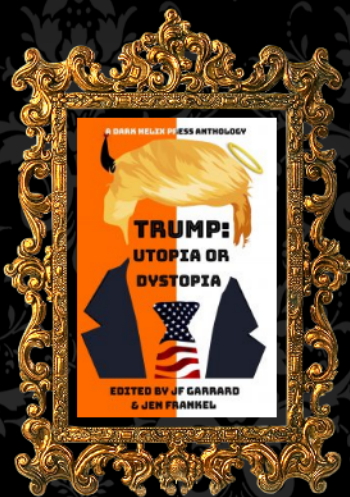




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The Seven Muses of Harry Salcedo, & Feeding the Kraken!*

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VOLUME 1



KOOM KANKESAN ANDREW JENSEN DERWIN MAK
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#TRUMPTOPIA BY KOOM KANKESAN



EXCERPT FROM TRUMP: UTOPIA OR
DYSTOPIA

4 :55 p.m. The time will forever be etched in my memory. My beloved Seahawks were losing to the Rams on their home turf. Frost lay on the grass back home. I was on the phone, texting my friend Jordan who was at CenturyLink Field. Jordan's a doctor too but he's just a GP, not a pathologist like I am. He decided to keep it cosy and move back to Seattle. It was after Coach Carroll made the decision to pull Eddie Lacy out. They didn't put anybody else in and then the game just sort of stopped.

I was at Walter Reed and it wasn't even my shift. I was just nursing that coffee that smells like burned wicker. They have it in the cafeteria. I was watching the players move around, not knowing which way to walk, on the small TV in the corner. We'd been texting but Jordan called me.

"Hey," he said, "do you hear what they're saying?"

A bald guy in a tuxedo had walked onto the astroturf and was reading something. The sound was muted on the TV.

"I can't hear anything," I replied. "What's going on?"

"They just announced that Trump's been shot," Jordan whispered.

I told everyone in the cafeteria to shut up, then stood up on the pleather banquette and turned up the volume on the TV.



As you know, president Trump had been shot while going out for a McDonald's run. Why did he go alone instead of sending the secret service? One of the many deranged shooters living in the DC area (of which I am convinced there are hundreds) exited the ammo depot in the strip mall as Trump drove through the drive thru in his gold Cadillac Allante. The Allante's top was down. The shooter, out-of-work welder Malik Malawi, fired four .38 rounds before a driver in the parking lot, Richard Dudman, ran his blue Volvo into him.

President Trump had his head turned towards the drive thru window when the first shot was fired. This is the bullet that the FBI concluded went wide and passed through the Allante windshield, shattering the glass. According to the McDonald's employee serving Mr. Trump, the president then turned to look back, the startled words "I'll tell you what—I'll tell you this—it's a disgrace—" escaped his pudgy jowls before the next shot was fired, entering Trump's trachea and collapsing his windpipe. The third shot was a head wound which entered the right temple and blew out the back of his skull, forcing the president to jerk back and almost stand up. The fourth round caught Trump squarely in the groin, rendering his reproductive organs a mess of spaghetti-o's.

At least, this is what we were told.



Walter Reed, or Bethesda Naval Hospital as it is colloquially called, has serviced countless presidents. I was just brought in as a witness to assist in the operating room. Trump's body lay pallid and lifeless on the operating tables as the chief surgeons, Dr. Lennox and Dr. Doyle, operated upon him. Among the EEG monitors, defibrillators, and

other equipment, Trump looked tiny. He's supposed to be 6' 2" and grossly overweight. Under the glare of sodium lights, a hive of masked doctors and technicians surrounding him, Trump looked insignificant. His skin, always a flushed overblown Technicolor salmon on TV, was mottled grey. An acne rash below his left collarbone had turned red where he'd picked at it. Lennox and Doyle on the other hand, towering over him with scalpels, light glinting off their glasses, looked formidable.

Trump's head was slung back where the bullet had entered the trachea. A tracheostomy tube had been inserted. A fair amount of blood was on the surgeons' gloves and smocks as they made incisions and tried to repair the severed nerve endings around C6 and C7. Usually a severing of the spine at that juncture is fatal. It effectively severs off all nerves going to and from the brain. The body looked dead. It's true that except for very light breathing, a body in trauma and heavy sedation looks indistinguishable from one that is dead, but I've seen a lot of dead bodies in my time.

This one looked dead.

I was there to observe and corroborate. Nothing more. There are many doctors and senior pathologists who rank higher than me at Walter Reed. The atmosphere verges on militaristic. I kept my mouth shut and nodded whenever one of them spoke and another wrote down what was said. I initialed where they pointed on the forms.

A half hour in, I felt lightheaded and my esophageal sphincter pinched so tight I could feel my belly spasm. I had to sit down. My eyes closed from the pain and when I opened them, for a moment, one second, two seconds, maybe three, the surgeons standing in front of Trump's head parted. I could see where the duckback comb over fell down in wispy straw strands. Blood still oozed out of the wound, slowly. In the cold of the operating theatre, the blood had congealed and ran in a slow motion stream, a rusty mould making its way across his head. Bits of brain were carried with it. Through the hole, I could see his brain but it wasn't pinkish like cerebellum is supposed to be. In fact, the exposure, maybe five and a half, six

inches at its widest point, revealed grey matter—undoubtedly the occipital lobe.

This was no gunshot through the back of the head. Or if it was, that had long been dealt with.

They began cutting his skull open.



After I signed the forms, no one mentioned Trump's body for about two weeks. There was a state funeral; closed casket of course. Nowhere near the number of attendees came out as you might expect. The rain slicked pavements looked as bald as a senator's scalp as the procession inched forward. Melania and Barron trailed behind the flag draped coffin, a Lincoln hearse slowly rolling its way down Pennsylvania Avenue, en route to Arlington cemetery.

What was in the casket? Was it Donald Trump's body minus his head and central nervous system? Was it everything except the brain and the face? Was it a pile of rocks? Was there anything at all under the flag-draped lid?

I didn't talk to Lennox or Doyle for two weeks. One day, I was summoned to Lennox's office.

A meeting was in progress as I got off the elevator and entered his suite. His stuffed armchairs and stuffed birds were hazy in the darkness as a group of people, mostly men, sat in a circle around a shrouded object. On the pull down screen behind Lennox's desk, a projector projected slides containing schematics of something I couldn't quite make out. It looked like a shop vac or one of those new vacuum cleaners with the tubes that stand upright. The top of the schematic looked familiar though—a roundedness and swoop to the contour.

I was introduced to the others briefly, although no introduction was needed. In the midst of the group, projector light glinting off Lennox and Doyle's glasses, someone removed the shroud. As the

brown vinyl tarp slid off, Lennox stood up and turned on the light. We adjusted our eyes to the brightness.

The brightness caused my esophageal sphincter to tighten yet again. Not a fear so much this time as a frisson. A shock at how small we were. How inconsequential and ultimately, worthless. The tables had turned. On the chair underneath the tarp was something made out of titanium alloyed parts, fluid mechanisms, and exposed ribbed tubing. Something huge and invulnerable. Something sophisticated and elegant. Atop the fiberglass and metal and wires was a head. A humanoid head with a wispy combover and duckback swoop that could only belong to one being.

The hair was recognizable but the face was not. Gone were the pudgy jowls. But if one stared, you could see the tight mouth, that puckering rictus of pride.

No one spoke until Lennox pointed to a lanky man, youngish, bearded, standing against the wall. In designer jeans, white t shirt, and a motorcycle jacket, this young man pushed himself forward, approaching us, a digital tablet in his hand.

"Gentlemen," announced Lennox, "I present you Jack Dorsey, CEO of Twitter."

A muted applause and many puzzled frowns sprouted in the room. "No need," said Dorsey quietly, "no need." I realized I'd seen photos of his face before. He was stiff yet louche at the same time. For someone who commanded our interest, he didn't speak much or look anyone directly in the eye. Instead, he stared in awe at the creation which sat dormant on its gold electronic throne. The chair was some sort of resting station, something that Trump 2.0 (that is what I called him in my head) was plugged into. A small series of monitors at the back of the chair indicated vital signs. A button pulsed blue in the shape of the Twitter logo. I thought of the flatlines on the monitors that day in Walter Reed when I'd been sure he was dead.

Dorsey talked in short epigrammatic bursts, not unlike tweets. "As you gentlemen undoubtedly know, our former president was a big fan of our platform.

“What you might not have known was that he left a proviso—in case of this very scenario. We at Twitter have been working on exciting things.

“The next stage in integration between human and computer. The president was excited, very excited.”

Dorsey looked around the room.

“You mean he’s an android?” someone ventured.

“We prefer the term *fully linked in*.” Dorsey was terse. “Imagine—the next step in human/software integration.”

“But you and the president...” someone else proclaimed doubtfully, “you’re known for being a strong liberal, you’ve publicly supported the Democratic party.”

“Well, we’ve made a few tweaks,” replied Dorsey, looking at Trump 2.0, “besides the cosmetic enhancements your colleagues Dr. Lennox and Dr. Doyle have so skillfully enacted, we at Twitter have made operating system upgrades.

“Our president desired nothing more than to live on, electronically if necessary. He wanted to find a way to tweet directly from his brain to his millions of followers.

“That is how the conversation started. For what is Twitter if not an ongoing conversation? He signed papers allowing us significant advantages. Google’s working on a self-driving car but we’ve been working on this!

“A personality is nothing more than a network of neurological connections, a matrix or an operating system. We can now code on a complexity that rivals DNA. We simply enhanced him. Greater logic, compassion, and altruistic tendencies.”

So there was the trade-off. “And you just paid for all this? How much did Trump 2.0 cost?” I found myself saying. Everybody turned and looked at me. I might have blushed. Lennox and Doyle both frowned and tightened their eyes.

“Ah, that is where we had to make a concession,” smiled Dorsey ruefully, scratching his beard, “the third party in our partnership.”

He retreated and a burly man in a military uniform stood up. The

man had the salt and pepper buzzcut favored by so many in the military. The folds in the back of his neck were pressed against the tightness of his collar.

“General Armbruster Fung,” puffed the red faced general. “The boys in Defense put together the portfolio to create... well, Trump 2.0, as you whizzes put it. We’re primarily interested in hardware. Our nation’s at the greatest risk it’s ever been since WWII: ISIS, foreigners, Putin and North Korea, a vulnerable economy...”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

“...cost of living in big cities, rising tuition rates, cellphone plans that are outta control, phishing emails, drunken behavior and low GPA scores in an ever competitive job market...”

Somewhere the general was losing his train of thought. It sounded like he had a kid in college.

“Anyway, we’ve outfitted Trump 2.0 with jet propulsion boots, short range ballistic missile capabilities, scanning and tracking software that’s virtually foolproof, hydraulically enhanced strength, and automatic .50 caliber cannons in his shoulders.”

“Not to mention the processing power of twenty computers,” chimed in Dorsey.

“So—he’s invulnerable?” someone asked.

“Better than anything the Chinese have,” replied General Fung, looking sharply at Dorsey. Dorsey looked away.

“Is he going to resume the presidency?” I wondered. Again, everybody stared at me.

“Well, the country’s in chaos, as you all know” admitted Fung, “let’s fly this up the flagpole and see what happens?”

Dorsey took his cue and pressed the blue button on the back of Trump 2.0’s gold sprayed throne. An image of what looked like a cellphone battery reserve indicator flashed on the screen and intense buzzing filled the room. Trump’s powerful atomic generator kicked in. A fusion engine warmed the plexiglass and ribbed tubing and the creature’s blue irises began to open. His midriff which consisted of little more than a spine screwed into a titanium pelvis (all of his bulk

was top heavy) radiated an eerie luminescence.

“State your prime directives,” whispered General Fung dramatically.

Trump 2.0 pursed his tight lips:

“Uphold the office of President.

Help the Economy.

Serve the Public Trust.”

