spiked crown and leans out into the salty sea air.

“Of all beings, I’ve fearlessly journeyed across galaxies riding stars to her bosom. I’ve hurled myself from the cosmos, through space and time, to stand within her, a being with purpose.”

“Shut up Zarey. You sound like you’re the first Queian to ever be given an assignment to this primitive planet. Why are you bragging? Many have been here younger than us.”

Zarey pulls himself back and closes the window. He looks at the smug expression on Amme’s pretty face. Her human being transformation is flawless. The technicians have given her auburn-colored hair with something called ‘golden highlights’, freckles, a ‘you are a moron’ stare, and a girlish giggle. Amme rolls her eyes, gives her gum a couple of chews, and then blows a large pink bubble.

“You’re a brat, Amme.”

“That’s precisely what I’m supposed to be.”

“To convince people that we’re living with our older sister Charlotte because our parents died in a car accident, you need to like me. A real human girl, the little sister of a human man who takes care of her; she would adore her brother.”

Amme sighs and nods. Zarey turns toward the window to hide a smile. She can tease him, but she must remember to pretend that she adores him too.

“Zarey, this planet has a bizarre class of human being: actors. They pretend to be other humans in something called roles, and they live made-up lives. They even pretend to have different names, mates, children, everything! Why do they do that? Why are some of them paid enormous sums of money? Why does it make some of them famous?”

“I don’t know Amme. We didn’t have to study humans as intensely as Charlotte had to. It sounds dumb to me.”

“You shouldn’t say that,” Amme warns.

“I shouldn’t say what?”

“You shouldn’t just say dumb. Human young people usually say kind’a dumb, or sort’a dumb.”

“Little sister, I think you’re right, my bad. I’ll remember to say kind’a or sort’a. Sometimes they say heck’a.”

“Yeah, they say heck’a a lot,” Amme agrees.

“Amme, did you notice that I said ‘my bad’? That’s a good one.”

“Yeah, that was sort’a smart to say.”

Amme walks to a trash receptacle and discards her gum. She then playfully wraps her arm around Zarey’s waist and gives him a hug. “I wish a Queian could become famous for pretending.”

Zarey gives her a quizzical look.

She laughs, “Pretending to adore you would earn me what humans call an Oscar. I’d deserve an intergalactic Oscar Award.”

He pushes her away. “You are so not funny Amme.”



The technicians have given Zarey reddish brown hair and something called a buzz cut. He has a small hoop earring, with an orange bead on it, piercing his left eyebrow, and trendy clothing fitting for any human obsessed with the latest fashion. He and Amme have camera cell phones, laptops, rollerblades, bicycles, messenger style satchels, blue jeans, baseball caps, and sufficient money in checking and savings accounts to cover their expenses.

Zarey also has a couple of credit cards. They've studied this planet's odd and archaic barter exchange monetary system and are astonished by it.

They have been transported to a metropolitan region called New York City where they own a modest two-bedroom apartment, meaning a place to dwell. Their human friends think it is part of their inheritance. Zarey has the smallest bedroom. Amme and their sister Charlotte, when she arrives, must share the larger one. The apartment is two blocks from Amme's high school, and four blocks from a hip restaurant where Zarey will work as a chef's apprentice. Apparently, it's important on Planet Earth to be *highly esteemed* if you're a chef's apprentice, especially in New York City.

When Zarey enters the restaurant the next morning, the human workers and human diners will fall into a trance. When they recover, their brains will have been programmed to believe they are acquainted with Zarey. He will be known as being a highly esteemed chef's apprentice for the last year and a half.

Likewise, when Amme walks into her school the next morning, the teachers and students will also fall into a trance. When they recover, their brains will have been programmed to recognize her as a popular student.

"Brother, I'm mad about you. Let's go see our new home," Amme said.

They both push a tiny spot under their chins and vanish. Human tourists around them lose memory of their presence.

On the sidewalk, Zarey reaches in his pocket and finds five keys on a ring for the apartment, mailbox, a bicycle chain padlock, his locker at the restaurant, and his locker at a gym

where he is to exercise three times each week. Keys puzzle him. He can't imagine why they are needed. He also can't understand why some humans are fanatical about exercising while others have a strong aversion to it.

The technicians have taught Zarey and Amme how to exercise. It's imperative for them to conceal their physical abilities when they are around others. When they enter the lobby of their building, the doorman tips his hat, and then falls into a brief state of unconsciousness.

"Hello, Mr. Woodmere. How are you this afternoon?"

"Just fine Amme. Have you had a wonderful Sunday?"

"Oh yes, Zarey took me to the Statue of Liberty."

Mr. Woodmere pushes the elevator button and steps aside.



Transitioning Charlotte to Planet Earth has to be seamless. She is the last hope of survival for humans.

Her mother tiptoes into the acclimating chamber. She gazes down at her 125.3-year-old sleeping daughter and kisses her cheek. This assignment is delicate, but Charlotte is prepared. She has diligently primed herself for the challenges she will face, and especially the opposition she will encounter from Sera.

Her adversary likes to destroy weaker beings. She thinks they are inferior and don't deserve to exist. Like Charlotte, she is a 125.3-year-old beauty. Sera will be going to Earth as well, and also in human disguise.

Her single purpose is to eliminate humans. She's been unimpressed with Charlotte's idealistic optimism since they were children. That was long before Sera's parents left Que to join a community of pessimists now living in Egrah, on the outskirts of Que, a mere thousand parsecs away.



Charlotte had to become familiar with, and knowledgeable about, earthling ways. She spent what would be one hour plus

four minutes—according to human time measurements—studying human mannerisms, strengths, weaknesses, hopes, fears, aspirations, and dreams. She completed that lesson, correctly answering every question on the 11,722 pages of the examination test.

A team of technicians designed her body; human in every aspect but for the powerful physical abilities she has taken for granted all her life. These have been temporarily suppressed. Unlike her siblings, Charlotte will not be permitted to use her physical powers. But neither will Sera.

Charlotte stirs when she feels her mother's kiss.

"Dear daughter, Commander is waiting. You must come now."

Charlotte rises from the human queen-sized bed assigned to her and prepares to accompany her mother to the conference section of the missions control center.

The For Planet Earth, FPE control center is self-contained. Most Queian operations utilize a cluster of huge rooms. But, for this small assignment, one room is sufficient. By Planet Earth dimensions, the FPE control center is sixty feet by one-hundred feet; approximately the size of the video scoreboard for the new Yankee stadium in the Bronx, a borough of New York City.

Technicians monitor the system while a computerized brain examines each component, instantaneously detecting, recording, and neutralizing unauthorized activities.

"Mother, my heart pounds with excitement. I want to do this assignment more than any I've ever done. I've studied the lives of countless oxygen breathing organisms, but none fascinate me as much as humans.

"I know they're flawed creatures, so unintelligent that they smoke toxic tobacco leaves and willingly ingest harmful substances. They consume excessive volumes of unhealthy foods that make their bodies susceptible to diseases. Most of them only use a fraction of their brains. But, they will run into a burning building, jump into a raging river, and fight a wild animal to save another human, especially if that human is a child.

"Mother, in their rudimentary archives, I've seen them

willingly remove coats from their own bodies and offer them to others less fortunate. I've watched men work so hard to provide for their families, that they could almost not continue to stand. I have seen hungry women starve so their children could have the food. I've watched children sit up all night with a sick domesticated pet, nursing it back to health. Humans write, sing, and dance. They are inspired and compelled to create expressive art.

"Like other primitive creatures, many are savages with self-serving natures. I know that many are apathetic and slothful. But, the majority of human beings, rich and poor, young and old, have compassionate hearts; they have courage in the face of adversity, and a will to survive. Mother, they are capable of being loving. How lovely it is that they can love! Some primitive beings have no capacity to love."

Her mother kisses her again, "I know you will be victorious Charlotte. Come now, it is time."



When they walk through the iridescent liquid-curtain of the conference section, the committee of transportation stops talking and waits for them to take their seats at the glittery star encrusted oval table. Charlotte sits between the Commander and her mother, across from her father.

The Commander squeezes her hand, "Child, if you wish to change your mind, you may without disgrace."

He is her great grandfather's brother, and Charlotte holds him in high esteem.

"I am eager to do this. I will try with the best of my ability to prevent Sera from destroying humans. She travels from Egrah to obliterate them. I will travel from Que to protect them from her cruel wrath."

"Then you may go. Your siblings are already established in the city where you will live. The dwelling will comfortably accommodate the three of you. You are their older sister from France. For a year and a half you have worked as a ticket agent

at the Statue of Liberty, and you are a part-time art teacher at Amme's school. You know the rest of your assignment.

"Remember, FPE requires that humans must save themselves. You and Sera will mutually select the location for the test and devise a scenario that will unfold naturally. I must warn you Charlotte. You cannot assist the humans. Sera cannot hinder them. This battle between you and Sera must be resolved with a human-nature test. We are confident that you will persevere. Be confident child."



A yellow taxi slows to a crawl, and the driver cranes his neck to give Charlotte a look. She waves the cabbie on and then glances at her attire. She is wearing sandals; the flowing skirt of the variegated green dress falls to her ankles, and a matching shawl drapes around her shoulders. Upon her head is a fog-colored felt hat with a circle of seven embroidered points on the crown. In her left hand is a college law textbook. Her right hand clutches a Nitecore Extreme flashlight.

She walks into a café and purchases a bottle of water. That is when she notices that the technicians have painted her fingernails with bronze colored nail polish. She is thankful for their attention to detail. She has copper-colored hair because the Statue of Liberty is a copper clad statue. It is an honor to be made in such an admirable image.

It is believed that the Statue of Liberty's face was modeled after the sculptor's mother. Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi's mother was named Charlotte.

Charlotte gazes at the clerk, who is intent on giving her a once over. He sees a tall young woman with mild blue-green eyes and long wavy hair. From her clothes, she supposes that he will assume she's an artsy type, perhaps a musician, painter, or a poet. Yes, she decides with a faint smile, she surely looks like an eccentric artist with a French accent.

It is dusk on November 30th. Near the street corner, Charlotte recognizes the restaurant where Zarey will work. As

she walks, she passes the high school where she will teach art classes, and where Amme will be a student. When she strolls into the lobby of the building where she will live, the doorman tips his hat, and then his face relaxes.

“Hello, Mr. Woodmere. How are you this evening?”

“Just fine Charlotte. Zarey and Amme got home a little while ago.”

Charlotte nods, “Oh yes, Zarey took Amme to the Statue of Liberty today. I bought them tickets.”

She pauses, “Mr. Woodmere, will you donate this to a library for me?”

Mr. Woodmere takes the hefty book, pushes the elevator button, and then steps aside. “Certainly, it’s my pleasure.”

“Have a good evening Mr. Woodmere.”

“And a good evening to you too, Charlotte.”

She has memorized Earth’s history and all the laws humans have ever created. She doesn’t need a law book. But, she’ll keep the interesting flashlight. It may come in handy.

Charlotte inserts her key and unlocks the apartment door.

Zarey is cooking something that smells delicious. Amme is setting the table for three and shrieks with delight at the sight of her.

“Zarey, she’s here. Charlotte’s here!”



The merchants have swept the slushy snow away from their buildings. Every shop window is decorated with glowing lights, wrapped gifts, colorful ornaments, garlands, and tinsel. Many of the bedazzling displays have Christmas trees, candy canes, and Santa elves. Charlotte, Zarey, and Amme have been in New York City, according to human time measurements, for twenty-four days and they have enjoyed becoming friends with humans.

Sera, on the other hand, is disgusted that she has been required to live in this revolting city for twenty-four days. She has despised every moment. She is homesick for Egrah and she

loathes human beings. Why Charlotte cares about even one is beyond her comprehension.

What's the point? So many are unproductive losers, users, and abusers, and they're always on the lookout for the next person to take advantage of. Sure, some are decent enough. The rest are decayed.

She has selected her subject; a homeless man who she believes will help her triumph over Charlotte. His name is Thomas, but his sickly mother, a lonely widow, refers to him as Buddy when she talks about him—an affectionate nickname from when he was her precious boy. The last time he visited his mother he stole her money, her late husband's wedding band, and her father's antique gold pocket watch. That visit was a long time ago.

Sera's observations of Buddy have revealed that he has a selfish and callous heart. He swindles people seven days a week. He steals from drunks, pilfering their bottles of alcoholic beverages. Once he attacked a man who refused to give him some spare change. The man told Buddy to get a job. Buddy shoved him to the ground and took his wallet.

She knows that Charlotte has not selected her subject. Charlotte trusts that an empathetic human being will rise to the occasion when the FPE human-nature test is administered. With angry eyes, Sera watches as an annoyed pedestrian kicks a starving cat that is begging for food.

It is 5:45 P.M. The assessment time nears. As she rushes to the subway, she thinks of home. She will return to Egrah tonight, a celebrated warrior.

Amme and Zarey hurry to the subway too.

"Remember Amme, Charlotte's allowing us to witness this test because we've promised to not get in the way. No matter what happens, we cannot interfere."

"I know Zarey. I know what we must do."

Zarey grabs her arm, "What we must do is nothing."

Amme pulls away from his grip, "You don't have to keep reminding me. Charlotte already talked to me."

Charlotte waits for them on the platform. As they enter the

train and take seats, they see that Sera is already there.

Buddy steps into the train, carefully making no eye contact with anyone.

It's Christmas Eve; many people have packages. A pregnant woman wraps her arms around her belly and nervously walks past Buddy. She looks exhausted and grateful that there are some empty seats available. She sits next to Sera.



The train rumbles to maximum speed and Buddy makes his move. He puts his hand in his jacket pocket. The man he will rob at knifepoint relaxes with his eyes closed. Dressed in an expensive suit and a London Fog overcoat, he carries a briefcase—the double thick type favored by attorneys—and wears an expensive watch, an onyx and diamond gold ring, and a wedding band. He is probably someone's father, husband, son, brother, neighbor, and perhaps a little league coach.

As Buddy inches closer to a vacant seat beside this man, a boy stands up, "Mister, you don't have a hat. It's too cold outside to not have a hat."

The boy reaches inside a crumpled sack, pulls out a new stocking hat, and offers it to Buddy.

Buddy glares at the boy, "Thanks, but no thanks. I don't need a hat."

The child's mother smiles, "It's all right. Tommy wants to give stocking hats to people this Christmas. He spent the money his grandparents sent him this year to buy them."

Buddy accepts the hat to get rid of the kid. He puts it on and sits down.

His intended victim opens his eyes. "Mister, you are wearing a fine stocking hat."

Buddy and the man glance at the boy. He is five or six; has a cowlick, and is wearing Harry Potter glasses. He is a funny looking kid with big ears.

Suddenly, a gush of liquid pours down the pregnant woman's legs, and she cries out in pain.

A lady moves forward, “I’m a nurse. How far apart are your contractions? Is there a doctor here? Someone, please ask around. Try to find a doctor.”

The young woman looks terrified, “Not far.”

The nurse rips her own coat off and throws it on the floor. She helps the young woman lie down. The man in the expensive suit and overcoat quickly kneels beside the nurse on the grimy floor.

“Nurse, I’m an attorney, not a doctor. Tell me what to do, and I will help you.”

Amme whispers to Zarey, “Look, they don’t care about getting dirty; they don’t care at all.”

Everyone watches in amazement. The birth happens quickly.

“We need a knife for the umbilical cord. Someone please, who has a knife? We need a knife.”

Buddy fingers the blade in his pocket, looks at Tommy, then gives his knife to the man he had planned to rob. The nurse cuts the umbilical cord and ties it off. The man reaches in his pants pocket and tosses a set of keys to Buddy.

“Please unlock my briefcase. Get my scarf.”

Buddy unlocks the briefcase and takes out a cashmere scarf. The nurse wraps the squalling infant girl in the scarf.



Buddy, the attorney, the nurse, Tommy, Tommy’s mother, Amme, Zarey, Charlotte, and several other passengers watch paramedics take the mother and infant away in an ambulance.

The attorney hugs everybody except Buddy and says, “Look what we’ve shared! I’m assembling a train set tonight after my son goes to sleep and putting training wheels on a pink bicycle after my daughter goes to sleep. My wife will pour me a brandy after I drink half of a glass of milk and we’ll eat two of three cookies our children will leave for Santa.

“As wonderful as all that will be, it can’t compare to helping to bring a little baby into the world on Christmas Eve!”

He walks to Buddy, gives him a bear hug, and slips his hand

into Buddy's jacket pocket. Then he wishes them all a Merry Christmas and goes on his way. When Buddy reaches into his pocket, he finds two crisp one hundred dollar bills.

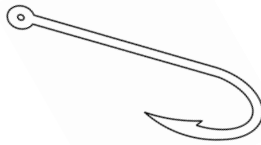
Charlotte, Amme, and Zarey climb the subway stairs. They will attend a Christmas party at Zarey's restaurant tonight and then go to their transport portal, the Statue of Liberty.

No human will remember them the next day. A couple with a spoiled Chihuahua will occupy their apartment.



Sera transported to Egrah the instant Buddy handed over the knife. Ironically, the man she had selected as her own subject defeated her.

In the end, Egrah's cynical counsel committee is profoundly touched by Buddy's change of nature. They decide that Sera should marry Buddy and devote her life to becoming a compassionate human being.





ROY L. PICKERING, JR.

I was born on the idyllic island of St. Thomas, USVI and currently reside in a quaint New Jersey town. In between, my formative years were spent in the Bronx, NY—the setting of my debut novel *PATCHES OF GREY* which was published in January of 2009 by *M.U.D. House Books* and has been lauded with stellar reviews. I am also the author of *FEEDING THE SQUIRRELS*, a novella published in electronic format by *SynergEbooks*. My personal preference when reading work longer than 10 pages is for it to be printed in ink on paper, but if others opt to read my prose by use of an e-reader or cell phone or decoder ring, that's fine by me.

A prolific short story writer, a diverse array of my tales have been published over the years since my graduation from NYU, with several of them collected at my web site—Previous anthologies that have featured my writing include *PROVERBS FOR THE PEOPLE Kensington Books*, *ROLE CALL Third World Press*, *THE GAME: SHORT STORIES ABOUT THE LIFE Triple Crown Publications*, and *PROSE TO BE READ ALOUD, Volume One*. In addition to fiction I enjoy writing about issues in professional sports.

DOUBLE FAULT is a merger of two of my strongest passions, and as for the ending, it's certainly not the only one of my tales to end with a twist. O'Henry was one of the first and strongest influences on my short story writing.

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Double Fault



Roy L. Pickering, Jr.

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I marveled as yet another backhand stroke took off like a canon blast from my racquet strings. The ball headed directly towards its intended destination, sending my opponent scrambling cross-court in vain. He was tiring, each step increasingly labored. Half an hour ago the same shot probably would have been returned, but my rather masterful placement had begun to pay dividends. It was evident to me from our very first match that I was the superior athlete. Strangers would have reached this conclusion strictly at a glance, based on the gut he carried about while my own abdomen is nearly as flat as it was in my teenage years. An accommodating metabolism rather than strict diet and a cardiovascular enhancing workout regimen bore primary responsibility for this.

Despite my higher level of fitness, I continued to be winless against Melvin at tennis. This was at least our fiftieth match. As usual, it was two out of three sets to determine the victor. Quite unusually, our latest match had made it to a third set. Even if a win over Melvin was not guaranteed, I had already achieved the moral victory of not being vanquished in straight sets as had happened in each of our previous matches. But success of the merely moral variety would be vastly insufficient on this day. I reached this conclusion as soon as I took the second set six games to four.

Now that I had Melvin in deep waters, there was no excuse for not stepping up and causing him to drown in a barrage of drop shots and overhead lobs. Either I would secure match point or else cause him to collapse in exhaustion, granting me victory by forfeit. Losing to him after making it this far was unacceptable to my ego. Although our matches are friendly in nature, this being especially critical since we are next-door neighbors, this did not change the fact that I am a competitive person and my pride can only take so much battering.



For this reason, unbeknownst to Melvin, I had been taking private lessons with a former professional for the past couple months. Vlad's expertise was a rather expensive luxury, but my improved performance against Melvin proved that it was paying off. The brand new racquet I was playing with upon recommendation from Vlad handled beautifully. These factors inspired me to step on to the court brimming with confidence that Melvin's term of having my number was coming to an end. My optimism was dealt a blow when he served to start the match and immediately sent an ace past me. He proceeded to hold me at love for the first game, and the second, and the third. By the time he sent a slice into the net to give me my first point of the day, Melvin was well on his way to taking the first set six games to zero.



My head was hanging low when he double faulted to start the second set. When he sent a forehand wide to give me the next point, my pulse began to quicken just a bit. I then hit a winner down the line to reach forty-love and suddenly the impossible was within reach. Every game I ever took from Melvin in the past had been on my own serve. I had come close on a number of occasions, but never managed to break him.

The rally that followed was the longest played between us in all of our matches. He kept going to my backhand, knowing it to be the biggest of my various weaknesses, but I continued to respond and send the ball back to the deepest part of his side of the court. Each of his shots had a little more spin than its predecessor, forcing me lower and lower as the ball dipped with increased pace. My tenth consecutive backhand clipped the net, remained suspended in mid-air for what felt like an eternity or at least the length of the chick flicks my ex-wife liked to rent, and finally fell on Melvin's side. The point and the game was

mine, and even more importantly, the invincible aura of Melvin's service game had been punctured.



Riding the high of this unexpected turn of events, I easily held serve to go up two games to none. As I faced the first of his serves in the next game, cockiness was replaced with nervousness. Ordinarily I was at relative ease when playing Melvin because defeat seemed inevitable each time out. Now that the opportunity to reverse this trend had presented itself, I tensed up with concern that I would blow it. Plenty of muscle was put behind the serve to come. The best I could do was to take a lunging stab at the green blur.

I somehow managed to get the center of my shockingly expensive racquet in the right place at precisely the right time, returning the ball even faster than it had arrived. Melvin could do nothing but watch it rocket past him for a winner. My nerves instantly settled in realization that from this point on I would be giving as good as I got. Five points later I broke him for the second time to go up three games to nada. Things got a little tougher for me after that. Melvin turned up his game a few notches, but it was too little, too late to prevent me from taking the set and removing a tremendous almost literal weight from off my shoulders.



Our first ever third set was an epic seesaw battle. Neither of us could maintain momentum because the other kept snatching it back. After twelve grueling games we were knotted at six apiece. Rather than playing the type of tie breaker used in the pro game, we decided to play one more game to decide the matter. I spun my beautiful new custom strung racquet on the ground. If the letter at the end of the handle came up W, it would be my serve. M would put the ball in Melvin's hands and the match on his racquet. I had been unable to break his serve

in the third set. Unlike previous contests between us, he had not been allowed to casually go through the motions and depend on my unforced errors to give him a substantial number of free points. Each one needed to be earned by performance at maximum capacity. I was dueling with him at his best and ably holding my own.

As the racquet went round and round I looked closely at my worthy adversary's face for signs of weakness. What I found was a stone face expression and enough perspiration trickling down it to form a waterfall. He was breathing heavily from our long rallies and my strategy of running him over as much court as possible before finishing off a point. My greater stamina would have to see me through because luck was not on my side. The Wilson racquet fell and we both peered to find an upside down W. Melvin came close to fully suppressing a grin, but not quite. He walked back wearily to the service line and prepared to finish me off. I set up to return fire with conflagration, unwilling to concede that I would have to wait for another day to end my losing streak.

His first ace flew millimeters beyond my outstretched racquet. The second went right down the T with such ferocity that I didn't bother to move for it, conserving my energy for when it might do me some good. His legs may have been shot but there was nothing wrong with his serving motion. When his next serve went into the net, I knew I would have an opportunity to take the next point. Melvin was adept at a few different styles of serve and skillful at unpredictable placement of them. This made dealing with his first serve a formidable challenge. But when it came to his second serve, he was as reliable as the rise and set of the sun. It came with minimal speed and kicked up high, forcing the receiver back deep. It was a safe serve that forced a timid return, leaving the point up for grabs until someone seized hold of it. I did just that to win the point, and the one after followed an identical pattern. With the set even at thirty, I watched another first serve ace fly by to set up match point for Melvin. On the next point he needed to go to his second serve again, and after a few shots back and

forth I hit a stunning cross court winner for deuce. Advantage next went to Melvin followed by another deuce. The scoring replicated itself nine more times until two consecutive drop shots fell short of his stumbling reach. Advantage was finally in my favor.

His next serve went blatantly wide. This was it. Match point for me on his second serve. I involuntarily held my breath, but quickly realized that breathing would be far more useful. Be calm, be cool, stay focused, and above all else I reminded myself, keep your eyes on the ball. I took a greatly condensed refresher course of Vlad's teachings as Melvin went through his routine of bouncing the ball three times before his toss and swing. Yet I knew that reflecting on my instructor's numerous tips regarding proper form would be useless. I could not will myself to perform with textbook execution. Once the ball was in play things would move too quickly for contemplation. Muscle memory would determine if my strokes were up to the task. Match point could not be treated differently than any other we had played. Succumbing to the pressure of the moment would no doubt cause me to either over or under hit. The final message I recited to myself as Melvin struck the ball was that this was just a game. In the grand scheme of things it would not matter if I won or not. Convincing myself of these lies was a futile effort.



