

MICHAEL BRAY



ELEVEN STORIES OF HORROR

FORGOTTEN FEARS

'SOMETHING FOR EVERY HORROR LOVER'



FORGOTTEN FEARS



MICHAEL BRAY

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THE BEGINNERS GUIDE TO DEATH

[I wrote this one for an anthology which for whatever reason didn't ever get released. A more traditional zombie story than some of my other approaches at tackling the genre, this is a fun little story which I quite liked again on second reading when compiling work for this collection.]

EVERYONE KNEW THE end had come. We saw it on TV, at first, and then we saw the same thing out of our windows in the streets. It didn't hit home for me until I saw old Mr. Simms who owned the convenience store, on the corner eating that woman.

He was on his knees, arms covered in gore as he scooped the poor girl's innards into his blood-streaked mouth with a stupid, shit-eating grin on his face. I had known the old man for years, but to look at him through the gap in the curtains from my apartment, (located in a, frankly, shitty part of town above a Chinese takeaway) I realised that the old man I knew was gone and whatever had been left behind was something else entirely. It reminded me of the time I saw my father's dead body in his bed after cancer had finished eating him down to the bone. I remember looking at the frail corpse and wondering why everyone around me was crying. My mother asked if I was okay, to which I replied that I was fine because whatever spark that had driven my father in life was gone, and what remained

was an empty shell. That, ladies and gentlemen, was my first experience of dealing with death, and I'm sorry to say it wasn't the last, which, in part, is why I'm writing this all down by candlelight so as not to draw attention to myself. See, it's dangerous out there. Not only with the dead things like Mr. Simms, but the looters, and rapists, and murderers who are using the end of the world as a green light to go crazy. I sometimes wonder if they have the right idea, and I'm the one in the wrong. After all, it might be better to go out doing something you love rather than hiding away hunched over a notepad by candlelight. Then again, maybe not. At least, I'm in control of my own destiny, which brings me to the reason for my scribblings this bleak Tuesday evening. Let me set the scene. It's a little after seven p.m., and it's raining outside, although that isn't stopping the biters or the crazies from going out and looting the same stores for the hundredth time. There isn't much left out there, but I think they do it just for the hell of it. I have been lucky, in that the takeaway which I live above had nothing of value to steal, so other than a few broken windows I've been pretty much left alone. Even so, I've barricaded the door leading from there to here just to be sure, and I have a ready-made escape route via the fire escape if I should need it.

If I were to lean out of the window now, I would be able to smell smoke, rot, and blood, and all would be accompanied by the sounds of screaming, the crackle of fire, and breaking glass, so I pretty much keep to myself. My inventory, for those who are interested, is as follows.

- The trusty old Toshiba laptop on which I'm writing this. (70% battery power left)
- 6 cases of 24 bottles of Evian water
- 50 cans of beans (Heinz)
- 26 cans of tuna (unbranded)
- 40 jars of Kenco coffee (who doesn't love a morning brew with the apocalypse)
- Assorted medical supplies (looted from the chemist)
- Three boxes of peanut butter snickers, one of which I am enjoying right now.

Oh, I also have a syringe full of infected blood taken from the biter I killed a half hour ago, and whose stinking corpse is festering in my kitchen.

See, I'm a realist, and as much as I thought I wanted to survive, at first, I realised that I was only going through the motions because that's what I thought I was supposed to do. Call it stupidity, or maybe there's just an inherent flaw in human nature which makes us strive to do what our fellow man says we should do. But then I started to think about it, and asked myself, what kind of life would it be? Cowering in the dark, scrounging around for food. Sure enough, I have plenty of it for now, but what about when it runs out? What about when I have to venture outside to find more, or if one of the looters decides to burn down Mr. Woo's takeaway above which I live? I thought about that, and then I thought about old Mr. Simms and that goofy, happy look on his face as he scooped out that poor girl's

innards, and shoved them into his mouth. He didn't have any of those same burdens. He didn't have to worry about those same things. He was happy. Content. Maim. Kill. Eat. Repeat. Simple.

When you think about it, what's here for the rest of us is no life, and certainly not one that I want to live. It was then that I decided to take action, and determine my own fate, and maybe, just maybe help those in the world who are tasked with trying to stop this thing.

Good luck with that.

So, my friends here is the plan. I will inject myself with the needle full of infected biter blood and log, for as long as I can, the process of change. A real-life human experiment which may or may not help, depending on if anyone happens to find these notes.

If I'm honest (and since I'm here alone, I don't see why I can't be), I'm afraid. Terrified, actually. But I'm not as afraid of turning as I am of trying to survive, knowing that I could starve to death, be murdered by looters or eaten by one of the infected. None of those scenarios appeal to me, and so I have chosen to go out under my own terms. Before I begin, I would just like to say that, however, you may view my actions, they're not born from selfishness or disrespect. I love life. I loved living, but I also know that the world as it is now isn't one where I want to be. In closing, wish me luck with this, and I hope that the notes which follow will one day help someone.

Best,

Gerrard.

5:17pm

I have injected myself in the right leg with the needle full of infected blood. I had expected to maybe go into spasms or convulsions, but other than the rush of adrenaline and fear, which I could almost taste, there was no discernible immediate reaction. Is it odd that I was a little disappointed with this? One other thing to note is that although I drew the needle full of blood from the biter almost an hour before I injected it into myself, it was still warm when I picked up the syringe, and it hadn't clotted. Either way, it's inside me now and my entire world has become the clock on the wall. I wonder if it will hurt when my body dies? Or maybe I'll be like the plot of some Hollywood blockbuster, and find that I'm immune, although it's unlikely. Lucky shit like that never happens to people like me. I'll report back as soon as symptoms start to show.

5:22

I think I just felt the first symptoms. I have started to sweat, and my heart is beating way faster than it probably should – although that could just be the excitement/nerves about what I'm doing. I actually closed my eyes and tried to just listen to my body, to see if it was doing anything out of the ordinary,

but other than my bad left knee and the sweats, it's telling me nothing new. I am starting to feel a little jumpy, though, and my stomach feels greasy and tight, but again, that could just be nerves.

5:27

Something is definitely happening. I'm drenched in sweat, and my body is starting to twitch. Why is my heart beating so fast? If I wasn't going to die anyway, I would be worried about cardiac arrest! Ha! Does killing a biter make me a bad person or doesn't it count because it's already dead? I keep getting stomach cramps, and I'm pretty sure the blood I injected into me is working its magic. I wonder how long I can last. I'm aiming for an hour, or as close to 6:17 as possible. We will have to wait and see. All I know is that right now I don't feel too good.