It was impossible to read the expression in Trump 2.0’s eyes.



We all know what happened next. Trump not only helped the economy and served the public trust: he revitalized the country. He healed the divide between North and South. He united the Democrats and Republicans. With the neo-liberal programming installed by Dorsey and the hardware provided by the military, Trump plugged in electronically to the defense grids, the complex networks of banks and finance that clogged up the country’s economy; he even controlled the traffic patterns of the U.S.A.’s major cities so that everybody got to their destinations faster. And safer.

Dorsey had a team of technicians working on the president twenty-four seven. The full capacity of the neural networks of twenty linked computers was put to maximum effect. He only needed to recharge once every hundred hours. A new heightened processing power allowed him to see that the only way forward was to increase social spending. To repair the great schisms and cracks in American society, he put money into neighborhoods that needed it most. He created job programs that were labeled by the media as the ‘*new* New Deal.’ Over-congested prisons were shut down and an increase in rehabilitation programs, like those in Norway and other Scandinavian countries, helped smooth the transition of felons back into society. Public health clinics, community centers, and immigrant services were created. Affordable housing and sound mortgage options returned. The disenfranchised were supported on a level never seen

before. Corporations and politicians were made liable for their crimes. For the first time, bosses were responsible to their employees and voters. Tax havens and graft became a thing of the past.

For those on the right, Trump gave them the work programs and blue collar opportunities that had become scarce in the heartland. He was tough on crime and built an army of police droids that he controlled. Singlehandedly, he put the fear of law into criminals' hearts, both on the street and in office towers. The force's resources and power were insurmountable.

All the while, he tweeted about it. Our phones constantly buzzed and flashed at Walter Reed and around the world as Trump 2.0 updated the entire nation as to what he was doing, on the hour every hour. And he always used the hashtag #Trumptopia.

He plugged in directly to all the cellular networks and acquired even more followers. His popularity rose. A team was put together to run his campaign for re-election. Their motto:

"Taxes, Transparency, Tweets. Trump 2.0 for 2020. #Trumptopia."



I had signed off on the forms so I was present, albeit on the fringes, of the group at Walter Reed that monitored him and checked the big man's vital signs. I wasn't invited to the sessions where he rested in the recharging chair in Lennox's office.

But I was around. And I kept my eyes open. The scientists at the hospital were excited. It was a new age: Trump 2.0's changes heralded a new era in technical advancement, scientific discovery, and space exploration. Learning and curiosity became popular for their own sake. The only people who really objected were the plutocrats. They numbered less than five percent of the population. Their objections were easily quashed. Wealth was redistributed to pay for all the new benefits, and once Americans saw the increase in their quality of life, the increase in happiness and neighborliness and contentment and basic felicity that existed, they didn't wish to go back. It was the end of

that illusory and hollow *American Dream*. It was instead replaced by a new *American Health & Happiness*.

There were still rich people and Trump and his family numbered among that class. I did too, to be honest. But now that the very very rich had been seen to, that virus of greed that made people aspire to the unnecessary and lavish excesses of *that* toxic class dissipated and lost its hold. Trump and his family even donated half of their fortunes to cancer research and inner city schools. Instead of espousing golden edifices, the Trump brand became synonymous with a gold standard. Trump Tower itself became a temporary shelter, a mission if you will, for the dwindling homeless population in New York.

#Trumptopia had been achieved. And it was huuuge with everybody.



Three years into his presidency, Trump's hardware had been built over and redesigned by the military and Dorsey's team so often that it was hard for any of us to say which version we were dealing with at any given time. He no longer needed to recharge every hundred hours—a cooling/generating system filtered nutrients and minerals from the air while he flew—like *Iron Man*, he had hundreds of duplicates taking care of whatever needed attending to. One body took care of earthquake victims in California while another spoke to prisoners in Idaho about reforming their lives while yet another aided Kurdish militants in Syria. We could not call him Trump 10.0 or 20.0 or even 100.0 because numbers meant nothing. We might as well call him Trump Infinity.

I saw him rarely, just when one of his bodies visited Lennox and Doyle's hangar. The clanking of his jet propulsion boots rang through the halls. The armored boots left impressions in the concrete as he walked. And always, that smell of jet fuel and oiled machinery, the ionic heat of fibre optic cables pushed beyond burning point, cloyed to the walls. It was ironic in a way—so much of our energy came from

solar panels and turbines now—renewable sources of energy had been worked into the electric grids—America had become a world leader in reducing carbon emissions—and yet, Trump Infinity was still made of gears and wires and oil and machinery and silicon and fibre optic, all crowned with that iconic face with the tight blue eyes and puckered lips and swoop of hair that become his trademark. Only, the hair on the versions I saw now was not original hair—it had been replaced by an aestheticized alloyed skull plate, painted gold, that swooped over the back of his head.

Sometimes he erupted from Lennox and Doyle's lab in a cloud of what seemed like urgency, flying away on jet fumes into clouds, the plexiglass flashing an electric shade of neon, reverberating some emotion beyond the ken of ordinary folk. Sometimes there were four or five of him descending from the sky at the same time. A visual reminder of how exactly things had changed. If we felt trepidation or fear during those times, we didn't talk of it.



With everything running smoothly, Trump Infinity had all but become an anachronism. Though he was no longer the bloated representation of a cancerous America, as he had been before his death, with his long range missiles and nuclear capability, he inhabited bodies that were out of step with the world he had created. The Trumptopia he engineered was at dissonance with the microwaves emitting from his eyes and the strategic protocols that linked his hard drives.

I was no longer in the loop but had been given a promotion and significant bump in pay. I used it to fly back to Seattle often. To remain in touch with reality. Or I bought tickets for myself and Jordan to stay at hotels and see away games, so we could witness the Seahawks get trashed firsthand.

We were at the newly-opened Las Vegas Stadium where the Seahawks played an exhibition game against the Raiders. Trump, or

one of his manifestations, sang the national anthem. At first, he stood erect and sang in perfect pitch, albeit modulated by autotune. But when he got to ‘the land of the free and the home of the brave,’ his voice cracked and something rusty came out, a wailed croak or a sob, as Trump’s plexiglass and metal frame crumpled. He then ripped the gold alloyed skull plate from atop his scalp and flung it into the Nevada sky. It traced a perfect screaming parabola and crashed back down, almost maiming one of the players. Coach Carroll tried to approach the great hulking droid but Trump suddenly straightened and shot off in a cloud of jet exhaust, singeing Coach Carroll’s face.

The exhibition game that night began after a delay.

I felt a troubling sense of déjà vu.



It wasn’t too long after I returned to Walter Reed that the anonymous texts began.

“I know you were there,” read the first one.

“I’m in pain. You’re a doctor. A stand-up guy. Help me...” read another.

A later one still flashed: “I know you’re a patriot. One of this nation’s heroes. Not a loser. I can sense it... this isn’t right and you know it—in your heart.”

I didn’t answer and quickly deleted the texts. After all, there was no number attached to them and I didn’t know where or whom they were from. They simply appeared on my phone. I was enjoying the fruits of my promotion. America was enjoying renewed prosperity for the first time since the sixties. The world was a better place. Where was the loss?

So I switched cellphone plans. And bought a new phone. But I transferred my contacts from my old phone and in that split second, he grabbed hold of the signal and whatever essence was left, whatever smidge of human consciousness still remained, rode the electrons from one device to the other. I say ‘he’ because it could be no other.

The compulsive four a.m. tweeter. The reluctant reality star. The ghost in the machine. Trump 1.0. The original.

"I'm in pain," he texted, "I miss having a penis... I miss the thrill of taking Viagra... I'm in anguish... you're my doctor. Help me!" The time was 4:55 p.m.

I reminded him of his directives:

Uphold the office of President.

Help the economy.

Serve the public trust.

The ensuing silence was worse than a heart-wrenching sob.

No matter how I reasoned with myself, I could not deny that he was right: I was his doctor and since I had signed those forms on that fateful day, he was my patient. He was right. The man was in anguish and I must help him. What did he want? Nothing short of death, it turned out. The sweet release of oblivion. A respite from consciousness, from the weariness of serving an immortal term. He had died on that fateful day he placed the McDonald's order from within his gold Cadillac Allante and he now wished to ride the great Cadillac in the sky. There was no real relationship between him and Melania or Barron or Ivanka or any of the others, only photo ops.

He was a copy of a copy of a copy.

Don't you understand? He did not really exist anymore and yet, he could not die. His was a soul caught in purgatory.

The more he worked at me, the more he wore me down. In the end, the texts not only infiltrated my phone, they infiltrated my mind. I became loyal to him. Let's be honest. I worshipped him like everyone else.



You know by now what happened. How the nuclear fallout came about. It's not easy to kill a program, a copy of a copy of a copy. Simply breaking into Lennox's hangar and burning it to the ground would do no good. Neither would attacking Jack Dorsey and

demanding he erase the code. The code itself was as sophisticated as DNA and possessed both sentience and resilience. Would I then approach Armbruster and demand back the bits of Trump's brain they'd copied? No, Armbruster only served others.

He served the public trust.

There was only one way to defeat Trump Infinity's existence and that was to carry out a plan Trump himself designed. His software had protocols that stopped him short of harming himself, erasing or deleting any of the work Dorsey had done. But there was nothing to stop him downloading the information, the code created by Dorsey, the schematics I had seen that day in Lennox's office, the automatic video and memory logs that were kept, everything that could be compressed into a series of files. It all existed in the cloud. Using an anonymous routing process, he set up a meeting between me and his adversary. No, not Putin. Kim Jong Un. The president of North Korea.

"Why not Putin?" I asked, "you two were rumored to be friends at one time. Why not have him and the SVR carry out the job?"

"Putin's an android himself," came the cryptic reply. "You think those muscles are real?"

I didn't want to know more.

Kim Jong Un, according to the deal, was to use the schematics and updated files I provided to find Trump's weaknesses and destroy him. But Kim, being the jealous madman that he was, set out to build an army of flying 'droids that would serve himself, counter Trump, and commissioned a very special exoskeleton for himself. While Trump felt less than a man, Kim Jong Un armed himself with penis projectiles and ballistic balls.

The battle over the Pacific has been recorded and commented upon by smarter people than me. It rivaled the war between the Greek Gods and Titans. It left a nuclear fallout that we are told will last decades. Perhaps a century and more.



So now you know the story. How a simple doctor like me could do a thing like that. I turned myself into Armbruster and that's how I ended up in here. It's a good thing that the death penalty was abolished nationwide while Trump still assumed his presidency.

I know there are a lot of conspiracy theories out there, like I was a sleeper agent working for the Russians. That I was born Korean and had my face surgically altered. That I was hired by the consortium of plutocrats taxed heavily by Trump 2.0. That I was in collusion with Malik Malawi, the person who killed Trump the first time. That I worked with a team of people who belonged to a cult that considers *The Apprentice* their religious text. That I've hidden a memory key with Trump's consciousness on the grounds around Twitter's campus, to be dug up and implemented later. That they froze his brain and keep it in a safe in the Arctic. That Lennox and Doyle were alien ambassadors sent to Earth with alien technology. That the mafia bankrolled the whole thing.

No! For goodness sake!

It was just me and this is what happened. Not a lone shooter exactly, but a lone something. I'm not even sure that I was in control when it all went down. I was as much swept away as everyone else. By him. It seemed like the right thing to do. His voice was so urgent—like a child's. Then it was gone.

Now, I know I wasn't the only one being reached out to. There were others. At the time, I didn't know that. I felt special. He asked them all to do the same thing. But I was the only one who went along.

Was I special or stupid?

You tell me.

Me! A lonely doctor from Seattle who likes the Seahawks. The only reason I haven't been shanked in prison is because of the prison reform *he* created. This place is almost humane. It's certainly better than the world out there, with the fallout. And the riots and the looting. And the burning buildings.

Like the medieval ages now.



