

# The (almost) complete Risen short Stories

**J. Knight**



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# The (almost) Complete Risen Short Stories

by J. Knight

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These stories are based on the novel Risen by J. Knight, published by Kensington Books under their Pinnacle Books imprint.

## Introduction

### Life: A Fate Worse Than Death

The first story that ever really scared me was “The Monkey’s Paw” by W. W. Jacobs. In it, an old woman uses a magic talisman in the form of a mummified monkey’s paw to wish her dead son alive again. The horror arrives in the form of a knock at the door, her son, returned from the grave.

I read “The Monkey’s Paw” in school, junior high school I think. I suppose it was deemed acceptable for impressionable youngsters because the “monster” is never seen, only implied, existing not as dangerous words on paper (we all know how dangerous words can be) but only in the mind of the reader.

Which of course is the best way to insure that an impressionable kid will scare himself silly thinking about it late at night as he’s drifting off to sleep while the shadows on the wall dance and writhe and form themselves into witches and werewolves and unnamable, empty faces.

Death is scary, certainly. Sometimes I lie awake even now trying to imagine the world going on without me, thinking of people living their lives, making movies, writing books, and me not there to see it. Forever.

No wonder we’ve contrived various theories of after-lives and reincarnations where death holds no sway.

The alternative--to fade out of consciousness into a blackness as dark and deep and empty as our memories of the world before we were born--is as intolerable as it is unimaginable. If there were no afterlife, we as thinking creatures would invent one. Our very sanity is at stake.

And yet....

There is one fate more horrible than death, and that is life without a soul.

One of the first films to truly terrify me is the 1956 version of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Again, it is a virtually bloodless work. All that is lost to the victims is their humanity. Memories and physicality remain, but the horror that is the "pod person" is so great, the phrase has entered the vernacular.

Another formative chiller was *Village of the Damned*, a movie about children with power uninformed by empathy or human compassion, children without souls.

Then along came George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* and, much later, Stephen King's *Pet Semetary* and the remarkable *Re-Animator* film based on H. P. Lovecraft's "Herbert West: Reanimator." If these works are any indication, that knock on the door in "The Monkey's Paw" rightly inspired terror and dread.

Death is bad, no doubt. But the profane life that comes from resurrection eclipses mere bodily death, the sole exceptions apparently being Jesus Christ and his pal Lazarus.

Personally, if I'd been around when that stone rolled back and a man pronounced dead three days ago stepped out, I'd have run for the hills. Dead should be dead. One man's miracle is another man's horror.

Is it a coincidence that the most enduring monster of all time, the vampire, is a being returned from the dead? Not to mention the Frankenstein monster, ghosts and even the endearingly cheesy brain in a fish tank (and its disembodied cousin, the head on a dissecting tray) of 1950s b-flicks.

All of which brings me to believe that while, yes, being skewered by Michael Myers or Freddy Krueger or Jason Voorhees is enough to ruin your day, true horror lies not in death but in life, if that life is devoid of the qualities that make us human.

The New York Times (June 29, 2001) printed an article circulated by the Reuters news agency titled "Scientist Says Mind Continues After Brain Dies." In the article, British scientists maintain that consciousness may continue after the brain has stopped functioning and a patient is declared legally dead. The idea that a person's consciousness or "soul" continues even after the brain has stopped functioning is apparently gaining scientific credibility.

The article implies that such persons may be resuscitated and returned to life, and that this re-animation is A Good Thing.

I'm not so sure.

Accounts I've read of near-death experiences always include a reluctance on the part of the near-victim to return to the world of the living. Apparently, dead people would rather stay dead.

What do the deceased know that we who have never glimpsed the other side do not? Is it worth returning if the ticket price is your soul? What would be the value of life in a world that doesn't know death?

These are the questions that motivated me to write my novel, *Risen*.

*Risen* tells the story of a town where Death goes on holiday. It's an ensemble piece with a fair number of characters, but even so, the novel leaves quite a few stories untold, stories that slipped through the cracks of the narrative.

I've written six such stories. Here are five of them. The sixth, "Maryalice, Make With Me The Two-Backed Beast," is available in an anthology from CyberPulp called *Be Mine*, which comes out (or came out) around Valentine's Day 2004.

"The Fat of Saint Iglesias" and "Death Took A Holiday And All I Got Was This Crummy T-Shirt" appeared online in *Epiphany Magazine*. "Do Overs" appeared online and in print in *Nuvein Magazine*. "The Adventures of Tom and Geraldine" and "I Just Want To Be With Edgar" appear here for the first time, except for brief postings on my website at [www.atombrain.com](http://www.atombrain.com).

I don't think they'll spoil the novel version of *Risen* for

anyone. Also, you don't have to have read *Risen* to understand the stories. Really, all you need to know is contained in this preface I wrote to each of the stories:

One autumn week in the small Midwestern town of Anderson, the dead began to rise. They appeared, not as shambling corpses, but in a state of perfect resurrection. Were the *Risen* the work of God or the Devil? Opinion divided sharply.

Many stories emerged during this singular week. This is one of them.

J. Knight

Los Angeles CA USA

## The Fat of Saint Iglesias

Morgue attendant Curtis Waxler was on duty with mop and pail the night John Duffy returned from the dead, and so Curtis became the first person in Anderson to officially experience the Risen.

Duffy had been lying passed out, dead drunk on the sofa at one in the afternoon when he'd been murdered by his wife. She had parted his throat with a filet knife. She had spent the next hour on other household chores, changed her dress and telephoned the police to turn herself in. They'd brought Duffy into the morgue some hours later and that's how Curtis first met him, cold and bloody, as dead as any corpse Curtis had ever seen, and he'd seen plenty.

So when Duffy rose up under his sheet, banged his head on the overhead lamp and cried out, "What in the hell-?" Curtis ran from the room as if someone had just set a match to his ass. Somewhere in the process he had wet himself.

He ran up the stairs, past the night nurse and into the midnight dark of Anderson's sleeping streets. He ran as he'd run for the Anderson Meadowlarks before his abysmal grades and worse behavior had forced the high school administrators to kick him out even though it probably cost them the season. He ran as he'd run as a young black boy growing up in a white community where the word "nigger" passed as easily over the lips

as "rain," "wheat" or "tractor." He ran through the dark and through his fear and through the years to find himself back on the playground of the community park, at the top of the jungle gym, with no memory of how he'd gotten there..

Curtis was not a religious young man, though his aunt who raised him was a devout Baptist who was never far from a "Praise God!" or "Hallelujah!" She praised God when it rained and praised Him when it stopped. She praised God for the monthly pension check and Hallelujahed when the bread rose. But Curtis doubted that even his aunt would have praised God when John Duffy awoke from the dead.

"Dead is dead," he said to himself, shivering in the chill autumn wind that cut wickedly through his flimsy cotton uniform. The steel bars were cold. An old taunt from his childhood came to mind along with an image of pale and freckled and unwashed children pointing at him on the monkey bars and chanting, "Monkey on the monkey bars!"

He climbed down and started walking, but he didn't walk toward home. If he went home he would just drink and get high and wake up as troubled as he was right now. No, he had to think. He had to figure some things out, important things about life and death and evil and the secret acts of people who think no one is watching.

"God is always watching," his aunt had said, and he'd laughed at her. Bread just rose, and the dead didn't.

Religion was superstition on a collection plate, in Curtis's mind. There wasn't any meaning to the world and life didn't mean crap, which took away a lot of pressure when it came to figuring out what to do: You did what felt good that didn't land you in jail, end of debate.

Now John Duffy's resurrection had cast a shadow over what passed for Curtis's philosophy. So Curtis started walking, walking anywhere his feet wanted to take him, walking just to keep moving. He had become that most bewildered of all disillusioned young men, one who has lost his faith in nihilism.