5:39

Passed out, I think.

One second I was clinging to the edge of the desk and trying to ride another wave of stomach cramps, and the next I was on the floor, curled up and clutching my belly. I thought I had been drooling, but when I looked at the carpet, I saw blood there. It looked almost black in the gloom, and I'm starting to think I have made a terrible mistake. The cramps in my belly are getting worse, and I'm starting to think they are hunger pains, although if they are, then canned tuna and beans probably won't cut it! HEHEHE!

God, I need to calm down. My nerves are on fire, and my head feels as if it's underwater somehow. Maybe a bite to eat could help these cramps a little? God knows it's worth a try.

5:44

No go on the eating. With some effort, I managed to open a can of tuna, but as soon as that fishy smell reached my nostrils, I projectile vomited all over the side. That, in itself, was bad enough, but there was blood mingled in with the bile. It seems that whatever is inside me is trying to rearrange my innards, somehow. My entire body aches now, and I have had to take off my t-shirt, as it was clinging to me. For as wet as my skin is, my throat is dry, yet when I tried to have a drink of water, it was like someone jamming their fingers down my throat, and I brought it straight back up, this time with a few fleshy lumps of my stomach. I'm not sure what part of me it was. It was a reddish-pink lump about two inches long, but I presume it's not vital to my ability to function, as I'm still here. Either way, the missing body part is here on the desk in front of me just in case I need it later. Good God, this pain is unbearable. I'm seriously considering abandoning this little experiment and chugging down the

painkillers I have stashed away in the bedroom, although I suspect they won't work even if I did.

One positive note, though, is that I'm nearing my one-hour goal. It's exactly 5:45, which means I only have to last another thirty-two minutes to reach my target.

6:01

Somebody, please make it stop. Why did I do this?

6:04

My wife is alive.

My wife is dead.

My wife is alive.

My wife is dead.

My wife is alive.

My wife is dead.

My wife is alive.

My wife is dead.

My wife is alive.

My wife is dead.

I'm not even married. But I sure am hungry.

6:06

Please, just let me die already.

6:09

Swallowed all the painkillers. My body tried to make me spit them back up, but I refused to let it, counting backward from ten until they stayed in my stomach. I hope they take effect soon, and I fall asleep. My nerves are on fire, and I'm starting to see things. My father is here, and he's been dead for ten years now.

6:14

Had a lovely chat with father. Told him what I did, then ate his face. It was delicious. Threw up all

over myself. Just blood and sleeping pills.

6:17

There. That's an hour, now please just let me die.

6:20ish

Am I dead, is this what it is? A perpetual agony? Is this hell? God, I'm scared.

6??

I'll fucking kill that old Mr. Simms. This is his fault. How could I know it would hurt so much?
Bastards all of them. Hard to type now, coordination bad but I'll xfc keep trying..

6:666452rfgc

So mch painm i,, cnt stand,,fd mucjh morew...

6:40

I'll call him Bertie. Berhgie the biter who's blood I...

No thast wojhnt work. Zdf

How about:

Bertie blod on a littel neesafdle,

All I needfg to keep j me evil...

Please just die.

6:44

Night fever, night fever weeeeeeee!

God I'm hungry. Something rare and bloody. Father agrees, and heeeeeees been dead for years
hahahah! gsth

6:52

Cant vbreathe5 i thindk thiss is it.

how longhg did I lastg????

I'm so so hungry, I think itsgd timew to stepkl outside for a bite to eat.

ONE NIGHT IN OCTOBER

[This is a bit of a departure from the norm for me. I normally don't stray into anything too graphic or extreme (although recently I have dabbled in this area in some co-authored works with Matt Shaw. Before all that, this was my first foray into the extreme. This story was written in mid-2013, and had been part of a Splatterpunk anthology. I present it here for the first time as part of this collection.]

I HAVENT MOVED for hours Lying here in the dark, ignoring the cold and damp, and the mildew smell of this rotten shithole of a house, I wait. My brain is a stew, a melting pot of emotions. I realise that I am as cold and barren as this room. The floor is bare apart from the army of empty vodka bottles which stand as a testament to the lifestyle I chose. They shimmer in the moonlight and remind me that I have a pretty severe drinking problem. Rats scratch and scurry in the walls, and rotten pipes drip their monotonous song. I'll be the first to admit it. This house is a shithole, but at least it's mine. I don't have power or hot running water. The walls are thick with black mold that spiders up from the floor, and the sickly yellow wallpaper hangs off in great, wet sheets. Still, I can't complain. I manage to get by. Cold baths are the perfect penance, the ideal way to cleanse me after I have done the work, and that, as I lie here is what I'm contemplating. I turn my head, feeling the clammy touch of the filthy pillow – the one I use to sleep on and, when the mood takes, stick my dick in. It's crusty familiarity doesn't bother me, nor does the smell, not anymore. Outside, is a typical English October night. Winds rock the broken house, and drizzle tickles the window pane. I can almost imagine that it is calling to me, telling me to venture out into the night and do what I do best.

As much as I tell myself that I can't really be bothered, that I'm not in the mood, I know it's bullshit. Like any addict, I know I'm a slave to it, and a little rain won't stop me. Hell, I would go out if fireballs were raining from the sky. Welcome, my friends, to addiction.

I feel something stir in my gut; the dark thing that lives there demands to be sated. Blood rushes to me, and I find myself stiffening. It's only the anticipation of what I'm about to do that usually makes that happen, and I'm resigned to another sleepless night. I pull the pillow from under my head and push down my tatty shorts. As I slide myself between the pillowcase cover, I start to think about the act.

The warmth of viscera as I squeeze it like tripe between my fingers, the taste of hot, copper blood as I drink it from dying, depressurised veins. God, it's divine. I think about my first, a sweet girl who I met at a bar. For all the days that blend into each other, I can still remember her. Brown hair, blue eyes. Strong cheekbones. A moan escapes me, and I increase the tempo of my movement and arch my back, pushing my head into the mattress.

I remember the way she looked as I strangled her, the desperation in her eyes as I squeezed her neck hard enough to burst the blood vessels in her eyes. She wept tears of blood, and as that image came to me, so vivid and detailed even after eight years, I shot my warmth into the pillow, gritting my yellow, gappy teeth in ecstasy as I murmur my bitch of a mother's name.

This is my life. This is the life of a killer.