Jordan's gone too. I miss him. Ah well. I wish the radiation hadn't destroyed the whole western seaboard including Seattle. And my beloved Seahawks.

And the NFL.

Why did I sign off on those forms? It wasn't even my shift.

People told me to sign those forms, that's why.

Nobody told me to be a hero.



Koom Kankesan is the author of *The Panic Button*, *The Rajapaksa Stories*, and *The Tamil Dream*. He contributes comics journalism to Deconstructing Comics Podcast and Comicon.com. Feel free to listen or read at: deconstructingcomics.com and comicon.com.

HERE COMES SANTA CLAUS BY
ANDREW JENSEN



EXCERPT FROM FUTURISTIC CANADA

David Stewart rode slowly through the town. He looked it over carefully as he followed the main street, noting his first impressions. Many of the homes were made of the yellow brick people in the region called “white.” They were not fancy but seemed to be in good repair. Some lots were vacant, but none would be considered derelict. Most had vegetable gardens. It was late fall, and there were plenty of tomatoes in sight, but even with the extended growing season caused by climate change, they wouldn’t last much longer. Plants needed light and the days were growing shorter.

His first impressions were enough to make him curious. He could see that the people here were poor, which was no surprise since a great many small Ontario towns had sunk into poverty. After the pandemic, and the collapse of the economy, very few small towns had much to trade. But New Jericho did not seem depressed in any way. The sign welcoming him to town was newly painted. David couldn’t see any idle adults, and he was happily aware that this town didn’t have the automatic hostile stare he’d come to expect as a stranger. No one had welcomed him, exactly, but he didn’t feel any hostility, either. The only building he could see which had decayed past repair was

being systematically torn down by six men. Actually, one man and five teenagers. And with the coveralls they all wore, he couldn't tell anyone's gender, beyond the full beard of the leader. The yellow bricks they had already removed were clean of all mortar and were neatly stacked in front of the house next door, ready for reuse. The workers seemed purposeful and cooperative.

His horse, already walking slowly, came to a complete stop. A small girl stood right in his path. He noticed her plain summer dress, obviously homemade and repaired enough to suggest that this child had a thrifty and caring family. David smiled ruefully, thinking that when he had been a child, such clothes would never have been seen in late November. Global warming had banished the snowy winters he used to enjoy.

The girl took his smile for a good omen. She smiled at him and said, "You're a Stranger, aren't you?"

He replied, "Yes, I am. I'm David Stewart. Do you know where the Mayor is?"

The girl looked his horse over with a practised eye.

"We have a mare, but your horse is a gelding. They don't care about mares."

David was confused for a moment. Before he could rephrase his question, the girl asked, "Have you seen the Elders yet?"

Elders! David sat up straighter. This might prove to be a very fruitful visit. "No," he said. "Where can I find them?"

"I'm not allowed to talk to Strangers who haven't seen the Elders yet," said the girl. She started to back away.

"Tell me where they are, and I'll go see them right away."

The girl shook her head and continued to back away.

"You don't need to talk," David called. "Just point."

The girl pointed. There were a few large buildings a couple of blocks ahead. One was more imposing than the others and made of the more expensive red bricks.

"Should I go to the big red building?" David called.

The girl nodded. Then she turned and scooted behind a house.

Elders! David poked his horse into a faster walk than before. If the change from "town councillor" to "elder" meant what he hoped, then he could accomplish quite a bit here.

David hitched his horse to the post at the town hall and went inside. In a sparsely furnished office, he was met by a small woman with white hair.

"How can I help you, Stranger?" she asked kindly.

"My name is David Stewart," he said. "I'd like to speak to one of the Elders."

"I'm Elder Rosie McLachlan," the woman replied. "Today is my turn in the office. How may I help you?"

"I'm a theology student, working on my Ph.D. thesis. It's about the different ways the change in society has affected traditional forms of faith. I'm particularly interested in new expressions of the Reformed tradition. I'm a Presbyterian, myself." David didn't mention that his thesis advisor called his research "cult crawling."

Rose was silent for a moment. Then, frowning slightly, she asked, "You mean you just want to learn what we believe? Come to church and talk to us; things like that?"

"Yes. I'd like to stay for a week or two and interview people, especially the Elders. If I could attend worship with you, that would be a great help."

"You promise not to do any preaching, or try to change what any of us believe?"

"I promise!" David replied emphatically. "I want to learn what you believe now. Changing that would be the worst thing I could do."

Rose McLachlan smiled. "We agree about that. Well, you're welcome to stay with us. The Bible enjoins us to welcome Strangers, and we do, but we expect you to respect our ways while you're here."

"Are there any particular rules I should know about?" he asked.

"If you've studied the Bible, as you say you have, you'll know them all. The Bible is the guide to everything we do. You'll catch on quickly." She smiled, then added, "Unless you're wealthy. If you are, keep it to yourself. We expect you to pay your way, of course, but don't be too

free with your money. We're not a well-off town by old standards, and we've learned the hard way that the love of money is evil. *Do not* lead anyone into temptation."

"I'll be careful," David replied. He added to himself, *besides, I don't have that much myself.*

David's research went well, although it didn't turn up anything extraordinary. The town had experienced a religious revival when the national economy collapsed. The local United Church had strong Presbyterian roots, so the revival took a Reformed shape, with a heavy emphasis on the Bible. The whole town, as well as the surrounding farms, had become a single religious community, ruled by the church Elders. They acted as both lawmakers and court when the need arose.

Sunday worship was like going back in time two hundred years, to the 1880s. All signs of wealth or decoration had been stripped from the church; even the stained-glass windows had been replaced by plain or frosted glass, and even some of those were gone, replaced by neatly cut boards. David noted too that there weren't any offering plates in evidence. He decided to ask about this when he spoke to his next interviewee.

The man in question was quite old, although not an official Elder. David suspected the roguish twinkle in the old fellow's eyes kept him from being considered responsible enough.

"We haven't passed the plate for years," he explained. "No one has anything to put in it. If something needs doing, we just do it. If we had a minister to support, there'd be a problem, but the Elders take turns preaching." He grinned. "For free!"

David grinned back. Some things didn't change. "I just have one more question. You were around when the town was re-named New Jericho. Why did you folks choose that particular name?"

The man's grin widened. "'Cause the walls were a-tumblin' down."

Shortly before the end of his second week in New Jericho, David was summoned before a meeting of the Elders. The senior Elder, Henry van Erp, addressed him formally.

"Mr. Stewart, for the most part, you've been a welcome guest.

You've refrained from directly preaching your beliefs, and have mostly respected our ways. However, a problem has come to our attention. It concerns your wealth. Rose McLachlan said that she specifically warned you not to flaunt any wealth here. Yet you've done just that. On many occasions you've openly used an electrical device: a voice recorder, I believe. This has caused discontent among the young people."

David was stunned. He *had* brought a small digital recorder, several memory cards, and a solar-powered battery charger for his interviews. He hadn't dreamed it would become a problem.

"But it's only a digital recorder," he protested.

"Mr. Stewart," continued van Erp, "a digital recorder isn't a small thing. You have noticed, I'm sure, that there are no electrical devices of any sort in New Jericho."

David had noticed, without much surprise. Few small towns could afford the cost of electricity unless they could generate their own.

"This isn't just because we can't afford it. We chose to abandon these things and the other wasteful parts of the old, corrupt society that rotted and collapsed years ago. Your recorder seems innocuous, and you're friendly and polite. Some of our young folk are wondering whether the old ways were really so bad. The Devil takes many forms, and the most dangerous appears to be the most innocent.

"Mr. Stewart, our youngest children have never even seen a snowman. They'll never know the extinct animals. They hear us talk, but they'll never really know what they're missing. They're paying for the sins of their parents. That is not 'only' a recorder. It's a threat. So are you. It is the decision of the Elders that you must leave New Jericho at first light tomorrow."

David was horrified. His best source of material in two years of travelling was throwing him out. He had to salvage something.

"Elders," he said, "I'm very sorry for this trouble. I had no idea this would be a problem. If I'd understood your beliefs, I would never have used my recorder. My work isn't finished. Another five days would be enough. Please let me stay that long. I'll put away the recorder, or even

destroy it in public if that would help undo the damage I've caused. Without the machine, I wouldn't be any kind of a threat to your teachings. I'll abide by whatever decision you make, or whatever restrictions you put on me. But please, I ask of you, allow me to stay just a few more days to finish my work."

Van Erp looked around at the other Elders, and then back at David. "We'll consider your request. Please wait outside."

David waited over an hour for their decision. As he secretly looked at his watch, he considered what he was experiencing. On the one hand, he was witnessing how deeply their faith controlled their daily lives, and how they dealt with problems: banish sinners, keep the town separate and pure. On the other hand, it looked like he wouldn't be able to stay long enough to expand on this new knowledge. The long discussion gave him hope, though. Clearly, they were not unanimous about sending him away.

At last, he was invited back into the room.

"Mr. Stewart," van Erp said, "we've considered your request for more time and we've decided that you can do more to repair the damage you've caused by staying than by leaving. You may stay the five days you requested, and possibly longer, if things go well."

David couldn't help but grin in relief.

"There are some conditions, of course," the Elder continued. "You must leave your digital recorder with us. We'll return it to you when you depart. Curiosity has arisen among the younger folk concerning Toronto, where I understand you lived, and the other places you've visited. You may not speak of these things to anyone under the age of forty. Older residents have their own memories to weigh against your words. I don't think you'll have much opportunity to speak to the children. We don't forbid you from speaking to them, but their parents will probably warn them away from you. Do *not* encourage them in any way to disobey their parents."

Van Erp went on to describe further conditions, which included moving into a basement room in the town hall since his host family would undoubtedly ask him to leave. The conditions were strict, but

at least he could stay. He felt a bit like a leper but was pleased his work could continue.

As van Erp spoke, David looked around at the faces of the other Elders. As he had expected, this had not been a unanimous decision—that much was clear from the expressions on various faces. It did seem odd, though, that the Elders who had been the most cooperative during his interviews now seemed the most unhappy with his staying.

The next few days passed without incident. David was so busy gathering information and taking notes by hand that he only occasionally noticed the way that children, and some adults, were avoiding him. It was an uncomfortable way to live, but it gave him new insights for his thesis.

On the fourth day of his reprieve, David was approached by one of the younger Elders, Bill Smith, with a proposal that delighted him. He was asked to take part in a celebration.

"I'd be honoured," David said. "Can you tell me a little more about it?"

Bill looked a little embarrassed. "Actually, it's a Santa Claus parade. Tomorrow is December 6th, which is St. Nicholas' Day, and that's when we have our parade."

David was surprised. "Santa Claus? He's not exactly a religious figure, at least, that's not the way he came across in the parades I remember from my childhood."

Bill shook his head. "No, sir. We've added some real meaning to the parade. It may look the same at first, but by the end, you'll see the deeper meaning. You won't have to do much. You dress up as Santa and throw presents from your wagon to the children. The kids really love this parade."

David was frankly curious. "Of course I'll play Santa for you. I'd give anything to see how this works out. To be honest, Santa seems much too secular to fit in here."

Bill smiled knowingly. "I guess it looks that way to an outsider. Actually, you're lucky. Only one Stranger per year is allowed to be in New Jericho for the Santa Claus Parade."

David became concerned. "Will I be allowed to write about this in my thesis? I wouldn't want to break any rules, but this may prove to be one of the most interesting parts of my work."

Bill smiled again. "We discussed that very question just this morning. None of the Elders are worried about this appearing in your work. It might be hard to take notes while you're playing Santa Claus. But don't worry about that, these parades are hard to forget."

David didn't doubt that. For people whose lives were as bare and restricted as this, any kind of celebration must be memorable. He was looking forward to the next day. He wanted to see how such repressed people behaved when they partied.