Curtis stared into the fire. He watched a bulbous spider crawl from a crack in a log and skitter for its life. It halted, its legs smoldering, and then exploded with a pop. Curtis thought about the fires of Hell and imagined his own body swelling with boils and popping like the spider's, over and over again, for all eternity, while above him the world whirled on, its people living and screwing and watching television and getting high and laughing, oblivious to his suffering. He felt panic swell in his chest.

He started when Reverend Small re-entered the room.

"Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea culpa," Small said. He settled himself into the chair across from Curtis, who had no idea that Small was apologizing to him. "Sheriff Clark just verified your story. John Duffy has indeed risen, apparently, from the dead."

"No 'apparently' about it," Curtis said. "That man was dead. Ask Doc."

"Doctor Milford agrees. Obviously, since he signed the death certificate. I'm sorry I doubted you. Must have been quite a shock."

Curtis glanced at his lap and wondered if the Reverend could smell the piss.

"Yeah," he said.

"It could still be a mistake. I understand Doctor Milford has been practicing a long time. What about the sheriff?"

"What about him?"

"Do you know him?"

"Oh, yeah. Me and the sheriff go way back."

Reverend Small noted the sarcasm in Curtis's voice. He wondered when Curtis had experienced his first brush with the law. He was probably very familiar with, or at least to, the local constabulary.

"Is he reliable?" Small said.

"Yeah. Real upstanding."

"So, there we are. John Duffy has come back from the dead. Enough to frighten anyone. But...." Reverend Small sat back in his chair and studied Curtis's face. Curtis hadn't looked him straight in the eye all night, ever since Small had found him wandering around the church as if casing the joint. "There's something



more to it than that, isn't there, Curtis? Something that scares you deep down, that scares you in a way, or for a reason, beyond what you've told me."

"Maybe." Then silence, followed at last by, "I don't know."

"If there's something you want to tell me, now's the time. Otherwise, it's very late, and once the news breaks about Mr. Duffy, I expect I'm going to have an extremely busy weekend."

"What do they know, Reverend?" Curtis blurted out the words. They had been wanting to come out for some time, all night long. They were what had drawn him to the church, to Reverend Small, in the first place.

"Who?"

"The dead. What do they know?"

"The answer to the ultimate question," Small said. "They know God."

"No, I mean, about...before. About, when they were dead. Do they know what happened to them? To their bodies?"

"What are you asking me, Curtis?"

Curtis hung his head. He studied his piss-damp pants, his shoes, the floor.

"I...I guess you'd say I've sinned."

"We all sin."

"No, not like this. It's just, I didn't think anyone

would...I didn't know...." He couldn't have looked up to save his life. "Late at night, alone in the morgue. Sometimes...sometimes when a body would come in, a woman, I'd...I'd pleasure myself."

"You'd masturbate?"

"Yeah. And sometimes, a couple of times, I did...more."

Reverend Small sighed. "Oh, Curtis," he said, and the words hung in the air like stale smoke.

"It's bad, I know. I know that now. But back then, I just thought, what's the difference? They're dead, they don't know."

"And what they don't know wouldn't hurt you."

"Huh?"

Reverend Small stared at Curtis, his brow knotted. He let Curtis stew in the juices of his confession for long minutes. "What do you want me to do for you, Curtis? Pray? Absolve you of this sin with a few choice phrases? I can't do it. I don't have that power."

"Am I going to Hell then?"

"It's no small sin you've committed. Defiling the dead!"

Curtis looked up, tears streaming from his eyes.

"You gotta do something, Reverend. You gotta help me!"

Reverend Small shrugged helplessly.

"I'll do anything! I'll say a million Hail Jesuses! I...I can't go to Hell!" Curtis looked at the black smear in the fireplace that had been the spider. "Anything," he said. "Anything at all."

After long moments Reverend Small spoke so quietly that Curtis had to strain to hear the words.

"There's one possibility," Small said. "It lies well beyond the bounds of orthodoxy, but it's a chance. I hesitate to even bring it up. It poses a great risk to me."

Curtis beseeched him with his eyes.

"Have you ever heard of Saint Iglesias?" Small asked.

Curtis shook his head "no."

"He's a patron saint. Mind you, I do not personally believe in patron saints. I'm a Methodist, after all. But still, the borders of religion are porous. One faith leaches into another. Cosmologies overlap. The hand of Man is evident in all belief systems. Who is to say which-?"

"What are you getting at, Reverend? If there's a chance...."

"Of course." Reverend Small leaned closer to Curtis. "You need forgiveness, not from me, not from God, but from those you've sinned against. You must seek forgiveness from the dead."

"Whatever it takes," Curtis said.

Reverend Small moved slowly as if burdened by a great weight. He walked to a chest and hesitated before opening a particular drawer. After a moment

of silent prayer, he withdrew a black candle, crudely formed, still bearing imprints of the hand that had crafted it. He returned to the fire and set the candle on the table in front of Curtis.

"This candle," he said, "was formed three hundred years ago. The wax was rendered from the body of Saint Iglesias himself and mixed with his ashes. Iglesias, you see, is the patron saint of those who have sinned in word or deed against the deceased. If you are to be forgiven your sins, it may be of help to you."

Curtis stared at the portentous lump of wax before him.

"Your problem is that you must communicate with the dead," Small continued, "those whose bodies you defiled, and beg their forgiveness. You can't do that from this plane of existence. Do you see what I'm driving at, Curtis?"

Curtis shook his head.

"I mean, you can only seek this forgiveness after your death. Unfortunately, the wrath of God is swift. Upon your death, your soul will be, well...."

"Sent to Hell, do not pass Go, right? And this candle can stop that?"

"Supposedly. For a time. What you must do, Curtis, upon the moment of your death, is...you must light this candle, the candle of Saint Iglesias. As long as it burns, your soul will be spared the fires of Hell, and you will be presented with the spirits of those you've

offended. You can beg their forgiveness. If they give it to you, your soul may be spared. If not...."

"But it's a chance, right?"

"A chance."

"Can I touch it?" Curtis asked.

Small nodded.

Curtis picked up the candle and turned it over in his hands.

"Where'd you get it?" he asked. "Shouldn't something like this be, you know, in a museum or someplace?"

"I told you, this offer comes at some risk to myself. You're right. A sacred relic of this antiquity, for it to appear in the hands of a small town Methodist preacher...I'm not without my own sin, Curtis. To possess such an item is an enormous temptation. Let us just say that I was presented with an opportunity, and I will have to pay in the Hereafter for taking advantage of it."

Curtis considered the candle, playing the scenario in his head. How would he know when the moment of death was on him? "What if something happens?" he said. "Like, what if I'm hit by a truck or something? How am I supposed to light a candle if I'm layin' dead in the middle of the street?"

Reverend Small sank deeply into his chair. "I think you know the answer to that," he said.

Reverend Small received the telephone call from

Curtis's aunt early the next afternoon. Curtis did not generally rise early, so it had been several hours before she discovered the body. Small wrote down the address and said he'd be there shortly.

He found Curtis hanging by the neck from a drain pipe in his basement apartment. He was tied by the neck with a piece of electrical cord. On a table nearby stood the black candle, burned halfway down.

Small wondered if it had begun to sputter even as Curtis struggled in the grip of the electrical cord. Had he watched it flicker out as he gasped his last breath? Had he felt an indescribable fear as the promise of eternal damnation closed in on him? Reverend Small smiled at the thought.

He pried the candle loose and inspected the bottom. The sticker was still there, the one that declared "Handmade by Laurie." He had wondered at the time if leaving it there wouldn't clue Curtis that the "sacred relic" was a craft fair candle Small had purchased the previous Halloween. It was a chance he had reveled in taking, an essential moral component of his modus operandi.

It was only right to give his victims a sporting chance.