I was unprepared for what transpired next. Melvin did not fall back on his old faithful second serve. Instead he fearlessly went for broke and blasted the ball down the center of the court. Ninety-five percent of it, maybe even a little higher, fell on the wrong side of the line. But the outermost edge nicked it for an ace, the set back at deuce. At least that's what I was supposed to confirm for Melvin.

Instead I stared at the line for a few seconds before raising a finger to falsely call the ball out. Double fault – game, set, match to me I declared with a single digit, the little piggy that stayed

home, pointed things out, and declared my new position in our rivalry as number one. Melvin and I played by the rules of gentlemen. The disbelief that his facial expression shouted was not verbalized. He briefly bowed his head and then trotted to the net. As we shook hands I understood that he knew I had cheated. His eyes spat accusations, but other than to weakly congratulate me for a “nice game” his lips remained pinched shut. I held his gaze and tried to figure out whether it was the intense physical exertion of the past couple hours or a guilty conscience that caused me to suddenly feel overwhelmed by exhaustion rather than euphoric in victory.



The mother of all headaches kicked in about an hour and a half later. Unlike my ex-wife Sheila, who I hate to reference but find it unavoidable on occasion, I do not suffer from migraines. What I do find myself incapacitated by from time to time are brutal tension headaches. During the final six months of our marriage and the ugly divorce proceedings, the frequency of my headaches dramatically increased.

Thank God we had no kids to fight over or else my head probably would have exploded. With lawyers on both sides who were adept at dragging matters out to their fullest possible length, it often seemed that no end was in sight.

Then one day it was officially over. Every “i” had been dotted, every “t” crossed, every applicable line signed on. I was a free man who did not even have to move from my house because Sheila had latched on to a new guy, a wealthy one whose mansion-like home was more to her liking than our humble three bedroom Dutch Colonial. So I bought her out and began the next phase of my life. During this period the biggest changes in my day-to-day have been that my headaches went away, and I developed an enormous passion for the sport of tennis that is shared by my next-door neighbor.



I consider myself to be an honest man, perhaps even a good one. Granted, an application for sainthood won't be filed on my behalf any time soon. I have my fair share of flaws and vices. For a full list of them with considerable embellishment, ask Sheila. Just keep in mind that her application will be even further down in the pile than mine. It was her actions that set the demise of our marriage in full speed motion and placed her towards the top of Santa's naughty list.

I freely admit that I did not live up to the potential she first saw in me, either squandering opportunities or else failing to pursue them aggressively enough. For this perceived sin, Sheila betrayed me. Sometimes I wonder if she would have stepped out on me with another man even if my career and bank account had reached greater heights. But I tend to swiftly change the subject from such useless thoughts. There is no impartial review of the instant replay in life. It works out as it does whether fair to you or not, and that's all there is to it.



The four aspirin I took earlier have failed to make a dent in my headache. Only coming clean will accomplish this feat. I pick up the phone and ask Melvin to come over for a minute, explaining that I have something to tell him that needs to be said face to face. In a desperate moment of weakness I listened to the devil perched on my shoulder whispering in my ear. I temporarily forgot that there is no shame in defeat and no honor in deceit. In order to maintain self-respect, I must make my foyer a confessional. The doorbell summons my moment of truth.

"What's up?" Melvin asks when I open the door but do not invite him in. Our chat will be a brief one. "You said you have something to tell me. I suspected you might, even made a little wager with Claire about it. She won though because you took a half hour longer than I guessed."

The look on his face is the very definition of smug. Melvin's air of superiority over me has been inflated well beyond what another mere victory at tennis would have resulted in.

"I do have a few confessions to make."

"A few? I was only expecting one."

"Well, you're going to get three," I inform him. "Do you remember about six months ago when your Sunday newspaper was not delivered?"

"Not really."

"Trust me, it happened. I ought to know because I'm the one who snatched your New York Times that day. I should have denied the impulse, but I didn't. I apologize for it."

"Oh, okay. That isn't such a big deal. I'm glad you told me if it makes you feel better to get it off your chest."

"It does. My second confession is for something I did about four months ago. Remember the dent you discovered in your car?"

"That was *you*?"

"I'm afraid so. Once again, my sincerest apology. The driveway had a thin coating of ice, my car got away from me for a few seconds, and your car took the hit. I didn't want my insurance to go up. Ordinarily I would have offered to reimburse you for the repair charge, but I was consumed with how much money the divorce was costing me. I knew it was a jerk move on my part, but then it turned out you have a cousin who is a mechanic and you got it taken care of for free. So I figured all is well that ends well and kept my mouth shut."

"Until now."

"Yes, until now."

"What's so special about today?" Melvin asks, anxious for me to get to the confession he has been expecting.

"Just felt a need to put my accounts in order, which leads me to confession number three."

Melvin smiles like a little boy coming downstairs on Christmas morning and seeing a big gift-wrapped box that he was certain contains what he wants most out of everything in the world.



It is not until this moment that I realize just how much he must have enjoyed beating me at tennis all those times. He never gloated, never bragged, yet he had become spoiled, taken domination of me for granted. That is, up until today when I made the call that awarded bitter victory to me. Only I can reverse it and restore the natural shape of our rivalry, with him back on top. I want to smack the satisfied grin off his face, but instead speak my piece.

“When I found out that Sheila was cheating on me, I did not confront her right away. I decided to take the payback route. There’s this woman in the neighborhood that had made it clear on more than one occasion that she was willing and able whenever I was. She said her husband did not know how to please her.

“I knew I wasn’t the first guy she had propositioned like this because two others told me she made them the same offer, and they both took her up on it repeatedly. After I found out what Sheila was up to, I took my place in this woman’s line, also repeatedly. We did everything I could think of that I never would have suggested to my wife, but nothing was too kinky or degraded for this woman. She gave new meaning to freakiness, at least in my own personal sexual dictionary.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Melvin asks, clearly intrigued by what I’m saying yet still impatient for what he had come to hear. “What the heck does it have to do with me?”

“Think about it, Melvin. Tell Claire that me and the fellas say hello.”



I close the door with rude quickness in case he is faster at releasing a punch than at figuring things out.

It is beyond debate that I ventured well across the line. This is a shame, perhaps to eventually blossom into a regret.

After all, well matched tennis competition is hard to find.





KATE QUINN

Kate Quinn is a native of southern California. She attended Boston University, where she earned a Bachelor's and Master's degree in Classical Voice.

She wrote a historical novel in Boston University's basement computer lab during her freshman year of college, and held down any day job she could find until it was accepted for publication. Titled *MISTRESS OF ROME*, it is scheduled for publication with *Berkley Books* in April 2010. Kate is currently planning both a sequel and a prequel to *MISTRESS OF ROME*. She now lives in San Diego with her husband, and her interests include opera, movies, cooking, and the Boston Red Sox.

THE SUPPER. God and the Devil have dinner once a year. Whatever do they talk about?

STRING OF PEARLS. Nora is a serene and middle-aged Cornish woman, welcoming her young niece into an insular seaside village. Nora is also the Undine—but what is that?

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The Supper

Kate Quinn

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When I returned from my usual daily tour of my domain, I found a business card waiting in the salver on the hall table. I picked up the stiff ivory-colored rectangle, turned it over. Across the back was a jotted note in copperplate gold script: "Would dinner at eight be convenient? Godfrey."

'Yes' I wrote across my own black-bordered business card, and signed my name at the bottom: 'Nick.' Then I rang for my butler. He appeared, his suit impeccable, his manner containing the perfect degree of haughtiness and civility. Only the glow of his eyes and the hint of flame at his nostrils betrayed what he was.

"Sir?"

"Who delivered the card, Mephistopheles?"

"Michael, sir."

"Very good. Send this on up."

He took my card, and went to the door. I couldn't hear his words, but the tones of icy disapproval carried clearly. Mephistopheles dislikes Michael, has disliked him ever since their original battle at the dawn of the world, and will very likely go on disliking him until Judgment Day. Demons are very single-minded creatures.

He returned, radiating displeasure. "Will there be anything else, sir?"

"Arrange for dinner at eight. Dry white wine, pheasant under glass, asparagus in butter, and trifle with strawberries." It is winter, I believe, and strawberries will be out of season—but I can always get them. Things grow surprisingly nicely in Hell; the earth is very black, and there are never any blighting frosts.

I returned to my dim, rich chamber and read Trollope. I have been reading Trollope since he published his first book, and I have followed his career faithfully. I am now in the middle of the Barsetshire novels; I'd have finished them long

ago if I weren't such a busy man, and if I hadn't become distracted by Hemingway.

When my ebony clock struck seven-thirty, I laid down my book and allowed the imps to dress me. I used to be attended by succubi, but they too are single-minded creatures, and very inconvenient if one has a schedule to meet.

I dressed in black tie; Godfrey and I only dine together once a year, so it is something of an occasion. I looked into the mirror as I fastened my tie, and the glass flickered, as it always does. I suppose that's because I have so many shapes: the Devil with horns and tail, Satan of the flickering forked tongue and the red eyes, Lucifer of the Old Testament, Beelzebub of the goat's haunches and cloven hooves... I prefer the guise of Old Nick, who is dark and urbane and unfailingly polite. I look rather like Lord Robert Dudley, although I suppose he's a bit out of your century. Picture Alec Baldwin with a slight orange gleam to his eyes; I look like that.

When I was suitably readied, I checked the dining room. The pheasant was succulent, the wine cooling in its ice bucket, the trifle shivered slightly. The candles burned steadily upward, lighting the red brocade walls and the mahogany table with dim, rich brilliance. The imps had done a beautiful job, although they too disapprove of Godfrey's visits.

"Sir, may I announce the lord Adonai, Jehovah—"

"I know the titles, Mephistopheles." I turned towards the door. "Hullo, Godfrey."

"Hullo, Nick."

He stood easily in the doorway, handing his hat and cane over to the icily polite Mephistopheles. Godfrey, too, flickers in the frame of a mirror. He is the stern long-bearded Patriarch of the Old Testament, the just and vengeful Almighty of the Puritans, the gentle, contemplative, loving God of a fresh young world. He is Buddha, Allah, Great Spirit, and Supreme Being.

To me he is Godfrey, a solid-shouldered man of medium height whose direct gaze and air of quiet command belay the grey in his hair. A man in old-fashioned top hat and tails like a

Victorian gent; a civilized and decent man; a remnant from a better age. Anthony Hopkins might play him, in a movie.

"Are you well, Nick?"

"Well enough. You?"

"The same."

We ate in easy silence. There would be time for talk later. We never rush, Godfrey and I. We have all the time in the world. At last we pushed our plates back, where the imps whisked them into invisibility, and I offered him a cigar. I poured into his glass a brandy that made him raise his brows in appreciation.

"1884 Armagnac," he said, and I lifted my glass in acknowledgment. We drank slowly, alternating with drags on our cigars.

How did it start, this tradition of ours? We are enemies, opposites. We oppose each other in every battle. I am loathed while he is revered. He, who feels no hate, should come closest to it in his feelings for me. I, to whom hating comes easily, should hate him.

In the beginning, it was like that. Full of zeal for our respective positions, we never spoke, never met, never corresponded except by courier. But curiosity eventually got the better of us; we began to exchange guarded notes now and then. And now you could say we are friends, for neither of us chose our jobs, and we cannot help it if we like each other.

"Any business?" Godfrey asked, breaking into my thoughts.

"Only a few mistakes. I'll make my usual apologies and send them on up. A stockbroker, a writer, a lawyer—"

"A lawyer?" Godfrey smiled. "How unusual. I haven't any for you, Nick. Not as many crossed wires this year."

"Remember when John F. Kennedy was sent down here?"

"Junior?"

"No, the first one. Punishment for all his cover-ups, I suppose, but try telling that to any of the Americans. I got more protest petitions that first week—"

"So did I. Even from the Monroe girl, although after what that family did to her..."

“And speaking of Miss Monroe, I don’t suppose you could find it in you to send her down to visit me—?”

“Nick.”

“Sorry, Godfrey.”

We fell into another comfortable silence. But this one stretched out too long, hung waiting for the question that would eventually emerge, as it always did.

“Shall we trade places this year, Godfrey?”

The very walls of my rich, insubstantial house rippled with shock. Godfrey swirled the brandy around in his glass. “I’m tempted, Nick,” he said. “I always am. And I always wonder what your motive is for offering.”

“It’s the Devil’s Bargain, Godfrey. What a feather you would be in my cap.” It’s true enough; part of me enjoys the thought. But it’s not my only motive, and Godfrey knows it.

“And?”

“I get tired,” I said, “of hating.”

He nodded, and I continued.

“I get tired of being suspicious. Of looking at a couple in love and seeing only lust, of looking at every friendship and finding only calculation, of looking at altruism and seeing only self-serving vanity.

“Breathing in the fumes of acid has made me unable to smell daisies, as it were. I can’t see love, or bravery, or kindness, or unselfishness. I see only lust, cowardice, cruelty, and greed. I’m tired of looking for the bad in everything, and finding it. I’m tired of offering Faust’s bargain to every dumb schmuck who thinks he’s so clever he can trick me...and I want to warn them that they can’t, but they’re all too stupid to believe me.

“There’s really very little evil in Hell, Godfrey—just stupidity. And I’m tired of stupidity, too, because I have nothing and no one to talk to. Only you,” I raised my glass, “and every year you force me to admit all of this, and I wonder why you do it.”

Godfrey puffed thoughtfully on his cigar. “To remind myself why I like you, Nick. Because most of the time, I don’t. I see plenty of your work—”

“Not mine. My agents. I don’t run this organization; I’m just the CEO. I’m not allowed to interfere with how it works.”

“Nor am I. The archangels run everything without my assistance. I get the feeling I’m a bit of a third wheel, sometimes.”

“That expression is eighty years out of date, Godfrey.”

“It suits me. Because sometimes I think that I am, too. Old and out of date.”

He looked at me. “What am I for, Nick? Why was I created? I do nothing. I sit on top of a vast machine set up long before I got there, and I can’t interfere with the way it works. But I have the privilege of hearing it. Day and night, people invoke my name. They bargain, they plead, they scream for help. And I can do nothing. Nothing. My ears ring with prayers, my dreams echo with pleas. I am never free of them. I see joy and I rejoice in it, but suffering is louder, and my ears ring with suffering from morning to night.

“The fall of Acre made me sick. World War Two nearly killed me. Every man who dies has a moment for a prayer. I hear them all. For thousands of years, I have had no peace. Even now, a little girl is asking me for a dollhouse on her birthday, and a soldier in Kosovo is begging me to let him die before the surgeons take his leg off.

“And the worst part of it, Nick, is that I can’t shrug it away. I can’t close my ears, or become indifferent, because of what I am. I love these people. I love the little girl, I love the soldier in Kosovo, I love the American who shot him and who is now carving another notch in the butt of his machine gun, and boasting. You say hating is a burden, Nick: what about loving? I love indiscriminately. I love people I cannot possibly like or condone. I loved Hitler when he ordered *Kristallnacht*, and I loved the Jews he murdered. How is that possible?

“People say it is because my heart is great, but I say it is because I am a fool. I was made wrong. I love everyone; that is as great a fault as hating everyone. And I was given the capacity to appreciate suffering, but no power to relieve it.”

The silence was long after that. The heatless fire danced. We drank our brandy from glasses that would not smudge, and tapped cigar ash onto a rug that would not scorch.

"Hitler is burning, Godfrey," I said then, deliberately. "He digs eternal graves for a pile of bones which gets no smaller, and the air he breathes is the gas from *Zyklon-B* poison crystals. He suffers, and he will suffer for another three thousand years. I made sure of it."

Godfrey's hand shook as he lowered his glass. "Thank you, Nick."

"I was glad to do it."

There was no more to be said after that. We sat in the weary quiet of two people who need to say nothing. What, indeed, is there to say? In all the world, there will be no one to understand Godfrey but me, and no one to understand me but him. We are unique. And we are alone.

He rose at last, the gold cufflink flashing discreetly in his sleeve as he straightened his tie. I walked him to the door, handed him his top hat and white evening scarf with my own hands.

"Good-night, Godfrey."

"Good-night, Nick. Next year?"

"Next year."



String of Pearls



Kate Quinn

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I saw the puff of smoke before I saw the train, a grey cloud above the crag, hovering in the blue sky before the train swept down on the station like a mechanical wolf. I waited as gears ground and doors opened. I was the only person waiting on the platform; we get few visitors in Covell.

The train pulled away with a screech, and I saw my niece: a tall girl in a blue coat, a plaid tam on her dark hair, a suitcase in one narrow brown hand. She had a three-cornered face with a blank expression.

"Hullo, Aunt Nora." She made no move to hug me. I offered her my hand instead, and after a moment's hesitation, she shook it.

"Hullo, Halcyon Grenville," I returned.

"Hallie. I've never gone by Halcyon."

"Hallie, then." My Cornish vowels sounded broad next to her clipped London accents.

"Thank you for meeting me here. Will we go to your house now?"

"Yes."

"I have a cell phone if we need to call a cab."

"We'll walk."

She has my eyes, Halcyon Grenville. Grey, elongated at the corners, fringed with dark straight lashes. My eyes. I wonder what my sister thought of that.



Hallie politely took her suitcase up to her room, politely accepted the cup of tea I gave her, politely sat in the rocking chair and sipped. I wonder what my sister told her about me.

"Is your room comfortable?"

"Very, thank you."

"There are extra blankets under the bed if you need them. Cornish nights are cold, even in June."

"Mmm."

"How long were you on the train?"

"Since this morning."

"I'm sorry I couldn't come to the funeral."

"That's all right. Mam wouldn't have—" I turned in time to see a deep flush mount in Hallie's cheeks.

"Your mother wouldn't have wanted me there anyway," I finished. "Your mother didn't like me, Hallie. I know that, and so do you. No need to tip-toe."

A spark of curiosity lit her eye. "Why?"

"Well, I'm a great deal older than she. I was twenty when she was born. That makes me sixty-two, now. And then, she was always making plans to get out of Covell as soon as she grew up. I wanted to stay." I shrugged. "Differences."

"She didn't talk about you much," Hallie said abruptly. "But I could read between the lines."

"Yes, you seem quite bright." I turned to look at her. "I had hoped you wouldn't dislike me, Hallie. Perhaps you need a few days to figure that one out. For now, I'll say good-night." ¶She didn't smile. But she looked as if she might like to.



"Can we see the townie?" Nine-year-old Simon tugged his hand from his mother's and ran to me. "Can we see her?"

"Call her Hallie, not 'townie.'"

"But she's from London, isn't she?"

"Yes, she is. And she's still asleep, so keep your antics down." I pushed a cookie into his hand, laughing as he shot off in pursuit of the cat.

"He expects the townie to have green hair." His mother Gartred brushed back a bit of straying hair. She was a tall, rawboned woman in jeans and rain slicker, her only ornament a pearl strung around her neck on a plaited flax thread. "And three eyes, like the Martians in his comic books."

"He's nine, Gartred. He's never seen a Londoner in his life."

"That's so." Her eyes traveled up the stairs. "How is she settling in?"

"All right, from what I could see. She's reserved."

"No easy thing for a townie to settle in with fisher folk like us."

"She's born to it. My sister was fisher folk."

"Queer name, Hallie."

"It's not her full name." I smiled, knowing the effect I was about to make. "My sister named her Halcyon."

Gartred's eyes widened, and a smile broke across her face. "And here we thought your sister never looked back after she packed her suitcase." A glance at me. "Might bring good luck, the Undine's niece bein' called Halcyon."

"Morning, Aunt Nora." Hallie stood yawning in the doorway. "Sorry I slept in."

"Quite all right. Hallie, this is Gartred. She lives next door. And somewhere around here is Simon."

Simon pounded into the room, face sticky with chocolate, and skidded to a halt, looking up at Hallie. "You don't have green hair," he observed.

"That'll be enough out of you." Gartred grasped his hand firmly. "Hallie has lots of settling in to do. Lovely to meet you, dear." Simon waved chubby fingers as he was tugged out the door, sunlight gleaming off his barley-fair hair.

"Sit down, and I'll fetch some breakfast." I shoed Hallie over to the table.

"What was it she called you when I came in?" A gleam of curiosity lit the eyes that looked like mine.

"The Undine." I spooned hot oatmeal into a clay bowl. "It's an honorary position I hold here in Covell."

"What do you do?"

"Nothing, really," I said easily. "It's an old tradition more than anything. Back in the middle ages, the Undine blessed the village on Midsummer's Day, and her touch was supposed to keep the villagers from drowning. We still have the ceremony,

but it's more for tradition's sake. Traditions die hard in a place like this."

"What did Gartred mean when she said my name was good luck?"

"Halcyon means calm." I smiled, placing her bowl before her. "Even now, the fishermen pray for calm seas. Eat up, now, and I'll show you around the town."



Covell clings to the Cornish cliffs like a little grey jewel. The houses are built of weathered grey wood, knotted and swirled like the rain-swept waves of the sea. The streets are narrow, still paved with the rough cobblestones laid down over two centuries ago. I saw it all new through Hallie's gaze as I took her on a tour of her new home. Her London-bred eyes, accustomed to crowded buildings, peered into the lush green gardens surrounding each house; her traffic-savvy feet trod the car-free streets with caution. Her nose wrinkled up at the smell of brine and herring that washed over everything, but she soon forgot the reek of fish and became fascinated by the sight of the fishermen hauling in their nets in the trawlers as their fathers had done before them.

"Don't they have machinery to do that?" She pointed to a man bent nearly double beneath a net full of cod.

"We don't need it," I answered. "Things change slow in Covell. The old ways work well enough, at least for now."

"Mam didn't like the old ways. She thought they were stupid and slow."

"Your mam liked the fast track. Life moves slowly out here, true. The sea doesn't count time, and neither do we."

"How long has Covell been here, Aunt Nora?"

"The oldest stone in our graveyard reads 1278. And there are older graves, marked by cairns. Would you like to see the graveyard?"

We drew glances as we turned away from the harbor and walked towards the graveyard. "That's the Undine's niece,"

came a whisper or two. "Halcyon Grenville..." Hallie lifted her chin, and I was proud of her. "They'll forget in a week or two," I told her. "Not much new happens here, so for the time being you are news."

"They think I don't belong here."

"I tell them differently. They'll believe me."

Unexpectedly, a smile touched her mouth. "You could say the earth was flat, and make people believe you."

"The earth," I said severely, "is not flat."

"Yes, Aunt Nora." A flash of laughter escaped her Grenville eyes.

The Covell graveyard is a peaceful place. The stones lean grey and crooked in the long grass, and the trees arch overhead like the ribs of a great ship. "Beautiful trees." Hallie laid her hand on a vast smooth trunk. "Beech?"

"Oaks, with mistletoe growing between. People say that the trees were planted by Druids, who founded Covell as a place of worship."

"Do you believe that?"

"It's a pretty story, anyway."

She bent to brush a leaf from a stone. "I can see why people like to be buried in graveyards. It gives the family a place to visit them—a sense of permanence. Are people still buried here?"

"Everyone. Each family has their own burial space. Here is the Grenville plot." I led her to a patch of shade beneath a spreading oak, watching with a smile as Hallie tramped among her ancestors to read their lives on the stones.

"My mother would have been buried here if she'd stayed in Covell. But she wanted to be cremated." Hallie brushed a leaf from a stone. "Will you be buried here, Aunt Nora?"

"No, I'll have a place in that corner." Hallie followed me, curious, to a new batch of tombs. The names here were all women. Hesitant, she read them aloud. "'Elizabeth Cartwright, 1694 to 1753. The Undine.' 'Anne Gardiner, 1753-1798. The Undine.' 'Deborah Welles, 1798-1842. The Undine.'" She looked up at me. "All the Undines are buried here?"

"Yes."

“The dates back up on each other.”

“It’s their terms of service, not their life spans.”

“Why?” Her musing voice overlapped mine. “Tradition.” Her chin poked up in a gesture I was beginning to recognize. “I like tradition,” she said boldly, and looked around as if she expected a cry of alarm from her mother.

I laughed. “Good. I like it too.”

She bent down to brush her fingers over the newest tombstone. “‘Laura Eddington. The Undine.’ Your predecessor?”

“Yes.”

“Funny, how none of these stones just say The Undine. Never ‘Beloved Wife Of’ or ‘Mother Of.’”

“The Undines are always spinsters.”

“Why? Oh, I know. ‘Tradition.’ What’s this design here, under the name—the row of circles? All the Undines have that pattern.”

“It’s the ceremonial string of pearls. Every Undine has a pearl necklace.”

“Do you have one?”

“Certainly.” I folded down my collar so she could see my Undine’s necklace: forty-two fine white pearls strung loose along a plaited flax thread.

“They’re beautiful.” Hallie touched the pearls with one finger, and then bounded ahead to look at the other tombstones. “You know,” she called back, “none of these stones ever say, ‘Drowned’ or ‘Lost At Sea.’ Funny for a fishing village.”

“We are very good fishermen in Covell,” I said lightly, tucking my pearls in close to my skin. “We don’t often drown. Come, you should see the ocean from Covell Crag.”