I'm addicted to two things. Sex and murder. Neither seemed to do it for me alone and so it seemed like the most natural thing in the world to combine the two. I'm still not entirely sure if I'm going to venture out or not tonight, but the black thing inside that guides me seems active, so you never know. Anyhow, let me tell you a little bit of my modus operandi, as it were.

I always like to strangle my victim. Always from the front so I can see the light go out in their eyes. That's when I open them up. Pubic bone to the ribcage. I have a really good strong knife for that, part of an old doctors kit that I picked up at in a second-hand store a few years back. I love to see how people tick. Such complex things. I like to feel the textures, to get the insides outside. I like to squeeze the intestines like tripe. I like to touch the slippery livers to my face, I like to open the stomach and see if I can identify what they last ate.

I also like to fuck them.

There is no shame in that. It's just how it is. Some cultures fuck their dead until they start to rot. It's nothing new. Not really. Besides, I do it a little differently. I like to straddle the head and fuck the mouth whilst I explore their insides. It's such a rush. I don't care who it is. Men, women, young old. All are the same inside.

I can feel myself stiffening again as I think about it, and although I'm tempted to give my pillow another going over, I really do feel like I should go out and find someone.

You might wonder if I feel guilt or remorse.

I say a resounding no on both counts.

One of my victims once told me that god would strike me down, and I couldn't help but laugh. If he even existed, he would have struck me down long ago.

No, there is no god. No afterlife. No fucking white light at the end of the tunnel. The planet is full of animals. All of us trying to live and learn, cheat and play, scheme and fuck our way to the top of whatever society deems we should be striving for.

Screw that. Let me tell you something about life.

The only guarantee is death. I'm sorry if it sounds blunt, but that's just the way it is.

Death is a good thing. It's an escape from the monotony of this pitiful existence. It's something which I believe in wholeheartedly, and something which I have devoted my life to. To date, I have killed sixty-seven people. Forty-nine men, the rest women. I have also killed eleven dogs and twenty-four cats. I know what you must be thinking. That I had a troubled upbringing, or that I was abused as a kid right? Wrong. My upbringing was normal. I was raised in a middle-class home with a loving family who always tried to give me what they could. My father worked long hours every day to put food on our table. I have a brother and two sisters, all of which are, as far as I know, perfectly normal. I just knew I was different. Some people excel at sports or music, others in politics or science. My brother plays guitar like a fucking beast. My skill was killing. I turned out to be damn good at it too. The rain continues to probe the glass, breaking me from my train of thought, and I'm having second thoughts about going out tonight. I wonder if I can get another few days out of my last one.

I can see her bloated, blue gray corpse propped up in the corner of the room, sitting in a puddle of her own putrid liquefying skin and organs. I can almost imagine that she is still alive and breathing, but I know that it's just an illusion – a trick played by the army of maggots which are feasting on her. Her open mouth is packed tightly with them, a writhing mass of the little bastards. Same goes for her nostrils and even the hole in her arm where the flesh had putrefied and fallen away. Love never lasts for long, and I realise that soon enough I'll have to put her under the floorboards with the others. I had half hoped that she would last longer, maybe I thought that the cold weather might keep her fresher for more than a couple of weeks. I wonder if I should have bought that chest freezer the other week?

I give my bloated companion a quick once over, casting my professional gaze and trying to gauge the level of decay. I have become quite good at it actually, and my instincts tell me that perhaps I better go find a new one. God knows I need someone with me. I can't stand to be alone here. I need the company.

“Shall I go out tonight?” I whisper to the rotting thing in the corner. She, of course, doesn't answer, but I hear her voice anyway, sweet and encouraging in my head. The dark stuff bubbles and my dick stirs. I half consider jamming it into her mouthful of maggots, a final farewell if you will, but decide against it.

Besides, there are always plenty of opportunities out there in the streets. Plenty of people walking around thinking they are safe, either because they have a misplaced sense of self-confidence, or more likely that they have forgotten that monsters like me still exist.

I roll off my stinking mattress, wiping my hand on the sticky, come stained pillow and get to my feet. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror and immediately look away. Too thin, too pale. Too dirty. I really must get rid of that fucking mirror.

I dress slowly.

All the clothes are second hand, begged or borrowed from shelters or charity shops. Not because I can't afford them, but because I want any flecks of DNA that might be on them not to be mine. I also put on five pairs of socks to hold the shoes – which are deliberately two sizes too big for me – in place. Fuck you forensics. Ha!

I tuck my greasy, graying hair under a black beanie hat, and shrug into my hoodie. The rage is growing now, it knows the time is close. I spare a glance at the maggoty thing in the corner and feel as if its remaining milky eye is judging me.

“I'm heading out for a while,” I croak in the darkness.

It looks at me, only the constant wet shuffling sound of the maggots for a response.

“It was never going to work anyway,” I add, feeling sorrow and shame and even guilt towards her. She knows I'm planning to replace her. I can see it in her watery eye.

Still it looks on.

Why can't she just respond?

It's too late now because the rage is close to taking over. I can feel it spreading from my stomach and through my veins. I know what is going to happen, and I know it won't be pretty. I explode and am across the room in two strides. I grab her by the face, intending to pull her to her feet, but the skin is putrid and rotten, and her entire head comes off, bringing a snake of rotten flesh and skin with it. Displaced maggots fall back to her body, looking for new dark places in which to fester. I look her in the eye, squeezing my hands hard into her cheeks, teeth gritted as I watch my palms sink into the slippery flesh, which slides over her skull in such a way that I think, for a second that she is wearing some kind of mask. It's then that I hear her in my head. She is laughing at me.

They always laugh at me.

The smell is enough to even make me retch, but despite myself, I have a point to prove, and manage to shove my shorts down with a fumbling hand, and guide my way into her mouth, pushing the maggots aside. The sensation is both wonderful and repulsive as they writhe against me, and I finish within seconds.

It would be rude not to.

I toss her severed head down by her body, and wipe myself clean, using the trusty pillow to do it. I'm ready now, ready to go out and find a fresh companion. I'm feeling it now, the full flow of the rage and I'm ready to kill.

It's almost two thirty am on a Saturday night. The streets will be crawling with people, too drunk to care that they are walking home alone, and too out of it to be afraid that someone like me could be lurking in the shadows.

Maybe tonight is my night.

Maybe tonight, I'll find what I'm looking for.