## The Adventures of Tom and Geraldine

"All I'm saying," Louis said, "is that there's more to it than the fact that Duffy came back from the dead."

John Duffy, pronounced dead on Friday afternoon, had sat up in the morgue on Friday night without so much as a scratch to indicate that his throat had, only a few hours before, been sliced from here to there with a fillet knife by his wife Madge. He'd passed out drunk on the sofa and woken up on a stainless steel table in the basement of the county hospital, much to his consternation and that of the night-shift attendant. Through no effort of his own, Duffy became the talk of the town and the subject of Reverend Small's Sunday sermon. The sermon itself, praising God for Duffy's miraculous resurrection, was now under scrutiny by the after-church crowd at Ma's Diner.

"What I don't get is, why him?" The speaker was Selma Withers, wife of Martin Withers. The Witherses sat across from Louis Shroeder and his wife Darleen. "If the Good Lord was going to choose somebody for resurrection, what on earth drew Him to a wife-beating ne'er-do-well like John Duffy?"

"Tip of the iceberg," said Darleen, who had the habit of speaking as if she were being charged by the word.

"Tip of the iceberg is right," Louis said. "Let me tell you

about my cat, Old Tom."

The group settled in for one of Louis's narratives. Unlike Darleen, Louis was not known for brevity.

"Now we've had Old Tom for, what, nine years? I don't know exactly when he started hanging around, do you, Darleen?"

Darleen shook her head.

"Okay, call it nine years, give or take. Darleen gave him a handout one day and it proved to be a habit too tough to break. The cat wants for nothing. Darleen feeds him in the morning and he spends the rest of the day laying about the yard like he owns the place, as if the only reason the sun exists is to give Old Tom a warm place to take a nap. And once he's settled into a spot, it's like he's grown roots. I swear, I have to mow around him.

"Anyway, there's only one thing I've ever seen excite Old Tom, and that's Geraldine."

"Mockingbird," Darleen said.

"Right. Geraldine the mockingbird," said Louis. "She showed up not long after Old Tom did, maybe a year or two later, her and her mate. Grubbing around the lawn, nesting in the bushes and the potato vine. It was that first spring that Geraldine and Old Tom got into it.

"Tom was lumbering along, you know, looking for the perfect spot to park his carcass, and I guess he passed too near Geraldine's nest. She flew at him like the Red Baron zeroing in on a British Sopwith. I mean,

she gave him hell, diving at him, pecking at his head, screaming threats! Old Tom didn't know what to think at first, but pretty soon he got the idea. He scurried off and stayed hunkered under a hedge until the sun went down.

"I don't know exactly what went on in Tom's head as he lay there under that hedge, but I do know this: The cat that came out from under the hedge at dusk wasn't the same cat that went in. The cat that went in was as shiftless as moss. The cat that came out was a cat with a mission, and his mission was to get that mockingbird.

"From that day on, Geraldine couldn't set foot in the yard without Old Tom getting a lean and hungry look in his eye. He'd crouch down and sneak up on Geraldine, tighten his haunches and pounce, and every time she'd wait 'til the last moment to take wing. She knew he was there all along, you see? But a fat old lazy cat like that was almost beneath her attention, seemed like."

Martin Withers had been listening with only half an ear. Most of his attention had been concentrated on getting a refill of coffee and not the dregs out of the pot, either, but fresh. Now that his cup was full, he joined the conversation.

"I thought you said he was lean and hungry," said Martin.

"He said he had a lean and hungry look," said Martin's wife.

"Oh."

"Anyway," Louis continued, "this little song and dance goes on for, what, six-seven years? Then last Friday, the impossible happened. Darleen saw the whole thing. You tell 'em, Darleen."

"Go ahead," Darleen said.

"Okay, I'll tell it, then. Darleen had dragged home this mirror from the alley behind the Davis house. Big mirror, the one they'd had over their fireplace. It didn't look too good, had a few chips, some of the silver was off it, but Darleen seen on television how you can use a mirror to make your garden look bigger and it didn't matter what kind of shape it was in.

"So she drags this mirror home and sets it up against the fence, and here comes Geraldine to grub around in the yard, and Old Tom jumps at her, and she takes off and flies right head-first into that mirror. Well, she weren't killed outright but she fell to the ground dazed-like and that's when Old Tom got a claw into her. I think it surprised him as much as it did her. But anyway now he's got her and there's nothing to do but kill her and eat her, which he does."

"It's a sin to kill a mockingbird," Selma Withers said.

"That it is, Selma," Louis agreed, pointing a finger at her, "and I think Old Tom knew it. All day long, when he'd usually stake out his claim somewhere and move just enough to keep up with the sun, he wandered around the yard like a restless soul. Now and again

he'd yowl like he'd lost his best friend, and I guess he had, in a way. It wasn't his fault that the stupid bird had practically thrown itself down his throat.

"I don't pretend to be an expert in cat psychology, but I think that, in his way, Old Tom was mourning for Geraldine."

"Say," Martin said, "that reminds me of the young man who killed his mother and father and then begged the court for mercy on account of he was an orphan."

"Hush," Selma said. "Go on, Louis."

"So," Louis said, barely skipping a beat, "Darleen and me go to bed, and sometime around midnight we hear this horrible caterwaulin' out in the back yard. I mean, it's just horrible. And loud? Loud enough to wake the dead."

"Hey, maybe that's what woke up old John Duffy!" Martin said. His wife elbowed him in the ribs.

"We look out the window and there's Old Tom in the middle of the yard, writhing and twisting and yowling. Darleen says to go get him, maybe he's swallowed poison or something, so I run out to the yard barefoot and I'm not more than a couple of feet away when I see a sight that, well...I'd give a hundred-dollar bill to wipe it clean out of my head, even now."

Louis leaned forward and spoke in a confidential tone.

"Old Tom's belly swells up like a balloon, the skin pulls tight, Tom lets out a howl and suddenly he just pops

open, belly and bowels, with a spray of blood. Stopped me cold in my tracks, you can bet. I just stood there, transfixed. And then, out of the hole in his gut, here comes the head of that mockingbird, Geraldine, and I swear to God she's alive!

"She looks Old Tom in the eye and Old Tom looks back, then he lets go a final breath and he dies, still staring at Geraldine. She rips away what's left of Tom's gut and claws her way out. She's a bloody, shitty mess. Then she starts heaving and coughing, and out of her mouth pours the damndest bunch of bugs and worms-all alive and wriggling!

"I hear this screaming behind my head and I realize that Darleen's followed me out of the house and she's seen the whole thing and she's screaming her head off. I'm looking at her, and then I hear this flutter of wings and when I turn back around, there goes Geraldine, flying off into the bushes.

"It was something, I tell you."

Silence fell over the group. Selma pushed away her half-eaten chicken fried steak. When the waitress came up behind Martin and touched his shoulder, he jumped up in his seat and the coffee in his cup fountained into the air and came down all over the table. After a period of wiping up and some nervous laughter, Louis said, "It didn't end there, though, did it, Darleen?"

"No, it didn't."

Everyone listened up. Any experience that could make

Darleen utter an extra three syllables must have been pretty special.

"Naturally," Louis said, "we buried Old Tom in the garden. The Davis kids wanted to come over and dig the grave and I said 'Okay.' Of course they didn't dig it half deep enough to keep out a stray dog, but I figured I could dig Tom up and give him a proper burial later.

"Geraldine hung around the whole day, keeping her eye on the proceedings. Now and again, after the burial, she'd swoop down and peck at the grave. I didn't think an awful lot about it. I figured it was probably because turning the earth had loosened up some bugs or whatever.

"I couldn't believe how good she looked. Even if Old Tom had swallowed her whole, she shouldn't have looked so healthy. How long could a bird live inside a cat's stomach, anyhow, without suffocating to death? It didn't make sense.