Covell Crag is a white rock that juts out over the ocean. The waves smash into the rocks forty feet below, and the currents are deadly. But the light there has a peculiar clarity, and the air is like wet silk. I heard Hallie suck in a breath as she stood on the crag and looked out over the ocean. The waves lashed themselves into frenzy on the rocks, and the wind tore fiercely

at her hair. The sharp smell of salt blew over our noses, and the sky was a maelstrom of tinted green and violet and blue, like paint stirred by the hand of God. Hallie turned back to me, breathless, exhilarated. “The sea will swallow Covell right up one of these days, Aunt Nora.”

I shook my head. “No, we’ve made our peace with the sea. She’ll let us be.”

Hallie tilted her head. “You sound like a sibyl.”

“Come home,” I smiled, “and the sibyl will make you some cocoa.”



Hallie settled into Covell with barely a ripple. A few brows were raised initially at her London voice and her iPod, but she was my niece, and the village accepted her. She went to school with trepidation, and came bounding back that afternoon with a glowing face and Maura Cartwright for a study partner. They did more giggling and texting on their phones than studying, but the sound did my heart good.

She settled in tentatively, scarcely daring to like the place that her mother had loathed. I was pleased to see that she did like Covell, liked the silence and the sea and the serenity of the traditions that lived around her. She liked to sit on Covell Crag, watching half-fascinated and half-horrified as the fishermen plied their precarious trade on the slippery rocks. “I don’t know how they do it,” she exclaimed one afternoon as I was kneading bread dough. “I don’t see how they can stay outside all day, all year, without getting swept away by those currents. I’d be dead in a week.”

“No, you wouldn’t.”

“Why not?”

I half-smiled and punched the dough flat.

“You’re awfully—peaceful,” Hallie said suddenly. “You’re never in a rush. With Mam it was always hurry hurry hurry.”

“It’s roots, that’s all.” More flour on the rolling pin, another turn of the dough. “Your Mam was a footloose creature from

the day she was birthed. It's how she was happy. Being still, putting my roots down in one place, that's what makes me happy."

"I'm—a bit more like you, aren't I, Aunt Nora?" Hallie cleared her throat. "You know, Mam always wanted me to get colored contact lenses; blue, or green, or hazel. She didn't like my eyes." Hallie's grey Grenville glance flicked up at me.

"Put down your roots if you like," I said softly. "No one'll come along to transplant you now."

She gave a smile so sweet my heart turned over. That was the night she stopped crying.



Gartred and I were knitting on the porch one fine afternoon and little Simon playing at our feet when Hallie and Maura Cartwright thumped up the steps.

"No school this Wednesday?" I overheard Hallie saying. "Why not?"

"It's the Shelling."

"What's that?"

"It's when we pick the Child of the Sea."

"What's that?" said Hallie patiently.

"Your aunt's the Undine, and you don't know about the Child of the Sea?"

Gartred shot me a glance. I kept on sewing, the voices of the girls pattering over my ears.

"On Midsummer's Day we have a Parade of the Sea," Maura was explaining. "Games, races, pageants. The Child of the Sea presides over everything. Like a Harvest King or Queen."

"And you pick the Child of the Sea during the—what's it called?"

"The Shelling. The men gather a big heap of mussels, and the children shell them. One's got three pearls inside. Whoever finds the pearls gets to be the Child of the Sea."

"I don't know how to shell a mussel."

"You're too old. It's for the little kids, really. All the ones under ten."

Gartred's eyes fell on Simon, contentedly zooming toy cars off the porch railing. He was nine; this year would be his last Shelling. "Nora."

"Mmm?"

"Will you be taking Hallie to the Shelling?"

"No reason why not, Gartred."

Gartred's fingers fiddled with the single pearl around her neck. We continued our knitting, backed by the laughter of the girls.



The morning of the Shelling dawned fair and bright. "What should I wear?" Hallie said anxiously. "I don't want to look like a townie."

"Wear a sweater. It may look warm outside, but these sea breezes blow straight from the north." I looped my string of pearls tight around my neck, and the two of us sallied forth.

"Where's the Shelling held, Aunt Nora?"

"Covell Crag. Last night the men dragged up all the mussels they could find. One has the three pearls."

"Who puts the pearls in?"

"No one."

"But pearls don't come in mussels; they come in oysters. So someone has to pry a shell open, put the pearls in, and glue it back together, right?"

I smiled.

"You're not going to tell me," Hallie sighed. "That's your Undine face."

The Shelling children gathered in behind us, chattering and laughing. They ranged in age from four to nine, and they all had been equipped with sharp little shelling knives. "It's quite safe," I laughed, seeing Hallie's doubtful expression. "They've been shelling mussels in their mams's kitchens since they were three."

“And they all want to be—what did you call it? The ‘Child of the Sea?’”

“You couldn’t keep them away. They only get a few tries at it, you know. Once they reach the age of ten, they’re too old.”

“Says who?”

“Says tradition.”

The older children and their parents strolled along behind, gossiping and laughing. It was a festive mood; old John Penhallow already had out his fiddle and was tripping old Cornish tunes. We mounted Covell Crag like a triumphal procession, and the children bunched eagerly at the sight of the black dripping heap of mussels.

“Bet you I’ll find the pearls,” little Simon boasted. “Like Nancy did.”

“Nancy?” Hallie wondered.

“His big sister,” I heard Maura explaining. “She was Child of the Sea—oh, it must have been three years ago. Died that same fall, poor sweetie. Pneumonia on her lungs.”

Hallie’s exclamation of sympathy was drowned by the eager shouts of the children. “Can we, Nora? Now? Now?”

I waved my hand. “Now.”

There was a rush of small bodies and a flash of little knives as they hurled themselves on the mussels. Each of the children elbowed themselves a place, expertly splitting the black shells. I saw Simon’s bright head bend low over an open shell, searching the flaccid grey meat for the pearls.

Gartred was sensibly unpacking a blanket to sit on, and the other women followed suit. “Best sit down and eat,” I told Hallie, unpacking a hamper of meat pasties and smoked herring. “It could take all morning.”

Maura dragged her off to sit with the other girls, who giggled and tossed their blowing hair and threw glances to the boys. The men jostled with much hilarity around the whiskey bottle that someone had stowed in the bottom of his hamper. Their wives settled down to sample each other’s nut-bread and gossip. A peaceful scene; I wondered how much it had changed over the hundreds of years it had taken place.

"I found 'em! I found 'em! Lookee here!" Simon waved a mussel over his head jubilantly.

"All right you little joker, let's see." I held out my hand. Hopping with excitement, he tipped three white pearls into my palm. I rolled them back and forth, and the sun struck a rich luster from the surfaces.

"Congratulations, Gartred." I looked up at my friend. "Your son is this year's Child of the Sea."

Simon let out a war whoop, and his mother reached out to ruffle his hair.

The rest of the day sank into hilarity, as always happens. Simon was perched on top of the crag and crowned with seaweed. I kissed his hand with much solemnity, and the rest of the villagers followed suit. I saw Hallie scramble to get into line, giggling as she caught sight of Simon's regal expression. And oh, how the tunes from the fiddle soared.

"That was a lovely day, Aunt Nora," my niece yawned as we finally turned our backs on the setting sun and headed for home. "Reminds me of the harvest festivals I used to see in those little farming towns. But nicer." Her voice had a tinge of nationalist pride.

"Your mam never told you about the Shelling?"

"No, she just lumped it all together under the heading 'stupid village superstitions.' Hey, are those the pearls?"

"Yes." I held up one of the small white spheres. "This will go to Simon on the day we hold the Parade of the Sea."

"When's that?"

"On Midsummer's Day, of course. These old customs rely so heavily on proper dates." I held up the second pearl. "This one will go to Gartred."

"She already has one. Did it come from the time Simon's sister got to be Child of the Sea?"

"Yes, each year the Child's mother gets a pearl. Quite a few women in Covell have them, you'll notice."

"And the third pearl?"

“Is mine.” I unknotted the plaited flax thread around my neck and slipped on the newest addition. “The Undine always keeps the third one.”

“You’ve got quite a necklace there. How many Shellings have you seen?”

“Forty-two, now. One a year since I turned twenty. Many children. I could still tell you all their names.”

“Do that sometime, Aunt Nora.” Hallie’s hand slipped briefly into mine.



The Parade of the Sea starts well before dawn. It was still dark outside when I roused Hallie. “Can’t it wait at least until dawn?” she yawned, shivering in the biting cold.

“Not according to the Druids. Pity, isn’t it? I always feel sick, getting up this early.”

“You don’t look very well. Maybe you should get someone else to stand in.”

“Oh, it’ll pass; it always does. But why on earth can’t Druids do anything at a sensible hour like normal folk?”

“What are you doing now, Aunt Nora?”

“Getting out all my Undine paraphernalia.” I threw open the lid of the little wave-carved wooden chest that sat at the foot of my bed. “The conch shell, symbol of the sea. And the fishing knife, symbol of the fisher folk.”

“That shell’s huge! Big enough for a mixing bowl – it’s all dirty and crusty inside, though. Should I run it under the faucet?”

“No, just hand it over. A little dirt never hurt anyone.” I tucked the sickle-shaped knife into my belt.

“What’s that rattling around in the bottom of the chest? Pebbles?”

“Pearls. The necklaces of the past Undines.”

“There’re hundreds of them!” She stirred the pearl strings with her fingers. There were nineteen strings in all. “Aren’t you afraid they’ll get stolen? They must be awfully valuable.”

“No one here would touch them. They’re almost sacred.”

“Only in Covell,” Hallie laughed. “In London you’d have to keep them in a bank.”

The torches were already lit and the parade assembled when we hurried outside. Simon was gritty-eyed but bouncing with the excitement of it all. “Where do I stand?” Hallie whispered.

“At the front, of course. Take Simon’s other hand.”

“Hi, townie,” he whispered.

“Hi, brat,” she whispered back.

The three of us locked hands and led the parade straight up towards Covell Crag. The torches wound along behind, single file and in total silence. Even Simon slowed his bouncing in response to the solemnity.

Dawn was just breaking when we reached the crag. I gently pushed Simon out to the forefront, standing behind with my hands on his shoulders. Gartred and Hallie squeezed in on either side. The rest of the torches came to rest, and we stood still to watch.

It’s a simple ritual, almost no ritual at all. Watching the waves turn pink and then gold, watching the sun slip up over the horizon. Watching the dawn – probably the oldest of all rituals. When the sun hung full and warm over the ocean, I quietly slipped a plaited flax thread over Simon’s head, and folded his warm, moist little palm over the pearl.

“Heave!” The cry went up, and the torches sailed lazily through the air, over the crag, and into the water forty feet below.



Breakfast was pasties and fruits and pints of fresh cream. And afterwards, the Sea Festival began.

There was a Crab Race, where the children frantically scuttled sideways like little crustaceans. There was a shell hunt, prizes going to the first child to find the hidden conch. More prizes went to the man who could mend a net the fastest. The smallest children competed with toy boats, the larger children

with real ones. Ill-tempered lobsters yanked that morning from their tidepools were decked with ribbons like racehorses and set to race. There were swimming contests of various lengths; Hallie came second in the fifty-yard dash out to the end of the pier, and her smile rivaled the sun.

Simon was King of the Sea Festival. He sat up over everyone on a special heavy chair draped with fishing nets and seashells, a kelp crown sitting on his barley-fair hair. He handed out prizes to the winners, and settled disputes over finish lines. Sometimes when the temptation was too great he wriggled off his throne to join in the fun, pearl gleaming at the soft hollow of his throat. He presided over the evening's feast, solemnly intoning the old toast to the sea. And he got the first bite of every dish.

"Ooof, I'm stuffed." Hallie leaned back in her chair, yawning. "I'll be fat as a pig if we eat like this every day. Fat and sleepy as a pig."

"Don't go to sleep yet. We've still one last ritual to go."

"Which one's that?"

"The sunset ritual."

"We all get blessed," Maura explained to Hallie. "So no one will drown in the new year."

The sunlight was just beginning to slant over the rooftops when the sunset parade formed. More torches were lit, and once more Hallie and I took Simon's hands and led the procession up towards Covell Crag. Simon's feet dragged from weariness, but his eyes were still bright. He was the only child of his age allowed to walk in the sunset parade; the others had long since trudged off home, sleepy and sandy and ready for bed.

Once more the silent village clustered on the crag to watch the sun retire. I glanced over at Hallie; in the orange light her face was peaceful. Simon's little shoulders moved under my hands as he sighed and touched the pearl at his throat. "I likes being the Child of the Sea, Nora." We all smiled.

When the lower rim of the flame-colored disc touched the waves, I spoke. Ancient words. Silly words, perhaps, but not here, not now, and not to us.

"Lords of the sea, we have come once more to worship. For a year we have accepted your bounty and your protection. In the name of this child we have crowned in your honor, we thank you. Taste him, and know him."

Gartred brought up my massive conch shell, which she'd filled with seawater and carried all the way up from the village. I looked down at the Child of the Sea. "It's easier if you don't fight, Simon."

Hallie looked puzzled. "Aunt Nora, what are you—"

I may be an old woman, but my hands are still strong. I linked my fingers behind Simon's head and pressed his face down into the water.

"What are you *doing*?" Hallie came forward, but old John Penhallow grabbed her wrist and pulled her back. Simon began to thrash, but my hands were strong on his neck and his mother held the massive shell steady. Bubbles drifted up frantically from the little submerged face.

"*Aunt Nora!*"

Simon struggled. Gartred's face was white.

"Aunt Nora, stop!"

One last flail of the little arms, and Simon went still.

That was when I yanked him up briskly, and pounded him between the shoulder-blades. "You were very brave, Simon. Now go ahead and cough."

He coughed again and again, spitting up seawater, and the torch-lit circle of watchers cheered. Simon's curly hair was plastered flat to his head. Gartred dropped the shell, and I felt seawater splash over my shoes as she reached for her son, drying his face on her dress and murmuring wordlessly. Two spots of color burned in her cheeks now.

"What —" Hallie jerked away from John Penhallow, blinking. "What did you—"

"He has to get a little seawater into his lungs," I explained, pounding Simon on the back again. The crowd was cheering him now, and a dimple flashed in his cheek as he smiled around the bursts of coughing. "It's how the sea will know him."

"Oh." Hallie reddened. "I thought—for a moment—"

"I knew it was gonna be like that," Simon informed her between coughs. "M'sister—she said—when she was Child of the Sea—"

"Don't talk, love," his mother soothed. "Just breathe."

Hallie managed a weak laugh, definitely red-faced now. "You won't believe what I was thinking—"

"You're a good boy, Simon." I mussed his soaking-wet hair.

"Did I do well?" he beamed.

"Very well." With my sharp sickle-shaped knife I gutted him in one long vigorous stroke.

His eyes sprang open and he thrashed against my arm. I tilted his small body outward, so the first dark jet of blood would fall into the waves below. "In the name of this child, we renew our pact with the sea."

He opened his mouth to scream, and I cut his throat with the swift double slash of forty-two years' practice.

Hallie found her voice and screamed. She flung herself forward, but John Penhallow was ready, pinioning her arms and wrenching her back. I heard Maura Cartwright whispering earnestly: "Don't upset it now, Hallie. This is the important part."

Simon convulsed weakly. Gartred stood impassive at the head of the crowd, watching his blood flow down into the sea. A cupful of that blood I caught in the conch shell.

The only sound was Hallie's sobbing.

When the flow of blood thinned to a trickle, I allowed Simon's small body to drop into the ocean. He bobbed limply in the vortex of the high tide.

"We give you the Child of the Sea," I said to that vast ocean. "We give you his life. Take no more."

I turned to face the crowd, bearing in my hands the conch full of blood. Gartred came forward and bent her head. I slipped a flax thread around her neck: her second pearl, and the second child she had given to the sea so the rest of us might live. "I'm sorry, Gartred."

She nodded briefly, her face drawn. I dipped my fingers into the blood and touched her forehead. She backed away, taking

her torch and heading for the rough crag path down to the village.

One by one the rest of the villagers came forward, and I anointed their foreheads. The touch of the Undine, which gives protection from drowning.

I heard Hallie's low sobbing, felt her eyes fixed in horror on my string of pearls. Forty-two pearls, forty-two years, forty-two children. I wore forty-two lives around my neck. I could still tell you all their names.

It is terrible to lose a child. Little Simon will be sorely missed. But is it more terrible to lose one than many? For all the years we gave the sea its blood, we lost no other lives.

Still, it is a hard thing to be the Undine.

The last of the villagers passed beneath my hands and back towards their homes, and I turned to face Hallie.

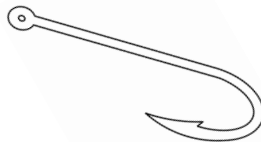
"Don't touch me!" she screamed. "Don't touch me, you witch!"

I sighed. "Hold her," I told John Penhallow.

She screamed as the blood touched her forehead. She screamed again as I withdrew from my pocket a plaited flax thread and dropped it around her neck. A thread exactly like my own, but barren (as yet) of pearls.

John released her arms as I nodded, and she dropped to her knees on the bloodied crag, covering her face with her hands. She clawed at the thread about her throat, but she did not tear it away. She already knew the weight of it, felt it settling on her neck like a noose. Her sobs were helpless, self-loathing.

She will make a fine Undine when I am gone.





KELLEY ROBY

Kelley Roby lives in the Indian Lake region in north-western Ohio with her wonderful husband, son and Golden Retriever. Kelley is a former EMT and former Volunteer Fire-fighter. Kelley has two wonderful grandchildren. She also misses her daughter dearly who is attending Rio Grande University. Kelley is the co-author of *THE PULL OF BLOOD*, the first book in *THE KEEPERS OF THE DAMNED* series. She is currently working on the second book in the series and her first erotic novel. When Kelley is not writing, she reads every chance she gets. Kelley also enjoys attending her children's sporting events, fishing, scuba diving, attending hockey games and just hanging out with her friends and family.

SHE. A story of heartlessness, suffering and betrayal. Shriver Manor becomes a prison for Taren Shriver when her daughter disappears. Cries in the night haunt her and treachery surrounds her.

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A cry in the dark, full of anguish and dripping with terror, echoed through the walls of the manor. The bloodcurdling shriek of the young nanny brought partygoers to a halt.

Thundering footfalls raced down the mahogany carved staircase delivering a young, tearful Ariane to the forefront of the festivities.

“Liliana,” she wailed, “Liliana is gone!”

For a brief moment all means of breathing seemed to have been sucked from the vast banquet hall of Shriver manor. Taren Shriver, the beautiful mother of little Liliana, collapsed in a heap on the floor.

Eyes turned to a speechless and equally shocked Harden Shriver. Harden had no idea where to start. Did he see to his grief-stricken wife and nanny? Should he check Liliana’s room himself to make sure that Ariane was not mistaken?

Harden Shriver knew that as head of the manor that all eyes would look to him for guidance. Overwhelming fear settled into his soul as he barged through the crowding guests, elbowing his way through, walking past a still crumbled Taren and the females that had gathered around her unconscious form, to race up the stairs. Taking the steps two at a time, he barreled into the second story room and gasped from the chill of late autumn air funneling through the opened window. Heavy drapes swirled and pitched, screaming with the call of the night’s air. The mobile over the crib lurched back and forth, the pastel stuffed teddy bears tangled and frayed.



Two full months lagged by and nothing... nothing but the constant harassment of the county police and their persecuting

questions. No word on the whereabouts of little Liliana. No ransom note. No fingerprints. No DNA...nothing.

Harden couldn't concentrate on business, and of course by this time the community whispered behind his back when he strolled through town, or stopped to get gas or groceries, the gossipmongers loving every bit of his family's misery.

The Shriver's wealth came from decades of his ancestors' sweat and hard work. Harden's great-great-grand father had practically built the small town of Handlin with his bare hands. Starting with Shriver Mill, Shriver Trading Post, and Handlin Post Office, the small town just grew from there, to the point that when Harden's father died, he had accumulated enough money that no descendant of the Shriver name would ever have to lift a finger or sweat blood ever again. That fact alone tended to make the townspeople just a little more than jealous, and it really didn't help that Harden never grew up in the family home.

Hubert Shriver wanted his son well educated, sending him to boarding school at the early age of five, and then on to the Ivy leagues. After that, Harden traveled the world, and every time he called his father and told him he wanted to come home for a visit, his father not so politely told him to stay away.

Even on the day that he called his father to tell him he was to be wed; Hubert insisted Harden held the nuptials in another state and wanted no part of the ceremony. Harden's parents died, never meeting or coming to know the woman that gave her heart to their son.



Taren never understood why she had never met her husband's family, and her questions never gained answers either. Harden kept thin lips when Taren asked questions about his past. Taren married Harden not even knowing he was heir to a vast fortune.

The daughter of a poor farmer in southern Ohio, Taren grew up in a loving household, but she never knew what it was

like to go shopping with girlfriends, or have clothes that were not sewn by her own mother's hand. When Harden Shriver, with his intoxicating features, drifted through town—and took a liking to her—she fell fast and hard for his gentlemanly ways. In Taren's eyes, the love affair bloomed and flourished. Within a few months she was married and pregnant.

Growing up poor, Taren worried over how they would survive, but every time she questioned her husband, Harden, with an impish grin would just say, "Fear not little lovely, we will prevail." So with hope and love she gave her faith to him in total surrender.



One day, Harden received a fateful phone call. His parents had died in a questionable car accident and his presence was needed back in Handlin. He wondered how Taren would take the news of his wealth. And as one would expect, an eight month pregnant Taren collapsed, more likely than not, from pure shock.

When Harden returned to Handlin with a young, beautiful and very pregnant wife on his arm, the men gawked with envy, which in turn led to tongue wagging from the women.

Taren had a hard time adjusting to the wealth and the immense household that he put her in charge of. When Liliana came along, Hardin thought Ariane's sanity might just break.

Harden noticed the change and, under the guise of searching for a solution, he hired Ariane, a long time friend of the family.



Taren worked day and night trying to take care of the household, the chores becoming more than any one woman could handle. Hardin disappeared more and more, on trips to God only knew where. Ariane became Liliana's sole caregiver.

Taren seldom came into contact with her own daughter and

this, more than exhaustion, demanded she spoke with her husband at once. Hours after her fatigue usually called her to sleep, Taren sat in the dark waiting for Harden to slink into the bedroom.

Harden slowly pushed the mahogany door open. . As he slid through the tight opening he turned on the ball of his foot, slowly inching the heavy door shut again.

“Hi.”

Harden looked as if he had lost bowel function right then and there. Startled, he jumped and slammed the door with more force than expected, and down the hall a harsh cry echoed from within the nursery.

“Woman,” he stuttered. “What in Gods teeth is wrong with you? Why aren’t you sleeping?”

With a timid pat on the bed, Taren beckoned him to her, “I need to talk to you.”

“And it could not wait until the morning?”

“No.” she stated firmly. “You are never here to talk to me, I can’t even remember the last time I saw you, let alone talked to you.”

“Whose fault is that, Taren? You are always too busy for me.” Harden cursed.

“Exactly, love,” Taren whispered sweetly, hoping to entice her husband into seeing things her way. “If you would hire a maid or two, then we would have more time for each other. And I could spend more time with little Liliana.

I feel like she doesn’t even know I am her mother. I only see her a few seconds each day.”

“But that is why I hired Ariane! I thought you needed help with the baby.”

“Harden, I want to be with my baby...it has only been two months. I know I have to learn a lot, but she is still mine, and I want to take care of her.”

“But, dear,” he spoke through clenched teeth. “You said you wanted to spend more time with me. If you spend time with the baby, how will you spend time with me?”

Taren sighed, and with a glimmer of hope whispered “Can’t

I do both? Can't I spend time with her and you both? If we hire two maids and keep Ariane on, then I will have time for both, and maybe even time for a few friends."

Taren watched her husband drop his head and she knew she had won the argument.



Within three months of hiring help, Harden saw a visible change occur in his wife. Taren no longer worked day and night in a daze of exhaustion. She now flitted through the house, making sure her orders were performed to perfection, the tired circles under her eyes vanished and her cheeks were rosy again. Taren now had time for everyone, including the baby. And she kept trying to pull him into her jubilant lifestyle.

She constantly brought the baby to him, insisting on taking family picnics, and at night she expected him to trudge through his husbandly duties with enthusiasm. With her lovely country personality, she made friends easily and had a following of admirers throughout the community.

Of course, that only lasted another month. Her happy, carefree life ended the night of that Godforsaken party.



Taren would do anything to go back and change what happened. The guilt ate at her every day, all day, never relenting.

Harden lurked around corners checking up on her constantly, but truly, he need not have even bothered. She didn't move. For two months she lay in bed, only getting up to go to the restroom...sometimes. Sometimes she relieved herself where she lay, making more work for Ariane. The only thing that passed through her lips was the mere sip of water that Harden forced down her so she could take the medicine that the doctor left for her weekly, after he had come to check on her, and sips of broth.

Also on his weekly visits, the doctor would administer an IV loaded with proteins, calories, fats, electrolytes, potassium and such. Harden tried to argue the need of the treatment, but the doctor argued that she was too emaciated and needed the boost.



Black circles found their way beneath both Taren and Ariane's eyes. Ariane had her hands full taking care of Harden's wife, himself, and the rest of the household.

He kept Ariane on staff, but let the rest of his wife's employees go. Harden did not know how long either of them would be able to continue like this. Taren had lost so much weight that the beautiful young lady who *once* had caught his eye now just seemed to shrivel away. Soon, he thought, soon, this will be over, soon her mind will fade.