SOMETHING IN THE DARK

[This story, like a few of the others in this collection, was originally released as a standalone kindle only title. The idea came when we experienced a power outage just like in the story, and because it was getting late, I was going to stay at home and wait for the repairman to come. I got to thinking what would happen if when he arrived, he wasn't exactly normal, and how it would be to have to face that in a house without light or access to phones etc. This was the result of that thought process and is one of my favourite stories.]

HE HEARD IT slithering out of the basement. Impossible as it was, the sound was easy to pick out in the utter stillness of the house. It was impossible because Billy had shot the man in the Trans Energy uniform in the face from close range, sending his body tumbling down there in the first place. But now he was back, and Billy had neither ammo nor the strength left to run. In the movies, the hero always had a plan, always had an idea, but in reality, there was only the cold grip of fear and the certainty his life was now almost certainly over.

As he cowered in the darkness behind the sofa, his broken arm and shoulder throbbing in agony, he was grateful at least Tyler and Angeline would be safe, no matter what was about to happen to him.

He could hear it now, the thing from the basement, dragging itself across the kitchen tiles towards where he hid. As if that idea wasn't surreal enough, it had started to whistle that tune again. The one he was sure was from an old movie or TV show but couldn't quite place, only now it was garbled and wet, a sloppy, half slurped expulsion of air.

He knew it was empty, but he checked the gun hanging limply in his one good hand anyway, wishing he had saved a bullet for himself. But hindsight was a wonderful thing, and for as much as he

could wish to go back and change things, he couldn't, because what was done was done, and what would be would—

Silence.

The slithering and whistling had stopped, but instead of relief, it brought fresh terror raging through Billy, as he would rather hear it and know where it was, than not hear it and risk it sneaking up on him. He checked the perimeter of the room, wishing for the lights to come back on, wishing those shadow draped corners were visible enough to give up their secrets. Most of all, he wished he had told his wife and son he loved them before he had sent them away. He supposed they knew, but he still didn't say it nearly often enough, and if, by some miracle he survived this, he promised himself he would make sure that changed.

A thud from the hallway snapped him back to the present, and he licked his lips, which were dry despite the sweat which was pouring out of him. He knew the man in the Trans Energy uniform was outside the door. He just knew. Billy tightened his grip on the gun, ignoring the little voice in his head told him it was now useless, re-reminding himself it had been useless even when fired at point blank range because the thing in the cellar had taken it, and come back anyway.

He fought the urge to scream as the door creaked open, and the slithering thing entered. He had just about succeeded when it started to whistle again, that wet throaty sound which reignited his horror, as it sounded even more disgusting from a few feet away. As he cowered, Billy asked himself the same question that had been racing around his mind since the entire thing began.

Why did this happen to us?

~ I ~

The power went out just after three in the afternoon. Billy had been at his computer, finding new and inventive ways to distract himself from the presentation which he needed to finish before he went into work on Monday.

"Billy!" Angeline shouted from downstairs.

"I know, I know, I'm on my way," He yelled back, giving the computer a sour glare as he jogged downstairs. His wife was waiting at the bottom, their three-year-old son, Tyler cradled against her.

"This is the third time this month Billy," She said as he paused to kiss his son on the head. He flicked the hallway light switch on and off then on again, not sure exactly what he was expecting.

"I know, but they said they had fixed it last time."

"I told you coming here was a bad idea," She said, giving him that look he had grown to hate.

"We agreed this was the right thing to do."

"Why here? Why in the middle of nowhere?" She whispered, not wanting to alert Tyler to their

disagreement.

Because you decided to fuck your boss.

The words almost came, and part of him wished they had, but he didn't have the strength for another argument. Far too many of those had already happened.

"Look, we both agreed we needed this. It's a new house, gremlins should be expected."

"I hate it here," She said, glaring at him with a mixture of hurt and anger.

"We knew this was never going to be easy," He replied as he stroked his son's head. "But we committed to making this work, to putting things right. Let's not let something as minor as a power outage come between us, okay?"

"Well, for what this place cost us, it should be problem free." She shot back, readjusting Tyler on her hip. Billy looked at his son, who responded with a torrent of toddler babble.

"It's probably the breakers again. I'll go check it out."

He looked her in the eye, hoping the woman he had fallen in love with was still there somewhere, and one day he might find her again. But he felt only the disgust and hurt at what she had done, and quickly looked away and walked towards the basement door.

"I don't know why this happens so much here." She called after him. "We never had this problem in the old house."

Once again, the desire to point out the reason for their move leaped into his throat, but he managed to swallow it back down.

Not now, not again. Let us get through one day without a goddamn argument.

"I guess it's the price of living out here in the countryside," He said over his shoulder as he opened the door, trying to diffuse the situation before it escalated into yet another blazing argument. He eyed the hook on the back of the door.

"Did you move the torch from here?"

"I haven't touched it."

"You sure?"

"I already told you, I don't know where it is. Jesus Billy, you just don't listen." She hissed as she glared at him.

He turned his gaze back to the empty hook on the door. He was finding it harder and harder these days to look his wife in the eye.

"Well, it must be somewhere!" He said balling his fists and showing her the empty hook, then realising Tyler was looking at him, he took a deep breath. "What I mean is, are you sure you didn't give it to Tyler to play with?"

"Yes. I'm sure."

She was giving him the usual semi-silent treatment now, responding with short, to the point answers. It was a familiar territory. "Try the kitchen," She added.

Ignoring the sarcastic tone in her voice, he closed the basement door and started looking through kitchen drawers, which were filled with clutter.

“You know, I just wish things would get left where I put them. Every time I put something somewhere, somebody moves it.” He muttered.

“And by someone you mean me?” Angeline said, putting Tyler down on the floor. As was the way with small children, as soon as his legs touched terra firma, he was away, a three-year-old whirlwind of destruction.

“I didn’t say that,” He said as he pushed aside old letters and rolls of tape. “I hate having to search for things.”

“Well, if you put things back where they belonged, you wouldn’t have to look would you?”

He was about to make a below the belt comment about her affair when he saw the torch, which was in the cupboard under the sink wedged between two pans. He snatched it up and turned to his wife.

“Well, either our son has grown tall enough to get this off the back of the basement door, or he’s been allowed to play with it.”

“It’s not my fault if you left it where he can get it.”

“Jesus, it’s always the same with you, it’s never your fault is it?”

“This isn’t my fault!” She said, lighting a cigarette with shaking hands.

“No, it never is, is it?” He replied, half glad he had said it, and regretful at the same time.

His words had the desired effect, and he saw her flinch as he walked past her.