"Then we heard about Duffy and how he'd been pronounced dead and come back to life and I began to put two and two together. I tell you, I believe that bird was dead, and it came back inside of Old Tom!"

Martin made a snorting noise and signaled for more coffee.

"So, anyway," Louis said, "I wake up this morning and I hear Geraldine singing out in the back yard. I go to the window and look out, and there she is on the telephone wire. She swoops down into the yard and I spot

a black shadow out the corner of my eye, moving slow over the grass. Bless my poor miserable soul if it isn't Old Tom, crouched low and inching toward her, predator after his prey.

"I look over at the garden where we'd buried him and I see the cardboard box laying off to the side, ripped-up like, and a hole in the dirt where we'd planted him. That damn cat had come back, too.

"I look back toward Geraldine just as Old Tom makes a leap for her, and just like old times she waits for the last minute and flies off and Tom's claws scratch at empty air. He sits up and watches Geraldine fly around 'til she lands again on the telephone wire, and he can't take his eyes off her. The way he sits there and stares, I swear it's like he's in love or something."

Louis paused. A thoughtful look fell over his face.

"It made me think of the cartoons," he said. "Cat chases mouse, gets blown up. Dog chases cat, gets an anvil dropped on his head. But they keep going at it, over and over, forever, because it's their nature and in some deep, animal way, they need each other.

"I thought about Old Tom and Geraldine engaged in this struggle for so many years, then having it cut short by happenstance. And I thought about how it could be the best thing that ever happened to them to know that, now, the game would never end, no matter what damage one of them managed to inflict on the other.

"If this resurrection business keeps up, Old Tom and

Geraldine have a real good thing going, and they have it forever, just like in the cartoons.”

“Yes,” Darleen said, “just like.”

## Do Overs

Some people, it seems, have to learn everything the hard way. Waylon Durgg was one of those people.

He knew better than to drive drunk, but only an accident that cost him a hand could drive the point home. He knew he should wear safety glasses when operating the power saw, but it took a hot sliver from a lurking nail flying into his good right eye to make the argument convincing.

He also knew that you never put your finger on the trigger until you were ready to shoot.

Still, he was picking his way through the field of milo with the .22 pistol in his non-prosthetic hand, in the mood for a little target practice, and he wanted to be ready in case he scared up a rabbit or got a clear shot at a crow. He didn't plan to stumble, but he did, and he didn't mean for the .22 to discharge its load into his chest, but it did, and in his last moments among the living he certainly didn't expect to wake up in that same field shortly after midnight with the wound in his chest fully healed, his right eye clear and a spanking new hand growing where the plastic one had been the day before. But he did.

Waylon was not a learned man, and he did not possess a keen, natural intellect. Most of the people of Anderson regarded him as a dunce and Waylon knew it, which is why he lived in a ramshackle house on the



outskirts of town, kept pretty much to himself and devised his own simple amusements, such as going out with a gun and filling a small animal with #6 shot.

At this point in his hunting career, Waylon had done it all. He'd stalked the wild turkey, punctured the quail, pierced the rabbit, and he'd even trekked through the wilds of furthest Wisconsin to test his mettle against the ruffed grouse. He felt himself ready for bigger game, the most dangerous game of all, man.

For anyone but Waylon, the leap from small game to human without passing through intermediate prey such as jaguar, tiger and Cape buffalo would have been a stretch. Resurrection had enabled Waylon to bridge that gap in one mighty stride.

For one thing, returning from the dead had put Waylon keenly in touch with his hatred for his fellow Andersonites, the ones who taunted him and made jokes that he didn't comprehend, the ones who felt themselves superior to Waylon because of their high school educations and ability to work the Daily Jumble. Waylon's hatred ran deep, like magma seething beneath stolid rock. Resurrection had freed the molten flow of Waylon's resentment, freed it to rain fire upon an unsuspecting populace.

For another, immortality conveyed upon Waylon the one advantage he so sorely needed, the ability to make mistakes. Waylon made mistakes, he knew that, but he was able to learn from them, though the lessons inevitably came too late to spare him grief. His blind

eye and severed hand were testimony to the fact that Waylon was what his teachers called "an experiential learner." Hunting man would involve risk, and Waylon might very well find the tables turned upon him. He might even die. But, so what? His new-found ability to regenerate himself would see to it that no lasting harm was done, and Waylon would chalk up useful experience which he could apply to the next hunt. He could play the game over and over until he came out on top.

Poised in a field of stubble under the midnight sky, Waylon studied his new hand. The pink flesh was devoid of blemish, the muscles were strong and supple. Waylon smiled as he curled his freshly minted fingers into a fist.

As much as he longed to stalk his fellow townsmen, Waylon realized that it would be best, at first, to choose his victims randomly. It wouldn't do to have Sheriff Clark hit upon his actions too soon, not until Waylon was skilled enough to challenge the sheriff himself. Better to draw his victims from the isolated travelers who found themselves, usually because they missed a turn, on the highway that ran just outside the city limits.

He waited until dark to drag the dead tree limb onto the asphalt. He hunkered down in the ditch beside the branch and waited. An hour passed without traffic. The old road in this post-turnpike era was as dead as Waylon himself had been, and it would take a similar miracle to bring it back to life. Waylon was working a

kink out of his left leg when he saw the cold blue headlights of the BMW approaching. The car's high-beams hit the branch and the tires squealed and the front wheels crunched wood and the car came to a halt with the branch stuck fast to the undercarriage.

A young man stepped out of the car, cursing. He gave a few useless tugs on the branch and uttered a few more expletives. AAA would be more than an hour away, most likely, if he could even get a signal on the cell phone. He jumped at the bark of Waylon's voice behind him.

"Move away from the car," Waylon said. He tried to suppress the quiver of excitement in his voice.

The young man turned to face Waylon and his 20-gauge over/under Browning.

"This is how it works," Waylon said. "I give you a twenty-minute head start. That way lies the town." He gestured with the shotgun. "You reach town before I kill you, you win. You're safe."

The young man help up both hands shoulder high.

"Look," he said, "I don't know what your problem is--"

"I ain't the one with the problem," Waylon replied. He spit for emphasis.

The young man reached for the billfold in his back pocket. He opened it and pulled out a sheaf of bills. In the brightness of the BMW's dome light, Waylon easily made out the portrait of Ben Franklin on the top bill. He wondered how many more there were.

"It's all yours," the young man said, stepping forward. He extended the bribe to Waylon. "Take it. Just don't do this...thing."

Waylon was indeed going to take the young man's cash, but there was no hurry. Time enough to collect his winnings when the game was over.

The young man took another step toward him, pleading. He was beginning to get on Waylon's nerves.

"Time you started running," Waylon said. Or rather, it's what he would have said if the edge of the young man's hand hadn't crushed the words in his throat.

Waylon was not sure exactly what happened next. He dropped the gun, he knew that, as he gasped for breath and the air rattled in his shattered windpipe. The young man appeared to be in three places at once as he kicked Waylon in the stomach, then slammed Waylon's head twice against his knee as Waylon doubled over, and somehow or another he spun around and grabbed Waylon's arms and there were a pair of loud snaps, and then Waylon's leg was bending backward at the knee in a way God never intended, and by the time it was over and the BMW was driving off dragging the tree limb, Waylon was back in the ditch where he'd started the encounter, unable to move and in indescribable pain.

Waylon struggled through a red haze toward the Browning that lay just out of his reach. It might have taken hours, maybe just minutes, but eventually he hauled himself into position and managed to get one

finger on the trigger and to lay his face down by the muzzle.

"Do over," he said. He didn't even hear the explosion that took off the top of his head.

He awoke at midnight, lying by the side of the road in a puddle of his own blood, feeling like a million bucks. He stood, gripping the shotgun tight. He gazed into the distance in the direction the BMW had taken hours before.