The county police came by regularly checking up on him, but mainly they came to ask questions of Taren, and not once could Taren even mumble anything other than, "Can't you hear her? Can't you hear her cry for her mommy?" This reply only made the officials more suspicious, and once word circulated through town, the community became suspicious. So now Shriver Manor once again became the talk of the town.

Stories about the goings on out at Shriver Manor flowed from lips of the likes of every man, woman and child. Though mostly speculation, the gossip carried a certain ring of truth, and no one had any idea how close to fact their jawing really was.



Three long agonizing months had crept by since Liliana's disappearance. If she still breathed, she would be just six months old, just developing a personality.

Taren couldn't hush the cries, not her own...at least she didn't think they belonged to her self. She wiped her face and found it lacking the moisture that a face would have if it had

been one shedding tears. But the cries came from somewhere. The cries broke her heart.

A rustling from above and another angry shriek ricocheted through the ceiling. Taren could not take it anymore. She had to find the origin of the noise, the cries; they sounded like Liliana's. If it was Liliana, she sounded hurt, as if she needed help; like a baby crying for her mama.

Taren tried to sit up, but the movement brought weariness crashing down upon her consciousness. She blinked. She needed to find her baby. "Liliana," she whispered through cracked lips. A voice so husky and raw she didn't recognize it.

Taren dragged every ounce of strength she could muster, pulling from a depth that most people didn't know they stored within them—strength that only came from the Heavens, a raw need to prevail. And with that deep-seated strength, Taren forced her torso up, her need forcing her soul to keep going.

Numb feet landed hard on the floor, numb legs pushed her body up. Knees prickling with the rush of unused blood bent and moved forward. First one step and then the next, Liliana... calling...crying for her mama, the only fuel she needed to trudge ahead.

Moving slowly, Taren slid one foot in front of the other, finally reaching the hallway. Turning right, she used the wall to help hold her weak body up as she inched her way to the helpless cries. Faster, sliding her feet, faster she moved, praying she made it in time, driven by a mother's instinct.

As she reached the expanse that led to the attic, she stopped.

"Woman, what in God's name do you think you are doing?"

The booming voice of Harden sent her crashing to the floor. Desperation brought her hands up, grabbing for anything to help her.

Harden rushed to her side.

"Don't you hear her," Taren wailed, finding her voice. "She needs me. Please let me find her, please let me take care of her." Her body shook, frantic sobs devouring her sanity, the need to get to Liliana more than she could tolerate.

"Woman, you hear nothing but what is in your imagination."

“No!” she cried. “How can you not hear our daughter?”

“I can’t hear her because there is nothing to hear.” Harden glared at her with a hatred she had never seen from him before.

“But...she is here. I know she is here. She is crying...she needs me. Oh please Harden...please let me go to her!”

Ariane emerged from within the attic door.

“See, you crazy bat...the only thing you are hearing is Ariane cleaning the attic. She has been working her beautiful fingers to the bone doing your job.”

“Nooo...” Shrieking, Taren threw herself toward the attic door.

Harden grabbed her, stopping all progress as she fought with the adrenaline rush of a mother trying to save her child. Deep scratches oozed and trickled with crimson rivers of hate from Harden’s arms. Taren heard Harden yell for Ariane to call 911. Taren watched in fear as Harden raised his fist for what she knew would be the last time.

Fifteen minutes later, an ambulance and Taren’s personal doctor hovered on top of her. The medics checked her pupils and the doctor administered an injection of something sure to keep her quiet. She could hear their words, but unable to say anything, she couldn’t make them understand her plight.

“Harden, I am truly sorry,” the doctor stated, “but I don’t think she will ever recover. I think it’s time to send her to a home where professionals can take better care of her.

“Obviously you and Ariane are just not capable of doing it any longer. I’m sorry that after losing your baby it has come to this so quickly, but I seriously doubt that Taren will ever be strong enough to come back to reality.”

“It’s all in her imagination, Doc...she keeps hearing the baby crying.”

That was about the last thing that Taren Shriver ever heard. Driven by guilt, fear, and desperation Taren’s curse would hold her in its bond until the end of her days.



Twenty-four hours later, the cry of lovely little Liliana squealed from the front porch. Exactly ten minutes after that. The county police stood on the same front porch.

“It is a miracle, Officer, a God’s honest miracle. My baby returned to us, healthy as pie, and not a hair harmed on her head.”

Hours and a boatload of questions later, the kind officers vacated Shriver Manor, mumbling about what a shame it was that Mrs. Shriver couldn’t be here to witness the joy of the return of her beloved baby.

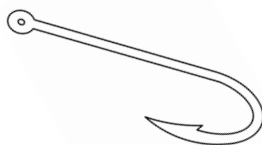
After all of the accusations and talk of how everyone suspected that she, the mother, had actually murdered her own child. After she had driven herself to a brink of hopelessness and her poor mind failed, a miracle among miracles was granted from the Heavens above.



Ariane carried her Liliana up to the baby’s clean, well-maintained crib, swaddled in the warmth of blankets. She bent and lowered the sleeping child into the crib that Liliana had spent every night of her life from the day of her birth, dreaming of a mother she would never remember.

Harden closed the distance between their bodies. Peering over Ariane’s shoulder, he gazed at his daughter.

“I never thought we would get rid of her, sweetheart. I never thought we would be free to show our love for one another. You were always the one for me. I told you I would find a way to give you the baby you could never carry.”





LAUREN STONE

Born and raised in Southern California, Lauren has trained since the age of five as an actor, singer and dancer. As if by divine intervention in 2007 she was hired to choreograph a musical, but they failed to write the script. Through a series of improvisations with the actors Lauren wrote the book to the musical in a week, rejuvenating her love of writing. Over the next two years she wrote “THE GAYEST MUSICAL EVER” with composer Timothy Hazen Rathke, as well as several screenplays and works of fiction. In June of 2009 her cousin made the innocuous suggestion that Lauren should join Goodreads, “Its’ like Myspace for books.” In the writing groups Lauren has found the support and criticism crucial for growth as a writer. She returned to college in August 2009 to pursue a degree in Creative Writing, she has since had her poetry published in Verdad and is pleased to have two short stories in this anthology.

COMMITMENT. Mary and Thomas are trapped in a world of mundane violence. Desensitized and irritable they strive to maintain their connection and love for one another in the face of an unavoidable future, grasping for something to control in a world filled with chaos.

JUSTICE. Stephanie awakes to find herself strapped to a bed. A middle aged man enters the room Stephanie is unsure whether he is her captor or savior. Justice poses the question: What is more damaging, physical violence or bad art?

<http://www.laurenstone.info>

<http://verdadmagazine.org>



Commitment

Lauren Stone

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“Well, I guess this is it,” Mary sighs as she loads the magazine of her 9mm Glock, struggling with the last round. It finally succumbs, the magazine slipping easily into the frame of the gun. She releases the slide loading a round into the chamber.

The crash of metal slapping together wakes Thomas, Mary’s boyfriend, passed out on the couch in a haze of Guinness and Saturday morning cartoons.

“What the fuck Mare?” he yawns, stretching his arms above his head, then collapsing back on the couch, as Mary loads another magazine. “Will you stop that?”

The magazine crashes on the table.

Thomas grabs his gun from under the pillow, jumping to his feet pointing it wildly around the room.

Mary laughs.

“It’s not funny. What’s wrong with you?” Thomas lowers his weapon walking to the kitchen table, sets his gun down and sits across from her.

Mary lays her weapon down, takes a deep breath, sighs, reaches across the table and takes Thomas’ hand. “I’m just so tired of this shit. Everyday it’s the same thing. You lay there on that couch and do nothing. I’m tired of this shit. I want to do something different, you know?”

Thomas kisses Mary’s hand; she lets her head fall to the side, closes her eyes and revels in a moment of tenderness.

He steps over to the refrigerator, grabs two bottles of beer and returns. Thomas twists the top off of a beer and hands it to Mary, “This’ll take the edge off.”

She takes a sip as he opens his beer. Mary removes the bottle from her lips, looks at it for a moment with utter disgust, and hurls it into the sink.

Thomas shudders at the sound of shattering glass. “What the

fuck Mary?”

“It doesn’t taste the same. It’s not worth it.” Mary starts to cry.

Thomas puts his drink down on the table, wrapping his arms around Mary’s head. Turning to him she throws her arms around his waist and sobs into his chest.

Stroking her hair, to calm her down, gently asking, “Are you ok?”

“Not really, but yes.” Mary mumbles in his chest.

He kisses the top of her head then sits across from her.

“I’m sorry. I should be used to it by now.” Mary wipes her tears away.

“It’s okay.” He picks up his beer, presses it to his lips and tilts his head back.

“No it’s not. Look at you. You’re fine. You act like it’s no big deal. But everything is different now.”

The bottle clangs on the metal table. “Nothing is different; today is the same as yesterday and the day before that.”

Mary glares at the bottle. “It’s not the same. It looks the same but it doesn’t feel right. It’s not normal. This existence or whatever you want to call it is not normal.”

Thomas pulls his gun off the table. Pushing away, the chair crashes to the floor. Laying the barrel of the gun along the side of his face, walks to the window and stares out at an untouchable world.

“I can’t change it.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it.”

Mary picks up her gun walking to Thomas’ side. Lacing her fingers in his, they stare out the window in silence. The room is still, but through the window, the world is in chaos. The building across the way is on fire. People run screaming and crying in the streets, a SWAT team stands at the end of the road, putting down those poor souls silly enough to approach them. Thomas squeezes Mary’s hand tighter.

A man on a black rope wielding a shotgun rappels off the roof into Mary and Thomas’ window. Raising her gun Mary fires two shots into the man’s chest. He reflexively squeezes the

trigger and a spray of buckshot pierces the glass, hitting Thomas and Mary, forcing them backward. They collapse still holding hands.

Thomas crawls closer to Mary taking her in his arms. Blood pours from her chest, her breathing raspy and wet. Thomas, bleeding from his stomach, gently kisses her.

"I hate this part Tommy. It's not fair." Mary shakes, a deep sob racking her chest.

"I know baby. I know. I love you."

"I love you too."

Mary's breathing is shallow and labored. The tension escapes her body, laying limp and lifeless in Thomas' arms, he starts convulsing. Pressing the gun to his temple he pulls the trigger. The bullet leaves the chamber as the world around them collapses in darkness.



Sitting at the kitchen table a 9mm Glock, a box of bullets and two empty magazines in front of her, Mary handles one of the magazines, loading it with bullets. Struggling with the last round; it finally succumbs. She rams the magazine into the gun, releases the slide and slips a round into the chamber.

The crashing metal wakes the sleeping Thomas, who sits up and looks over to Mary, "Babe!"

"It's not my fault," slamming the gun on the table. "I fucking hate this. It's not fair."

Thomas steps over to Mary, takes her face in his hands and tenderly kisses her.

Pulling away she collapses into his chest sobbing, "I don't want to do this anymore."

"I know." Lifting her chin he wipes the tears from her eyes, "But we don't have a choice now. You killed him and I committed suicide. It was our choice and we have to live with it."

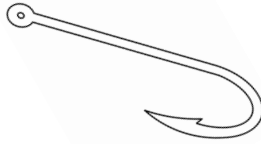
Mary pulls away from him and nears the window, "I didn't choose this."

Picking her gun off the table he walks over to Mary, “You chose this the minute you pulled the trigger. I didn’t want to leave you.”

“Don’t blame this on me.” She takes the gun from Thomas.

“I’m not, I love you. I wanted this for us... well not this, but at least we get to be together.”

Taking her hand in his they stare out the window as flames engulf the building across the way.





Justice

Lauren Stone

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Stephanie awoke tied to a bed, a gag in her mouth and unable to remember how she had gotten there, a bandage wrapped around her head, blood seeping through the gauze. She shuts her eyes and searches for an answer. A toilet flushes and Stephanie's eyes blink open.

The morning light is distorted by clouds and the canopy of the maple tree outside the bedroom window. A cloud moves and the light shines across Stephanie's face, skewing her vision in a haze of brilliant orange. She hears a door open and close. Footsteps grow louder and closer then stop outside her door.

Keys jingle, then a snap when one slips into the lock and turns. The door creeps open. A middle-aged man, with graying hair and black wire-rimmed glasses, pokes his head around the door. A coy smile creeps across his face as he steps into the room and approaches Stephanie. She recoils, but her bonds keep her pinned to the bed. There's no escape. The man sits on the bed, reaches out a gentle hand and strokes her cheek. She tries to pull away, every inch of her contracting on her small frame. She crinkles like a plastic bag in an oven. He leans over and kisses her forehead.

She mumbles into her gag in protest. The frail old man in the wire-rimmed glasses, lays his hands on her face, trails them to the back of her head and releases the gag.

Stephanie coughs and gasps deep labored breaths. She realizes this man may not be her captor, but her savior. He stands walks over to a table beneath the window and pours a glass of water. A robin lands on the branch of the maple tree; he stares at the bird and that same smile creeps across his face.

The water overflows from the glass and spills onto the table. "Oh fiddlesticks," he says. The man pulls a towel from beneath a water basin and carefully cleans the table.

Back by the bed he holds the glass to Stephanie's lips and helps her drink, her body still bound to the bed, the nylon rope snaking through the frame. She nods her head signifying she has had enough. The man sets the glass on the nightstand.

"Thank you," Stephanie whispers.

The smile returns to the man's face. "You're welcome... you know you're not at all what I expected you to be."

Stephanie cocks her head to the side, puzzled, "What do you mean? Who are you? What's going on? Why am I here?"

The man drops his head and fiddles with his fingers; he sinks back onto the bed and looks up, a sad expression in his eyes, "You don't recognize me?"

"Should I?"

The man's chest rises two inches then deflates as he lets out a sigh. "You really don't know anything, do you."

"About what? What is this place? Who are you? Why am I tied up like this?" her breathing frantic as her world becomes smaller. The more she panics, the larger his smile gets.

"Calm down. God, you are so ridiculous, you know that? There is no reason to get all excited over nothing." The man leans over, retrieves the glass of water and holds it to Stephanie's lips. "Come on drink this, you'll feel better."

"What is it?"

The smile dissolves from his face. "Its ... water... are you really this paranoid? Or are you just that stupid? You've already drank from this glass, you've tasted it."

"Well how do I know there isn't something else in it, maybe you're trying to poison me?"

The corners of the man's mouth upturn. "Stephanie, if I wanted to poison you, I would have done it already."

"How do you know my name? Are you a psychic?"

The smile retreats, he slams the glass on the nightstand and walks over to an antique mahogany wardrobe. "I wasn't sure until right now if you were just some horrible self-indulgent, self-righteous, self-important, self-involved canker on the earth, or so ignorant you didn't know that what you were doing was reprehensible. But now, after that little display, I know it's

both.”

The man opens the doors to the wardrobe to reveal a collection of torture devices, whips, restraints, knives, needles, hammers, and blocks of wood. Stephanie struggles against her restraints trying to free herself, as the man pulls a sledge hammer and a block of wood from the back of the closet and walks back to the bed.

Stephanie claws at the bed searching for a way out, anything she can grab onto to defend herself with. There is nothing. The man sets the block of wood between her legs on the bed.

“What are you doing?” she screams.

The man shakes his head, adjusts the restraints on her wrists, grabs the block of wood and slips it between her arm and the mattress.

“Are you going to kill me?” Stephanie queries in a panicked vibrato.

“That’s the first good question you have asked. No.” The man tightens the rope to secure the block in place.

“What are you doing?”

The man raises the sledgehammer over his head, “Making it so you can never hurt anyone ever again.”

He swings the hammer down, shattering her wrist.

Stephanie vomits a low guttural scream.

The man lowers the hammer and releases the block of wood. He walks to the other side of the bed, slips the block between the mattress and her arm, raises the hammer and crushes her left wrist; the shock of this blow pulls Stephanie back into consciousness.

She screams and cries uncontrollably.

The man walks back to the closet and carefully returns the wood and the hammer before taking out a large pair of scissors and forceps.

Stephanie through muffled tears asks, “Why are you doing this to me?”

The man stabs the scissors into the mattress. “I already told you, so you will never hurt anyone ever again.”

“What are you talking about? I’ve never hurt anyone.”

The man pulls the scissors out of the mattress; an explosion of cotton falls on Stephanie's legs. "Are you kidding me? You have tortured millions of people for years, with your so called writing."

Recognition finally comes to Stephanie. "My books? This is all about my novels?"

The man rushes to her, pressing the scissors to her throat, "Novels? What you write are not novels. Austen, Tolstoy, Tolkien, Gaiman; they write novels. What you write isn't worthy of that title."

Stephanie forgets herself. "People love my books, I have made millions of dollars, and the films are even more popular. People love me."

"People are sheep... I'll give you this, the movies are much better than the books, but that's because they hired someone to actually write them, with plausible story structure, and consistency."

"If it wasn't for my novels, there wouldn't be source material for them to write from."

"Stop calling them novels... you know what? That is true. If you hadn't written those awful books, then maybe the stories would be better." The man releases the scissors from her throat and sets the forceps on her cheek. "Stick out your tongue."

"No."

"Stick out your tongue!"

Stephanie turns her head away from him. "I still think it's unfair to say my books aren't novels."

"You are a petulant child. How old are you? Forty? Forty-five?"

"I'm 36 on Christmas Eve. I was born on the same day as Jesus. I'm a good person, a Mormon, and a mother. Don't do this."

"Stick out your tongue. I can't listen to this incessant rant anymore."

Stephanie clamps her mouth shut.

"You're really going to make me do this?"

The man climbs on the bed, sets the scissors on her chest and

straddles Stephanie. Holding the forceps in his right hand, he presses them into her lips.

She stops them with her teeth.

He raises his left arm and with his index and thumb pinches her nose. "You are only making this harder on yourself."

Stephanie stares at him pleadingly, her body tense as the need to take a breath consumes her, and the smile creeps across his face, manic and childlike now. Stephanie gasps for air and the man clutches her tongue with the forceps.

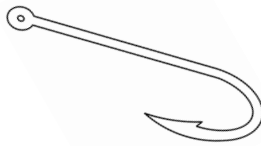
He releases her nose, transfers the forceps to his left hand, picks up the scissors from her chest and takes them in his right hand.

Stephanie mumbles one last please, as the man in the black wire frame glasses slips the blades around her tongue and closes them. His deed complete, he wipes the blood from the scissors onto her shirt, releases the portion of her tongue into the glass of water on the nightstand, walks over to the wardrobe, puts the scissors and the forceps in their proper place, closes it, turns, and walks to the door.

Stephanie mumbles incoherently choking on her own blood.

He stops to stare at her from the door and shakes his head. "Vampires burn in the sun, they don't fucking glisten. That's the gayest thing I've ever heard, vampires that fucking sweat glitter."

He turns and slams the door behind him.





RITA STRADLING

Rita Stradling brings to life her most feverish nightmares, tantalizing imaginings and colorful fantasies. Whether she is writing for young or aged minds, she always introduces an element of the supernatural. Rita lives with her husband and baby son on the edge of an ancient forest in Northern California.

MONSTER

What evil prowls outside my window?

Who needs rescue? Who can be saved from the calculating daemons of the night?

ritastradling@yahoo.com



Monster

Rita Stradling

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Wha—

What is that?

I open my eyes.

Is there someone in here? Who's that? What's that sound?

I strain to listen. I can't hear anything.

I'm going back to sleep.

There it is again.

I try to concentrate on the noise.

It sounds like—like a—baby.

My eyes lids close, I peel them open. *I need to wake up, but everything is blurry. My throat hurts. I need some water.*

There is that sound again, I raise my head and look around. Where is that crying coming from? The noise can't be from inside my room, it sounds—muffled.

Ok, I'm getting up.

I sit and peer around once more. *Wait, I already checked my room. I feel dizzy.*

The moonlight illuminates my clutter.

My stuff is everywhere. I must've knocked over my dresser when I snuck in last night, I don't remember that.

Ugh, I'm never going to drink again! Well at least not until graduation. No, prom, I'm not going to drink until prom.

Oh my god, I'm going to puke!

What am I doing? Oh! The baby! There is a baby crying somewhere.

This is so strange; there is no way that sound could be coming from the neighbors' house. They live way too far away. This baby is close.

My head hurts.

I climb over the shambles of my room to move to my door.

What is that smell? Ew, I do not remember vomiting. Oh, I feel queasy again.

I pick up a wet towel from my bed and cover the pool of sick on the floor. *I'll deal with that tomorrow.*

Pushing my clothes aside I open my door.

No, the wailing is not coming from inside the house.

“Mom?” I whisper.

There’s no answer.

“Mom?” I say a little louder.

She doesn’t respond.

Wow, my hair smells awful, like old beer and cigarettes. Maybe it’s better if my mom doesn’t wake up. I close the door as quietly as I can.

I turn to my room and look out of my sliding doors, which lead to the balcony. *The moon is huge; no wonder there is so much light.*

The crying is getting louder and higher pitched. I trip and stumble across my room.

Ouch! That hurt so badly, what was that? Glass, I stepped on a damn piece of glass and now my foot is bleeding all over the carpet. I extract the shard and hobble over to my sliding doors to force them open.

Oh no, I forgot to lock them again! I need to quit doing that.

The misty night air is freezing, I feel more awake now. I step outside. *Ops, I am only wearing a shirt and underwear. The boards are cold and slippery I should put on some sandals.*

I can’t believe what I am seeing; there is a baby on the grass! Who would leave an infant on the ground? He’s only wrapped in a little blanket. He must be freezing.

What the hell!

Should I walk through the house to reach him? No, then my mom would wake up. I should carry the little guy inside first, and then I’ll clean up a bit before I wake my mom.

Should I put on pants? No, I have no time; I need to save that child!

I throw my leg over the railing; *wow, that’s cold on my skin.* Scooting off the balcony and onto the roof I scrape my thigh. *Maybe I’m still drunk.*

This is a bad idea, I’m not thinking straight. I should have gone through the house. My cut is getting dirty and I’m bleeding all over the roof. Also, how am I going to carry that baby up the lattice?

The baby’s crying is getting more intense; I have to rescue him now!

Laying my stomach on the rough sand paper shingles, I dangle my legs over the edge of the roof in order to catch hold of the vine-entangled lattice with my feet. My cut is dripping blood down the white lattice; *how am I going to explain this to my mom?* I climb down the wood frame and jump off the last four feet. *I have to be fast.*

The dew-covered grass is ice cold. *Now my feet are caked in mud and blood; this is a terrible idea.*

I look around. *I can't see anyone else in my yard. What if someone left this baby here to lure me outside and kill me?*

I shouldn't think of things like that. Now I'm terrified.

I need to help that little child.

The squish, squishing sound of my feet on the grass makes my heartbeat accelerate.

The little guy is wrapped up tight at least. I hope he's not too cold.

There is something wrong with that baby. His eyes, there is something wrong with his eyes. They are all black, no color, and no white. This baby must have seen something awful. I have to bring him inside.

I swaddle his wrappings tighter around him and hold him close to my chest. His blankets are all wet from the dew. *I should take him to a hospital.*

Screw the cigarette smell! I'm just going to walk in through the front door. Clutching him tight I run across the yard to my door.

He stopped crying; *maybe I am doing something right.*

The door is locked.

I bang on the wood.

Mom, where are you?

I hit the door again. "Mom!"

She must be out cold.

"Mom it's an emergency! Open the door!"

There is no reaction from inside, no sounds and no lights being turned on.

What is going on? I whimper involuntarily; *I feel like crying.*

Well I do not want to wait down here for whatever horrified the boy.

I gather him in a strong one-handed hold and climb up the lattice.

“There is a monster,” The baby whispers. His voice is sweet and chilling.

A monster, that is great, as if the situation isn't bad enough.

Wait, shit, that baby talked. Babies can't talk that young.

Maybe someone slipped me something last night at the party. I feel nauseous; maybe I'm on some kind of drug.

I look at him; he's sucking on one of his fingers. *He looks like an angel, the only thing off are those eyes—*

This is too weird. I need to carry this baby inside, eat something, and then call 911.

I tighten my hold around him as I clamber up to the top of the lattice.

“He is five percent jagged claws.” He grabs a lock of my hair and pulls.

I try to ignore the baby's words, *I'm just hallucinating he's talking.*

The roof juts out three feet from the lattice.

How am I going to lift this bundle onto the roof? I usually do a pull up, but I do not know how to do that holding an infant.

“He is eighty percent scales, thirty percent razor sharp teeth—”

I wish the little guy would stop talking so I could concentrate.

Knowing the action could end disastrously, I raise the child and balance him on the rain gutter. I keep one hand there to make sure he's secure.

I know this is a bad idea, damn it.

“Twenty percent going to suck your blood, one hundred percent going to kill you—”

Shut up baby, you are not helping!

I take in a deep breath and swing my body up to do a pull up.

Yes, the little guy is stable! Oh my god, If I had dropped that baby, but I didn't.

I gather him into a snug hold.

“He is two-hundred percent flesh eating, five-hundred percent bone crunching.”

What was that? I whip my gaze to the shrubs behind my garage. *Something is in the bushes groaning! There really is something else out there!*

This is freaky; I want to move inside now.

I stand with difficulty on the rough roof.

Great, more scrapes.

“He’s ninety percent daemon—”

I sprint across the shingles and kick my leg over the balcony railing.