The next morning, David and his horse reported to Bill Smith's house at the edge of town. There, David was fitted out with an old white toque which had been inexpertly dyed red, the remains of an old wool sweater that had been transformed into an almost white beard, and a vintage red jacket, several sizes too big, from which someone had carefully removed the name "McGill." It seemed odd that the Santa for the parade should be dressed so shabbily. Usually, for a celebration, people try to produce their best. This looked like a deliberate attempt to make it look like the worst.

Perhaps this was part of their symbolism: that even Santa Claus was impoverished? Spiritually impoverished? He decided to ask Bill about it and went over to where the young Elder was busy hooking up David's horse to the old wagon that would carry him.

"We had a real sleigh when I was a child," Bill remarked cheerfully. "But then the snow got so that you couldn't count on it. Now, it would be a miracle if it ever snowed before February."

David tried to ask about the symbolism behind the shabby costume, but Bill just shook his head impatiently.

"No time for that now," he said. "The children are waiting downtown. Just climb into the wagon and ride 'er down toward the town hall. You can throw the presents to the children as you go by them. And make sure the 'Ho, Ho, Hos' are nice and loud."

"Won't the presents be damaged if I throw them?"

Bill laughed. "Naw, they're just empty boxes with fancy paper. We'll use them again next year."

David asked, "Won't the children be disappointed?"

Bill grinned. "How could they be? They've never been thrown a real present. They love it just the way it is. You'll see. Now get going. They're waiting."

David got the horse and wagon going, and headed down the main street. He saw the crowds waiting just a few blocks ahead, neatly at the edges of the road, as if this were a real parade. He heard the sound of excited voices becoming louder as he approached. It looked as if the whole countryside had joined the town for the event. Children darted across the empty street as if it were the most daring thing they'd ever done, only to be scolded by adults when they crossed. Despite the fact that David couldn't see anyone in charge, everyone stayed back from the street. Couldn't these people let their hair down at all? He'd just have to do his best to liven things up. After all, he was the star of the show!

He opened the sack on the floor of the wagon. It was full of brightly wrapped boxes, each tied with a red ribbon. A few looked a bit scuffed and battered, obviously veterans of previous parades. He wasn't surprised that the boxes were reused. The wrapping and ribbon on each box looked like it was worth more than his whole Santa suit.

David carefully tossed one of the boxes to the closest child. He didn't want to ruin the colourful paper by letting it hit the ground, so he threw it straight to the child. He was astonished to see the young boy shriek and dodge aside from the "present."

It didn't take long for him to notice that all of the children behaved the same way. Each one would run from the parcels, yelling with delighted terror. He then observed that the children he had passed were following along behind the wagon, laughing and shouting in the middle of the street. Some of what he heard wasn't very civil.

They're rejecting him, David suddenly realized. Santa is a symbol of greed and sin to them. They're teaching the children to fear and reject

materialism! David grinned. If the Elders had asked him to do this as a way of embarrassing him for the recorder business, then he would play along. He would play his part to the hilt.

"Ho! Ho! Ho!" he bellowed over the noise of the crowd. "Merry Christmas!"

David's words stopped suddenly as something hit him on the back. He reached behind the seat and picked up one of the empty boxes. It hadn't hurt, but he felt odd that it had happened at all. He looked back at the children behind the wagon. They were shouting and jeering now, with less mirth than before. One or two seemed to be preparing to throw other presents. David urged his horse to speed up.

The extra speed didn't last long. Santa David's way was blocked by a crowd of adults. Leading them was the chief Elder, Henry van Erp. He was dressed in the black robes and long preaching tabs of a nineteenth-century Presbyterian minister. While someone held the horse's bridle, van Erp climbed up into the wagon, carrying a heavy pulpit Bible, and stood next to the seated Santa.

"Santa Claus has come into our midst," van Erp intoned. "What does he bring?"

"Empty gifts!" shouted the crowd.

"Ho! Ho! Ho!" retorted David. The angry looks from the crowd made him wish he hadn't.

"What does Santa bring?" repeated van Erp.

"Empty promises!" the shout was louder.

"Is Santa good?" continued the robed Elder.

"No! No! No!"

"Is Santa holy?"

"No! No! No!"

"What does Santa bring to our Saviour's birth?"

"Mockery! Mockery!" The shout was deafening.

"What does Santa teach us?"

"Greed! Greed!"

David was no longer fascinated with this litany. The roar of the crowd was beginning to sound dangerous.

"What does Santa bring us?"

"Sin! Sin!"

"What do we need instead?"

"Food! Food!"

David was surprised at this nonspiritual answer.

"Then food you shall have!" Van Erp gestured at the horse, and David heard it scream in pain. Someone had expertly cut open the animal's throat, and its blood quickly pumped out onto the road.

The horse's scream snapped the fascination that had held David spellbound. He started up out of the wagon seat, a cry of outrage on his lips. Before he could utter anything coherent, his shout was cut off by the weight of a large Bible hitting his head.

Stunned and confused, David didn't resist as he was pulled down from the wagon. He barely noticed his hands being tied behind his back. He stumbled along past those who were carving up the dead horse and was led to an old parking lot behind the town hall. His wits began to return as he crossed the crumbling asphalt. He realized that the crowd was now rhythmically chanting:

Remember, remember, the sixth of December; Santa's a treasonous plot!

David shook his head in confusion. The chant was wrong. It should be November. And where was the gunpowder?

He felt himself being tied to a post. Then he noticed that each person in the crowd placed a piece of wood at his feet. As the pile grew higher, he observed that each piece was neatly tied with a red ribbon.

David tried to say something, but his miserable beard was tied into his mouth as a gag. He looked around desperately, and found van Erp, still in his minister's garb.

Something was wrong with that attire, too. The pair of white tabs representing the tablets of the Ten Commandments were too large, more like the kind worn by lawyers than preachers. The collar was wrong, too. Instead of the back-closing collar of the clergy, van Erp was wearing a front-closing collar. He wasn't dressed as a nineteenth-century minister. Van Erp was dressed as a nineteenth-century judge.

He began to speak, and the chanting crowd grew silent. "The scriptures tell us that we must put away our sin and purge our nation of evil. The scriptures tell us that a man who has sinned greatly should have his body delivered to Satan, that his soul may be saved, though tested by fire. Santa Claus once led a whole world to sin and destruction. We repudiate him and all his works. And he shall wear the sign of his sin, as a reminder to us all never to follow him."

At these words, Bill Smith came forward. He was smiling broadly, as always, but his eyes were too intense to be reassuring. David saw he was carrying the infamous voice recorder, neatly tied with a long loop of red ribbon. Bill reached up and hung the loop around David's neck, so the recorder hung at the centre of David's chest. As he did this, he whispered, "Thanks, David. You're the best Santa we've had in a long time." Then he stepped back.

The judge stepped forward. Someone had given him a burning torch, which he held in his left hand. The large Bible was in his right. Van Erp's voice boomed: "Thus do we purify ourselves." He cast the torch onto the pile of wood.

The celebration began as Santa burned.



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THE HOUSE OF HAGFISH BY
DERWIN MAK



EXCERPT FROM IMMERSION: AN ASIAN
ANTHOLOGY OF LOVE, FANTASY, AND
SPECULATIVE FICTION

SHARKS INVADE LAKE ONTARIO DURING SWIMSUIT FASHION SHOOT. Cathy Wong watched her phone in horror as the swimsuit models rushed back to the shore. An unsteady camera zoomed in on the shark fins circling in the water.

A fashion reporter, pressed into duty as a science expert, breathlessly said, "Polar bears have disappeared from Churchill, Manitoba, but sharks have invaded Toronto's waterfront. Global warming has brought another new species here. Bull sharks can live in freshwater like lakes and rivers. They never used to swim up the St. Lawrence River and into Lake Ontario, but now they have made their way here."

Global warming also moved the Summer Fashion Festival to that warm October day. When Cathy was a teenager, she would have bundled up in a sweater and jeans and felt the chill air blow around her. A decade later, she wore a pink off-the-shoulder top and black mini-skirt as she walked into the offices of Seagold Textiles. Cathy walked beside the slime production vats. Her stomach churned from the odour. It smelled like stale sweat. Even after a month of working here, she still hadn't gotten used to the stench.

"When I got a degree in fashion communication, I thought I would be designing ad campaigns for big brands like Givenchy," she said to Greg, the marine biologist. "I never imagined I would sell eel snot to clothing manufacturers."

Greg shook his head and took a deep breath. Like all the scientists, he was used to the smell. "They're not eels. Eels are in class *Actinopterygii*. Hagfish are in class *Myxini*."

"Well, they look like eels, sort of. Slime eels. That's the nickname that the fashion reporters gave to hagfish. It stinks here. Hurry up, let's go to Alfie's room."

They sped past the slime production vats and into a room with a sign reading "ALFIE". Cathy turned on the clean air intake. Posters of clothes hung on the walls. Another wall had a counter, sink, and refrigerator. Off to the side, a fish tank held a grey hagfish. It slithered at the bottom of the tank like its ancestors at the bottom of the ocean.

The hagfish stopped evolving three hundred million years ago. It has a skull but no spine. It has no jaw but has a mouth with rows of sharp teeth for tearing apart dead fish for food. Its primitive eyes are white spots that lack irises and pupils; they are merely retinas that can detect light but cannot create detailed images. It is seemingly ill-suited to thrive in an ocean full of large predators with vertebrae and good eyesight. It did, however, gain one evolutionary advantage. A hagfish is covered with glands that eject mucous. Combined with water, the mucous expands and creates a thick, white slime that clogs the gills and mouths of predators. Any big fish that tries to bite a hagfish will suffocate on the goo.

The mucous contains long threads of protein, a hundred times thinner than human hair but ten times stronger than nylon. In 2012, biologists at the University of Guelph extracted the protein threads and spun them into fibres. Eventually, the textiles industry used hagfish slime to create alternatives to petroleum-based materials like polyester.

Most slime production companies had a giant aquarium full of hagfish. Seagold Textiles went two steps further; it genetically

modified a hagfish that could create twice the amount of mucous. Then it used that hagfish's DNA to genetically modify a bacterium to create the mucous. The vats were full of bacteria, not hagfish. It was cheaper to keep bacteria than hagfish, giving Seagold a financial advantage. Not all companies had the talent to develop and patent a process and creature like Seagold's.

"Good morning, Alfie," Cathy said to the hagfish in the tank.

"The guys want to take him to the fashion show today," Greg said. "I'm getting the portable aquarium ready."

"Whoa. You're taking Alfie to the fashion show?"

"Why not? We owe our company's profits to his DNA. We made him. He's our pride and joy."

Cathy looked at the posters. They showed models in cheap, ordinary blouses and pants. Each poster also had a portrait of Alfie, with his white eyes and gaping mouth. He was anything but cute.

"Now that I'm in charge of promotion, I'm going to change our image," Cathy declared. "Our only customers are cheap clothing factories in China."

"Nothing wrong with the Chinese market," Greg shrugged. "I'm wearing their clothes right now."

Cathy looked at Greg's lime green T-shirt and faded red denim pants. She nodded and silently noted how differently people dressed here compared to her previous employer of two months, the fashion magazine *Tease*. Everyone there wore stylish clothes.

"China is a huge market, and it's great for us, but I want to expand our customer base," Cathy said. "I've invited Dior, Chanel, Versace, Armani, Givenchy, and Gucci to our show. I want the high-end designers to stop thinking of hagfish as ugly and disgusting."

"But hagfish *are* ugly and disgusting."

"All the more reason to keep Alfie away. Let the textiles sell themselves without their DNA donor slithering nearby."

Greg shrugged. "Hey, Alfie, our marketing director thinks you're too ugly to slither down the runway. What do you think?"

Alfie stared up at him with his white eyespots.

"Oh, you're more interested in lunch," Greg said. He opened a refrigerator, took out a dead fish, and dropped it into the tank.

Alfie's teeth tore a hole in the fish. He burrowed inside it and began eating the fish from the inside out.