“I better go check these breakers,” He muttered, swinging open the basement door and descending, leaving his cutting words lingering in the kitchen with his wife.

The basement was a long L-shaped room which was full of boxes of things they still hadn’t unpacked. The air down there was dry and musty, and particles of dust swirled in the torch beam as he made his way through the haphazardly stacked maze of bric-a-brac. Although he wasn’t a man who was easily afraid, even he had to admit the basement had a certain eeriness when illuminated only by the beam of his flashlight. He made his way to the breaker box at the end of the room, and not for the first time, started to ask himself if they should have just parted ways after he found out about the affair.

She had insisted it was a drunken one-time thing at the works Christmas party, but that didn’t make it any easier to swallow. His response, fuelled by anger, frustration, and betrayal was to return the favour. Rather than a satisfying act of revenge, his affair was an awkward fumbling thing with a woman he barely knew and even now, he couldn’t remember. Although he regretted it deeply now, at the time it made him feel better about what she had done.

They had tried – mainly for Tyler’s sake – to stay together, but it was becoming clear they were papering over the cracks, and no matter how strong it is, the wallpaper will never be strong enough to hold up crumbling foundations.

For his part, he had tried hard to forget what had happened and get things back to normal, but resentment was still there. Sure enough, it was buried deep, but that only helped it to grow and fester, spreading like cancer. He hoped one day to make the darkness within him dissolve. Right now, it wasn't looking too good.

Billy took a moment to look at the breaker box, then flipped open the panel. All of the switches were still in the upright position. He powered them all off and back on again anyway.

"Anything?" He shouted over his shoulder.

"No, still nothing." Came Angeline's muffled reply.

"Great," He muttered to himself as he closed the box and made his way back upstairs. She was waiting at the top of the steps, still unable to look him in the eye. Instead, she studied her shoes as she put the torch on the kitchen table and closed the basement door.

"It's not the breakers. I better give the power company a call and see if they can get someone out here."

"It will be getting dark soon, Tyler will need feeding, and we have no heat or..."

"I know! I know!" He snapped, crossing the room towards the fridge.

"Hey, did you move the card with the number of the power company on it?"

"No. it was right there on the fridge the last time I saw it."

Billy looked at the front of the refrigerator. It was covered in magnetic letters Tyler often rearranged to make gibberish words. On the upper door were the magnetic photograph frames containing snapshots of a life before affairs and mistrust and bickering. And there, next to it was the Budweiser magnet behind which the card for the power company had been placed after the first power outage.

"It's not here," He said, then glanced over at his son, who was busy making some kind of fort out of the sofa cushions.

"Looks like our son, the architect has decided to relocate," He said, smiling and trying to lighten the mood. It almost worked, and Angeline responded with a flicker of a smile, which at least served to break the tension.

"What will we do now?"

"I think we have a leaflet with the details on," He muttered, heading back to the kitchen and to the drawers he had already rummaged through and started again. Angeline didn't respond, and for that, he was grateful.

He leafed through the drawer full of crap for the second time and was about to give up when he found the leaflet stuffed between a stack of old bills. He pulled it out and straightened it.

TRANS - ENERGY

Proud providers of power to Oakwell.

Service like it used to be!

He grimaced as he looked at the garish green font on a red background. The graphic designer in him couldn't help it. Even when he was an intern, he would never come up with something so cheap looking. He held up the leaflet like a hard-won trophy.

"Got it. I'll give them a call." He said, pushing his way through the kitchen door to stand on the back step. From here, he had a wonderful view of the rolling fields which surrounded the house. In the distance, he could just about make out the faded red sidewall of the barn belonging to their nearest neighbor, Mr. Conwell.

Enjoying the warmth of the sun on his face and getting away from the awkward atmosphere in the house, Billy fished his Samsung out of his pocket and punched in the number from the flyer. As he waited to be connected, he glanced up to the thunderheads in the distance. The wind was only light right now, but it was definitely pushing them towards the house. He only hoped the power company could get someone out to them before dark.

~II~

Angeline was making Tyler a sandwich when Billy came back in from outside.

"What did they say?" She asked, acting as if the near argument had never even taken place.

"They are going to get someone out as fast as they can."

"Why do I get the feeling that's not all?" She said as she cut the crusts off the bread.

"Well, they said they can't guarantee a timescale, only that it will be within twenty-four hours."

"We can't wait that long. Did you tell them it's an emergency?"

"I did. That's their standard emergency response time apparently."

"That's bullshit. What are we going to do? You know how Tyler is with the dark."

"I know, I thought about that, and I have an idea. Why don't you pack a bag and take Tyler over to your mother's for the night."

"What about you?"

"I'll stay here and wait for the power company to come out. They will need to get inside the house to fix the problem I expect"

"You can't stay here without any power," She said, looking out of the window. He could see on her face she was trying to gauge how long until it would be dark.

"Look, it's fine, really. It's just one night. Hell, they might even get here before dark and you can come back home if you want. I would feel better if I knew the two of you were warm and safe."

Plus I could use the break away from you.

Although tempted, he didn't say it. He had avoided one major argument already today and didn't want to push his luck. To his surprise, she walked towards him and hugged him tightly. It felt more

awkward than it should, but he went through the motions of returning the gesture.

“I’m sorry,” She said against his chest.

“It’s okay.” He lied.

“I want things to go back to how they were before... I get frustrated, that’s all.”

He said nothing and stroked her hair.

“We’ll get there, I promise.”

He hated himself for saying it, because, in truth, he had no idea if they would be okay or not.

“I know you gave up a lot to move us out here. More than I deserve. I... I don’t mean to get angry all the time.”

“I did some things I’m not proud of either,” He replied, partly on autopilot as the cancer like hate inside him grew a little bit more. “It’s not your fault.”

The words left a bitter aftertaste, because, in his heart of hearts, he didn’t believe them.

She pulled away from the hug and looked him in the eye, probably for the first time in recent memory, and for a split second, there was no anger.

“Make sure you let me know as soon as they arrive and fix the power. Okay?” She said, blinking and reverting to staring at her feet.

“I will, I’ll just feel better knowing the two of you are safe,” He repeated. “You can’t stay here with Tyler when we have no power.”

“I’ll go pack a few things. Keep an eye on Tyler for me.”