“And three-hundred percent evil—”

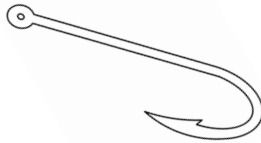
I yank open the glass door and step inside. Sliding the door shut I click the lock into place.

The baby and I gaze at each other.



“But he’s twenty percent a sweet, cute and cuddly baby.” His black eyes open wide.

I need to drop him! I can’t drop a baby—





WENDY SWORE

Born a crop-duster's daughter in Sacramento, CA, I lived in several states before my family settled in Pocatello, ID. While attending ISU, I met Mike, a farm boy with a computer brain, who wrote me during my 4 month stay in Europe, and asked me to marry him upon my return.

I spend my summers working our truck-bed farm along with our five young children. After the sweet-corn harvest, thousands of people come to learn about agriculture in my educational corn maze and farm tours.

Writing is my guilty pleasure for winter. My first YA novel follows Jenna, a farm girl, as she struggles against a lurking menace on the Sho-Ban Indian reservation. My next deals with arson and a girl's race against devastation. An avid reader myself, I hope you enjoy my short stories.

LETTING GO. Ryan despairs as his wife sinks into an inexplicable and severe depression. She ignores his pleas to seek help and teeters on the edge of madness. When the solution comes, he hopes for a reconciliation of their relationship, but learns that there are worse things than loneliness.

THE FOUNDATION. Weary of her husband's raging demands for perfection, Trina ponders whether there is anything left of their marriage worth saving, or if she and the children would be better off alone. She tells her husband, Ben, that their marriage is as rotted and feeble as an old dead tree...or is it?

<http://www.goodreads.com/user/show/1139740-wendy>

<http://www.facebook.com/profile.php?ref=profile&id=679259206>

Letting Go



Wendy Swore

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Something was wrong with my wife.

Tessa had always been prey to seasonal depression, but after the holidays this past year, she took it to a new level.

I found her sitting on the kitchen floor and weeping; a dribble of water spilling over the top of the sink to form a puddle on the linoleum beside her.

I turned off the faucet and tried to raise her, but she would not be moved. Eventually, I knelt on the floor beside her until she could compose herself.

It was hours before we got up.

The crying went on for weeks. I tried to be supportive—to be there for her to talk to, but she would ignore me. Sometimes she sobbed into the night; other times she stared at nothing, neither seeing nor hearing. I tried to reason with her; if she wouldn't talk to me, then we should seek professional help, but she wouldn't listen.

Nothing I said mattered anymore, but she allowed some physical comfort. I spent many a sleepless night just holding her, or stroking her hair until she fell asleep. Sometimes she would close her eyes and lean into me when I rubbed her shoulders, her melancholy lifting away with my touch—for a few hours at least.

A month later, I rejoiced at the first signs that she would pull through this thing. Her beautiful, elusive smile surfaced now and again with increasing frequency; a giggle for a funny TV show, a wistful smile for a romantic book. After much encouragement, she even took herself out to the movies once. I could barely contain my glee when she seemed a little happier on her return.

Eventually she resumed her old schedule, though her talkative nature seemed to have died. I had to read her body

language to carry on our one-sided conversations. She would nod softly in agreement, or frown when she thought I was wrong; little things, but at least she started to acknowledge me again. Still, I missed her voice.

I wondered if maybe she had a stroke or something—a medical reason for how she acted—but she adamantly refused to seek help, and I could not force her.

Though heartbreaking, life returned to a new kind of normal; one where we lived together, but shared little.

If I called her name, or got right in her face, she would glance up and look past me, eyes unfocused. Things were easier—she was happier—when I didn't try to force her. Against my better judgment, I let it go.

When it felt too hard to bear, I had to remind myself that my vows were for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health... This inexplicable illness she suffered from didn't let me off the hook just because I missed how things used to be. My loneliness was palpable, crushing me by inches each day.

I never thought anything could be worse than this depression, but these last few weeks, she began exhibiting anger and dread at the oddest moments. I feared for her sanity.

Just the other day we were doing the dishes together like normal, which meant that she did most of the washing while I talked to her about getting help. I started to put the dishes away, but I dropped the first one on the floor. It shattered. She yelped and jumped back at the sound. Her hand trembled over her heart against her chest, her eyes wide with fright. They were her grandmother's dishes, so I knew it was no small thing, but still...she was overreacting.

"Honey, I am so sorry," I apologized, and moved to take her into my arms, but when my foot slid over the broken pieces, she backed away and shook her head, her breathing erratic.

"Relax, baby, it's okay. See?" I held my hand up in surrender. "I'll clean it up. You just stay there and I'll fix this."

The rise and fall of her chest steadied.

"That's better, now just give me a minute and I'll clean this right—"

She turned on her heel and took the broom and dustpan from the closet. Marching back into the kitchen, she stooped over and swept the remains of the plate up.

“I said I would do it.”

She ignored me.

“Please say something.” I brushed her arm. “Please.”

She shuddered, shrugged my finger off, and vigorously rubbed the remnants of my touch away with her other hand as if I were a disease.

After everything I put up with, she expected me to not even touch her?

“Say something!” I demanded.

Standing, she dumped the glass shards into the garbage and walked away.

I was shocked. I had never treated her with anything other than respect and compassion even through those months of mental illness, but to be treated as such, like a cur, a leper, shook me to my very core. What would be next? How much more could I endure?

Later that week, I noticed that she resented the things I did for her. Once she left the bedroom light on when she had gone into the kitchen. I flipped it off, only to have her glare first at the light switch and then in my direction.

“I thought you were done in there, sorry.” My apology sounded stupid even in my own ears. Why apologize for so trivial a thing?

And then there was the day that I opened the door for her when her arms were laden with groceries.

Rather than thank me, she froze, stared at my hand on the door handle, and went around to the back door so as to not use the one door I held for her. It seemed she’d do anything to avoid me, the pariah of her life.

Watching her put the groceries in the cupboard my offer to help died in my throat since I knew already that it would go unanswered.

That evening she changed into the full-length white silk nightie that I loved. It made the prettiest little pile when it hit

the floor. I sometimes imagined it was like a cloud that fell away to reveal her beautiful body.

A sliver of hope pricked my heart and I waited to see if she would turn back like she used to; throw her arms around my neck and beg me to forgive the silliness that had taken over our lives. I leaned against the door in anticipation. It creaked.

She looked up.

“Hey baby. You look beautiful tonight.” I smiled and crooked my finger at her with a “come hither” motion.

She frowned and turned away, slipping under the covers and rolling onto her side.

Disappointment flooded in. Nothing had changed, but it felt worse because I hoped for a miracle. It seemed to me that hope itself must be made of glass; when it shattered, the shards cut far deeper than the original wound. I felt such profound pain at her rejection that my legs no longer had strength to stand.

I staggered to the bed and sat heavily, my head already in my hands. The moment I sat down, my wife flew out of bed, her pretty voice hysterical.

“Go away! What do you want with me? Leave me alone! Go away, please, go away!” She sank against the wall shivering and crying. “Leave me alone. Please, please, please...”

My mouth fell open. It was too much to ask. I had endured one version of extreme dysfunction after another for nearly a year...and now this.

I stormed from the room into the kitchen. Leave her alone? You bet. Fine. I’d do just that. Nothing I did made it better anyway.

Roaring in frustration, I slammed the cupboard door hard enough that all the others popped open and a picture frame fell off the shelf beside it to the floor. I was going insane along with her. Could any vow survive this?

I slid my back down the wall and sat on the floor.

“Why?” I pleaded. “Why is this happening? It’s got to end.”

I choked on my tears and hid my face in my arms. “I can’t take it anymore. I want my wife back.”

Tentative footsteps echoed down the hallway and my wife

emerged, still clothed in her pretty negligee. Even after all this, she moved me; a vision of heaven on Earth.

“Honey,” I whispered, “this is killing me—killing us. You have to talk to someone. We can’t go on like this.”

Her eyes scanned the room, taking in all the open doors and freezing on the picture frame. Hesitantly, she retrieved it and backed against the wall beside me.

“Oh, Ryan.” She whispered, her fingers touching the photo. “I don’t know what to do.”

I shot to my feet beside her.

“You can beat this, Tessa, but you’ve got to talk to a professional. I don’t think we can do it alone. It’s just not going away.”

I glanced at the photo of our third anniversary, and watched her clever fingers trace circles around us.

She still loved me, I was sure of it. We just had to break through the barriers between us. Slowly, I put my arms around her, my lips against the hollow of her throat.

“There is no shame in talking to a professional, a counselor, not if it helps get our lives back. Please. You have to do it...for us.”

The clasp of her necklace had slipped to the side and I pulled it back center for her. “Make a wish. Isn’t that what you always said when you fixed that?”

Her finger stilled on the photo and gooseflesh rose upon her arms. For the first time in forever, she turned and looked directly into my eyes, but I could not hold her gaze. That same lost look returned and her pretty blue eyes slid on past my face, staring at nothing across the room. She walked back to the bedroom, the white silk billowing behind her.

I walked the hallway that night while she made phone calls, occasionally going out on the patio to calm my nerves with the fresh air while she called first one counselor and then another, looking for the perfect fit.

It was so nice to hear her voice; I just let it wash over me, the words blending with one another as she took the first steps toward getting the help she needed. In spite of my previous

disappointments, I hoped for a cure.

We both felt the stress of that night. I spent it pacing, occasionally checking in on Tessa. She spent most of the night sitting up in bed, her pillows gathered around her. Her eyes darted in my direction whenever I approached, but neither of us spoke again.

When the doorbell rang the next day, I was dead on my feet from worry. Would it work? Would I get her back?

Tessa took a steadying breath before opening the door. The woman on the step looked nothing like any counselor I'd ever seen. Her eyes had a luminous quality behind large glasses, and her dangly earrings brushed her shoulders when she moved. She looked more suited to the set of a 70's show than a real counselor.

All those phone calls and this is what she comes up with? I would have to get her references later.

"Thanks for coming. It's Celia, isn't it? Won't you come in?" Tessa stood aside and held the door.

Celia stepped inside, her eyes flickering toward me before resting on Tessa. "Is there a room where you feel more comfortable?"

"The couches are in here," I suggested, but Tessa ignored me and led the way to the table.

"How about here?" she offered.

"Fine." Celia draped her wrap over the chair and settled down opposite my wife. "I know it can't be easy taking this step."

I nodded. "It has taken her a year to get this far."

"I felt like I had no other choice. I couldn't go on this way." Tessa's hands rested on the table, her fingers twisting around each other. "Do you think you can help?"

"We can try. I want you to relax. Think back to when things first started changing for you. Was there any trigger or event that preceded the feelings?"

I gently put my hands on Tessa's shoulders and rubbed in circles, the way she liked it. She shrugged my fingers off and rubbed one hand over her neck. For the sake of our company I

tried to hide how much that little movement wounded me.

"I can't think...maybe a year ago? After the holidays, and all that happened, I was pretty out of it for a while."

"What kind of energy are you feeling today?"

"I don't know. At first I think I felt excitement, and anticipation...but now it's more muddled. Sad? Disappointed? I can't tell."

"Let's begin and see what we find then. Give me your hands." Reaching across the table, she grasped Tessa's hands firmly.

The corners of my mouth turned down. What kind of a touchy-feely counselor was this? Did I really want her slogging around in my wife's head? But before I could give voice to my concern, Celia's eyes rolled back into her head. Her frame shook and a soft moan sounded from her throat.

"She's having a seizure!"

I tried to lift their hands apart, but she had a steel-trap grip on Tessa's fingers. I couldn't make her let go. I glanced at Tessa. Her mouth was set in a grim line, a touch of fear in her eyes.

"Let go! We need to lay her on the ground before she hurts herself."

Instead of answering, she closed her eyes too, her brows furrowed in concentration.

"Damn it all! Why won't you listen to me?"

Taking Tessa's face in my hands I forced her to turn toward me. "Answer me! Why won't you listen?"

"You're asking the wrong questions." The Celia's voice had taken on an ethereal quality.

"What?" I let go of Tessa and stared at the counselor. "What did you say?"

Celia's lids fluttered opened, but the black depths of her dilated eyes bored into me.

"Ryan?" Tessa hesitated. "Is that you?"

Tessa's glazed eyes shocked me into taking a step back. "Tessa? Are you okay?"

Her intense stare followed my movements, her bottom lip

trembling. “I don’t understand.” A sob escaped her. “Why is this happening?”

“He doesn’t know.” Celia explained.

“Know what?” I backed away from them both, a sick feeling in my gut. “What is going on? Stop staring at me like that!”

Their horrible gazes were unwavering.

“Stop it!” I yelled.

“Oh, Ryan.” Tessa cried. “I love you so much.”

Was the room shaking?

“Ryan, you need to let go.” Celia’s voice rang with power and authority.

It was getting hard to breathe.

“What’s happening?” I gasped.

The floor fell away from under my feet and I grasped at the chair in front of me, both of us rising.

“You can’t take care of her anymore, Ryan.” Celia’s words landed against my chest like a sledgehammer, knocking the breath from my lungs.

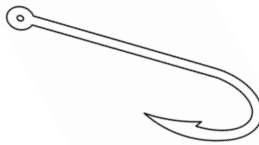
“Tessa!” I screamed, the windows shattering from my cry.


Tessa’s tear-filled eyes watched my agony.

“Why are you doing this?” I begged, my distorted voice echoing throughout the room.

Celia’s hideous eyes focused on mine.

“Because you’re dead.”





Foundation

Wendy Swore

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“Where are the potato chips I bought yesterday?”

Ben slammed the cupboard door and stormed into the family room, his eyes narrowing as they focused on an empty chip bag on the floor surrounded by toys. He kicked the toys out of the way and swept the bag up in his hand, to crumple it in his fist.

“Is it too much to ask for a little help with the cleaning?”

Spying the DVD he bought last week, he snatched it off the floor and cursed at its smudged finish.

“None of you take care of anything! I might as well pour my money down the toilet as buy anything new around here.”

He paused to hear the barbed reply that his wife would throw in defense of the children and their carelessness...but none came. The house was empty.

A muffled squeal of laughter led him out to the back yard.

Trina, his wife of twelve years, sat on the porch step watching the children play and bicker as siblings do.

He stood in front of her with his arms crossed.

“The house is trashed.” He accused.

“I know.”

“My DVD is ruined.”

“I’m sorry.”

The twins ran past, their braids dripping wet from the sprinklers. He turned to yell at them, but she interjected before he finished drawing breath.

“I told them they could get wet.”

“They’re making a mud hole in the lawn...and the mower is getting wet,” he complained.

“The grass will grow back and water won’t hurt the mower. Your clippers are broken, but that was an accident.”

“This is unacceptable. You say you’re busy all day but when I

come home, nothing's changed. Basically, your performance is sub-par."

He kicked a doll off the sidewalk.

"I'm tired of it. I can't stand it. You need to step it up a notch."

Lifting his chin, he stood over her, his mind simmering with righteous indignation.

"I'm tired of it too," her eyes still focused on the children, she replied. "I'd tell you what I did all day, but you wouldn't care or value it anyway, so what's the point?"

"I value you. I just think..."

"That I'm lazy? Sub-par? Not trying hard enough? What is it today, Ben? Tell me how inadequate I am. How I suck as a mother and wife."

"Hey, I never said that. You're putting words in my mouth."

"Respect and love are the foundations of a good marriage. Do you think we have that?" She darted a glance at his eyes before looking away. "I used to think we did, but not anymore..."

"When did this become about our marriage?" he asked.

"It has always been about our marriage. I thought having children would bind us closer, but it hasn't. Instead you push and push until I've got nothing left. I'm not even sure you love us anymore."

"Love us? What are you talking about?"

"How can you claim to love the children, when every little mess infuriates you? How can you claim to love me when nothing I do is good enough? Your anger is like a disease that rots this family from the inside out."

"Don't blow this up into something it's not. Things aren't as bad as you're making them out to be," he tried to reason.

She pointed to a dead tree in the pasture next to their yard. "That used to be my favorite apple tree, but it has been dead for years. It waits for the next windstorms to make it fall. Some disease or insect wormed away at the inside until there was nothing left. It just gave up."

She shook her head.

"I spend each day waiting for your next storm. What will tick him off this time? A forgotten errand? Or maybe spilled milk?"

Ben waited for her to continue, a deep frown on his face.

She pointed her finger at him.

"Someday your storms will go too far, and I will break. Then your house will be spotless and perfect, because no one but you will be there to mess it up."

A tear streaked down her cheek and she swiped it away with the back of her hand.

"Mom, I'm hungry!" Suzanna called from the tree fort.

"Me too! I'm hungry too!" The twins chimed in.

Trina rubbed the last of her tears away and stood up.

"I'll have dinner ready in about a half an hour. Clean up your toys while I cook, okay?"

Ben watched her go into the house and then sat down on the step she had just vacated. It was still warm from her touch. He watched the children run and play for a few minutes, and then gazed off over the fence, her words echoing in his memory.



Later that week, an evening thunderstorm shook the house, its powerful gusts rattling the windows.

Sitting alone in the front room, Trina watched the lights flash across the sky and thought that surely this would be the storm that brought down the tree.

Ben had been different this week; not perfect, not even kind all the time, but the cruel barbs had ceased. He was quieter, and it made her uneasy, like the calm before the storm. Part of her felt the stirrings of hope, but with hope comes the possibility of disappointment. Through the years, the numerous disappointments came as heavy blows, stacking one on top of the other until each new crushing attack threatened to bury her.

A hopeful heart was vulnerable, a liability.

A brilliant strike lit the night, silhouetting the tree in the grips of the storm. The branches tossed so violently that the entire trunk seemed to sway, but still, it remained standing.

The night would see it bend, and shake, but even the mighty storm could not make it fall.

It's like me. I'm bending...but not yet broken.



FORTY YEARS LATER...

Trina shuffled through the field mulling the events of the past week. Fifty-two years was a lifetime to spend with someone, and yet it had not been enough.

Her fingers twisted around the locket that held her favorite photo of him, taken not long after their twelfth anniversary. That was the year she had thought their relationship was over; a year of bitter tears wept into the pillow at night when everyone else slept; a year of wondering if the children would be better off with a father that raged and cursed, or better off with none at all.

That year Ben had changed. He became the father she hoped him to be. Under his tender care, the children and their relationship flourished.

Instead of raging, Ben reasoned.

Instead of cursing, he complimented.

She had thought their union to be as rotted as an old dead tree, but it had proven to be much stronger...and so had the tree.

Approaching the tree with the reverence of an old friend, she stretched her wrinkled fingers and touched the aged wood. She had glanced at it a thousand times over the years, always expecting to see it fall, but it remained. Instead of a symbol of defeat, it had become a symbol of fortitude, of faithfulness.

Eventually, the bark fell away and the core wood weathered until the brown whitened to a dusty grey. The last couple years it even seemed to lean a little like a tired old man. She felt that it was fitting to see it age so, like the three of them were linked to grow old together and never fall.

Except that Ben had fallen, and now she was alone.

Overcome, she leaned against the trunk of the old tree,

meaning to have a good cry. But when she did, the entire tree shifted. She stilled and touched the tree again, pushing harder when she felt it give. Instead of falling, it swiveled to the right, returning to its former position the moment her pressure let up.

“What’s this?”

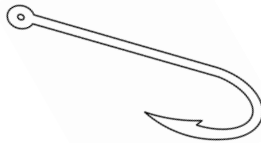
Her brows furrowed as she examined the tree closer, her fingers tracing down the side. The large knot she had observed from a distance proved to be a worn hole with some sort of iron rod jutting out of it. *Iron Rod?*

Slowly making her way down on one knee, she dug loose dirt at the base of the tree to see how far down the rod went. After a minute, her fingers scraped over something hard. She brushed away the dirt and uncovered... concrete.

Deep grooves in the dirt on either side showed where the tree had rocked back and forth as the wood around the iron post wore away.

“Oh Ben,” she whispered, a tear spilling down her cheek. “You saved us both.”

For a long time she stared where the tree had been impaled and then cemented in place.





JEANNE VOELKER

I was born during WWII and spent my childhood years in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains.

I graduated from the University of Washington, Seattle, in 1980 with a degree in English literature. I studied literature and composition because I consider stories essential to life.

I have always admired a well-told tale and for many years, stories have amused, encouraged, educated, and sustained me. Now it's my turn to add to the pot.

I write from my remodeled farm house in Seattle where I also have a well-established tutoring business.

ELDER CARES is a snippet from the lives of Kate and Maude, two lively, though ageing sisters, who live in tune with nature at the edge of the continent. Their talents lie in playing the cards life deals them. Following a disheartening loss, the sisters' generosity brings them a surprise and undreamed of pleasures.

Elder Cares



Jeanne Voelker

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After Kate took the soup, bowls, and spoons down to our beachside table, we—one at each elbow—guided Hank from the front deck to the path and down to the bulkhead. Hank's feet have walked this path for sixty years, so he often says that his feet can see the way and he doesn't need our help. He could be right, but we help him anyway, and this time he didn't protest.

Living on the shore of Puget Sound, we follow the cues of the seasons, and we eat our supper when the sun drops behind the Olympic Mountains. The climate is mild in the Pacific Northwest so, even in winter—when the sun sets at 4:30—we occasionally dine on the beach.

On this evening in early spring, it was a few minutes past seven o'clock when we headed for the beach. Evening brought a chill, so we wore sweaters and carried a blanket. I stirred the soup and Kate praised the tangy aroma, but Hank said his stomach felt off and he would rather lie on his recliner and drink the fresh air.

Kate wrapped and tucked the blanket for Hank and gave him a soda cracker as a digestive. I filled two bowls at the table and prepared to eat in the crisp salt air.

Oh how I love this beach. The waves splash in and, as the water recedes, the gravel drums a rolling staccato into the sea. These scents and sounds have informed my soul for thirty years. I'm not surprised that Hank finds the sea air nourishing.

Far out on the sound, a tugboat pulled a barge heaped high with sand. Near us, a gull picked up a butter clam, flew it high into the air and dropped it onto the rocky beach. The shell didn't break, so the gull flew it higher the second time to open his dinner.

The sun sat for a moment on the peaks of the snow-covered Olympic Mountains and the light streaked a brilliant path across

the water. The beach rocks glowed, as did the trees beside us in their new green dress.

As the sun disappeared behind Mount Olympus, the clouds on the horizon were edged with gold. A few minutes later, the sky in the west was painted with soft warm colors. I soaked up the beauty and promised myself, as I had many times, that I would remember this scene always.

Some day, when we cannot climb the hill, we will have to leave this paradise.

The thought made me shiver and I pulled my sweater close around me. Kate turned to Hank. "Are you warm enough, honey?" she asked.

But Hank didn't answer. Hank had closed his eyes and died, his soda cracker still on his blanket. Kate kneeled beside him. She laid her head on his chest and kissed his face and whispered something to him.



The sons had to be called home to this house that Hank built, or as John, the eldest, sometimes called it, "the house built for Kate in 1948". There were bedrooms to tidy and funeral arrangements to complete.

Kate spoke of visitations. "Hank is still with us. I saw him last night."

"Where?" I asked.

"Down on the bulkhead. And later he stood behind my chair."

"What did he look like?"

"He looked like Hank, and he wore bright colors."

Another day, Kate cried. "I knew this day would come, but I didn't know I would miss him so much."

What could I do but hug my tearful sister.



The day of the funeral came and went. The sons grieved for

the loss of their father, yet the joy of being together and exchanging light-hearted banter mitigated their sorrow.

"Ninety-five years," said Robert. "I hope I make it that far."

"Then you should get more exercise," said Richard, the youngest. "Why don't you get on a plane once in a while and come play tennis with me?"

"Or build a house from beach wood and scrap lumber, no board the same length as another," said Patrick. "That's exercise!"

"I have always wondered why you boys scattered so far," I said.

"Aw, Auntie," said Patrick, "Don't you remember Dad's words? He said overlooking the sea in our growing-up years gave us wanderlust."

The local paper published the funeral date and people we hadn't seen in many years showed up—sons and daughters of couples who once lived on this beach, and workers who remembered Hank as a kind and fair boss. Some said they hadn't heard anything of Hank for at least twenty years, meaning of course, they had wondered if we were still alive.

After the funeral, the family and a few friends went to dinner at a restaurant where we ate, drank wine, and shared Hank stories and fish stories.

"Remember the time when Dad took us rowing and the tide changed and we could hardly get back?"

"Remember when Dad taught us to sail and we stopped to fish and you caught a dogfish?"

"Yeah, that sucker was a fighter. I thought I had a whale!"

"How big was it?"

"Ummm, like this! And he almost dragged us out to sea."

"How big?"

There's a lot of good will and laughter at after-funeral gatherings. The sons stayed for two more days and then caught planes to their faraway homes.



“The house that Hank built” was secluded, yet we were not far from town. To reach town, we walked up our switchback trail, then along the shoulder of the road for two miles. Convenient? Not at all, but the hill was a blessing.

Five years ago, Kate, Hank, and I were interviewed on a local radio show. The host of the program introduced us and asked, “What is your recipe for a long and healthy life?”

A standard question, but the young host did ask it as if he genuinely wanted to know.

“We live on the beach, at the base of a hill,” said Kate. “The hill is our daily exercise. Need groceries? Hike up the hill! Take out the garbage? Haul it up the hill! Doctor appointment? We mostly get well by ourselves. No sick person feels like walking up that hill.”