"You beat me this time," he said, "but I can do this over and over. Over and over until I get it right."

He headed home to make plans for the following night.

His mistake, obviously, had been to get within the young man's reach. He would be more careful tonight. He'd keep his distance. And he'd be choosier about the victim, maybe hold out for someone older, someone who wouldn't be likely to know karate or nintendo or whatever it was the young man had pulled on him.

The branch barricade had been a partial success, but Waylon needed a more refined technique for stopping travelers, something that would let him discriminate. He parked his pickup on the shoulder at dark, got out the flares and waited.

Headlights appeared down the highway. Waylon stepped out of the truck and lit a flare. He stood in the middle of the road and waved the burning torch, conscious that he might be driven over but fearless in the

knowledge of his immortality.

The headlights slowed and the vehicle revealed itself as a fifteen-passenger van. Stenciled on the side was the name of a Baptist Church. The driver stopped. As he opened the door, the lights in the van came on and Waylon could see that it was packed with teenagers.

Waylon felt his head go light with the prospect of stalking terrified teenagers through the woods, picking off his victims like huckleberries from a shrub. As giddy-inducing as the thought was, however, he realized that it was too much. Too much, too soon. Another night, maybe, if he was lucky.

"You need help?" the driver asked.

Waylon waved him away. He turned his back on the embarrassment of victims like an overeater prying himself from a smorgasbord of desserts. "No, no," Waylon said. "I'm fine."

The driver shook his head, and soon the Baptist van was a pair of red taillights disappearing over the horizon.

Waylon waited and waited. He gradually lost his patience with the notion of selecting a proper victim. Whoever he could lure into his trap tonight would be good enough. He should have gone with the teenagers, ready or not. He'd have gotten some sport out of it, and if they eventually overwhelmed him, who cared? He'd come back, killing himself if he had to to avoid being taken alive to Sheriff Clark.

Once he dozed, only to awaken as an eighteen-wheeler roared past, horn blaring. His heart practically stopped, and Waylon fretted that he'd just slept through his last chance of the night. He turned to look back down the road. Like a miracle, another set of headlights was coming his way.

He pulled out a handful of flares and lit them one by one. He dropped them in a line across the highway and took up his position in the ditch. He'd had time to reconsider his *modus operandi* and didn't want to waste an evening being run down by some clown over-driving his headlights.

A black Lincoln Continental coasted to a halt in front of the flares. The driver leaned forward to peer into the glare, then he shut off the Lincoln's engine and stepped out.

Waylon was on him in an instant. The driver was middle-aged and obviously well-to-do. His suit was hand-tailored silk, his hair dyed jet black, his shoes Italian and shiny and spotless. He was a man of character, a man who did not frighten easily, one who was used to issuing orders, not obeying them. It would be an enormous pleasure to see him brought sniveling to his knees.

"You have twenty minutes," Waylon said, and he laid out the rules of the game. The man did not reveal a glimmer of emotion. Apparently, years of boardroom combat had taught him to conceal his fear. But he would break, Waylon knew. He would break when the

game was up and Waylon had him at the point of the Browning. The man would muddy the knees of that silk suit as he fell to the ground to beg for his life. He'd offer Waylon anything-his money, his car, his fancy shoes. But Waylon would just smile and pull the trigger.

"Don't I get a weapon?" the man asked.

"I'm not stupid," Waylon said.

"No. I can see that." Was the man smirking ever so slightly?

"Twenty minutes," said Waylon. He gestured with the shotgun. "Clock's tickin'."

The man turned his back on Waylon and strode into the woods. The way he walked with confidence, as if he had all the time in the world, ticked Waylon off. The man vanished into the darkness between the trees.

"Cocky bastard," Waylon muttered. The more he thought about the man, the madder he got. Five minutes later he set out.

Waylon paused as he entered the forest. The night was still. He should be able to hear the man's footsteps crackling in the dark. No sound came his way. If anything, the air was uncommonly quiet. Then there was a hiss, a spitting sound from behind Waylon's ear. Bits of skull flew out of his forehead and landed with a patter in the grass. His body hit the ground with a thud.

"Amateur," the man said. He unscrewed the silencer from the Ruger Mark II favored by many in his profes-

sion and replaced the .22 in the holster slung under his arm. He smiled. The boys at Luigi's would get a kick out of this one. He brushed a smudge from his lapel and then drove on to Kansas City where the boss had a job for him to do.

Waylon was leaving nothing to chance tonight. He started before dawn and spent the day preparing the woods for his victim. He set leg traps designed for coyotes, not that they'd kill a man but they'd slow him down, sure enough. He fashioned snares and chopped out a tree fall that would crush a man flat. He dug a pit and fitted it with pointed stakes, then covered it with loose branches and leaves. He rigged a log to swing down from the trees on a rope and smash a man's skull. He mashed down a trail that led straight to the traps, and at dusk, just beyond the traps, he hung a gas lantern, pumped it up and lit it. His victim would see the light through the trees and surely run in that direction.

"Over and over," Waylon said as he laid his traps. "If they don't work this time, I can make 'em better. I can learn, I can. I just have to do things..." he grunted with exertion as he positioned a dead log across the trail, "...over and over."

Night fell and Waylon waited by the road. He was learning patience, and he'd learned to bring a Thermos of coffee along to keep himself awake. He was relieving himself of two hours' worth of caffeine when the headlights appeared.

Waylon zipped up hurriedly and laid out the flares and hid in the ditch. The car came to a stop. A Miata. Out stepped a pair of shapely legs followed a year or two later by the shortest skirt Waylon had ever seen in real life. Boyish hips gave way to a thin waist nestled below a promontory of breasts. The woman's lips were full, the eyes darkly outlined, the hair swirled around her head like a tempest. Waylon felt a stirring in his undershorts.

A woman! The notion had never entered Waylon's mind that his prey might be a woman. He turned the idea around inside his head and decided that it appealed to him, but considering the question consumed valuable time. The woman was already inserting herself back into the car when Waylon emerged from the ditch and introduced himself with the shotgun. He explained the woman's situation to her.

"I still don't get it," she said after Waylon had finished going over the rules for a second time. "I mean, like, what's in it for me? I run through the woods pursued by a madman, no offense, and for what? What's the pay-out?"

"You get to live," Waylon said. "It's simple. You run, I chase. You escape, you live. You don't escape, you die."

"So this is, like, a stalker thing."

"Yeah. It's a stalker thing."

"Well, I guess we'd better get started then."

“Yeah. I guess so.”

Waylon watched the woman's buttocks contend with one another as she ran for the woods. Her spiked heels would leave an unmistakable trail. Waylon wondered if the game might prove to be a disappointment after all, like shooting deer from a Barcalounger. He toyed with giving her the full twenty minutes' head start he'd promised, but after five minutes he grew restless and gave chase.

He hadn't gone far before he encountered the shoes with the spiked heels. Maybe the woman wasn't as dumb as she seemed. She'd had the sense to kick off her shoes. The trail grew fainter but Waylon realized that all he had to do, really, was to follow the scent of the woman's perfume.

“Follow the scent,” he said. The very thought made his organ stir. He doubled his speed.

Ahead of him, something waved in the breeze. It wasn't the woman, but something about it struck Waylon as decidedly feminine. As he drew closer he realized what it was: the woman's shirt hung on a low branch where it fluttered like a flag of surrender. He glanced around, alert for an ambush like the one that had done him in the night before, but he heard and saw nothing. He pressed on.

One by one the objects presented themselves on the trail like offerings: the tiny skirt, the bra, the panties. Waylon could not believe his extraordinary fortune. The woman was panicking, tossing off every last ves-

tige of her humanity, reverting to the primitive state of a savage, albeit a savage wearing perfume and silicone breasts.