"We don't need to show *that* at the Summer Fashion Festival," said Cathy.

"Too late," Greg said. "His mealtime video has already gone viral."

Cathy sighed and tapped on her phone. A photo of a blonde woman appeared. "Giselle, the Victoria's Secret supermodel. How about hiring her for our campaign? I heard she came by our booth to look at Alfie last year."

"Yeah, she even held him, but it suddenly rained, and Alfie panicked and slimed all over her."

"Nobody told me about that!" Cathy blurted out.

"Her dress was ruined. It was Alexander McQueen, I think. Oh, is my little Alfie feeling full now?"

Alfie swam out of the fish's carcass. He had reduced it to a bag of skin. Greg reached into the tank to pet the hagfish. Alfie coiled himself at the tank's bottom and suddenly sprang out of the water. Cathy screamed as the hagfish flew in front of her.

"What the hell!" Greg shouted as he caught Alfie in his hands.

"Hagfish can't jump up!"

"I've never seen him do that before." Greg desperately grasped the slippery hagfish.

"When you guys modified his DNA, could you have given him superpowers?"

Greg struggled as Alfie squirmed in his hands. "Superpowers? This isn't a comic book!"

"Then how can he jump out of the water?"

"Well, genetic manipulation sometimes creates unintended effects. Like his ability to live in freshwater."

"Which means he and his offspring can live in our lakes and rivers as well as the ocean," Cathy said.

Greg lowered Alfie back into the fish tank. His hands were covered with white slime. It drooped like a gelatinous sheet.

"Ewww, that's so gross!" Cathy cried.

"You get used to it after a while." He smirked at her. "Do you want to touch it?"

"Uh, no. I don't want to get it on my clothes."

"Come on. You don't have to grab it. Just poke a finger slightly into it."

Cathy touched the slime and recoiled immediately.

"It feels like snot!"

Greg laughed and flung the slime into a garbage pail before he went to a sink and washed his hands.

Cathy rushed to join. As she washed her hands, she said, "Don't let anyone touch Alfie at the fashion show, alright?"

"What's your plan for the Summer Fashion Festival?" Greg asked.

Cathy wiped her hands on a paper towel. "I got some design students to create a variety of outfits and accessories from hagfish textiles. Evening gowns, sundresses, skirts, pantsuits, fall jackets, bikinis, belts, handbags: you name it, the kids made it. These kids will be the Vivienne Westwoods and Ralph Laurens of tomorrow. This time, we're dressing our models in *haute couture*, not mass market. And no more science-y presentations."

"But lots of people attended the presentation at last year's Summer Fashion Festival," Greg protested.

"They were all genetic scientists and marine biologists. We need to reach a new audience."

"That's fine, but did you read the latest email from the boss?"

"Not yet." Cathy pulled her phone out of her bag and read the email:

Cathy,

Using the fashion students' designs is a great idea. Add one more item to your show: bring Alfie along in the portable tank. He's our pride and joy. We want to show off our greatest achievement in applied genetic engineering.

Indeed, my friends think I should get a Nobel Prize, LOL. Alfie is always popular with the science journalists.

I know we got some bad press from the fashion magazines last year, but Giselle should have worn the rain poncho that we offered to her.

John Herring, Ph.D., M.Sc., M.A., B.Sc., B.A.

President, Seagold Textiles

Damn. She couldn't get rid of Alfie.

"Little eel, it looks like you'll be going to our fashion show after all."



The Summer Fashion Festival was held at an open-air stage at Harbourfront, Toronto's classy neighbourhood by the northern shore of Lake Ontario. Cathy felt the summer heat on her shoulders as the models and the designers gathered on stage for the finale. Cathy strutted out in a sleeveless blue sundress. One of the design students had made it from hagfish cloth.

Cathy took the microphone and announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, here are the designers of the future using the fabrics of tomorrow!"

Alfie sat in a fish tank atop a trolley cart beside the stage. Greg stood there too, watching the show. Thank goodness Greg had one blue business suit, Cathy thought. It was a no-name brand from a cheap department store, but at least it wasn't jeans and a T-shirt.

After the fashion show, the reporters clustered around Alfie. Much to Cathy's dismay, they ignored the designers. "Hey, can you feed a dead fish to him?" asked a *Toronto Star* fashion writer.

Cathy eased herself between the reporters and Alfie. "Why don't you interview the designers?" she suggested. "They can tell you all about their fashions, all made with hagfish fabric by Seagold Textiles."

The reporters murmured in agreement.

"The designers are at the refreshments table," said Cathy, smiling. "Go help yourself to some coffee and cookies."

Suddenly, a shrill voice shouted, "So this is the creature that slimed Giselle!"

A brunette woman approached them wearing a white silk blouse, leopard print bolero jacket with a matching miniskirt and a wide-brimmed ivory hat, all by Fendi. She carried a miniature poodle in her Louis Vuitton black leather bag. It was Heather von Sator, editor-in-chief of *Tease* and Cathy's boss for two months. Cathy quit *Tease* after von Sator ordered her to hand-wash the blouse that von Sator had worn to the *Vanity Fair* party, the same that blouse she wore now.

"It's got to be hand washed," von Sator insisted at the time. "Look at it! Do you think you can put silk like this into a machine? You should know better."

"I shouldn't be doing personal chores like hand washing your clothes," Cathy had protested.

"I thought you Orientals are supposed to be obedient and hardworking, knowing when to submit to authority. That's why I hired you! You have been a disappointment."

"First, the word isn't Oriental, it's ASIAN," Cathy had shot back. "Second, Asian girls are not submissive, little slaves. You want to meet a real bitch? Meet my mother! And she's Asian too!"

"You must have grown up in Scarborough," von Sator said. She snorted. "No wonder you speak English so well."

Cathy shuddered at the memory.

"Well, if it isn't little Cathy," von Sator said. Her eyebrows and facial muscles barely moved when she talked, a sign that she had been injecting Botox to smooth her wrinkles.

"Hello, Madame von Sator," Cathy muttered. Von Sator insisted that peasants address her with French honorifics.

Von Sator gave Cathy a once over. "Wearing a no-name brand, I see. So you're working for a bunch of geeky marine scientists who harvest snot from eels? To think you aspired to a career in fashion."

The reporters giggled nervously. The little poodle barked. Cathy's heart thumped faster.

"My dress was designed by Miranda Chang from the Ontario

College of Art and Design," Cathy said calmly. "We gave hagfish fabric to the best design students in the country and told them --"

"I'm not interested in your no-name dress. I want to see the famous Alfie."

Von Sator pushed aside the reporters as she strutted to the tank. She looked at Alfie and guffawed. "This ugly little thing is Alfie? Do you really think any *couturier* will want to make clothes from eel snot?"

"He's not an eel," Cathy blurted. "Eels are in class *Actinopterygii*. Hagfish are in class *Myxini*."

Von Sator glared at her. "Save the science lecture for *Scientific American*. There's no reason for *Tease* to cover your fashion show. *Tease* is for the woman who appreciates her own beauty and a modern lifestyle. This eel's slime is fit only to be made into cheap clothes for low-end retailers."

She thumped Alfie's fish tank repeatedly. "See how the pathetic little eel squirms. It's not even good enough to be cut up for sushi."

"Uh, don't bang on the fish tank," Greg warned. "When hagfish feel threatened or stressed, they --"

Alfie jumped out of the tank and spewed his mucous on von Sator. When he fell back into the tank, the splash of water got onto the mucous, and it expanded into slime all over von Sator's face and chest.

The reporters gasped. Von Sator tore an opening for her mouth and screamed. Her dog barked incessantly. Spectators pulled out their cell phones and made videos of von Sator struggling with the slime on her face. Miranda Chang, the designer of Cathy's dress, showed her phone to Cathy.

"My video will go viral," Miranda giggled. "It's already gotten twenty likes in just a minute."

"You PEASANT!" von Sator shrieked. "*Tease* will do EVERYTHING to put your company out of business! You'll NEVER get another JOB in fashion for the REST of your LIFE!"

Madame von Sator stomped away. The reporters and

photographers followed her, abandoning Cathy and the design students.

Cosmopolitan's beauty director approached Cathy and whispered, "It was *sooo* fun to watch that cow get slimed!"

"No, it wasn't. Oh my God, I'm ruined!"

"No, we'll be okay," said Greg. "Our company survived Giselle getting slimed last year."

"But Giselle is just a supermodel. Heather von Sator is the bitch empress of fashion publishing. She makes Anna Wintour look like Princess Diana!"

"Who's Anna Wintour?" Greg asked.

Cathy groaned. Why did she turn down the unpaid internship at *Women's Wear Daily*?

A Summer Fashion Festival assistant came by. "Miss Wong, I'm sorry to ask you, but can you and your crew leave soon? We have to get the stage ready for the Armani show."

Cathy led the Seagold staff and the student designers away from the stage. Greg pushed Alfie's trolley cart behind them. They walked beside a beach, recreated in the latest government project. Lots of people, wearing swimsuits in October, stood in the sand at the lake. The crowd babbled excitedly.

"Shark!" someone shouted.

A teenage couple was out in a small inflatable raft. A shark's fin circled them, its head above the water from time to time. The girl swung an oar at the shark's head but missed it. Instead, the oar flew out of her hands and into the water.

"No, no, don't provoke the shark, just leave it alone," Greg yelled.

The boy held an oar and poked at the shark's body.

The shark bumped the raft with its nose. The two teens yelled and screamed as the shark rocked the raft, trying to overturn it.

A lifeguard ran out of her station to look at the shark attack. Some beachgoers called to her. "Marlene!"

"What are you going to do?" Cathy asked as Marlene ran by her.

"We have no protocol for sharks yet," Marlene replied, "but I know I've got to get those kids out of there."

Marlene ran to a rescue boat with an outboard motor. Cathy took off her high heels and chased Marlene through the sand.

The crowd continued to yell; the shark had bumped the raft again.

"The shark's getting aggressive," Cathy said. "What if you or one of the kids falls into the water?"

"It's a risk I have to take," said Marlene.

"I've got an idea," Cathy said. "Do you have a bucket, something you can use to hold water?"

"In my boat."

"Good. I think I have a way to scare the shark away."

Greg pushed and pulled Alfie's trolley cart through the sand to Cathy and Marlene. "What are you thinking?" he asked.

"Let's take Alfie out to sea," Cathy said, looking at the hagfish in the fish tank.

As the rescue boat sped towards the raft, Cathy looked down at the bucket, where Alfie lay curled in water. She doubted the hagfish knew what was going on.

Marlene steered the rescue boat towards the raft. The shark darted at the rescue boat and bumped it. As the boat rocked, Cathy squealed and grabbed the boat's side. Water sloshed out of Alfie's bucket.

"Alfie's already excreting mucous," Greg said. "He must be feeling stressed."

The shark bumped the rescue boat again. Greg groaned as he held Alfie's bucket upright.

"It'll be hard to pull beside the raft if the shark keeps bumping us," Marlene said.

"Not if we make the shark leave," Cathy said.

She and Greg lifted the bucket and poured Alfie into Lake Ontario. The hagfish stayed close to the surface near the rescue boat. Alfie looked up at Cathy. She felt a lump in her throat. She knew Alfie could defend himself, but he was just a little hagfish against a big shark.

The shark rose and opened its jaws over Alfie. The predator's sharp teeth hovered inches away from the hagfish's soft body. Cathy held her breath. Then Alfie ejected slime into the shark's mouth. The slime expanded quickly, oozing into the shark's throat.

"What was that?" Marlene asked, her eyes wide open.

Greg laughed. "The shark just got slimed."

The shark shook its head violently and quickly swam away, leaving a trail of slime in the water.

Marlene threw a rope to the two teens and said, "Tie this to your raft. I'm towing you in."

Greg plunged a hand net into the water. "Come on, Alfie, get in there," he said.