The interviewer laughed. “What are your thoughts, Maude? Is the hill behind your house the secret to eternal youth?”

“Pretty close,” I said. “We’re quite active. We grow vegetables in the summer, and in the autumn, we rake the big maple leaves off the trail.”

Hank said, “Look at these ladies! Eighty-three and eighty-one years old and they have schoolgirl complexions. They’re slim and they have legs that a twenty-year-old would be proud of.” Hank was ninety at the time. His mind was sharp, but his sight had failed, so maybe we didn’t look quite as good as he imagined.

“How many years have you and Kate been married?” asked the interviewer.

“We celebrated our fiftieth anniversary five years ago, so it must be fifty-five now,” Hank answered.

“And what’s the secret to a long and happy marriage?” he asked Hank.

“Ask Kate. She’s the boss.” Hank smiled and winked as he passed the question to Kate.

“What do you say is the secret, Kate?” asked the interviewer.

“Well, we never had any complaint about each other,” said Kate.

“No complaints? Pretty good secret.”



I moved in with Kate and Hank after their boys were grown.

"This house is awfully big for two," Kate had said.

In his last few years, Hank was blind and frail, but Kate cared for him so earnestly that he never grew ill. He faded gradually, like daylight. Now, Hank was dead and Kate and I confessed that we felt rather dead ourselves.

After the sons had chosen mementos and returned to their countries of choice, Kate fell into deep grief. She had lost her only love, her lifetime pal, and she was inconsolable. For two weeks, Kate didn't eat and she hardly slept. Her tears were unrelenting, and I feared I would lose her too.



After two weeks, I finally convinced Kate to taste a soufflé I had made. She ate a half portion and said she felt a little better.

"Hank had a long and happy life," I said for the hundredth time.

"But now he's gone," said Kate, "and we were so accustomed to each other."

"Do you want to move to an easier place?" I asked her.

"No. I don't want to lose our home as well."

I didn't want to move either. Yet, I wanted to do whatever would be best. "But won't these surroundings only remind you of our loss?"

"Hank made these walls, these floors, these windows. Hank is here in this work. Staying will be a comfort."

Kate was right. Losing Hank was difficult enough to endure. A change of residence now would only make life harder.



In recent years, Kate and I had developed a routine. Each day, one of us would shop for food and the other would stay home to help Hank. In earlier times, we three had walked to

town together, but there came a time when Hank couldn't climb the steep trail. That's when Kate and I decided to take turns. Each day, one of us would walk the miles and carry groceries home. The one not going out would cook that day.

The vegetable garden was originally Hank's project, but we took it over when he could no longer kneel. Now summer was coming and we would plant again. Digging, weeding, and seeing things grow would do Kate good.

After Hank died, Kate and I walked together to the shops. We didn't talk much. It felt better to be silent. One time, as we walked down the trail, loaded with groceries, Kate said, "Do you know what I liked best about being married?"

I looked at Kate's face to see if the answer was there.

"There was always someone around to do things for."

"I can see that. I've always liked helping too. Remember? I once hoped to go into nursing."

"Mm, yeah, I dreamed of a helping career too, but when I met Hank, my ambition changed." Kate gave a small laugh.

"It's good to see you smile. Have you thought of anything you would like to do?"

"I've considered taking on volunteer work, but I don't know..."

"What sort of work?"

"Oh, maybe at the hospital or at an old folks' home."

I smiled to think of Kate tending the old people.

"There's a new nursing home in town," I said. "I haven't seen it, but there was an ad on television."

"No, it was just a thought. If I committed to helping and then didn't feel like walking up the hill, I would let people down."

The next day, Kate wanted to work in the garden. We had already prepared the soil and Kate liked to plant, so I said I would go buy groceries and she could plant her circles of carrots, radishes, bush beans, and squash. Some people arrange their gardens in rows. Kate prefers circles.

"And if you see lettuce and cucumber seeds, will you buy some?"

“Yes, I’ll check the hardware store.”



I trudged up the hill with my backpack and grocery bag. The two miles up the road was a lovely walk in good weather. On this late spring afternoon, the air was brisk so I wore my coat. I found the seeds and the bread for dinner. By the time I began to walk back, the sun was ready to sink into the ocean. It was dusk when I neared the top of our trail.

We don’t see many cars or pedestrians along this road, besides those from the neighborhood. In the half-light, I saw a man walking toward me on the other side of the road. He had just come around the bend and I couldn’t see him clearly, but he had the careful walk of the elderly.

The next moment, a vehicle careened around the bend, and although the man stepped aside, the car clipped his leg and he stumbled into the ditch. The driver then turned on his headlights and continued up the road. I hurried to the man who lay sprawled in the ditch.

“Are you okay?”

“Glumph.”

“Can I help you?”

“Flizzescush.”

“Here, let me help you. Can you stand?”

I helped him to his feet, then realized that the man wore only a bathrobe. He stood on his right foot, but he held up his left. He had an abrasion above his right eye. Now what to do?

There were no houses nearby except for one whose owner was away. No telephones. If the man were unable to walk, I would have to leave him at the side of the road and go for help. Leaving him alone in his confused state was too risky. I would have to take him down the trail.

I picked up a knobby stick from the edge of the woods and gave it to the man to use as a cane. I became his left-side crutch. The man was slightly taller than me so I draped his arm over the top of my backpack. This gave him more support than my

narrow shoulders could have. Slowly, very slowly, we hopped and lurched down the trail.

I worried that Kate might say I was incautious, but her face lit up at the chance to help someone in need. She scurried about, first getting ice for the swollen ankle and the forehead bump. While she tended to our visitor, I made up a bed on the couch for him. The man couldn't tell us his name. He spoke slowly, but incoherently.

"What should we do?" I asked Kate. Call the hospital to see if a patient is missing? The nursing home?"

"Let's do what needs to be done. Maybe by morning, our visitor will be able to talk to us."

Kate heated some soup for the man. He picked up the bowl and drank, slurping the noodles after the broth was gone. Kate ran a bath and handed him soap and a washcloth. He dropped his robe and hobbled toward the tub, so Kate went out and closed the door.

While the man bathed, Kate and I searched through the closet that held Hank's clothes. Kate found briefs, an undershirt, some khakis, and a cotton pullover. Our visitor wasn't as tall as Hank, but he looked about the same size around.

"Pajamas. Do we still have some here?" Kate wondered aloud.

We found pajamas and a pair of scuffed slippers. Kate folded the clothes, opened the bathroom door a few inches, and set the clothes inside.

When the man came limping from the bathroom, he was wearing the shirt and khakis. The shirtsleeves hung past his hands and the pants covered his feet. His face did look cleaner, but he hadn't washed his matted gray hair and it still bore an odor of mildew.

The man looked dazed and still said nothing, so Kate and I rolled up his sleeves and pant legs. Kate smiled and asked, "Is this better?"

Kate offered the man a sandwich and he ate it quickly. Despite the bath, our visitor's fingernails, long and beginning to

spiral, were dirty.

I went to clean the tub and saw that he hadn't emptied it. Maybe he didn't know how to open the drain. There was urine on the toilet seat and phlegm in the sink. *Our guest is a little rough around the edges*, I decided while cleaning the toilet, tub, and sink. *If he is to stay more than one day, we'll have to teach him some household manners.*

Our nameless guest yawned several times, so Kate handed him the pajamas and directed him to the bathroom. Once he had changed, he climbed gingerly into the couch-bed I had made for him. Kate turned out the lights and we went upstairs to the sewing room. She opened her sewing machine, and taking out the scissors, removed the cuffs from the khakis.

"You're shortening Hank's pants?" I asked.

"Hank doesn't need them."

Kate pinned up a narrow hem on each pant leg and machine stitched them.

"Where do you think he came from? We need to find out. What if his family is searching for him? Maybe he's a missing person."

"He doesn't look like he's had anyone caring for him recently"

"Do you think he wandered from the nursing home?"

"Possibly."

Kate finished hemming the pants and cut the shirt sleeves.

"He'll probably leave tomorrow," I said. "Why are you fixing clothes for him?"

"It's better than sending him back in his bathrobe."

"Sending him where?"

"I don't know. We could see if there's a missing person report on TV. And we can make some inquiries. Let's help him. It would be nice if we could return him in better condition than we found him."

"Should we lock the front door?" I asked.

Kate laughed. "To keep him here? I don't think anyone will steal him. And I don't think he'll try to walk up our trail with a sore ankle. Let's see how he is in the morning and make some

calls.”



The next morning, we found our guest sitting on the couch, head in his hands.

“Good morning,” said Kate.

The man didn’t look up.

“Would you like some breakfast?”

The man groaned.

“Breakfast?” Kate repeated.

“Need a... drink.”

“Water or tomato juice?”

“A beer.”

“What is your name?”

The man looked at the floor.

“Can you tell me your name?”

Even after all of these years, my sister’s patience amazes me.

“I do have some home-made blackberry wine.”

“Okay.”

“Tell me your name and I will bring you a glass.”

“Hal.”

“Just Hal? Do you have a surname?”

“Uh, Smith.”

“Where do you normally live?”

“Not around here.”

“Hal,” Kate gently asked, “Do you remember where you came from yesterday?”

“Not a good place. Can I have more wine?”

“No, you may not. One glass per day, and you’ve just had it. Would you like tomato juice? Orange juice?”

I watched TV to see if any missing persons were reported. Kate called the nursing home and hospital. No one missed Hal, so we made him our project. His appetite was always good, and with care and attention, Hal began to talk more and to relax his guard.

He consented to having his fingernails cut and his hair

shampooed, so I helped him with these tasks. I gave him a safety razor to cut his whiskers, but he said he didn't know how to use it. I gave him the safety razor with a blade in it, gave myself a safety razor with no blade and we played 'follow the leader' in front of the bathroom mirror.

This was the first time I heard Hal laugh. He laughed at seeing my face with shaving cream on it, and he laughed at the paths through the shaving cream that my empty razor made. When we finished, Hal was clean-shaven.

Hal stayed off his sore foot until the ankle could support his weight—then Kate gave him strengthening exercises and we walked with him. The first time we went down from the bulkhead to the beach, Hal grew so tired that he could barely climb the few steps to the house.

Kate suggested an exercise. "Practice going up and down stairs indoors," she told him. "Try to do a little more each day."

For several weeks, we provided nourishing food, prescribed exercise, and taught Hal some of the niceties of housekeeping. Hal's stair climbing progressed and soon he could easily walk to the beach and back. When Hal said he would like his hair cut, Kate cut it to the length he described. When she finished, she playfully rubbed his head with a towel. Once again, Hal laughed. He had such a natural laugh; it was a pleasure to hear it.

As Hal grew in strength and health, he told us stories and shared his talents with us: How to build an efficient beach fire and cook in it.

"Bring your stew meat and onions, carrots, whatnot, and the heavy pot with a cup of water in it. When this fire burns down to coals, we will bury the pot. The best stew is outdoor stew."

"Where did you learn this? I asked.

"I'm a traveler," said Hal.

So he's homeless. I like him, but he doesn't tell us much about himself. Maybe he is still learning to trust us.



One day, Kate and Hal stepped down to the beach and I went up the hill for groceries. When I returned two hours later, Kate and Hal were not on the beach. Nor were they in the kitchen or sitting room. I looked into the bathroom and laundry room. I wondered if they had gone for a stroll along the beach or up the hill.

I put the groceries away and went up to my bedroom to rest. As I passed Kate's room, the door was open. The curtains were closed so the light was dim, yet I could see that Kate was asleep on her bed, and so was Hal. The sheet covered only their feet. They were asleep, all snuggled, and they were naked.

I closed Kate's door and hurried to my room. What should I do? What could I say to them? There was a pit in my stomach and tightness in my throat.

I went down to the kitchen and started making some quick bread. As I took it out of the oven I heard Kate and Hal coming down the stairs. I wanted to stay quiet about what I had seen and talk to Kate privately later. Yet, seeing them come down the stairs, relaxed and smiling, I burst into tears.

"How could you, Kate? What were you thinking? Life was simple before Hal came here. Can't we just send him away?"

I could hear the stridency in my voice, but I didn't care. Kate put her arm around my shoulder. I brushed it away.

"Maudie, dear, it's not what you think," Kate's voice, as always, was gentle.

"What am I supposed to think?" I countered. "There you were—you two—naked in bed. In Hank's bed! And Hank not gone four months."

"It's therapy," Kate said.

"Therapy, my ass!" I had learned some new expressions from the irrepressible Hal. "Therapists have lost their licenses for performing that kind of therapy!"

"No, please let me tell you. This afternoon, we saw a TV program that explained 'kangaroo care'. It told how newborn infants fail to thrive if they don't have skin contact with their parents or caregivers. It also said that older people often lose the opportunity for skin contact. They have no children to

cuddle and often their spouses have died. So there is no touching, no warmth of skin available to them.”

“Now you listen,” I said, “We don’t know Hal. We don’t know where he came from. We don’t even know if ‘Hal’ is his real name. He could be a felon. I’ll bet he conned you into this.”

These words came from my mouth unbidden. I had grown to like Hal and to trust him, so I suddenly felt ashamed of what I was saying.

“No, Hal didn’t con me into anything”, Kate said. “Hal has tolerated our managing his current life. He’s been very patient with our ‘one glass of wine per day’ and with our insistence on a health regime. The kangaroo therapy for elders was my idea. Hal agreed it was worth a try. Sharing a cuddle is comforting. It’s encouraging. And it motivates an old lady like me to go on.”

“So is the therapy for him or for you?”

“I meant it for him, but...”

“But...the sexuality of it,” I broke in...”I...I wasn’t expecting this.”

“Skin contact therapy is usually not sexual. If it becomes sexual, then we might want to see what we can do.” Kate smiled, but I was not in the mood for humor. “But for now,” she continued, “it is kangaroo care. It’s ‘cuddle time for grandparents’. You could join us. I imagine Hal would be willing.”

“Oh, we would just pile into bed like a bunch of puppies? No thanks. Please excuse my old-fashioned ideas, but I think *cuddling*, with all of its unproven benefits, is a private affair.”

While Kate and I talked, Hal left the kitchen. I heard his voice in the sitting room, but I couldn’t hear what he said. Was he talking to himself? Was he on the telephone? Had he remembered a friend or a relative who could come take him away? In my anger, I wished him to leave; yet I feared my wish might come true.

Anger exhausted me, wore out my spirit. We ate a quiet meal. After supper, we went to our individual rooms to sleep and to dream alone.



The next morning, I apologized to Kate and Hal. "I was taken by surprise. I'm not trying to manage your lives. Please...I didn't mean what I said. I was tired and upset. I hope that Hal will stay with you," I said to Kate, "despite your cranky sister."

"It's okay, sister," said Hal. "It's really okay," and he hugged us both. It felt good.

We spent a pleasant day cooking and beachcombing. We picked blueberries from the garden and made a pie. Kate smiled often, and when she smiled, the deep lines of age disappeared. There was life in her eyes and pink in her complexion that I hadn't seen since Hank passed.

The wind came up in the afternoon, and we knew rain would follow. Kate dressed a chicken and put it into the oven for an indoor supper. I picked lettuce and a cucumber from the garden, and pulled a few carrots and radishes.

The sun dropped into the sea and the dark crept up the hill behind us as we went inside to finish cooking.

I was tossing the salad when there was a knock at the door. My heart nearly stopped. *Someone has found their way here in the dark. Maybe Hal is leaving after all. If he goes, it'll be my fault... and my loss, as well as Kate's.*

I opened the door and there stood a man—about my age, about my height, his white hair windswept, as though his ship had just been blown to this shore. He carried a walking stick and a small knapsack.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you. I'm a friend of Hal's. He telephoned me yesterday, but he didn't leave a number. Is he in?"

"Uh, yes, he is. I'm surprised that you found your way down here in the dark."

"My feet led me here... They can see in the dark. I'm Peder. And you...?"

Peder's remark made me smile, and he returned my smile. The light from the kitchen sparkled in his blue eyes.

"I'm Maude. We're just sitting down to supper. Will you join us?"



RITA J. WEBB

Throughout her childhood, Rita J. Webb travelled around the country with a book always in hand. Rita finally settled in Ohio where she attended college to study Computer Science and then began a career as a Software Test Analyst, a beautiful title for an empty position.

Rita's love for books and great stories pushed her to start writing when impending layoffs forced her to reconsider her dreams and goals. Having tested software for ten years, she wanted to create something more meaningful than a test manual, something that would move hearts.

With her husband T.J., Rita home-schools her three girls, who keep her busy with art, science projects, books to read, and walks about the park.

PEERING IN THE WINDOW. Virginia Hamilton wants nothing more than to fit in, to find romance, to make friends, but when Bryan asks her out for dinner, she's clueless on how to respond. Can she overcome her shyness to learn how to love?

WRITER'S DREAM. Jason and his wife Trixie move to the country to escape the painful memories of their lost son. Trixie is soon pregnant, and the promise of new life gives her hope. But, Jason can't shake the guilt, grief, and anger that consume him.

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Peering in the Window



Rita J. Webb

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I sat typing at my desk. I loved being efficient. My fingers would fly over the keys, making quick tapping noises as the neat little letters marched like tiny ants across the screen. I always worked through my pile of typing faster than the other girls, and they hated me for it.

Mr. Appleton made it worse by giving me all the special assignments. Not only was I fast, I was perfect, and he made sure the whole office floor knew how special Virginia Hamilton was.

“Why can’t you type as fast as Virginia?” Mr. Appleton badgered them. “Look at all these mistakes. Maybe if you focused on your work like Virginia does, rather than gabbing all morning, you’d actually make some decent progress.”

All those eyes were on me—hateful, angry, and jealous—wishing and plotting my demise, I was sure. My face burned hot, and I hung my head to hide my embarrassment. I hated being the focus of attention and just wished that the ground would open up and swallow me.

Oh, I had tried to fit in, attempting to slow down, but once I got started, I couldn’t help myself. My fingers just wouldn’t listen. That’s why I always ate my lunch alone and watched the other girls laugh and gossip and carry on like schoolgirls. I wished to hate them for it, but I didn’t. Instead, I was an outsider staring with envy through the open window.

“Virginia.”

I looked up from my work to big blue eyes staring at me. The entire room was quiet. The clicking of keyboards, the chatter of the secretaries, the beeping of computers; it all stopped to watch him. I could just about hear the heartbeat of every girl in the room, clamoring loudly for his attention, the one man all the girls seemed to melt over, and here he was, at

my desk.

If I was hated before, they would loathe me now. “Mr. Johnson—” I started.

“Bryan. There’s no need to be formal.”

“Um. Yes. Bryan.” My heart hammered and my hands shook. “Um. How may I help you?”

He laughed; good-natured, but most definitely triggered by my bright red face and clumsy manners. Hadn’t he said there was no need to be formal? How may I help you? As if I addressed a stranger.

“Mr. Appleton,” Mr. Johnson—er, Bryan—said, “has assigned you to the project I will be starting next week. I would like you to come to my office within the hour to take some dictation.”

“Yes, sir, I mean, Bryan.” *Bryan. Bryan. I need to remember that.*

He opened his mouth as if to say something else and then smiled. “Thank you,” he said and walked away.

I put my head on the desk. How could I be such a dolt? I could hear the girls’ buzz behind me, whispering about me, no doubt, and probably remarking about how fine Bryan’s anatomy was as he walked away. *Anatomy*. That’s not likely the word they would use, but I couldn’t bring myself to use such words. Slang. I tried sometimes, but the words wouldn’t come out. Rather than sounding relaxed and natural, slang just made me even more awkward; just as I had been in high school; just as I had been in college; just as I was now.

Twenty-seven years old. Never been on a date. I lived alone without even a cat to keep me company. I did have a plant though. I watered it every morning at six fifty-seven, just before I went out the door. Precision and good books took the place of companionship and love. I was pretty sure that I was better off, based on the tales I overheard from the chatter of those little birds.

I entered my last data set, collected my pens and notepads, and headed toward Bryan’s office. He pored over some documents when I rapped on the door.

“Come in,” he said, gesturing toward a seat. “Let me give you

some idea what this project is about.” I sat down nervously, and he stood and walked over to the whiteboard. With the help of pictures, he explained about databases and servers and network connections.

I stared at him. It wasn’t that he didn’t make sense. I understood every word. Rather, nobody ever bothered to explain things to secretaries. We were there to take notes and type things up and enter data into the computers. We weren’t required to think or understand or know anything.

“Make sense?” he finally asked.

“Oh yes.” I nodded fervently.

“Good.” He smiled. “Now what I need from you is to take notes when we meet with our new partners. There will be brainstorming sessions, and I’ll need someone to keep track of all the ideas and agreements. Can you handle that?”

“Of course, sir.”

“Bryan,” he reminded me. “Tomorrow morning. 8:30. Meeting in Auditorium A.”

“Yes. Bryan.” I was supposed to remember that. I stood and gathered my papers. The book I was reading at home slipped out from my bundle of papers and notebooks and fell to the floor. *How did it get here?*

“Here, let me help you,” he said and leaned over to pick up my book.

My face must’ve been as red as a tomato.

“Ah, 1984 by George Orwell; this is a good book! I wouldn’t have taken you for someone who reads sci-fi. Have you read *Little Brother*?”

“One of my favorites,” I said. “But then I read anything I can get my hands on.”

“Oh?”

He looked at me funny, as though horns grew out of my head, but I couldn’t help myself. I rattled off a list of authors, as if I was a database of books. “Shakespeare. Charles Dickens. Victor Hugo. Raymond Chandler. Jane Austen. Frank Herbert.”

“A girl who reads.” He grinned. “You are a rare specimen

indeed.”

“Douglas Adams. Tom Clancy—”

“You? You read Adams? You don’t seem to have much of a sense of humor.”

“Of course I do.” I had laughed until I cried when I read *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, a humorous adventure through space. Well, the first time I didn’t understand all of it, but I had decided to give it another try. Even now I couldn’t help laughing. Forty-two. The answer to The Great Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything. *Maybe when I am forty-two, I will finally understand life and everything.*

“I didn’t know you could smile,” he said.

He had an odd look in his eyes. It made me uncomfortable; I felt as though something was expected of me. But for the life of me, I didn’t know what. It was the first time I hadn’t understood something. He looked down at his notes and straightened them on his desk. “Well, perhaps we could discuss this over dinner tonight?”

What was I supposed to say? No one had ever asked me out before. I was the girl who watched all the other girls get dates in high school and college. I sat on the sidelines, clutching my books and spending Friday nights alone. The guys wanted girls who could laugh and bat their eyelashes, not ones who could think.

“So we will meet tomorrow morning?”

“The answer,” he said, taking my hand, “should be yes.”

“Tomorrow morning—”

“Say yes.”

“Y-yes.” My heart choked me. Did I just say what I thought I said?

“Good, I’ll pick you up at seven this evening.”



Donald leaned back in his chair and studied the ceiling tile; anything to get his mind off the problem. He counted the pin-sized holes, analyzed the shape, looked for patterns, and then

did it all again with the next tile. There was a bug in his program—a problem he couldn't solve—and sometimes it helped to empty his brain.

"Morning, Don," John said, behind him. "How was your weekend?"

"Short. Too short."

"I hear you."

Donald glanced about the room and then lowered his voice. "Did you hear about what happened to Mike? He was escorted from the building last week. Got caught forwarding sensitive information."

He hit the run button and then spoke louder so that the room could hear. It wouldn't do to be caught whispering. "Take a look at this code. I've been trying to fix it all morning. Maybe a fresh pair of eyes..."

John leaned in as the code flashed across the screen. "I heard he tried to get the information to the press," he whispered as he watched the screen, "but the dork printed the material from his own computer. Might as well announce to the whole building what he was doing."

The script came to an end, and Donald hit the run button again. "This damn computer just won't listen to me," he grumbled.

"So what're you working on?"

"It's a new logic program I've added to monitor the test subject's language for me—look for trigger words, you know—but I'm not getting any alerts."

"Scoot over. Let me drive."

Donald got out of the way and let John sit down at his desk.

As he studied the screen, John chewed his lip and pulled on his goatee. "You're missing a tag here, you dork."

"Thanks." Don got back in his seat, fixed the code, and ran it again. He glanced back at the room full of developers, but no one paid any attention to them.

"Mike should've bounced the printout off the server. They'd never have known who did it."

"Nah, they'd figure it out. You know that."

“Oh, I know he should’ve—” The computer simulation stopped, flashing a warning. Donald jumped from his seat. “Oh shit—”

He raised his arm to wave down one of the suits on duty.

“Doctor,” he called, “you may want to see this.”

“What’s going on?”

“Test subject V-X14387 has completed Phase One of the experiment.”

“Good. Let me see the transcript.”

Donald handed the doctor the readout that spat from the printer on his desk. “Looks as though there are a few kinks in the programming.” He hit a few keys.

“Hmm,” the doctor muttered as he read. “Doesn’t know how to respond to the input and so resorts to familiar logic paths.”

“Yes, doctor. It rebooted.”

“Call it in for maintenance. Get this glitch patched by morning.”

“Will we be moving to Phase Two, now?”

“No, the connection has not yet been established.”

Donald sighed, relieved. He didn’t want to be here when they started Phase Two. But then he didn’t want to end up like Mike either. For the umpteenth time, he wished he’d never gotten this job.