She left the room, and as much as he hated himself for it, he felt better without her there. It was as if the heavy atmosphere was attached to her somehow, and whenever she left the room, she took it with her. He walked down the hall to the edge of the sitting room door and watched Tyler playing in his seat cushion fort without a care in the world. He was overcome with such a feeling of unease, he almost decided there and then to forget the house and go with them. He remembered Angeline’s mother, for want of a better word was a miserable old trout, who had looked down on him ever since the affair as if he were the only guilty party, and her daughter couldn’t possibly have done anything wrong. He decided he would rather take his chances in the dark than spend an evening with the in-laws.

“Come on champ,” He said as he picked Tyler up. “You are going to visit miserable old grandma for a few hours.”

His son chattered and laughed as Billy looked out of the window. The sun was already lowering in the sky, turning its blue hue to a yellowish orange. In a few hours, it would be fully dark.

~III~

Tyler was chatting away to himself in his safety seat in the back of the Ford Explorer as Billy

helped load the bags into the car.

“Jesus, it's only one night you know,” He muttered as he loaded the last of the bags.

“Well, I don't know what I might need for Tyler. He's still a little bit snotty.”

“Nice,” Billy said as he closed the car door.

They stood and looked at each other, and it was hard to ignore the awkwardness that lingered between them. The wind ruffled Angeline's hair, and Billy felt a flicker of the physical attraction which had once been so intense between them was now non-existent. She caught his eye and smiled as she tucked the wayward hair behind her ear.

“What is it?” She asked.

There was so much he wanted to say. He wanted to hold her, to protect her, shake her, scream at her. He wanted to wish away everything that both of them had done to taint their marriage, but the words wouldn't project passed his throat, and instead he coughed.

“Nothing, it's nothing,” He said.

“Do you have everything you need?”

“Yeah, beer in the fridge, and plenty of food. Don't worry, I'm sure this will all be fixed soon.”

She stepped forward and hugged him, and he held her, feeling that gnawing sense of dread which was becoming harder and harder to ignore. It was the same as when you could taste the energy in the air before a storm came, and as he cast his eye towards the heavens to the deep bruise coloured thunderheads, he thought a storm was a very real possibility.

“You should get moving,” He said, holding her at arm's length. “Looks like the weather is about to turn.”

Angeline looked up to those same purple thunderheads, and for a second, Billy was sure he could see the same uncertainty in her that he felt.

“Go on, get a move on,” He said, forcing himself to smile as he opened the car door for her.

“I'll call you when we get there,” She said as she climbed behind the wheel.

“I don't have much charge on my phone, so I'll make sure I don't use it until I hear from you.”

She nodded, and he wanted to tell her he loved her until he thought of her writhing underneath that fat old man at the Christmas party, and the words wouldn't come.

“I'll call you as soon as the power company gets in touch. Have a safe trip.”

He closed the car door and watched as she pulled on her seat belt. Tyler was heavy-eyed in his safety seat, so Billy decided it was best not to disturb him. Angeline gave him a last furtive look, then drove the car in a lazy circle, and headed slowly down the dusty road snaking away from the house. She waved as she went, and he responded in kind, ignoring the greasy roll of his stomach as his discomfort grew.

The first spot of rain touched his cheek and spotted his shirt as the thunderheads continued to build overhead. Not only was there going to be a storm, it looked like it might be a bad one. Billy sighed

and walked back towards the house, hoping the time away from his wife might help him to make some sense of what he wanted from life, and more importantly, if Angeline was a part of it.

Chapter Two

~I~

The novelty of having the house to himself lasted for all of half an hour. At first, the lack of Tyler's screaming and the whirlwind of chaos that went with him was bliss, but that quickly waned into boredom, and now, a little less than an hour after Angeline had driven away, he was feeling the effects of being alone. His isolation had been put to bed, for the time being at least, ideas of asking for a divorce. He walked through the house and out into the garden. The clouds seemed to have actually broken up a little, and although the sun was putting up a valiant fight, he suspected the thunderheads would eventually win. He held his breath and listened. Apart from the chatter of birdsong, there was silence. He watched as his shadow faded away as the clouds once again covered the sun, and another few drops of rain fell. He could taste the storm in the air, and suspected it could be a bitch. Struggling to shake off the feeling of isolation, he went back inside the house and walked through the rooms. Their wedding photograph was on the fireplace in the living room, and although he saw it every day, he picked it up and for the first time really looked at it.

It was plain to see they were both much happier. Angeline's blue eyes bright and full of hope, her smile wide and natural. He stood beside her, proud in his suit, his hair back then showing less of the flecks of gray that now littered his sideburns. He compared the photograph to his reflection in the glass, and even in its murky half transparency saw the extra frown lines and tension in his face that were absent from his wedding picture. Although time had been kind to Angeline, it seemed to have kicked him squarely in the face.

He set the photo back on the mantle, disassembled Tyler's cushion fort, and flopped down onto the sofa, lying across its full length. His eyes were heavy, and the silence which had bothered him so much earlier now soothed him. He glanced at the window, and could see a few streaks of rain were appearing on the glass. Stifling a yawn, he closed his eyes, only intending to rest them for a moment.

He was asleep within minutes.

~II~

Something pulled him out of his nightmare. He awoke with a start and for a moment, was unsure where he was. The rain drove against the window, and the room had grown murky. The ghost of his

dream lingered in his mind as he rubbed his eyes.

In it, Angeline was with Tyler, driving towards her mother's house. The storm that had been threatening was in full force, and the rain drove hard against the blacktop. He observed all of this from the passenger seat of the car and yet, he couldn't move, nor did Angeline acknowledge his presence. She was driving too fast, squinting out of the window as she tried to navigate the vehicle. He wanted to call out to her, but he couldn't open his mouth. When he looked in the wing mirror, he could see it was sewn shut with thick black cotton. Tyler started to cry, and already distressed, Angeline lost focus, passing his favorite toy between the seats to him in the back. Once again, Billy tried desperately to call out, but his stitched up lips would only let him murmur. Angeline veered into the opposite lane, not realising until she heard the desperate horn of the eighteen-wheeler, which was racing towards her head on. She had tried to swerve, but the road was wet, and the eighteen-wheeler smashed into the rear corner of the car at over sixty miles an hour, sending it flipping across the highway and into the ditch on the opposite side like paper caught in the wind. As was the way with dreams, Billy experienced the crash both from inside the car and out at the same time and now, to the backdrop of shattered glass and crumpled metal, he was free to scream.