He kept pushing the net in front of Alfie, but the hagfish kept escaping it. Alfie moved too quickly for Greg to catch him. The hagfish dove and disappeared under the waves.



TV news crews awaited them at shore. The reporters focused on Marlene. Cathy wasn't surprised that the reporters gave all their attention to the attractive lifeguard.

"I only drove the boat," Marlene said. "Alfie the hagfish is the real hero. He fought off the shark. You should talk to these two."

The reporters thrust their microphones at Cathy and Greg. Though caught by surprise, Cathy took only a moment to decide what to say.

"Alfie is a hagfish belonging to Seagold Textiles, a leading manufacturer of textiles made from hagfish protein. We are very proud of him," she began.

The story spread quickly. Headlines like "EEL-LIKE FISH SLIMES SHARK" and "FISH WITH NO BACKBONE DEFEATS SHARK WITH SHARP TEETH" appeared in newspapers and websites around the world.

"But he's not a fish," Greg protested.

Cathy laughed. "Let them call him whatever they want. This is the best free publicity ever."

The Australian company Speedo began using hagfish fabrics. Within a month, Speedo had an ad showing a male lifeguard in red swim trunks. Alfie's head appeared in a circle in the corner. The ad read, "Heroes of the Beach." Dior followed next, with Giselle wearing green hagfish leggings at New York Fashion Week. Giselle now cooed that she loved the "hero hagfish."

MTV aired an episode of *House of Style* with guest host Cathy showing the new hagfish collections by Calvin Klein and Vera Wang. Greg appeared as a scientist, saying that hagfish fabric was stronger than nylon. Cathy picked the blue Armani suit and silver Polo Ralph Lauren tie that he wore. He got to keep the clothes but never wore them again.

Not everyone wanted hagfish. *Tease* threatened to give no coverage to any company that used hagfish textiles. The boycott backfired; when *Tease* published an issue with no major designers in it, the magazine's sales plummeted. The advertisers cancelled their ads, and Heather von Sator got fired.

Six months later, Seagold Textiles' sales had tripled, and major designers like Chanel and Versace were using hagfish fabric on their *haute couture* and *prêt-à-porter* collections. Their ad campaigns featured Alfie. Once he was the ugly fish that only science writers noticed. Now he was the new face of fashion.

But nobody knew where he was.



"Look at these," Cathy said, pointing to her emails. "The House of Chanel just introduced a hagfish coat for the spring."

"Why do so many fashion designers call themselves 'the House of something'?" Greg asked.

"It sounds impressive, just like 'hero hagfish.'"

"Our Alfie, the hero! All kidding aside, I keep thinking about him."

We might have done a bad thing. We put a genetically-modified animal into the wild. He's probably gone up the St. Lawrence River and into the ocean, where he can breed with other hagfish. His children will carry his modified genes. They might be able to live in both seawater and fresh water. If so, they can come to our rivers and lakes. Who knows what they can do, how they'll interact with the other species, how they'll affect the ecosystem or the food chain?"

"Hagfish haven't evolved for three hundred million years. Why start now?"



Ten million years after Alfie entered the Atlantic, the tribe held its annual fashion show, modelling the new clothes they had made from slime proteins. The Chief watched the parade of tubes and capes, all coloured with natural dyes from rare plants discovered in the deepest seabeds.

The Chief did not know that he was descended from a hagfish that land animals had idolized. He did not know that his prehistoric ancestors lacked the complex eyes that he used to see all the vivid colours and shapes. He did not know that his kind were the first sea animals to create artificial objects. He did not know that land animals had unwittingly restarted his species' evolution after three hundred million years of inertia. He didn't even know that land animals had ever existed. The expeditions to the surface had found no evidence of life on land.

However, he knew that he had founded the House of Hagfish.



Derwin Mak's story "Transubstantiation" won the Aurora Award for Best Short Fiction. The anthology *The Dragon and the Stars*, edited by Derwin and Eric Choi, won the Aurora Award for Best Related Work. Another anthology, *Where the Stars Rise*, edited by Lucas Law and

Derwin, won the Alberta Book Publishers Award for Speculative Fiction. The anthologies have stories by overseas Chinese or Asian writers to get their viewpoints and experiences in science fiction and fantasy. His novels *The Moon Under Her Feet* and *The Shrine of the Siren Stone* are available from Dark Helix Press. Derwin's stories have a range of topics, especially the interaction of religion with science and politics ("Transubstantiation", *The Moon Under Her Feet*), political power ("Songbun"), and LGBTQ+ issues ("XY-Girls", "72 Virgins"). His website: www.derwinmaksf.com.

CHAPTER 6 BY JF GARRARD



EXCERPT FROM THE UNDEAD SORCERESS

When Tamara woke up, she found that she had been buried beneath a bed of loose soil. Opening her mouth to scream, dirt entered her mouth and she wretched at its bitter taste and sandy texture. Claustrophobia set in and she flailed her arms frantically which seemed to help her move up, toward the surface of the loose soil. When she finally spotted some glowing yellow lights, she pulled herself up with all her strength and collapsed onto a grassy surface.

The darkness was illuminated by a circle of flashlights held by about a dozen shadowy figures surrounding the gravesite. When she stood up, she felt a stab of pain as a sword was thrust through her stomach. As the weapon was taken out, she went into shock when she looked up and saw Jia's face. Falling to the grassy ground in a daze, she saw stars as pain overwhelmed her. Her cousin was dressed in the same black outfit from when she rescued Tamara and all her companions were similarly dressed in long-sleeved, tight black shirts and pants.

Voices started chanting in a circle around her and oddly, she felt the flesh in her stomach start to heal. She felt nauseous, yet ravenous,

as if she was craving something, but was not sure what she wanted. Jia held her wrist over Tamara's mouth and used a ceremonial dagger to cut her wrist. Tamara automatically started sucking at blood falling in a steady stream from the wrist, which seemed to ease her hunger. Tamara stopped when she felt satisfied and made a face as she started wondering about STDs and other diseases of the blood.

The chanting stopped and Jia dragged Tamara to her feet. "Tamara Wang, you have been reborn as a citizen of the House of Vampires and from this day on, you will serve the House and only the House," she said in perfect English. Then she handed Tamara a piece of parchment with an oath written in the same language. "At this moment, I need you to swear this oath. If you choose not to swear it, let me know of your last wishes and I will return you to the grave."

Tamara sucked in a deep breath and looked around her. The people holding the torches seemed to be pale looking Asian and Caucasian people and they looked very serious, seemingly ready to use the swords they were casually holding.

"I, Tamara Wang, appointed a vampire subject of The International House of Vampires, do solemnly swear, that I will bear true allegiance to the House, and that I will serve them honestly and faithfully against all their enemies or opposers, whatsoever, and observe and obey the orders of Ragnar, King of Vampires, and the orders of the masters appointed over me, according to the rules and articles of the House."

Finishing the words, Tamara wondered what she had just read and if she had joined a cult of some sort.

Jia smiled and said, "Put down your weapons, this has been a successful turning!"

There was some brief clapping as Jia embraced her new vampire progeny.

"Over the last century, there have been more monsters created than vampires," she explained. "Not everyone can be turned into a vampire and we had to be careful in case you became a monster and tried to kill us. Reading the oath proved that your mind is still capable and kept human characteristics."

The new vampire nodded, wide-eyed. She was in shock and the situation had not sunken in fully yet.

The group led Tamara out of the graveyard and into a cave in the nearby hills. She was tempted to start a conversation with her companions, now less stern looking than before, but she wasn't sure what to say or ask. Asking them when they died and what it was like to be a vampire seemed to be questions slightly on an imbecile level. The group traveled in silence as they made their way through the dark corridors. Although flashlights guided their path, the cave's darkness still engulfed them.

Eventually they stopped and Jia held her hand up to a wall at a dead end. She spoke softly and a secret entrance appeared. The group passed through and Tamara's heart skipped a beat as questions raced through her head. *Am I being brought to the underworld? Or have I been recruited into a vampire mafia? Are there such things as vampire prostitutes? Crap, what I have gotten myself into?!*

Tamara realized they were descending deeper underground as their path started to resemble a giant spiral which was sloping downwards with every step. She wondered if it was faster to just roll down the path with the help of gravity, but looking at her dirt covered clothing, she knew she already resembled a homeless person and acting like an earwig wouldn't exactly increase her coolness quotient at the moment.

After what seemed like more than an hour, the group hit another dead end. Walking up to the stone wall, Jia said some secret words again and then gestured with her flashlight for everyone to follow.

Tamara felt a strange sensation when she passed through the wall, as if she had entered a bubble. The air looked a bit silver in color and wobbly. She looked puzzled as everyone started putting away their flashlights. Looking around, she discovered there was no need for extra light because the ceiling and cave walls contained tiny lights embedded in its surface. Stunned for a moment, she gasped when she noticed the Asian village ahead of her. There were dozens of pagodas and buildings containing curved, yellow roofs held up by red

columns which were connected by a maze of bridges over a running river.

Tamara was still gawking when Jia motioned for her to keep moving. "We can't be late for Lord Himiko, she is a very busy person!"

Quickening her step, Tamara wondered if there were any vampire fish in the river as she crossed the various bridges. Their destination was the largest building in the center of the village. A soft, golden glow gave it an eerie look.

Two large guards in Japanese samurai uniforms were guarding each side of the main door. They bowed to Jia as she waved a small, golden wood plaque with strange symbols etched on one side and a red tassel dangling from it. The group walked onto a rich tapestry that was red in color and patterned with a variety of golden chrysanthemum flowers. Tamara gripped the side of her elbows, as if doing so would prevent any dirt or dried blood from falling onto the clean carpet.

Looking up, she saw that she was being observed by a beautiful lady sitting in a golden chair on a raised platform. Her yellow Japanese robe seemed to be glowing. The group bowed down politely and Jia kicked Tamara in the shins after she failed to see the gesture for her to bow too.

"Lord Himiko, please allow me to introduce the newest vampire subject born on the Dominion of Asia, Tamara Wang." Jia stood up and touched Tamara's shoulder. "She was on a quest to secure her family's assets for her dying grandmother when she was kidnapped for ransom and shot. As I had the duty to keep the descendants of the Wang family alive, I took a chance and turned her before full death occurred."

Jia then asked Tamara to stand up and read her oath from the parchment again.

"You have done well. It has been too long since there has been any successful turnings," Lord Himiko praised Jia in English thick with a Japanese accent. "Tamara, please come up here so that I may see you better."

Himiko's maids appeared and placed a chair next to their Lord for Tamara to sit. Biting her lip, Tamara studied the older woman's features. Himiko was a beautiful Japanese woman in her late forties with an aura of tranquility about her. The fancy, embroidered kosode robe the lord wore was held in place with a narrow brocade obi for a belt and there were several white layers underneath that were visible at the neckline. She knew the false eyebrows painted high on the forehead of Himiko was called hikimayu and was the practice of removing the natural eyebrows and painting smudge-like eyebrows on the forehead. She tried not to tremble as she sat, thinking about all the Japanese horror movies she had seen with aristocratic women ghosts and their painted eyebrows.

Smiling gently, Himiko took Tamara's dirty hands and spat on them before wiping them clean with a chiffon scarf. Tamara tried not to grimace as she thought about how saliva is mostly water with some antibacterial agents. Himiko didn't notice her guest's discomfort and proceeded to look closely at the lines on the palm of Tamara's hands.

"Hmm..." Himiko muttered as she hovered over the hands, poking and prodding at the palms. "You have many trials and challenges ahead, my child."

Himiko's large, brown eyes looked into Tamara's eyes. "Do not be afraid and know that the House and the Dragon are behind you. Your nature is to be trusting, but sometimes people are not who they seem, so do be careful and cautious. I have heard that Grandma Wang is dying again, is that true?"

"Dying again?" Tamara was confused. "Has she been close to death before?"