The doctor’s face turned sour. “Don’t get too attached. Remember, you are just a technician, and this is just a robot.”

“But commanding it to murder, sir? She—I mean, the programming—will never recover.”

“You forget yourself. You are not here to think.”

“Yes, sir.” Donald looked down at his shaking hands. They wouldn’t fire him. They’d just kill him if he balked now, he knew. “Forgive me.”

“We must put the programming to the test. Isn’t that our purpose: to see what it will choose, to love or to obey. Can a machine love?” The doctor turned to walk away. “Don’t forget to call it in for tweaking.”



The phone was ringing when I got home. Maybe Bryan was going to cancel. I wasn't sure which I wanted more—the relief of a quiet evening or something new and exciting, an adventure. “Virginia, speaking,” I said into the receiver.

“This is the nurse at the Warren County Hospital, reminding you of your doctor’s appointment at six tomorrow morning.”

I didn’t have a doctor’s appointment tomorrow. I always remembered those things. “You must be mistaken—”

“Security code V-X14387.”

“Yes, I will be there before work.”



I hung up the phone. How strange. I never forget anything.



Writer's Dream



Rita J Webb

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Jason pulled into the drive and killed the engine. The house's blank windows stared back, empty, forlorn. He should be excited, but he felt nothing, the same numbing hollowness that had gnawed at him.

"It's going to be all right," Trixie whispered. She squeezed his hand, and he turned to give her a lopsided smile. A tear trickled down her face, and he wiped it away with his hand.

"A fresh start," he said. "That's what we promised ourselves."

"Do you think—?"

"Of course." He forced the smile she needed. "Fresh country air, lots of space to exercise. Before you know it, you'll be healthy..."

"And then we'll try again."

He swallowed the heaviness welling up in his throat. "Yes, then we'll try again."

Turning away to hide his own tears, he swung open the car door. The for-sale sign, a sold sticker slapped brazenly on its side, stood in the center of the overgrown lawn, their memento to this new world. A tug and a push, and it slid out of the grass, mud caked to its legs.

They had dreamed of this—a place to call home, to raise their children. *Our son*. He would have been a year old now. She'd be getting him out of his car seat, and then he'd be toddling about. They would laugh and Trixie would smile like she used to.

Jason shook his head to clear the cobwebs clinging to the corners of his mind. Things were different now. They had a new home, an old rundown farmhouse with plenty of sunlight, fresh opportunities, and a chance at hope. He grabbed his laptop from the back of the car and went inside to find his wife opening windows in the kitchen.

“Oh, Jason, just look at this place!” Her face shone with a light he hadn’t seen since...since the day their boy was born. “I can just see it now,” she said, her voice so soft he could barely hear it. “Muslin curtains, a green tablecloth on the table, fresh flowers in a vase, a bowl of fresh apples on the counter, apples from our own tree, cookies in the oven—”

“Mmm, you’re making me hungry.” Jason put his arms around his wife and pulled her close. Her hair smelled of something flowery, as wonderful as the first time. Damn, her touch felt good, warm and refreshing. Trixie reached up and pulled his mouth down to hers. Her lips were soft and timid, the kiss shy, as if it was their first, but then, she hadn’t let him touch her in months. Tears trickled down his face and onto her hair. He hugged her as though he couldn’t get her close enough.

“Thank you,” she whispered, pulling away and looking up at him. For the first time, her smile reached her eyes despite the tears falling down her face.

A knock on the back door interrupted them. Wiping her eyes with the back of her hands, Trixie put on her best smile. “Our first neighbor,” she said. “Will you do the honors?”

Jason gave her a lopsided grin and offered his arm. “I would be delighted.”

On the other side of the door was an old man with a wrinkled face and an equally wrinkled jacket. He looked like the typical farmer with a straw hat, denim overalls, a blue striped shirt, and dirty boots.

“Howdy, mister. Ma’am,” he doffed his hat to Trixie. “I saw ya’ll drove up and thotcha might like a bit of homemade stew and fresh cornbread.”

“How marvelous,” Trixie said, taking the packages and setting them on the counter.

Jason stood back, watching her animated face, and smiled. This was the woman he remembered. This move was definitely for the best. They would settle in; he’d finish his manuscript and find a publisher, and she would finally find that joy she lost.

“My, you are a right pretty lady,” the farmer said. “Reminds

me of my Suzie Mae, bless her soul, back when she was as young and bright as you are. She was all smiles and sweetness. Been dead now, nigh thirty years, but I still remember her laughter to this day.”

“Oh, you lost your wife?”

“No, ma’am, I have her in mah heart.” The man tapped his chest and smiled. “Still talk to her while I’m doing my chores, and some days, I hear her singing in the kitchen. She had a right cheerful voice though she couldn’t carry a tune.”

“We—we lost a son,” Trixie said, another tear trickling down her face. “He was just two days old, and there are times I forget. When I’m shopping and see baby clothes in blue...”

A jealous pang shot through Jason at how forthright Trixie was with this stranger. She had never wanted to talk about it with him.

Oh, at first, she had gone on and on until he couldn’t stand it anymore. He’d wanted to forget, not dredge up every painful memory. “Shut up about it,” he’d yelled.

She had shut her mouth, as he had told her to. For a month, she didn’t say a word.

That first day home, he packed up the crib. If it wasn’t there to remind him, it never happened. Life could go on as it had before. But then he found her that night, like a ghost wandering in the nursery. She wailed, standing where the crib had been.

Everyday, she grew colder, burying her heart from the world, from him. But now this old man put his arms around her, and Trixie sobbed in his shoulder. He patted her hair like a father consoling a daughter, not saying a word, just letting her cry. *That’s my job. Get your grubby hands off her.*

“There,” the man said when Trixie had calmed down. “There, now. Better?”

“Yes.”

Her smile was so open, at peace; Jason wanted to hit the man.

Then Trixie moved away from the door. “Where are my manners? Please come in.”

"Thanks, but I'm fixing to milk the cows. Come for dinner tomorrow?"

"That would be an honor," Trixie said.

Jason pursed his lips and crossed his arms. She should have consulted with him. Couldn't she see he didn't like the guy?

"Just through the back pasture and out past the old pond." He doffed his hat and turned to go.

"Wait, I didn't catch your name," Trixie called.

"Farmer Tuck, but call me Fred." And with a wave of his hand, he was gone.



"Farmer Fred?" Trixie called, a bit too cheerfully for Jason's liking. Months had passed, Trixie's cheeks had become rosy, her appetite had grown, and she no longer looked like a walking skeleton.

A picture of health, the doctor had said. She smiled; she laughed; she danced about the kitchen. All because of this old farmer who pretended to be the father Trixie never had.

A log cabin lay nestled among the trees, and just beyond was a barn, old but sturdy, certainly well tended. Chickens strutted through the yard, clucking and pecking in the dirt; the baaing of sheep and the music of the cows could be heard from the other side of the barn. In the field, corn sprouted in neat little rows, not quite as high as the top of Jason's boot.

The old man poked his head out from behind an antique tractor and waved. "Howdy, ya'll. Glad you made it."

"I brought cookies, fresh from the oven." She practically sang the words.

"You sure know the way to a man's heart, ma'am."

She beamed. Jason grumbled under his breath.

"Well," Trixie said, "we have something special to celebrate."

"It's 'bout time," the old man said. The words buzzed in Jason's ears, not making any sense. Fred came around the tractor and enclosed Trixie in a hug, then shook Jason's hand and clapped him on the shoulder.

“What’s this all about?” Jason demanded.

“We’re going to have a baby!” Trixie smiled and gave him a hug.

He just stared at her. They were going to have another baby? She should have told him first. This was personal. It was supposed to be something special. A surprise, like she did the last time. She had dinner ready for him, and a little present beside his seat. He unwrapped it to find a pacifier inside.

A baby. He wasn’t ready for this. It was too soon.



Jason kicked at every stone and stick on the path as he beat his way toward the pond, hidden in the back acres of their land. Slung over his shoulder was his backpack, holding his laptop and notes for the book he had been working on for three years.

Trixie, the bitch, wouldn’t give him a moment’s peace. “Honey, please paint the baby’s room.” “Honey, I need you to carry the laundry basket upstairs.” “What do you think we should name the baby?” “Oh, the baby moved. Put your hand right here so you can feel it.” “Can you believe we are going to have a little girl?”

“The baby, my ass,” he said with a grumble. He’d gotten all excited last time, even helped pick out the boy’s name and painted the room blue. And then he selected the tiny white casket and sent out the invitations to the memorial service. He shook the spectators’ hands, saw their mouths moving—probably saying they were sorry when they should have been saying congratulations, but he wasn’t sure; he couldn’t hear a thing—he nodded, grunted, tried to thank them for their sympathy, not sure if anything that came out of his mouth was even audible.

Now, he had a deadline a few weeks away, a stack of edits requested by his first publisher, and an empty whiskey bottle hidden in his desk drawer. But his wife wouldn’t leave him the hell alone. Jason kicked another rock before turning the bend and finding himself at the fishing hole.

Farmer Fred—that sweet little name Trixie called him—was already there, sitting under a tree, scribbling with a tiny nib of a pencil, and watching the line on his fishing pole; so much for being alone.

Trixie loved the old man, and to him, she was the daughter that died in the fire at his wife's side, years ago. She'd become a blooming flower, beautiful, teeming with life, bubbling with joy. And this old man had fanned the flame; he did those things that Jason was supposed to do. Well, he appreciated it at first—Trixie needed him—but now the more Farmer Fred came around, the more Jason hid in his office, nipping his bottle when Trixie didn't notice. One swallow could drown out so much pain.

"It's a good day for fishin'," Farmer Fred said. "Got an extra pole here."

"No."

The man just nodded and smiled. "Not ready to let go of your pain yet, are ya, boy?"

"I have work to do." Jason tried to make his voice civil, but it still sounded as flat and empty as he felt. "Just need to finish the last few chapters," he attempted again.

That was better, he thought, satisfied. Sitting down, he pulled out the laptop and started reviewing his notes.

"Suzie Mae loved to fish," Farmer Fred interrupted.

Jason sighed in annoyance, hoping Fred would get the hint, but if the old man noticed, he gave no sign. "Used to come out together on days like this. Leave off working and have us a picnic right here by this tree. She made me balance work and life. When she died in the fire..."

The old man was quiet for a moment, likely lost in memories. Hopefully, he wouldn't wander back to the here and now and would let Jason work in piece. But shortly, the farmer shook himself. "I wasn't even home. Driving cattle to market. I found her and little Rose in their beds..."

Do you have a point? Jason wanted to ask, but instead, he pressed his lips together and looked down at the ground.

"Took to drinkin' just like you did," Fred continued.

“Nothin’ mattered but the bottle.” Fred was silent for a while. “Then one day, lookin’ for a drink, I happened across our old fishin’ poles. I took them down here to the pond, set ‘em out just like we used to, and laid back, starin’ up at the sky.”

Tears streamed down Farmer Fred’s face, unchecked, unashamed. Jason found himself leaning forward and nodding; the words could have been his own. *Nothing mattered but the bottle.* But the old man was wrong. Maybe *he* had found hope, but there was none for him.

“Her old journal—she was gonna be a writer some day, just like you—was in the tackle box, and I started reading. She wrote about us, how we met, the first time we made love, how I made her feel, how she loved my wild side...” His voice broke, and they sat silent for a time. “...her pride in me.” It was barely audible. “And so I set out to be the man she knew I was.”

The laptop, his stack of edits, his notes lay forgotten in the grass. His full attention was on this old man and the tale he told. Jason leaned back in the grass and looked up at the clouds passing overhead.

Closing his eyes, he took in a deep breath. The air tasted of fresh pine, wildflowers, and a hint of something wild and intangible. He thought of those first minutes, holding his son before all hell broke loose and the doctors rushed him away. *My son. I love you.*



Waking with a start, Jason jumped to his feet. The sun was low in the sky, and Farmer Fred and his fishing poles were nowhere to be seen. Jason dumped his writing gear back in his backpack and turned to leave. But there in the grass by his feet was a small, leather-bound book, worn at the edges, like a well-used glove. Farmer Fred would want it back as soon as possible.

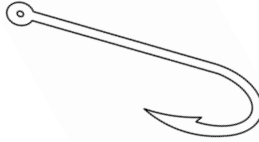
So Jason turned back toward Farmer Fred’s farm. The spread was just a half-mile from the pond; he could be there and back before darkness fell. Animals scurried toward their homes, and bats flew about when Jason finally found himself

outside the old man's home.

But nothing was as Jason remembered. He and Trixie had dined here several times, but where the small cabin stood, there was nothing but burnt rotted wood that had never been cleared away. The fields where the corn grew lay fallow, and the barn had caved in as though years of disuse had left to be ravaged by the wind.

“Farmer Fred?” he called, but there was no answer.

Not sure what else to do, Jason peeked inside the barn. The animals were gone; the antique tractor rusted and covered in dust, and in the corner, two old fishing poles looked as though they hadn't been used in years.



Epilogue



We are delighted you've reached this point in our book. Unless you've skipped, it means, you've read our eclectic short story collection.

Though we've tried to be as unobtrusive as possible, we've been near you, glancing over your shoulder and watching your facial expression for clues about your emotions. Why? We wrote our stories for the most important person in the world: you.

If these stories left you indifferent, if we didn't touch you, we've failed. If our efforts didn't fulfil your expectations we must try harder. Please, give us another chance next time you come across our writing.

But if you forgot your trials and worries, if you marveled at these snippets of different realities, if you dreamed—even if only for a minute or two—then we've accomplished our task.

As a token of our collective appreciation, we have a gift for you beginning on the following page, a gift from a group of struggling writers to you, our reader.

The 30th tale

The Writer



Twenty Goodreads Writers

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It has been a bitch of a day. The dock strike is on its fourth day; four days of mounted police charges, tear gas, and rubber bullets.

Bubba Kruger has an agenda. He needs a rest, a shower, Nancy, and a beer; not in that order. Beer first; Nancy second and then rest. The shower can wait until he runs a few times through the first three items.

After parking his van in the garage, Bubba lowers his head, turns sideways to squeeze through the kitchen door, and curses architects. His knuckles are raw. The horse was a big brute, but it crashed down like a log after an even bigger punch. Straight to his muzzle.

The kitchen is silent, no lights in the living room either. Bubba steps over to the fridge to grab a beer when he freezes. Strangled voices echo faintly from the corridor.

Bubba holds his breath and the voices stop. He waits. After a short interval Nancy laughs. Throaty. Bubba relaxes a fraction; she must be watching a show in the bedroom. One hand on the fridge's door, he pauses and frowns. There's no television set in the bedroom.

Bubba unbuttons his leather greatcoat and peers at pockets sewn in its lining, pockets bulging with an assortment of strike accessories—a two-foot piece of one-inch rebar, a slingshot, a large bag of ball bearings and his Lupara, a sawed-off shotgun.

After freeing the Lupara from two leather strips holding it in place, Bubba breaks it open, checks that there are two buckshot cartridges up the spouts, and snaps it shut. Silently, gliding on the edges of his steel-toed boots, he propels his bulk along the corridor.

Stifled laughter. Nervous. Nancy's. She could be in danger.

Gingerly, Bubba pushes the master bedroom door open and lowers his head to clear the doorframe.

The laughter stops.

Bubba surveys the bed and his Nancy—decked in his favorite yellow and fuchsia pajamas. She looks all right. In her hand, there's a bottle of champagne and next to her a naked young man. To use the bottle as a weapon, she doesn't hold it right. Bubba makes a mental note to teach her how to hold a bottle like a club.

The young man doesn't move. Next to Nancy's ebony glory, his pallid skin looks a sickly gray, like pigeon's feathers. The punk holds a large box in his hands. Under the box something stirs. A weapon?

Bubba raises his Lupara.

"I can explain," the young man says and sets the chocolates aside.

At least the punk has manners. Bubba stares at the young man's crotch, but it's empty, nothing there. It must have been a trick of the light.

Silence. Bubba's finger tightens on the trigger.

"I'm Benjamin Dover. Ben... Yes, I've heard the joke before." Ben spreads his arms as if to part the waters and shrugs. "You'll not believe this: I was in my apartment, settled in for the night as it were; slippers, a six-pack and the remote. I ran out of cigarettes. I put on my shoes and stepped outside. No car. Why bother? There's a Seven Eleven three-hundred yards away."

Bubba leans against the wall and keeps the shotgun trained on Ben's head.

"As I crossed the road, a black Escalade stopped in front of me. The doors opened, and two men in suits, one bald and the other with a fancy mustache, jumped out..."



"Get in the car," Mustache Guy said.

"No thanks," I said.

I should have run, fast, but I froze. When I tried to struggle, it was too late. These guys were pros. They had done that sort

of thing before. In moments, I found myself wrestled into the vehicle's back seat.

Once inside the car, I considered my options. "So, you guys from around here?"

"Stuff it, Leo," Bald Guy said. "We know you've been singing to the cops."

"Oh well, there's the problem." I said, smiling. "My name is Ben, and I only sing at choir practice. Sorry guys, wrong man. Er... drop me at the next crossing?"

The car screeched to a halt, my face smashing into the seat ahead of me.

"Jeeezus!" Mustache Guy cursed. Then he opened his door.

Ahead of us, a group of men in orange shirts scratched their heads and stood around a large hole in the road.

"Stay put," Bald Guy barked.

I nodded.

He followed his partner to the hole where they gestured wildly at the construction crew.

I opened the door and slipped out of the car. Bald Guy yelled, and I ran, tripping over myself, stumbling to the sidewalk. I pulled out my cell phone to call the cops and sing as loud as I could, but I fumbled. It fell on the road next to a grate.

A few feet away the mobsters drew their guns.

Dropping to the ground, I picked up my phone and tried to pry the grate open, but it held fast. Without another thought, I leaped sideways and sprinted ahead through the construction barricade. Behind me, heavy footsteps pounded on the pavement to the echo of low guttural screams. Somewhere, a police whistle pierced the night. As I ran, I searched for a place to hide. The street was lined with store fronts, and looking for a passage, an open door, something, I ran as fast as I could.

In the distance, a street light flickered reflecting off the dull surface of a manhole cover.

At a hardware store, I halted to try the door's handle. *Locked!* I leaned against the door, panting. In the distance, a big voice hollered. I raced to the manhole cover. Ten feet away, I leaned

forward, grazed the ground with my hands and slid on the concrete like a baseball player stealing home, to stop just short of the manhole.

I crawled to the cover, fumbled my fingers into the decorative holes in the iron grating, and pulled with all my might. The seal snapped, and the twenty-pound grate freed from its concrete binding. I tipped it on its side, trying to remove my fingers from the holes, but my pinky was stuck. My ring had lodged in a hole and trapped my hand.

There must have been a crowd chasing me because the noise grew louder. I couldn't wait any longer. I sneaked my fingers free, though my ring slipped off and clanged down the void, pulled the cover off to a side, lowered into the shaft and leaned outside to drag the cover upside down over the hole.

Standing on the ladder, safe beneath the manhole cover, I rubbed my swollen hand and climbed down in darkness, gripping the slimy rungs. When I reached solid ground, I pulled a lighter from my pocket and flicked its wheel. The tunnel was clear and ran at a slight slope. I ran, pausing often to flick my lighter and gather my bearings. As I went farther down, the gallery changed until it no longer resembled a man-made tunnel. Concrete gave way to gravel; the gravel gave way to dirt and the dirt to the slick walls of an underground cavern. Lights flickered in the void. I rubbed my eyes, but the lights persisted, yellowish, flickering: torches.

Out of breath, I halted, my heart thumping in my chest. Gargantuan stalactites hung from the ceiling, built over thousands of years, one calcium-rich drop of water at a time. I froze. Beneath me, a narrow river flowed to an altar surrounded by a dozen men in long black cloaks.

I tried to turn back, but lost my footing. Before I knew it, I slid down an incline and slammed into a wall.

One by one, the hooded figures turned to stare at me.

In the dimly lit cave, a vanguard of cloaked figures approached, step-by-slow-step, knives glinting at their belts. No escape, no place to hide. Furry shapes with hairless tails slinked around the men's boots.

I shuddered.

The pack drew near, murmuring and squeaking.

"Excuse me," I said. "I didn't mean to intrude. I'll leave if you'll show me the exit."

The men advanced, their knives drawn.

I sprang forward and tried to run around and through them, as I could have at the height of my football career, but an evil-smelling giant lifted me by the seat of my trousers. He carried me high and hurled me into a room piled high with human bones. The bones had been picked clean.

I stumbled toward the rungs of a ladder at the far end of the room. My shoes slipped and rolled on the bones.

Several men tackled me down to the ground. An old woman approached, a length of rope in her hand. When the men subdued me, the toothless hag grabbed the rope and bound my ankles, looping the rope around my thighs and cinching it tight. When she was done, I had been tied into a kneeling position.

The woman handed me a bottle of liquid. "Rub it on your face, chest and arms. It will do you good." Then she turned on her heel. The men followed out of the room, bolting the door after them.

I checked the label on the bottle. *Vitamin Tonic/Skin Oil—For Internal and External Use Only*. I removed the lid to smell the tonic. Fish oil! As I sniffed, a snout with twitching whiskers emerged from under a pile of bones. Instantly, a wave of rats swarmed over the bones.

Fat rodents sniffed and peered at me with bright eyes.

In a flash, I understood. The people in the cave must belong to a sect of rat worshippers. They would feed the rodents offal and fresh carrion. I gathered the crowd would be outside the door licking their chops in anticipation of my screams. Well, I thought, they can wait forever. This body is leaving.

I poured a few drops of fish oil onto the ropes that bound my ankles, careful not to drip any onto my skin.

The rats attacked and gnawed through the ropes in seconds. I struggled to my feet, still holding the bottle of fish oil. One rat tried to climb my trousers, but I kicked it away. Another leaped

to my neck. I stepped aside, and the animal hung onto my silver cross. The chain snapped, and the rat fell.

From holes in the walls, hundreds, thousands of rats gushed out, carpeting the floor with an animated furry rug. I stumbled.



Ben glances at Bubba and then to the champagne bottle.

Bubba nods.

Nancy pours the wine into a paper cup and passes it over.

After downing his cup, Ben reaches for the box of chocolates and offers it to Nancy.

She poises one finger with a gorgeously manicured one-inch-nail over the box and slowly points to one chocolate, then another and another, her face a mask of concentration. “Let me see,” she mutters and squints at the lid to read the different fillings. “Honey Balls, Creamy Shell, Caramel Rod, Sugar Lips, Spicy Knob, Cinnamon stick...” She pauses, her finger hovering in midair. “I don’t know...” Then her face lights up. “I’ll take the balls!” she giggles.

“And I’ll have the knob,” Bubba adds, offering one hand, palm up. By a strange optical illusion, in his hand the chocolate becomes sequin-sized. Bubba pops it in his mouth and nods to Ben; the gun barrel slides down a tad.

The young man picks a Creamy Shell and continues, his voice mushy. “When I regained my balance on the undulating floor, alive with rats, I eyed the rungs set on the far wall, a ladder climbing to an overhead hatch. I leaned in the opposite direction and poured the rest of the fish oil onto the nearest rats, rendering the predators prey. The room exploded in a cacophony of high pitched yelps and squeals, soon followed by chomping and gnawing noises...”



The crowd outside would be suitably gratified.

I clattered across the bones, flew up the ladder, and thrust open the manhole cover.

I climbed into a wide gallery, bunches of cables snaking along its walls, the floor surprisingly clean. Without stopping to think, I barreled ahead, periodically stopping to flick my lighter before continuing my mad dash.

The corridor ended in a rotunda. To one side there was a rusty iron staircase, climbing to a hole in the ceiling. I ran up the steps to discover another service hatch, complete with manhole cover.

I pushed the cover up, but it wouldn't budge. Voices, splashes, and dull thuds down below; the rat worshippers. Digging in my pockets while clinging to the handholds, I searched for something to pry open the cover. The only thing I found was my key ring. An old key, wedged between the grating and the metal rim should do the trick. I slid it in, pressed hard and the metal screeched as it opened.

I peeked my head out. Where was I? I scanned a deserted road surrounded by recently mown grass. The smell tickled my nose, I sneezed, and the keys slipped from my hand to disappear into the darkness below with a loud thunk.

"There he is! Let's get him," someone yelled from below.

Scrambling out of the hole, I ran blindly; not caring where I headed just so long as I got my ass out of there. As I crossed another road, a loud roar, followed by hurricane winds, hit me. I closed my eyes and climbed another rung, gasping reviving gulps of sweet air. Then, powerful lights shone, pinning me to the spot like a deer caught in the headlights of an incoming car. Only it didn't look like a car, the lights were too far apart, and high, and...

I turned, running, and tripped over my own feet as a Boeing 747 crashed down, its gigantic tires leaving an endless trail of burnt rubber where my body would have been. Damn!

Scratched but triumphant, I climbed upright and stood in the middle of the runway, the landed jet shrinking in the distance. Lights streamed in my face, and the kerosene-laden air

tasted like a cold beer on a summer day. I was free at last; I just needed to get my smokes and find a cab home.

“Hey, you there! You don’t have authorization for this area.”

Uniforms ran across the tarmac, hands reaching for guns. Cars with flashing lights on top converged in my direction. I ground my teeth and raced toward the cargo terminal, a few hundred yards away. I didn’t dare look back.