The broken remains of the car came to rest on its roof in a ditch by the road, which was filling with water as the storm continued to rage. He could only watch on helplessly and unscathed as his bloody and bruised wife struggled to unpin herself from the wreckage. Her face was now only inches above the rising waterline. He was a disembodied passenger, part of the dream but at the same time not. His sons' name flashed in his mind, but he couldn't bring himself to check the back seat, knowing he wouldn't be able to cope with what he would see there. He watched as the water filled the car and covered Angeline's face, sending her into spasms as she struggled to free herself. It was then he had been jarred awake.

His state of confusion was broken by another sound, this time, one in the real world, a sharp rat-a-tat-tat of someone knocking on the door. He realised as he stumbled to his feet that this was the sound which had initially pulled him out of his nightmare, and for that, he was grateful. Billy jogged to the door and swung it open.

Pale gray overalls filled his field of vision. It was only when he craned his neck that he saw the full scale of the man from Trans Energy. Rain dripped off his black hair, and his piggy eyes were harsh and staring, his skin waxy and pocked with old acne scars. The man was huge, at least six and a half feet tall and well over three hundred pounds. He filled the entire door frame. As Billy gawped, the man removed the red pencil he had been chewing on from the corner of his mouth.

"Name's Grant," He said, pointing to his chest, where, indeed, his name was embroidered in a tatty red font. "Power Company sent me. You need a fix, right?"

He had a southern drawl, Texas maybe, and something inside Billy told him to be cautious.

"Uh yeah," He mumbled, still trying to rid the vivid dream from his memory. "Come in."

The man nodded and entered, ducking under the door frame. He looked even more immense now he was inside the house. The man slipped the chewed up pencil back into his mouth and looked around the house.

“Breakers in the basement?” He asked, staring at Billy with those harsh, probing eyes.

“Yeah, it’s this way,” Billy said as he led the way to the kitchen. The man followed, the sound of his heavy work boots echoing on the wooden floor.

The basement was accessed through the kitchen, and Billy stood aside and showed the man the door.

“There it is. You want a torch?”

The man shook his head.

“I sniffed a cunts bicycle seat,” He said in reply as he unclipped his own much bigger, much more sturdy torch from his belt and opened the basement door.

Billy could only stare and try to figure out if he had either misheard or imagined what Grant from Trans Energy had just said.

The man went on as normal, as if the profanity had never left his lips, and contented himself with rolling the pencil to the opposite side of his mouth as he flicked the flashlight on and shined the beam down the steps.

“Okay, sir,” He said. “I’ll go check things out and see if I can get you back up and running.”

He did not refer to the other thing he had said, and Billy was beginning to wonder if he had perhaps misheard, or even imagined it. He had after all, been shocked out of his sleep and what had been a very vivid, and disturbing dream. His brain could simply be confused. Still, as he watched the hulking engineer duck his head under the door frame and descend into the basement, he couldn’t think of anything else he could have actually said.

I sniffed a cunts bicycle seat

It was pretty cut and dry, and that greasy rolling in his stomach returned. He crossed the kitchen and filled the kettle, placing it on the hob of the cooker, and lit the gas with a match. They had invested in an old-fashioned steel kettle after the first couple of power outages, which had been a semi-regular occurrence. It was one of those which whistled when the water was boiled, and although Angeline laughed every time he said it, Billy truly believed his drinks tasted better when made in this more traditional way. He flicked his eyes towards the open cellar door, which resembled a gaping mouth, and endured another roll of the stomach.

“Hey, uh, can I get you a drink or anything?” Billy called into the dark. He half expected some kind of twisted reply, perhaps a repeat of what had been said when he offered his torch, but the response that came back was perfectly normal.

“I would love a coffee if that’s okay sir?”

“No problem,” Billy replied, feeling stupid at his own paranoia. The man was perfectly safe, and

maybe the only reason for Billy's discomfort was just his unusual size. That combined with the dream and the infidelity of his wife had made him paranoid. As for what he thought he had heard, he was willing to dismiss it as a mistake on his part. He heard the heavy boots ascending the steps, and turned towards the door.

He had intended to ask the man if he wanted milk or sugar with his drink and froze, watching in sheer disbelief at the sight in front of him.

The man from Trans Energy was naked. He was still wearing his boots and tool belt, but that was all. It was akin to brain freeze, because Billy couldn't move, or think or do anything. The man strode across the room, unconscious of his exposed body, and sat at the kitchen table, the wooden chair groaning in protest.

"I can't fix it from here," He said pleasantly, flashing a broad smile. "I'll need to go pick up some parts and repair it at the generator. Is it out back there?"

Billy nodded, still unable to speak. The man either had no idea, or didn't care he was naked, and either option not only disgusted Billy, it frightened him. He would have stood there forever, frozen by fear and repulsion were it not for the whistle of the kettle.

"Uh, I think that's done sir." The man said.

"Yeah, yeah of course," Billy replied. His tongue felt too big for his throat, the words seeming to take an age to form. Thankfully, he went into some kind of autopilot, preparing the drinks as his naked house guest waited. Billy set the cup in front of the man, along with the milk and sugar without dropping anything, even though his hands were shaking. All the while, his guest waited obliviously and in complete disregard for his nakedness. Billy sat on the seat opposite, his eyes flicking to the door and escape.

"Thanks for the drink, friend." The man said as he began spooning sugar into his cup. Billy watched as he tipped spoonful after spoonful into his coffee. He counted thirteen before the man eventually stopped stirring and took a slurping sip.

"Ahh, that's good. Thanks."

Billy wanted to demand the man leave. There was obviously something wrong with him mentally, and he didn't want to trigger any kind of reaction.

"How is it looking down there?" Billy said, forcing himself to look his house guest in the eye and ignore his hairy, fleshy body.

"I can fix it. I need to kill some sluts and Gibberbombs and get a couple of new components for the generator. It's a straightforward fix."

Billy felt the hairs on his arms stand up on end. This time, there was no mistake, no chance he had misheard. The man he had let into his house was obviously mentally ill, and potentially dangerous. They sipped their drinks in silence.

The man slurped down the rest of his drink, set his cup on the table, and wiped his chin with the

back of his forearm.

“That hit the spot. Thanks, buddy.”

“No problem.” A numb Billy replied.

“This is a nice place. Seems quiet way out here in the middle of nowhere.”

“Yeah, we like it.”

“I bet those Squeakers and Moonglobbers don’t bother you out here do they?”

Billy shook his head, having no idea what Squeakers or Moonglobbers were. All he knew was that he wanted to get as far away from this horrible man as he could. Until then, he would play the game.

“Looks like it’s almost over.” The man said with an ugly grin, interrupting Billy’s thoughts.