"There have been a few close calls for your grandmother over the years. We have been watching your family for a long time." Himiko hesitated for a moment. "You must be tired, please do stay the night and Jia will fill you in on what you need to know. I am pleased that you are a subject of my dominion." She smiled at Tamara as she squeezed one of her hands. Tamara felt Himiko's sincere kindness

which put her at ease slightly, but all of these words seemed like cryptic messages.

Tamara felt fortunate that she was assigned to share the same room with Jia in one of the guest living quarters. The building was an antique, however, its rooms had modern facilities such as a bathroom and simple, wooden bedroom furniture. After washing their faces and brushing their teeth, Tamara, now dressed more comfortably in clean pajamas, sat down on one of the twin beds in the middle of the room and burst into tears.

“What happened to me? Am I going to live forever? Will I have to suck blood from my family? Will vampire hunters be coming after me?”

Jia gave her a pack of tissues and waited patiently until the rants died down. “Tamara, vampires do not drink blood other than at their initiation ritual. I needed to give you my blood in order to tie our bonds and to activate our mind chips, as I am your master and will be responsible for you.”

“M-m-mind ch-chips? Wh-what is that?”

“In the last decade, an invention called the mind chip was surgically implanted into vampires and their masters. One was put into you before we buried you. We use it to communicate to each other via psychic signals—like a walkie-talkie, so if you are too far away it may not work and we have to give permission to accept each other’s call. I have never tried this, as you are the first vampire I have ever successfully turned. We can try later tonight.” Jia sat on her bed in pajamas, brushing her long hair.

“So-so am I really d-d-dead? Wh-what will I eat?” Tamara asked.

“Yes and no,” Jia answered. “You are an undead, but because you are alive, you are not really dead. We still have physiological systems that work similar to humans, but we cannot generate chi. Do you know what that is?”

“Yes, chi is a life force generated by living things.” Tamara was thankful for Jia’s soothing effect on her when she realized she had calmed enough not to stutter.

“So the difference between vampires and humans is that we can’t generate our own chi. We have to take it from living things in order to stay alive. We have other abilities such as being able to heal our flesh wounds and move very quickly.”

Jia demonstrated by running around the room so fast that she was a blur and suddenly she was back in her seat again, patiently continuing with her explanations.

“Since the House was established, one of the first laws passed was that we are all to convert to feeding the same way as eastern vampires. All living creatures on this Earth have chi or energy which gives them life. Traditionally, many vampires used to feed on blood to gain chi, however, eastern vampires just fed off chi directly, with no need to kill or gather blood. As long as there is an energy source, vampires can feed off of that and survive.”

Tamara frowned. “I guess I can’t eat chocolate anymore.”

Jia laughed. “Actually, you still can eat food if you want. Cooked foods don’t have much chi. You just need to remember to wash any food down with lots of water or liquids to clear the ashes out of your system. Our bodies process things a bit differently than humans.” She grabbed her right hand and positioned their hands palm to palm. “Tamara, close your eyes and feel the warmth coming from my hand.”

She gasped when she felt the heat from Jia’s hand, complete with an instinct to try to capture the warmth somehow and she felt fangs emerge from her mouth.

“Did you feel like you wanted the warmth but didn’t know how to take it?” Jia asked.

Tamara nodded bashfully.

“You will start feeling the chi from every living creature whenever you feel hungry. Tonight, I’ll teach you the basics, so you won’t starve or want to bite people. But be careful! Taking a little bit of chi from a person, animal, or plant matter is fine. When you start taking too much, they will wilt and die. This used to occur quite frequently, in the past, when more vampires could use magic and needed more chi to cast spells.”

“Magic? That can’t be real!”

“Well, many humans and vampires used to have magic,” Jia explained. “So many wars were started because of this. During the Great War of Fire in the 1800s, which took place in Antarctica, vampires and magic users that were sorceress and warlocks, joined forces together to battle an evil being called Mammon and his yokai. To stop Mammon, the property of water was changed which trapped him and his yokai in the South and North poles. His head is in the North and body in the South. However, this subdued all magic on Earth after the contaminants escaped into the ocean currents and only those with the strongest magic abilities kept their talents. We believe it has to do with genetic structure and have been researching this matter by following descendants of those who used magic to fight in the war. Your family is one we have been following for a long time.”

“My ancestors were sorceresses and warlocks? Are they still alive? Or are they vampires?”

Jia frowned. “Your family is a line of magic users, but I don’t think any of them became vampires. It is rare nowadays that a sorceress, warlock, or even a human can be turned into a vampire. It seems like something changed after the water was altered. But why some humans can become vampires, no one really knows. One very famous vampire warlock is Merlin, and it is said he was turned many years before the War of Fire occurred. I do hope that you have some magical abilities, it could become useful in the future in case you have to fight in any battles.”

Tamara suddenly felt very tired. This all felt surreal and she wasn’t sure if she was happy or sad that she was alive. She was startled out of her thoughts when Jia opened a small box and started prepping a needle full of clear liquid. “What is that?”

“You have to be vaccinated. All that stuff about vampires burning up in the sun and being allergic to garlic, well, we have a vaccine for that. This will allow you to function in daylight and not be burned by silver, etcetera. Can you pass me that instruction sheet? This is my first time doing this.”

Opening up the piece of paper, Tamara noted that it was just an injection into the thigh. “Jia, it’s ok, I can do it myself. I used to work as a nurse in the hospital, so I have given lots of injections.”

“Oh, great! Here you go!” Jia gladly handed over the needle.

After prepping one thigh with alcohol, Tamara jabbed the needle down and winced as she pushed the liquid into her flesh. She wondered what it was made out of, but she wasn’t sure if there was any point in asking given that no science she ever learned could explain this situation. She stared at her flesh as she took out the needle, fascinated by the quick healing which took place. Taking the needle, she ran it across her wrist like a razor, drawing blood and watching in fascination as the flesh started to heal almost instantaneously.

“Stop that! What are you doing?” Jia yanked the needle from her hand and put it into a sharps container. “Look, when you heal, you use up chi. So, stop wasting your energy!”

Nodding guiltily, Tamara tried to stifle a yawn.

“Look, let’s lay in bed and test our chips. We can continue this conversation with our minds and let our bodies rest,” Jia suggested. She flipped off the lights in the room and as they lay in their separate beds, Jia tried out the chip. Tamara didn’t feel or hear anything.

“Hm, we will have to keep trying, it’ll work eventually,” Jia assured her.

“Can we die?” Tamara asked in a gloomy tone as she stared into darkness.

“Of course! Vampires can live a long time as undead beings, but we are still mortal because we can starve to death or be decapitated. Staking works too if the body is stuck in the coffin and the vampire starves to death.

“Another important thing is that you can stay with your family until the natural expected lifespan in the country you live in. Over the years, you will learn how to control your chi intake so that you may age your body appropriately. After your fake death, you will leave

your immediate family or over a certain age it will start looking suspicious that you are still alive.

"Anyhow, you can choose what you want to do with your life after your old one is over. As well, you can convert your body back to what age you are now, but you can't get any younger than this. I have chosen to serve the House, but others have chosen to remain in human society with the requirement to fake a death once in a while.

"No matter what you chose to do, you will need to pay House taxes with whatever salary you are given, as these funds support our society."

"Even though I'm a vampire, I still have to pay taxes?"

Jia laughed. "Nothing is certain but death and taxes! You need very little in order to survive from now on and money quite frankly, does not mean much anymore. However, the House still needs funds to run and to protect its subjects."

"When did you become a vampire?" Tamara asked.

"I was turned during the Han dynasty."

"Sorry, I'm a banana Chinese, white on the inside and yellow skinned on the outside. I don't know my ancestor's history very well."

"The Han dynasty, according to western calendars, dates back to around 202 BC, my banana cousin!"

"Wow, you are so old!"

"Yes, that is something I think about every day!" Jia rolled her eyes in the dark.

"What has it been like to live through so many generations? I always watch historical wushu dramas on TVB and wondered what it would have been like back then."

"Every period is different. The past was not as glamorous as you think. Women didn't have much of a choice back then and our destiny was in the hands of others. I was sold by my family to be a maid during the Han Dynasty and suffered many beatings on behalf of Lady Yi, whenever she accidentally irked the Empress. Lady Yi is my master and she is still alive. She is the second wife of King Ragnar who is head of the House.

“I think my favorite time is now,” Jia reflected. “I really enjoy the fact that we live in a time of peace and don’t have to fight with magic users or other countries. Also, there are no monsters going around killing people and causing panic.”

Tamara shuddered at the thought of real monsters. “I thought that vampires were the monsters,” she said half-jokingly as she let out another yawn.

“Oh no, we have become very boring, civilized creatures. After magic subsided and the monsters disappeared, building up stable economies and civilizations became the mandate. You know, initially vampires thought that all sorceresses and warlocks were worshipers of Mammon and Satan and were interested in siding with demons. That is they were hunted down originally, but that is not true. There are many shades of people, good and bad, same with magic users and vampires.”

There was a sudden silence which made Jia glance over and see that Tamara was already asleep. “Your life has changed forever, but I’ll be by your side to help you.” The older vampire whispered as she closed her eyes too.



JF Garrard is an award winning speculative fiction writer, editor and publisher. She is the President of Dark Helix Press, serves as the Co-President for the Canadian Authors Association’s Toronto Branch, Festival Coordinator for LiterASIAN Toronto, Deputy Editor for *Ricepaper Magazine*, and Assistant Editor for *Amazing Stories*. Her portfolio of books and short fiction is listed on jfgarrard.com and you can find her on Twitter @jfgarrard.

JAVA MAUSOLEUM BY VINCENT
TERNIDA



EXCERPT FROM THE SEVEN MUSES OF
HARRY SALCEDO

Three weeks passed since the Keurig machine stopped talking.

“A Keurig? Thanks, I guess.”

“Now you’ll spend less money on coffee and more money to find a girlfriend,” my mom said.

The Keurig box absorbed the awkward energy surrounding the dining table.

“Want to listen to my story? Maybe you can use it for that novel you’re trying to write.”

My dad feebly broke the silence. He retired early as the CFO of a multinational corporation based in Jakarta. It was a nice way of saying he got laid off. Indonesia seemed like a lifetime away. He retreated to his habit of stroking his incomplete beard; it was lacking that connector tissue between the moustache and the goatee. Placing his hand on his large gut, he waited for an answer. To be safe, I smiled and waited for my mom to change the subject but she was distracted by Candy Crush.

Sparing no detail, he narrated a downtown eastside parable as written by someone who’d been to Hastings and Main once and

decided to have a go at it. It had some merit—imagine if Ayn Rand decided to let Brett Easton Ellis inside of her and sired a love child in the form of a deluded venture capitalist who stumbled on a hidden fortune he could bank on if only he became a homeless person.

“How’s work?” My mom finally changed the subject.

“It’s work.”

My mom was an account supervisor for twelve years until she decided to bear witness to my father’s success and became the CEO of his estate. After his early retirement, she resigned as full-time housewife and became a full-time bookkeeper.

The staccato beep of the dryer buzzed, which concluded my visiting hour. Lunch, laundry, and light conversation— it made for a good break from the existential masturbation of city living.

I waited for the 351 lugging a Keurig box half my size. It was a two-hour journey that involved a bus ride leaving White Rock, a Skytrain intermission, and a bus detour so I didn’t have to go through the Eastside and be reminded of my dad’s magnum opus. My dad puffed on a Number Seven cigarette as he waited with me.

“Would be nice if Vancouver had a team, if we were in Toronto we got the Raps,” he said.

“We can always visit to check a game, but if I go, I’ll probably stick around for good.”

“Yeah, and find yourself a real woman, and not one-night stands.”

The bus pulled up when I needed it most.

“See you next week.”

“Happy Birthday.”