Waylon's member was already stiff as a soldier when he spied her a short distance away. She leaned against a tree, breathing heavily, her perfect breasts heaving. Her legs were scratched and bleeding. Her hair was a tangle of knots and twigs. She glared at him with pure animal hatred, and Waylon glared back with pure animal lust.

He raised the Browning to his shoulder and took aim. His hand shook. Sweat trickled into his eye. He couldn't do it. Not yet. Not until he had a piece of the splendid forest creature before him. He lowered the shotgun and stepped forward, bridging the dead log in his path.

He felt the trip wire and looked up to see the log swinging at him from the tree above. An unwary victim would have hesitated, trying to make sense of the dark, impending shape, but Waylon realized immediately that he'd stumbled into his own trap.

He leaped aside as the log flew past his head, clipping his ear. He landed on the ground with a crash. The loose branches and dry leaves gave way and Waylon plummeted into the pit. Stakes pierced his torso and legs. A stake penetrated his right bicep. He lay on his back, pinned, and felt his consciousness drain away with his blood. The last thing he saw was the woman looking down at him from the edge of the pit, laugh-

ing.

"Do over," he whispered.

For the fourth time in as many days, Waylon died.

Something, Waylon realized immediately, was wrong.

Midnight had come, bringing with it renewed life. But before, Waylon had awoken feeling refreshed, energized. This time all he could feel was...pain. Agonizing pain. Everywhere.

He raised his head to see his body still impaled on the stakes. Stakes protruded from his chest and stomach, stakes nailed his legs and one arm just as before. He tried to free himself but found that, already, he had lost too much blood and couldn't summon the strength. He had been healed, but only for the purpose of dying again. His body began to spasm. Blood flowed from a dozen wounds.

He would die again, and the next midnight he would Rise, but only metaphorically, for his body would remain firmly in the grasp of the impaling stakes. In his brief waking moments, Waylon would know only immobility and torment. Then he would die and wake again, and die and wake again, and die and wake again. Over and over.

Over and over.

## I Just Want To Be With Edgar

Grandmother woke to see Spider-Man swooping toward her over the rooftops of Manhattan. Manhattan meant nothing to her. She had never been there and had never felt any great desire to go. Anderson was plenty of town for her.

The poster reminded her that she was a guest in this house, sleeping in the bedroom of her nine-year-old grandson, a room the boy's parents steadfastly refused to alter any more than was required to accommodate an invalid. The room was his, though he'd been displaced temporarily, and retaining its adolescent trappings, they hoped, would ease the sting.

One day the cancer would take her away to join her late husband Edgar. Until then she would sleep here, surrounded by action figures, dinosaurs, monsters and pictures of the "heroes" of the World Wrestling Federation.

Every morning the armada of terrible lizards and plastic warriors reminded her that she would never again have a room of her own, a room of quiet, beautiful things, of flowers and lace and glass, of souvenirs and photos of those who had preceded her into the great unknown.

She hoped death would happen quietly in the night, while she dreamed of Edgar, but she would welcome it whenever it took her. She thought of the joke she heard

on the radio: "I want to die peacefully in my sleep, like my grandfather, and not screaming in terror like his passengers." Edgar would have liked that one.

Dead these five years, Edgar was still with her in spirit, in memory, in longing. How often these days did she start a sentence with "When Edgar was alive...?" Everything she had to say seemed to begin and end with Edgar.

Outside, in the hallway, she heard her daughter, Evelyn, and Evelyn's husband, Doug, arguing. Did they imagine that she couldn't hear them? Or did they just not care? She recognized familiar phrases.

I know it's inconvenient....

Only a matter of time....

Could hang on for years....

We have to think of our family....

Mother is family....

The boy gave a perfunctory knock at the door and walked in without waiting for Grandmother to beckon. It was his room, after all, and he had to get dressed for school.

"Good morning," Grandmother said. She wished she could remember the boy's name. She was always getting it wrong. All of these Joshes and Jonahs and Justins, her conglomerated grandsons, merged in her mind. By the time she remembered which one she was speaking to, they had all turned and fled from her like

ghosts.

"Hi," the boy said. He threw the word at her like a spitwad. He gathered his school clothes and took them to the bathroom where he had to dress these days, leaving without a backward glance.

After the boy was off to school, Evelyn helped Grandmother to the bathroom and then back to bed for her tea and toast.

"Today's bath day," Evelyn said. Grandmother knew she smelled ripe. Getting her in and out of the tub was a chore, as was the bath itself, so it had become an every-third-day affair or more often as needed, as when Grandmother soiled herself. "I'll be back after I get Doug off to work."

More arguing from beyond the bedroom.

If we could afford a nursing home....

If Edgar hadn't let the policy lapse....

You'll be old one day....

Just hope I don't overstay my welcome....

Grandmother knew that she'd overstayed. She had been with Evelyn and Doug longer than with any other relatives. Six months. It was a long time to intrude on a family's life, but Evelyn was a registered nurse, working part time, and she was the best caregiver available for no money. Grandmother's time was running out, but the sand drained so slowly from the hourglass that it was hard to foresee the end. It was cruel to every-



one, to draw death out this way.

"When Edgar was alive," she told Evelyn during the bath, "we always knew we'd die together. It was inconceivable that either of us would outlive the other. Now look at me. Five years and I'm still straggling behind."

"That's no way to talk, Mother," Evelyn said.

"Why not? It's the truth. If there was any God in this world, He'd have taken me five years ago."

"Hush. Can you help me raise your arm? That's good."

"I wish you'd just smother me in my sleep," Grandmother said, "or give me a shot of something from the hospital. It'd be a blessing."

"Hush."

"I just want to be with Edgar."

"You will, Mother. When it's time."

"It's past time."

"Hush."

The day passed as they all did, slowly and painfully. Grandmother listened to the radio, watched the portable TV and slept as much as she could. Then it was night and Evelyn turned off the lights and death was presented with one more opportunity to make Grandmother's fondest wish come true.

Grandmother woke a few minutes past midnight. The room was dark and quiet around her, and her mind

seethed with strange dream memories that swam in her mind and darted here and there, appearing from the dim recesses and vanishing into the murk as mysteriously as they'd come. Each by itself made no sense, but taken together they told an excruciating and unbelievable tale.

She remembered trying to breathe and not being able to draw a breath. Something pressed against her face, a weight held it down, and she barely had the strength to struggle. This memory was clear. It was not part of the dream.

The dream began with Edgar calling to her across a great distance. Then a man interposed himself between them and Edgar flew from the scene, or turned to smoke and was scattered by a cold wind, or maybe Edgar was never there at all. All that was left was the man, whose name she knew was "Seth," and they had a conversation that meant a great deal to Grandmother, but she couldn't remember a word of it.

Enveloped now by the darkness of the boy's room, Grandmother realized that something as familiar to her as her own skin was gone. After a moment she knew what it was. It was the pain. The pain was gone, and she knew she had Seth to thank for that.

She pulled the needle from the shunt in her arm. It made a soft click when it hit the floor. It would make a puddle if she left it there, if she didn't shut off the flow of morphine from the plastic bag on the apparatus beside the bed. She reached up and turned the little

wheel that crimped the tube.

She lay in the dark and marveled at how good it felt to have a body that was no longer at war with itself. She reflected on the miracle that had sneaked up on her.

Seth had brought her back from the dead. It would have been an unimaginable thing at one time, impossible, but now the notion of resurrection settled around her shoulders like an old shawl. She owed everything to Seth. If only Edgar could have known Seth he would be alive today, and they would be together.

She had traded Edgar for Seth, and the thought of that exchange made her sad. For so many years the dream of rejoining Edgar was all that got Grandmother through the day. Now the dream was postponed, perhaps forever.