“Can I have another chocolate?” Bubba asks.

Ben leans forward and offers the box.

Bubba glances at the contents, undecided. “Honey Balls?”

Ben points to one corner of the box. Then, while Bubba munches away, he holds his empty cup to Nancy.

She pours the rest of the bottle into the cup, rolls out of bed, and races from the room. “Don’t continue without me,” she yells, her voice thinning as she turns off the corridor and into the kitchen.

Ben sips and holds the paper cup over.

Bubba stares at the offering, suddenly realizing it held a far deeper significance; one only drinks from the cup of a friend. He reaches for the cup and downs it in one gulp, as Nancy runs back into the bedroom and climbs onto the bed, one bottle of champagne in each hand. Bubba’s nose tickles.

“Where was I? Oh yeah,” Ben clears his throat. “I entered a building full of large crates. I ran between two endless lines of containers and jumped into the shadow of one of the hulking crates as flashes of blue and red ignited the space between them.



“You in there!” An amplified voice crackled. “You are surrounded, come out with your hands above your head or SWAT will close in.”

I glanced around; a flash of red illuminated a crate labeled “European Cargo.” I thought, “What the hell.”

In pitch black, I was met with the familiar and intoxicating scent of manure. A breath huffed in my ear. I jumped and spun, finding myself inches from a giant nose. I relaxed; it was a horse.

I must have fallen asleep. I jolted awake when the crate shifted and ascended. I stretched out on the hay. "Europe, here I come," I whispered as I closed my eyes.



"Despierta, cabrón!" A voice woke me the instant a foot connected with my ribs. Outside the crate was bright daylight, and the horse had disappeared. A large man lowered his head and entered the crate. When I peered up, a hand dove into my back pocket and closed around my billfold. *Screw the billfold*, on all fours I scurried between the man's legs and bolted out of the crate.

I ran wildly, casting desperate glances around, aghast at the sight of mist and a haze of green. *Trees?* I tripped on a raised root and fell heavily on the ground. *Europe?* I stumbled to my feet, heart hammering, and crashed into the jungle. I looked about seeing only more green—vines, veils of leaves, towering tree trunks. A monkey screamed overhead. *If this is Europe, I'm the Pope.* In minutes, I was drenched in sweat as the damp jungle heat pressed about me like a warm wet sponge. I thrashed forward into the underbrush; the monkey screaming again... only it wasn't a monkey. Hands seized me, and I only had time to see a horde of painted faces before a rock struck my temple and I passed out.



Bubba lowers his Lupara; he could always bring it up if the need arose and his arm's tiring. He darts a glance at Nancy as she expertly uncorks one of the bottles. *A horde of painted faces, eh?* It doesn't look good. Bubba licks his lower lip and nods to Ben.

“When I woke up, I was curled inside a vast kettle...”



My ear bled from where some greedy fingers had torn my earring away. My face felt wet. More blood? I licked my lips to taste olive oil, spices—maybe rosemary? I had been basted head to toe. I eyed the jungle canopy. It couldn't be Africa, could it? To one side of the clearing, several women rocked their hips. Samba? Brazil? I wondered how cannibals in the Amazon could get hold of olive oil. Then I felt a pleasing warmth under the soles of my feet; the bottom of the kettle was heating up. I like a hot bath, but this was too much.

The cannibals crowded around the kettle, looking uncertain. An old woman pushed through their masked ranks, peered toward the base of the kettle and launched into a string of something that sounded like abuse. The cannibals lowered their gaze. Apparently she was telling them off; I would never boil fast enough with the tiny fire they had made, and dinner would be late. After another tirade of even grosser-sounding words the cannibals scampered into the jungle to gather more wood.

As soon as the last one disappeared beyond the greenery, I climbed over the side of the cauldron, careful to avoid resting my tender parts against the hot iron.

I landed in a heap on the ground and lay there for a moment to make sure they didn't notice my escape. When no sound came from the trees on the other side of the clearing, I jumped to my feet and ran into the jungle.

Branches scratched my face, mosquitoes the size of Chihuahuas swarmed my head, invading my mouth. Spitting and cursing, I ran. Behind me, I heard thrashing and men yelling. They sounded too close.

Coming out of the trees, I skid to a halt on a muddy riverbank. I had nowhere to run. If I went back, I was dinner. That only left the river.

A gaggle of cannibals burst from under the tree cover, only ten feet away, spears held high.

“Screw it,” I mumbled and dove into the water. The cannibals gasped and pointed. Uncertain why they didn’t come in after me, I swam toward the other side, probably they couldn’t swim.

After a few feet, I felt a pinch on my wrist. Figuring my watch was too tight—perhaps the leather strap had shrunk in the stew pot—I tugged it off and held it up. Then I felt another nip, and another. My stomach tightened, and I’m pretty sure I emptied my bladder. *Piranhas. Great.*

I dropped the watch and swam as fast as I could toward a jetty sticking out into the river. Attached to it was a small, flat-bottomed boat. Still smarting from piranha bites, I hauled onto the rotting wood of the jetty. Oars waited in the well of the boat. Here was escape.

I lost one paddle in my haste, but after freeing the boat, I paddled like a madman until I came to a swamp.

I thought I’d made it to safety until an arrow whizzed passed my ear, and then another. The third was so close it took my baseball cap with it, flew across the swamp and buried itself into a tree dripping with moss, my baseball cap hanging like a demented bat. Moments later a small monkey scuttled down the tree, retrieved the hat, and donned it before jeering at me.

Without thinking, I gripped a vine and swung across a narrow channel of greenish water.

Over the next two hours I waded, sometimes crotch-deep through brackish waters carpeted over with a layer of bright green stuff. Twice, I spotted things scuttling across the water like miniature submarines and ran like hell, curtains of water rising in all directions.

Exhausted, I reached what seemed to be the edge of the swamp. I gripped an overhanging branch and let go at once after feeling its soft texture. A huge boa constrictor fell into the water and swiftly made for my pursuing crocodiles. I dragged myself onto solid ground as the swamp erupted in a bedlam of sharp snaps and thrashes.

Crazed, I tore through the jungle and, suddenly, I was out on a beach of golden sands, the bluest ocean you’ve ever seen

stretching across the horizon. Narrowly missing the sharp thorns of a squat bush, I staggered toward a clump of palm trees and collapsed on the sand.



Nancy refills the cups and passes the chocolates around. Bubba decants for a Caramel Rod this time.

“When I came around...”



I sat huddled in a corner of a crowded fishing vessel, shivering from the breeze that swept over the deck. After a while, I changed my mind. The gear I could see from where I lay was a far cry from fishing tackle; Stinger missiles, fragmentation grenades and a Gatling gun. I was aboard a modern day pirate ship.

One guy came nearer and stood by a coil of rope. He wasn't big, maybe five two at the most but the Convertible G36 assault rifle resting in his arms and the Fairbairn-Sykes combat knife hidden in a leather sheath and hanging off his thigh made up for his short stature. Naturally, the rest of crew, two-score men armed to the teeth and running up and down the gunwales were a good reason for not putting up a fight.

I looked over the railing and spotted a mid-sized cargo ship. I thought of risking a signal to the cargo ship, but I noticed movement to the other end of the pirate craft. A few men lowered two speedboats into the blue waters. I realized waving my arms would be futile. Looking back to the commotion on the pirate boat, I spotted one of the men hauling an honest-to-God Jolly Roger flag up a flag pole.

Back over the railing, I watched as the two speedboats sailed through choppy waters toward the cargo ship. Four men per boat, all decked out with assorted weapons ranging from assault rifles, shotguns, pistols and grenade launchers. About fifty yards from the cargo ship, the pirates started firing.

The man by the coiled rope stepped over and pulled me to my feet. He then shoved me along the slick deck, barking out orders in a language I couldn't identify. The only word I could make out was 'landsman,' which I supposed meant me. Other men on board fired RPG's at the cargo ship.

I turned and came face to barrel with a Walther P99. I stepped to the side, swept my arms up and out and knocked the pirate off balance, making him lose his grip on the pistol. I took my chance and ran toward the stern. A deafening explosion reverberated through the air, but I kept going, leaping over another pirate reloading a missile launcher. When I reached the stern, I dove out far and shallow, swimming hard as soon as I hit the water.

The cargo ship was in flames, and the pirate ship blocked my way back to firm land. So I swam away from the ships and parallel to the coastline.

Twenty minutes later, I felt a powerful tug. An irresistible force hauled me out of the water. Frantic, I looked around me as I climbed ever higher.

Soon I realized my belt was entangled with the periscope of an Akula II nuclear-powered submarine. A man with a funny cap yelled at me in Russian. I unbuckled and jerked free of my belt, only to fall hard onto the hull.

I sat dazed until one man, in boots with thick rubber soles, climbed down from the conning tower, pointed to me and yelled. Four sailors darted over, grabbed me like a sack of potatoes and dropped me unceremoniously down an open hatch.

In the gloom of the submarine, my eyes adjusted slowly. I sat on a bench, by a long and narrow corridor, guarded by two linebackers. To my right, was a big door with a round handle—ladder ran up the wall to my left, ending at the roof and what appeared to be another hatch.

A thundering roar erupted below and the sub shuddered violently, tossing me off the bench. First one shout, then a chorus, then the shouts grew louder, alarmed.

My guards rushed through a side door. I had to escape, and this would be my only chance.

Scrambling to my feet, I ran to the ladder and climbed up. Trying not to think of what might happen, I fumbled with the latch and pushed it open causing an alarm to sound.

I climbed up and over, my shirt catching on the latch. Men yelled. I heaved myself inside a tiny metal chamber, my pants slipping, the buttons flying off my shirt, pinging off the metal of the pod. Seeing the first of many feet running toward me, I slammed the hatch, locking it.

Fists pounded against the metal, yelling in Russian. I scrambled back against a console, my hand bumping several levers. I felt a rumble, and then the tiny room around me moved, accelerating. This was no more room, but an escape pod. I could only hold on and pray as it burst to the surface.



Bubba lets out a long breath. His feet ache. He slides his back against the wall and sits on his haunches. Nancy refills the cups with what was left of the bottle and circulates the box of chocolates. Bubba dives for a Creamy Shell. Luscious.

“As I bobbed in the churning waters of the Atlantic,” Ben says, “I discovered four balloons I must have stowed away in my pants pockets last weekend at my niece’s birthday party...”



I blew one up while I kicked furiously with my legs to keep nose and mouth above water. I managed to knot it and started on the second balloon, this one pink. Finishing the second, I tied them together and shoved the pair under one of my armpits as a makeshift flotation device. Breathing heavily, spitting saltwater from my mouth, I rested for a minute before repeating this procedure.

Floating more easily, I assessed my remaining possessions; shoes, socks, pants and t-shirt. Oh, and my I-Pod, not that

reception was very likely out here in the middle of who knows where. Still, I lifted it towards the sky and turned it on.

"The sucker's probably waterlogged anyway..." I mused, treading water.

"Beep!" warbled the I-Pod, unexpectedly.

"Holy crap! I've got a signal out here?"

Not one to question my good luck, I immediately keyed in the e-mail address for Fred, my best mate, although I had no idea how to explain my position or what I needed.

"Merhaba," squeaked the I-pod.

"This isn't Fred, is it?" I looked at the screen. It was blank.

I turned in the water to find a rubber dinghy crewed by a questionable looking group of fellows in turbans and djellabas, machine guns pointed at my balloons.

I chuckled and waved my I-Pod. "You got here pretty fast."

Two of the turbaned fellows grinned, displaying cruddy, yellowing teeth, as they hauled me over the side of the dinghy. I fell back into the water as my favorite and much laundered AC-DC T-shirt tore under the strain. I was instantly gripped by the hair, which was almost as painful as watching the remains of my beloved T-shirt float away.



Bubba nods. *An AC-DC T-shirt? Ripped? A tragedy.*

"One hour later..."



The rubber dinghy met with a much larger vessel, this one manned by Turk mercenaries. Bound, gagged and balloons burst, I was exhausted enough to fall asleep as soon as they dropped me on the deck.

Hours later, I was slapped awake by a hideous woman with a body like Raquel Welch in her heyday. The irony of her smoking body trapped beneath her unbecoming face made me wonder if she ever wore a veil. The idea had merit. My smile

must have caused offense. She slapped me again. Fully awake, I realized the ground was solid. No movement. I was on dry land. The room was clad with crimson velvet and the air reeked of incense and Chinese Chanel 5.

“I know what you’re thinking you little vermin!” she hissed. “You’ll have plenty to smile about using your “tools.” But not with me! In this house, I provide entertainment for all the women of Turkey who have been shunned because of their misfortune. You will be the newest dancer for my sisters!”

A group of women entered the room. I noticed lots of missing teeth in their smiles. They must be in mourning, judging by the black material under their fingernails. I looked round at a sea of ugliness; my “tools” shriveling to nothingness. I would need more than four balloons to get me out of this mess.

Strong arms dragged me to my feet. A phonograph blared exotic music. The madam beckoned and wiggled provocatively toward the only visible exit.



Bubba slides further down and sits on the floor while Nancy busies herself opening the remaining bottle.

“A male brothel might sound exciting,” Ben says, “but let me enlighten you. Most customers to such an establishment are not comely females who wish to pleasure you all night long...”



I waited in this room until the door opened and a woman entered. If not for the mustache, she might have been cute. She advanced, stroking her hairy lip suggestively. Shuddering I moved until I felt the wall against my back. My hands touched the window ledge. I felt empty space above it. The window was open. I risked a glance behind me to determine that there was a three story drop to the ground below. Did I dare?

The woman laughed at my predicament. Her robe must have been secured with Velcro strips. With a lightning movement, she tore off the robe she wore. My eyes will never recover from the sight. I had to get out of there.

I dove through the window. Expecting to freefall, I was surprised by my sudden stop and narrowly avoided kissing the wall. The woman, hairy as a Borneo orangutan, held my left foot. I wriggled and kicked until my shoe slipped off and I plummeted to a cart full of rugs. Without pausing to check for injury, I jumped from the cart and ran.

Soon I left behind the last of the town's huts and continued running into the desert, anything beat the mass of lank hair I had left behind.

Hours later, close to the end of my endurance, I staggered over to a clump of rocks and a cave. Exhausted, I ran inside, hoping to get some rest.

The cave was occupied. An anchorite, tall, lanky and emaciated sat next to a small fire, sipping from a tin cup. He looked up and grinned. No teeth. The country must suffer a shortage of dentists. Something about his eyes wasn't right, but I smiled back anyway.

He motioned for me to sit, and I did. Then he poured some of the liquid into another cup, and sprinkled powder over the top.

"Vitamins," he croaked.

I was thirsty and anchorites are trustworthy types, so I drank.

His face loomed over me, my eyes blurred and my head spun and then everything went dark.



Ben pauses, drinks a little champagne and munches a Sugar Kiss. Bubba helps himself to a Cinnamon Stick and waits.



When my head started to clear a band of gunrunners overwhelmed the reclusive anchorite and delivered me to a group of waiting eunuchs. They quickly ushered me into a massive enclosed garden with an ornamental pond covered with water lilies. I'm a writer, and I don't mind admitting that I was rather inspired by the beauty of the scenery even though I was also scared out of my mind. About fifty veiled women with bodacious bodies pointed and whispered at me. Three dejected eunuchs wearing skimpy loincloths looked envious. My God, wouldn't you be jealous if you were a eunuch? One of the women who seemed to be in command, made a scissor-like movement with her fingers and the other women giggled. I relaxed a little because I was obviously the man of the hour.

The woman repeated the gesture. "Geld him."

The eunuchs converged upon me with rope, a razor-sharp scimitar, and an ominous looking curved knife. I ran and fell into the shallow pond, losing my left sock. Things weren't looking good. The biggest eunuch in the place yanked me from the water and trussed me up like a fowl. As you can imagine, I was mortified. Suddenly, a sheik that looked like a dead ringer for Lawrence of Arabia crashed through a window wielding a whip. The women shrieked and swooned while he gallantly untied me. We sprinted out the window and mounted a waiting camel. The outraged eunuchs chased behind us as we raced back toward the desert. I felt enormous relief and gratitude, but only momentarily. The sheik shouted, "I've waited for you all my life, ducky. Now you're mine!"

I bumped along behind the sheik, my teeth rattling. The damn camel churned up so much sand that, try as I might, I couldn't see two feet in front of me. A shrill scream echoed through the dusty haze, reverberating down my spine. The sheik wrenched the reins, causing the camel to lurch sharply to the right. I held on, certain I'd fall off the stinking beast and be trampled under its enormous hooves.

The camel halted and I scrambled to right myself. In front of me, the sheik screamed as a dark figure yanked him off the camel and carried him away. Fear seized my gut as more figures

emerged and surrounded me. When the dust settled, I found myself staring into the hard faces of a troupe of gypsies.

Their dirty faces and dark eyes stared back at me. A man approached the camel, his coarse black beard covered in dust. He leapt up on the camel's back in front of me, took the reins, and set off at a gallop.

Once more, I held on for my life. Dust swirled, and riotous shrieks filled the air. Though I could see nothing humorous about my situation, these crazy gypsies were having fun.

Large shadows loomed ahead, and moments later, I realized it was a jet aircraft.

The camel stopped and the gypsy pushed me off, my other sock caught on the reins and slipped off. He barked some kind of order at me. I didn't know what to do.

A rather attractive woman with full red lips and eyes like pools of dark chocolate approached. She took my hand and pulled me toward the jet. What else was I to do? I followed.



"I need to pee-pee," Nancy says, "wait for me."

Bubba reaches to pick the last bottle of champagne from her hand as Nancy runs down the corridor. He takes a long swig and passes the bottle over to Ben. When Nancy returns, the champagne is a memory. She frowns and picks up the almost empty box of chocolates before settling down in the middle of the bed.

"In the jet, I must have been drugged. I can't remember anything. When I woke up, it was dusk..."



I opened my eyes and cringed at the ache in my head. Crazy gypsies, I thought, and sat up.

Looking around, I could see crumbling walls and unlit candles hanging in sconces around the room. A castle? The air

reeked of rotten meat. I covered my nose, but I couldn't get rid of the smell.

A flash of lightning brought my gaze to the window behind me. I stood to look outside.

Daylight slowly waned as rain fell in sheets and thunder rolled in the distance. Turning from the window, I inspected the room, my gaze resting on a sight that sent a chill down my spine.

In the center of the room was a raised dais made of white marble. But that wasn't what had me backing against the wall in terror. Atop the dais was a coffin, covered in dust. The lid opened; its rusty hinges creaking in protest. A hand reached around the top and a head appeared. Long black hair framed a pale face with eyes that glowed with an eerie red light.

"Welcome," the thing's deep voice murmured. "I am Dracula. You, my friend, must be dinner."

A crack of thunder jolted me out of my stupor. Turning away from the vampire, I lunged for the window, and scrambled over the ledge. I heard a chuckle and risked a glance behind me.

Too late. Dracula grabbed the I-Pod that dangled from my neck, and I had just got the damn thing too. He smiled, a wicked grin that exposed his fangs. The cord was cutting into my flesh, choking me. I yanked it off, and, suddenly free, I dropped to the ground and landed in a heap. In the distance, I saw a structure of some kind. Hoping it wasn't home to more of the undead, I ran.

My bare feet pounded over the frigid ground, but I dared not slow for fear of what lay behind me. Before me, an old weather station loomed at the top of the hill, a beacon of safety to my beleaguered mind.

Only after clambering up a hundred metal rungs and planting my feet firmly on the top platform did I catch my breath. The breeze lifted my hair and enveloped me in its icy embrace, raising gooseflesh across my chest. I stood at the rail, my fingers clenched around the bar to stop my arms from shaking while I searched the shadows below for any sign of pursuit.

Off to the west, a dark figure glided over the field, swooping left and right...hunting. Choked with fear, I backed away, my eyes riveted on the airborne black creature. A blur of claws and feathers, the winged devil flew right over my head with a blood-curdling screech.

Launching myself away, I hit the back rail and flipped over into the night. My hands groped blindly as I fell into a tangled web of cords.

High overhead, I could make out the shapes of several massive orbs against the night sky. I dangled from the weather balloons like a marionette, and I started to rise.

My only chance was to get untangled enough to release a few of the weather balloons, so that I could drift back down to earth. Sharp hooks that had served to anchor the balloons before my unhappy accident dug into my flesh and clothes. I jerked and struggled, but could make no headway without my legs being jerked first one way and then another at the pleasure of the wind. Frustrated, I shed my jeans, but my efforts to sever any of the lines from the knots were useless.

Terrified and frozen, clad only in my boxers, I drifted up into the night sky.



Bubba accepts the last of the Honey Balls and makes a gesture of impatience. He can't wait. *Up and up in the air? Wow!*

"I could barely move; I've never been so cold in my life," Ben says with a shiver. "I floated in inky darkness..."



The only sounds were those of my rapidly tiring heart, when blinding light surrounded me. I must be dead, I thought.

Then millions of lights covered the horizon, and I realized my weather balloons were inexorably dragged toward a vast spaceship. A rectangular section opened to one side and a pink

beam darted from its entrails, pulling me in, as if I were ensnared by the tongue of a ravenous chameleon.

When the huge door slid closed. I remained entangled in the web surrounding the weather balloons.

A hiss and tens, hundreds, of small naked men with gray bodies and tiny heads poured in and stood on a circle. I thought they looked like children, but for the color of their skin, their miniature heads and, most surprisingly, oversized scrotal sacks. The ranks parted and one of the beings, slightly taller and with a tuft of white hair on his nose approached. His balls reached almost to the ground and would weigh a good five pounds each by the looks of them.

White Tuft drew level with me, smiled, drew a tiny gun from his belt, pressed it against my neck and did something.

I heard a puff and lights blurred. I could have imagined it, but I could swear White Tuft whispered, "Hello, ducky," before I lost consciousness.

Endless days of bright lights and anal probes followed. I endured the grays' poking and prodding with a species of weary resignation. Peripherally, I noticed my boxers had disappeared during the abduction. One day, I spotted White Tuft in sequined platforms, à la Elton John, wearing my boxers.

Left alone in a padded pink room, I was surprised to discover one final nugget of resolve.

The next time one of my abductors entered; short, gray, skinny, his dark eyes expressing first curiosity, then surprise and anguish; I punched him, kicked his oversized balls, and ran like hell down a pink corridor, pursued by alarm claxons and squelching footsteps.

The corridor ended in a door. My pursuers neared, wielding sharp metal objects that promised pain. I shrugged and pushed a button on the wall. The door hissed open, revealing a small room. The only furniture was a chair with a large red button set in the armrest.

A sign, curiously in English, stood by the chair. "Paradox Engine," it said.

“My whole life’s become a paradox,” I muttered, and sat in the chair. “OK, deep breath, close eyes and...” push the button.

I immediately understood what a mouse must feel like being swallowed by a python.

Swallowed and regurgitated. The last thing I remember was tremendous pressure like my eyeballs were about to explode, and then... nothing.



Bubba waits, but Ben shrugs and offers his hands, palms up. “And that’s all. I awoke in this bed, where this lady, looking concerned, offered me food and drink.”

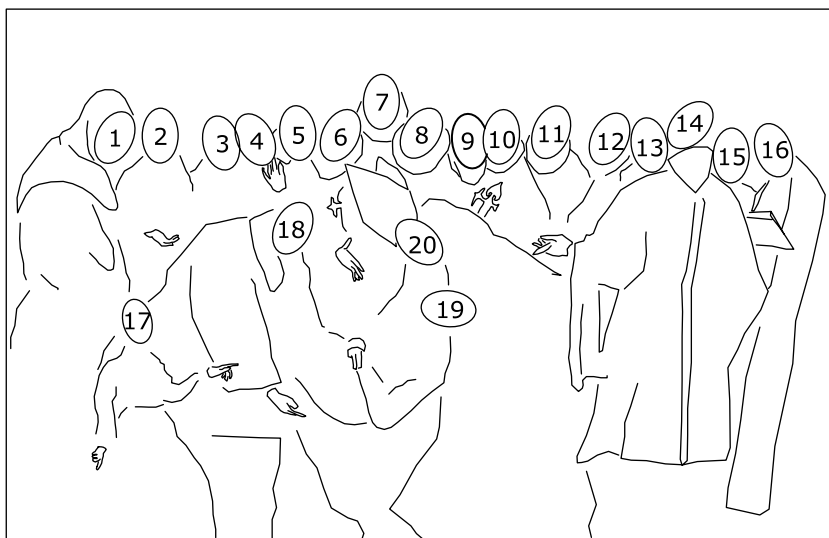
Bubba stands, his shotgun in his fist. With his free hand, he reaches to a hook behind the door, grabs one of his shirts and hurls it at Ben. “Put it on.” Then Bubba gestures with the shotgun toward the corridor.

Down to his feet, Bubba’s shirt gives Ben a curious ghostlike appearance.

When they reach the living room, Bubba nods to an easy chair. Then, he rests the shotgun on a low table, steps into the kitchen and returns in a trice with a crate of beer.

He settles on the sofa, opens one bottle with his teeth and holds it over to Ben. “Tell me more.” Bubba says. Then he smiles and raises his bottle in a silent toast.

GOOD STORYTELLING CAN MAKE OR BREAK A WRITER.



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