I remembered what the librarian said from my travel group in Yogyakarta back in ‘94. I packed three disposable Fuji cameras at the time and I was down to my last three shots. I still had three days left on the trip. “You shouldn’t be taking pictures. Try thinking of your eyes as a camera and let

the amniotic fluid develop your memories. You'll never need another camera in your life," the Librarian said.

It was a weird year of transition, puberty was picking up speed. People found me weird, so I learned to be alone. I ended up in a group led by the Librarian. I liked the guy—wide reader, booming voice, and he knew how to tell stories. It was as if the library, my sanctuary, came along to accompany me on my school trip. "Borobodur temple was the largest Buddhist temple in the world," said the trip primer and I took it at face value. Twenty years later, Borobodur somehow stuck in my memory. The vast and majestic symmetry of the stupas and buddhas helped imprint such sights into my mind. That and taking a shit in a hole on a moving passenger train.

I also remembered being coerced as a class to attend a traditional funeral in Tana Toraja. It included courtside seats to a bull slaughter. An abattoir slit the bull's throat. The clay soaked the seeping blood. The bull took several steps. Instead of collapsing, it made a majestic bow, leaning on its front legs while its hind legs lost balance. Its bloodshot eyes stared straight at this Filipino fat fuck. Would the bull return to this world as a venture capitalist destined for great fortune if he accepted life as a homeless person?

On the way back, I ended up having the bad luck of sitting next to an outspoken social studies teacher. I braced for a candid interview. "Did you watch the pigs get slaughtered? You know, the pig is a big part of the Filipino culture," he gushed.

Wanted to say, just because I'm Filipino doesn't mean I had to eat pork. I went inside a bathroom stall and cried that night. At the time, I thought it was because I didn't like to see death in the flesh. I thought about it—I cried because I didn't reply.

I sat down with the Keurig box next to me. I observed a college student's eating ritual that involved biting into a cheese bun then following it up snapping away on an iPhone 6.

Look at that basic bitch, I bet she's gonna post that on Instagram, said the Keurig box.

I bet it's gonna get 186 likes, more than any of my Facebook posts, I replied.

You ever wonder where all the excess photos go to?

Into the Pacific Vortex of wasted data.

Better than an unliked photo.

The Keurig box's voice was soft and squeaky. The voice sounded like it belonged to a snow blonde middle school girl. She reminded me of Katie, a girl from 7th grade.

Bali sunsets were a sight to behold in 1995. I wondered if the tangerine ball of fire kissing the waters of Kuta Beach changed in the last twenty years, but at that moment it calmed my teenage anxiety for a good twenty minutes. Three months later, Katie would leave my school forever. My English teacher sat down next to me as we watched the sunset. I forgot what we talked about: all I remembered was her frilly hair and buckteeth. She looked like a well-groomed poodle with a British accent. I liked her and she always indulged my flights of fancy. I had a bad habit of turning my teachers into pseudo-psychiatrists without the \$200 an hour fee. Later that year, Katie left and all I gave her was a torn-out of page of a notebook with a love letter written on it. She never replied.

I preferred the 7 to Dunbar instead of the 7 to Nanaimo. Less conflict. But this time the bus driver—a hot blooded young man, stopped a native woman from getting on with her stroller.

“No, you get out. You never ask me if you can bum a ride, you just get on like it's your goddamn right. Get off.”

Sometimes, the right is right.

You're a real asshole for feeling that, the Keurig box said.

You're not cute when you're being precocious, I said.

You lack empathy. You're so self-centreed, all you care for is what you feel. Women sense that in a man, that's why you're still single at this age.

I just turned thirty-four.

Expecting to get laid any time soon?

The bus headed off without further incident. As we zoomed along,

I spotted a Nissan sedan with a fat Asian kid in the back fiddling with his Nintendo DS.

Three days after the Jakarta riots in 1998, my mom woke me up and told me to pack a suitcase— we were being evacuated. In my rush, I took video games, comic books, and only three changes of clothes in total. A Nissan sedan rushed us to the airport.

I watched as my family rushed through the dead of night to leave town while it was still quiet. I watched myself finish high school and go through college. The memories felt like old archival footage watched then rewound, some parts high fidelity, other bits like pirated flash video. I watched myself follow my parents as they went through from one milestone to another—first back to the Philippines, and then my dad went to Japan, before we eventually ended up in Vancouver. I watched an endless loop as my dynamic life went from a whole world to a weekly routine.

The moment I entered my loft, the Keurig Machine stopped talking.

She made her home behind the Black and Decker coffee maker with its matching grinder. To her left sat a boxed Breville Espresso Machine I'd never gotten around to using. To the right, an unopened Tassimo I won last Christmas. A barely used pour over kit and strainer lay on the dishwashing area. The French Press lay ignored next to the teapot.

I walked into my living room and plopped on a cat hair-infested IKEA couch. Killarney, a black and white tom, hopped on my lap. I carried my roommate's cat on my shoulder as I listened to him purr. The well-oiled engine inside his feline form filled my heart with a fuzzy feeling. That, or I was infested with *Toxoplasma Gondii*.

I turned to the java mausoleum and thought about making coffee for a second. I noticed the Verismo Starbucks machine remained on the cupboard with the gift receipt intact. I forgot who gave it to me

but it was probably worth several cups of coffee. I checked the time on the microwave. 6:38.

The Starbucks five streets away was still open so I headed there, lugging a Verismo box half my size.



Vincent Ternida is a screenwriter, filmmaker, and author with several published short fiction and creative non fiction pieces. He was a second rounder for Austin Film Festival's screenplay competition and a finalist for Writer's Guild of Canada's Diverse Screenwriters in 2013. *The Seven Muses of Harry Salcedo* is Ternida's first novel. He lives in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Note – Vincent made the 2019 CBC Short Story Prize longlist for *Elevator Lady*. His CBC interview is [here](#).

RECIPES FOR BIG & SMALL CHILDREN



EXCERPT FROM FEEDING THE KRAKEN!

BREAKFAST - MICROWAVE FRENCH TOAST

Serving size - 1 serving

Prep Time - 5 minutes

Cooking Time - 2 minutes

Potential Allergens - dairy, eggs

Ingredients:

2 slices of bread, cubed

1 egg

1 tablespoon butter

1/2 teaspoon sugar

1/4 cup milk

1 teaspoon cinnamon

1/4 teaspoon vanilla

Instructions:

- Put butter into a large microwaveable bowl and melt, about 20-30 seconds, depending on the microwave.
- After the butter is melted, swirl it around the bowl to coat the sides.
- Add egg, milk, sugar, cinnamon and vanilla. Whisk the ingredients together with a fork.
- Drop pieces of bread into the mix and gently stir to make sure all the pieces are coated evenly.
- Microwave on high for 90 seconds. Stir pieces and microwave for another 30 seconds. Make sure egg is completely cooked. If not, keep microwaving for 30 seconds at a time until cooked.
- Top with powdered sugar and maple syrup.

Notes:

Be careful not to overcook the egg or it will become rubbery. You can put together all the ingredients the night before and store in the fridge until morning.

Advice:

P. Fong – Parents do not have to say “yes” to their kids all the time! If you do that, the child will expect everyone to say “yes” and will be very disappointed if they hear “no”.



LUNCH/DINNER - MEATLOAF MUFFINS WITH VEGGIES

Serving size - 15 servings

Prep Time - 10 minutes

Cooking Time - 45-60 minutes

Potential Allergens - eggs

Ingredients:

1 lb ground beef
2 cups vegetables of choice (carrots, zucchini, onion, bell pepper, etc)
1/2 cup quick cooking oatmeal
3 garlic cloves or 1 tablespoon prepared minced garlic
1 cup ketchup
2 eggs
dash of salt (optional)
mashed potatoes for “fake icing” (optional)

Instructions:

- Preheat the oven to 400°F.
- Break down all vegetables in a food processor or blender.
- Mix all ingredients, including the broken down vegetables, in a large bowl.
- Grease a muffin tin and spoon the mixture into each muffin slot.
- Bake for 45-60 minutes or until meat is cooked. Timing depends on what vegetables are used. The more water in the vegetables, the longer the cooking time and there may be liquid seeping out of the muffins (drain liquid if that happens).
- Optional step - to make the meatloaf look really fancy, you can pipe mashed potatoes on top to make them look like “meat cupcakes!” Put mashed potatoes into a sandwich bag, cut off a corner and pipe onto muffins.

Advice:

A. Agrawal – Instill good habits early such as making your toddler clean up. Make it a game or song and clean up with them so it seems like a fun activity rather than a chore. I bought a mini broom for my toddler and I always make her wipe up water and liquid spills with paper towels. Encourage daycare/care givers to do the same.



LUNCH/DINNER - SALMON AND AVOCADO CAKES

Serving size - 6-8 servings

Prep Time - 10 minutes

Cooking Time - 15-18 minutes

Potential Allergens - eggs, fish

Ingredients:

6 oz wild salmon

(canned, steamed or poached)

1/2 avocado

1 egg

1 teaspoon lemon juice

1/2 teaspoon dill

Instructions:

- Heat oven to 350°F and prepare a baking sheet with aluminum foil, lightly greased.
- Mix everything together and make into mini patty cakes.
- Heat a non-stick pan coated with coconut oil on low-medium heat and place the patties on top. Cook 2-3 minutes per side (or until it browns and binds together), then place on the baking sheet.
- Bake in the oven for additional 8-10 minutes. You will know it is done when the middle of the patty bounces back a bit when you press down on it.

Advice:

Wendy and Taylor – We began baby-led weaning after 6 months and Taylor was introduced to these salmon cakes in month 9. These are

loaded with good fats and even delicious enough for adults to
indulge in!



SNACKS - SMOKED SALMON AVOCADO FAKE SUSHI

Serving size - 1 serving
Prep Time - 5 minutes
Cooking Time - 0 minutes
Potential Allergens - dairy

Ingredients:

1/2 avocado
3 oz smoked salmon
2 tablespoons cream cheese
2 slices of bread

Instructions:

- Cut crusts off bread and use a rolling pin to flatten them.
- Spread cream cheese onto both pieces of bread.
- Use a fork to spread avocado on top of the cream cheese.
- Add salmon slices on top of the avocado.
- Roll up the bread into tight rolls and cut into small pieces, imitating sushi rolls

Advice:

N. Garrard – Never wake a sleeping baby.



SNACKS - CHEWY POWER BARS

Serving size - 10 bars

Prep Time - 10 minutes

Cooking Time - 0 minutes

Potential Allergens - nuts, dairy

Ingredients:

1/2 cup honey

1/2 cup peanut butter

1/2 cup cocoa

1/2 cup skim milk powder

1/4 cup wheat germ

1/4 cup rolled oats

1/4 wheat bran

3/4 cup sunflower seeds

1/4 cup unsweetened shredded coconut

1/2 cup chopped unsweetened dates

1/3 cup chopped nuts (almonds, walnuts, etc.)

1/4 cup sesame seeds

Instructions:

- In a pan over low heat, melt honey and peanut butter. Stir together until smooth.
- Remove from heat, add cocoa powder and skim milk powder and blend well.
- Stir in remaining ingredients.
- Press into an oiled 9" X 9" pan. Chill. Cut into squares. Stores well in freezer.

Notes:

Stir together all the dry ingredients first in Step 3 because the honey mixture will cool down quickly. Prior to cutting, let bars warm up or it will feel like cutting into a rock!

Advice:

V. Lepp – Give your toddler a plastic cup full of frozen corn, peas or mixed vegetables to snack on while preparing supper. It takes them time to eat and by the time dinner is on the table they've already had a serving of vegetables!

BOOK LINKS



Thank you for picking up this sample!
We hope that you enjoyed the selected excerpts from
our books and to read the rest of these excellent works,
check out the links below!

- Trump: Utopia or Dystopia
- Futuristic Canada
- Immersion: An Asian Anthology of Love, Fantasy, and Speculative Fiction
- The Undead Sorceress
- The Seven Muses of Harry Salcedo
- Feeding the Kraken!

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