The room was all shadows and portent. The hall beyond the doorway was quiet but for the distant hum of the refrigerator. She had never noticed it before. So Seth had fixed her hearing, too, as well as ridding her of the cancer. Her heart hadn't felt so strong in decades. She pressed the backs of her fingers against her cheek, and for the first time in ages her touch did not feel cold.

"I'm sorry, Edgar," she said, "but it isn't my time."

Grandmother lay in the dark and planned her next move. She longed to get up and go to the toilet by herself, to get dressed in real clothes and walk to the kitchen and fix herself a snack, to watch the big TV in

the living room. But that would give away her secret.

She reached for the plastic tube and fished the needle off the floor, but she did not put it back in her arm. She didn't want the morphine to cloud her brain. She had thinking to do.

First, she had to deduce which member of her loving family had murdered her.

And it was a loving family, in its own way. Evelyn, certainly, loved her. Loved her too much, perhaps. How often had Grandmother pleaded with her to end her misery, to reunite her with Edgar, and how often had Evelyn told her, as she had that very day, to hush?

Evelyn was a caregiver. Every bird fallen from its nest and discovered by a neighbor child ended up in Evelyn's hands. Her husband, Doug, was another kind of wounded bird, a dreamer trapped in an ordinary mind, a free spirit doomed by mediocrity to spend its life plodding through the mundane world, digging up paychecks like potatoes to sustain his hungry family. Evelyn nurtured Doug's dreams the way she nurtured wildflowers that labored their way up through the heavy, clay soil of her back garden.

Evelyn fed the defective birds until they drew their last, labored breaths. She tended the pathetic garden. She encouraged Doug to fill their garage with Amway products. Any doomed endeavor pulled Evelyn in with the attractive force of a sun luring a wayward planet into orbit, and it held her there until the last, cataclysmic moment.

She would never have killed Grandmother.

But Doug might have.

Doug, always treading the financial waters, always sputtering. The burden of an old, useless woman dragged at his ankles like concrete boots. Grandmother was one thing too many to deal with, in Doug's words. He couldn't wait for her to die. Just a little breathing room, that's all I need.

Doug, desperate for air of his own, could have smothered her. Maybe it was part of a larger plan, to hide the body and continue to collect Grandmother's government checks. Just until we can get a little bit ahead, he would say. Among his many, pedestrian dreams, could Doug harbor any dream so grand as murder?

It wasn't likely. Despite his feelings and his failings, Doug came equipped with an irrepressible sense of duty, the legacy of a demanding mother. Ultimately, it was duty that would keep Doug on the straight and narrow path, discontent and complaining and miserable, but surefooted as a Mohican.

It took more imagination than Doug could muster to kill Grandmother. Besides, killing her required fearlessness, that or an unsophisticated sense of consequences. Selfishness, too, to put the killer's earthly needs against the life of another person, however feeble and willing to pass on she might be.

Fearless, little sense of consequence, selfish. My God, Grandmother realized, it sounds just like a nine-year-

old boy. A boy who wants his room back.

Events replayed themselves in Grandmother's head. The boy's sullen glances, the resentful whining that went on behind her back. She thought of the grimacing figures on the boy's shelves, mirrors into the adolescent soul. How would any of those muscle bound oafs deal with an interloper like Grandmother? Violently, of course. They were action figures; they would take action. And these were the boy's heroes.

The boy (it occurred to her) was named "Jeffrey."

Grandmother lay awake trying to figure out what to do with little Jeffrey. Selfish, murderous little Jeffrey. By three a.m., she had formulated a plan.

The plan required sacrifice, but thanks to Seth and his blessing, the sacrifice would not be for long. A day and a night of death was all, then all would be restored.

Grandmother began with her daughter because Doug was such a sound sleeper. A tree could fall on the house and not wake Doug, whereas Evelyn was awake even before she felt the knife in her throat. Awakened by a creaking floorboard, she saw Grandmother standing over her, naked. She registered the knife in Grandmother's hand and for a moment thought she was dreaming.

"Mother," she said.

Grandmother drove the knife home again and again. She would never have had the strength if it weren't for the blessing of Seth. When Evelyn received the

blessing tomorrow night, what would Seth fix about her? Aside from the stab wounds, that is. Her bunions, maybe, or that premature streak of gray in her hair.

Even before Evelyn fell still, Grandmother crossed to the side of the bed where Doug, true to form, still slept. He woke when the knife bit his throat and tried to fend off Grandmother's second and third strokes, but soon he, too, collapsed into a dead and bloody heap.

Grandmother bathed the knife in Doug's blood and let it trickle as she left the bedroom. Blood pattered onto the hardwood floor of the hallway. Droplets stained the carpet in the living room where Jeffrey lay asleep on the couch, tangled in the sheets, arm dangling over the edge.

She tilted the knife to drip blood on the boy's chest, then set it on the floor beneath his hand where, in the morning, he would see it and instinctively pick it up. She backed away slowly, making sure that he had not awoken, and tiptoed to the bathroom. She washed away the blood from her hands and body. She pulled on her old night dress and returned to her bed. She replaced the needle in the shunt in her arm and turned on the morphine. Within minutes she was asleep and dreaming of Edgar. They were having a picnic.

The next morning, amid the hysteria surrounding the discovery of Evelyn and Doug's bodies, the boy was taken away and placed in a lock-down ward at Greenhaven Convalescent Center, the state mental asylum, in Junction City. He protested his innocence,

but there was the knife and the blood, and the only other person in the house was Grandmother and she was obviously too ill to have committed such a strenuous crime. She was taken to the hospital. She would be there at midnight when Evelyn and Doug returned from the dead, with Seth's blessing.

Thanks to the miracle resurrections, no charges would be filed against the boy, but he would remain at Greenhaven for another few weeks under observation as Grandmother had anticipated. Evelyn and Doug would immediately petition for his release, but once you've fallen into the system, it can take time to claw your way out.

Grandmother would have no need to feign illness with Evelyn and Doug. They would know what she did and they would understand, though it would puzzle them why she'd killed them and not Jeffrey at the same time.

By the time they figured it out she would have the posters down and the plastic figures in boxes and a cut glass vase of flowers on the chest of drawers. Her own knick-knacks would decorate the shelves. On the table beside her bed, in a handsome silver frame, she would place her favorite photograph of Edgar.

## Death Took A Holiday. And All I Got Was This Crummy T-Shirt

"You don't look like a drug dealer," Lila said.

"Secret of my success," Pascal said, which was a partial truth. The whole truth behind the remark was that his face, so ordinary as to defy description, and his body, lean but muscular, gave him a presence that seemed grown from the wholesome, Midwestern earth itself. But it was his energy that completed the façade. Pascal was no sallow-faced lurker in the shadows. He raced from drop to drop in a cherry red '65 Mustang ragtop he'd restored himself. His cheeks bloomed with the sunburn he'd picked up from some early season skiing at Vail (where he'd also scored a kilo-brick of mediocre cocaine that he would cut even further and sell by the gram to the local cokeheads).

It was coke that brought Lila and Pascal together in the stubby field outside of Anderson, but it was Lila's t-shirt that aroused his fascination.

"Nice shirt," he said.

Lila tugged at the hem of the shirt and gazed at the monster-in-a-hot-rod design as if seeing it for the first time.

"This?" she said. "It's just something I found in the garage, in a trunk of my dad's stuff. I thought it was kinda cool."

Kinda cool, Pascal thought. She doesn't know what she has. An original Stanley Mouse, pristine, from the 1963 Winternationals in Pomona. Hand airbrushed. Worth five hundred bucks, easy.

"I guess my dad was kind of a car nut."

"Tell you what," Pascal said, "I'll give you a discount. Eighty-five for a gram, you throw in the t-shirt."

The girl shrugged off her windbreaker and peeled off the shirt. Her top was bare.

"Deal."

"You want a shirt? I could give you mine."

"I just want my gram."

Pascal handed over the cling-wrapped coke and tried not to grin from ear to ear.

"Your dad got any other old stuff like this? Posters, or...?"

Lila had already turned her back, pulling on her windbreaker, headed toward her car with her own treasure.

The first thing Lila felt when she died was a sense of relief that the worst headache in her life had disappeared. She woke up just past midnight in her bedroom, refreshed in a way she couldn't recall ever feeling before. Then she remembered Seth.

She had met Seth on the other side. Seth had brought her back from the dead. She loved Seth, she realized,

and she wanted to help him in his work. She wanted to help by bringing more people to the other side, to Seth.

But something wriggled in the back of her mind. It was Pascal. In the clear light of resurrection, Lila began to suspect that she had been hoodwinked.

No, it wasn't only that Pascal had sold her the cocaine that took her life. That probably wasn't even his fault. Nobody knew what they were getting these days, and no one could predict that a single gram in the nose of an experienced user would lead, now and again, to sudden death. These things happened.

It was the t-shirt. Was that Pascal's way of catching a glimpse of prime female boobie? Was it a power play? Or had she simply been screwed out of something of value?

Lila decided to consult the source of all earthly knowledge. She powered up the computer she hadn't used in months and dialed onto the internet.

Pascal didn't enjoy the thought of meeting Lila at his apartment, but she had promised to show him the contents of her father's trunk and wanted to do it someplace safe and out of the weather.

He felt like doing a line while waiting for her, but he restrained himself. He wasn't like the town cokeheads. He could take cocaine or leave it. He was strong in that way. He had to sample the goods he sold, of course, and he reveled in the strength and clear-head-

edness that coke brought him. Skiing in Vail had been fantastic, lit up, despite the low-grade artificial snow that dusted the slopes so early in the season. Racing downhill, impervious to the chill, skiing was the most exhilarating thrill that Pascal knew. Even hang gliding had been too languorous to give him the rush he craved, though maybe under the right medication....

Lila's knock was firm and measured. Pascal had hoped it would be panicky, that he could play it cool and draw out the negotiation and count on her addiction to sell him the stuff cheap. He realized too late that he was wearing the Stanley Mouse t-shirt and cursed himself for a fool. It never paid to appear too eager.

Lila entered and set a cardboard box on the floor in front of Pascal's bed. If she noticed the t-shirt, she didn't let on.

Pascal pried open the box and handled each item with casual reverence while stifling his desire to shout out loud, to dance around the room in unbridled glee, as his hands unearthed prize upon prize. Lila's old man wasn't a car nut. He was a Stanley Mouse nut, and he had everything from Mouse's early days airbrushing t-shirts at hot rod shows with Ed "Big Daddy" Roth to his stint in the sixties as one of the top rock-and-roll poster artists in the world, right up there with Rick Griffin and Victor Moscoso.

Pascal drew out a Grateful Dead poster, San Francisco, the Avalon Ballroom, 1966. First use of the famous grinning skeleton and roses design that would

become the band's emblem for four decades. Beneath it was the famous five-and-six dollar bill poster, Big Brother and the Holding Company and Bo Diddley at the Avalon, August 5-6th, 1966, signed. He pulled out more Avalon Ballroom and Longshoremen's Hall posters, then he hit a vein of hot rod art: monster decals circa 1964, bubblegum cards, a Mouse Monster Club membership card, 1964, in mint condition, another t-shirt, hand painted....

Pascal's head was swimming and he'd only scratched the surface. Who knew what lay below? He wouldn't have been surprised to find original sketches. It was getting hard to feign detachment.

"What are you wanting for this stuff?" he said.

"What's it worth?" Lila asked.

"Well, most of it's in pretty good shape. It's been in the garage?"

Lila nodded.

"There's some damp rot. But like I say, it's pretty good. Maybe if you could find some real collectors, auction it off on eBay a piece at a time, you'd get a decent price."

Lila shook her head. "Too much hassle," she said. "You know what I want. How much for all of it?"

Pascal sat back and puffed out his cheeks. "I'm not a collector," he said. "I just like this shit. I don't know. Coupla grams."

"I want ten."

"Five."

"Ten."

Ten it was, and a steal at that.

Lila pocketed the ten grams. She turned to leave, then paused at the door.

"You want to do a line?" she said.

"Sure," Pascal said. "Yours or mine?"

Lila surprised him by saying, "Mine."

Pascal closed his eyes while Lila drew out the line on a hand mirror. White powder was lodged in the groove between glass and frame, the sign of a user in control of his habit. A true cokehead would have dug it out during a dry spell.

"Anyone ever try to ply you with sex?" Lila said.

"All the time."

"Does it work?"

"Sometimes." Pascal savored the repartee. It looked as if the afternoon was going to pay a sexual bonus on top of the one he'd already scored. Sometimes life was almost too sweet.

"You like speed, don't you?" Lila said.

"Never touch the stuff."

"No, I mean...going fast. I've seen you in your car. If Deputy Haws ever catches you driving like that...."

"I'll buy the fat bastard off with burritos," Pascal said.

Lila handed him the mirror. Pascal snuffed the white powder and instantly knew that something was wrong.

"This isn't coke," he said.

"PCP. Sorry. I thought you'd know."

He might have, if he hadn't been thinking about Lila's naked body. Had she counted on that distraction to let her make the switch?

"I hate the stuff," he said. He shoved it back at her. "This shit's poison."

"Sorry."

"Get out," Pascal said.

"In a minute."

Pascal braced himself for the rush to come, the hallucinations that had marred his first and only trial of the drug. He tried to speak, to order the treacherous girl from his apartment, but already his speech was beginning to slur. He felt numbness climbing up his legs.

"Sit back," Lila said. "Lay your head down."

As if he could hold it up another second.

Lila fluffed a pillow and stuffed it behind his neck.

"Where'd...you get this shit?" Pascal said, his tongue feeling and tasting like a dead toad.

"It's some of my dad's stash. I scarfed it when they took

him to the hospital. When I saw what it did to him, I put it away. I didn't throw it out, though. I wonder why."

Pascal tried to sit up but found that his arms and legs had become logs.

"There's something in it," Lila said. "I don't know what. Whatever it is, it's killer. They took my dad to Kansas City. He's still there. Paralyzed. Oh, he's not in a coma or anything, don't worry about that. They say he can hear and see everything that goes on around him. He just can't move, not a muscle. He's been that way for two years. They're saying it's probably permanent. How you feeling? Oh, can't talk at all anymore, huh?"

She brushed a strand of hair off his eyes.

"It's kind of sad," she said, "that you won't die outright and get to meet Seth. Half-dead doesn't count, unfortunately. I hope he isn't too disappointed in me. It's petty, I suppose, but you really pissed me off, you know?"

"Now, let's get you out of that shirt."



## Afterword

If these stories have sparked your interest in the novel of *Risen*, you're invited to my home page at [www.atombrian.com](http://www.atombrian.com) where you can read a lengthy sample and, if I'm lucky, be instilled with an insuppressible desire to read the whole book.

Then you'll have to pay some money, but not that much: \$5.99 in the USA, \$7.99 in Canada. *Risen* is available through all the usual channels: online bookstores, chain bookstores, your local independent bookstore, and if you wait long enough, yard sales and second-hand book shops.

Thanks for reading!  
J. Knight  
Los Angeles CA USA

## Author Bio

J. (Jaroslav) Knight lives in Los Angeles, California. He moved there in 1985 from his home state of Kansas for reasons that are pretty obvious to anyone who's been to both places, especially in the winter.

He works in TV and film and is hoping that the film version of *Risen* is just around the corner.

*Risen* is his first published novel. His actual first novel resides in a box in Knight's garage where it lives on rats and spiders. It is hideous and deformed and you wouldn't like it. His second novel is in the works.