“What do you mean?” Billy said, gripping the arms of the chair as panic surged through him.

“The rain, it’s just about done.” The man replied as he pointed a grubby finger towards the window.

Billy followed his gaze to see the rain had indeed slowed to a gentle drizzle and dusk was coming. The thought of being alone in the house under any circumstances with this deranged man was enough. To think about it after dark was something else entirely.

The naked man broke wind.

The sound was sharp and disgustingly loud against the bare wood of the seat. He didn’t acknowledge it at all, and it took all of Billy’s will to fight off his repulsion and keep a neutral expression as the awful stench reached him.

“It’s getting dark,” Billy said, choosing his words carefully. “Will the power be on before then?”

“Oh, it will all be over by then, don’t you worry.”

There was nothing sinister in the way he said it, but Billy was horrified by the predatory way in which he smiled as the words left his mouth. There was silence as they stared at each other, which was broken by the vibration of Billy’s phone on the kitchen table. He looked at it, then at the man.

“Mind if I get that?”

“It’s your phone and your house chief. I’m just the repair guy.” He replied, standing up and giving Billy a view which would have made him bring up his breakfast if he had eaten any.

“I’ll grab my stuff and get right to work.” he added, then headed back into the basement.

Billy answered the phone, the motion of doing so left him feeling lethargic and detached.

“Hey buddy, what’s going on?” The voice on the other end of the line said.

He had expected it to be Angeline telling him she had arrived safely. Instead, it was his friend Alex. They had known each other for seven years, and it was actually Alex who had suggested to Billy about making a move out to the country to start afresh.

Billy hadn’t taken much convincing the change in scenery was exactly what the two of them had needed in order to try to fix their splintered marriage, and as it was a problem he had the power to fix, he had made moving his sole obsession.

“Hey man, you there?” Alex repeated, pulling Billy’s attention back to the present.

“Yeah... yeah, sorry, I’m here.”

Alex started to talk, just shooting the shit, completely oblivious to what was going on. Billy interjected with the occasional response. A yes. A no. A murmur of agreement. All the while, he kept his eyes on the open basement door.

As soon as he leaves, call the police.

Billy didn’t often agree with his inner voice, however on this occasion, they were both on the same page. No matter how he tried to justify it, the strange man in his cellar clearly had issues, and Billy certainly had no intention of confronting him. That, after all, was a job for the local law enforcement. He conceded, however, having someone like Alex around couldn’t harm. He half tuned back into what his friend was saying, then drifted off again when he heard it was some small talk about a fishing trip he and his brother had recently been on. Billy instead watched the basement door and waited for his unwanted guest to emerge and leave, so he could alert the authorities and get his home back. Already it felt tainted and violated, and he had decided no matter what happened, he would throw the chair the man’s naked body had been in contact with away long before Angeline and Tyler came back home.

“Hey, man.” Billy interrupted, realising it was the first thing he had said during the entire conversation.

“Yeah?”

“Do you think you could come over? I could use your help with something here.”

“Uh, I guess, what do you need?”

“I think I have a problem here that I could use your help with.”

“What kind of problem?” Alex asked, sensing the tension in Billy’s voice.

“I can’t talk about it on the phone. Can you come over?”

“I’ll be there in twenty. I’m on the bike, though, the damn car blew a gasket.”

“Yeah, no problem just put it around the side of the house when you get here.”

“What’s going on over there pal?”

Billy was about to give him the short version of what had happened so far when the man from Trans Energy re-emerged from the basement. He was thankfully dressed, and could almost be a normal, if oversized person. Billy, of course, knew different. He had witnessed it for himself. The man hovered, waiting patiently to get Billy’s attention.

“Just a second buddy,” Billy said, covering the receiver with his palm and looking at the hulking man by the cellar door. Now he was dressed, he immediately seemed less frightening and intimidating, and Billy was beginning to feel stupid that the man had spooked him so much.

“I need to head out and get those parts to fix the generator,” He said as he took the chewed up pencil out of the breast pocket of his overalls and slipped it into the corner of his mouth. “I shouldn’t be too long.”

“No problem, thanks again.” Billy heard himself say, still struggling to deal with the situation. “I’ll show you out,” He added, trying not to sound too keen or eager.

“Oh, that’s okay sir. I’ll show myself out. You go ahead and finish your call.”

Billy nodded, noting even despite the nakedness and speaking gibberish, ‘Grant’ from Trans Energy had impeccable manners.

Billy exhaled as the man walked down the hallway, his boots echoing through the empty house. His relief didn’t last for long, as he heard the man turn and walk back towards the kitchen. He popped his head around the corner of the door and smiled.

“Oh, also sir, before I forget, just to let you know if you leave or call the police whilst I’m gone, I’ll gut that wife and kid of yours.”

Billy’s arms fell to his sides and his legs buckled. Somehow he remained upright but was powerless to do anything but stare and endure the tight feeling in his stomach, which was now doing dizzy somersaults rather than just rolling with unease. The man was waiting for something, his eyebrows raised and questioning.

He wanted confirmation that Billy understood.

Somehow, he managed to nod his head.

The man’s piggy eyes shifted to the phone clutched in Billy’s hand, and again, without a word, he knew what was expected of him. He ended the call, barely hearing his friend asking if he was still there. He tossed the phone on the table and sat down hard. The man from Trans Energy seemed satisfied and turned back towards the hallway. He started to whistle, a tune that was maddeningly familiar, but one Billy could not quite place. The sound of his boots grew quiet, the door opened and closed and Billy was left alone.

CHAPTER THREE

~I~

He wasn’t sure how long he had been sitting there at the kitchen table. His brain felt as if it was overfilled, stuffed with hundreds of thousands of thoughts, emotions and ideas trying to fight for his attention. The only thing he could concentrate on were those words, uttered with such calm and pleasant indifference.

If you leave or call the police whilst I’m gone, I’ll gut that wife and kid of yours.

He looked at his phone sitting on the table, and although he desperately wanted to call Angeline, he knew he couldn’t. If he did, he was certain the man from Trans Energy would know. The rain had started to tap at the windows again, and as Billy glanced outside, he noted the best of the day was long

gone, giving the house a shadowy murkiness which only added to his unease.

Whenever he had watched movies or read books in the past, he always used to imagine himself as the hero, the go-to guy when shit hit the fan. He was finding when real life presented such a horrifying situation as the one he was currently in, he was in no way cut from the hero cloth. In truth, he could barely function on a basic level, and felt as if he was slowly coming apart at the seams. Talk of Oglebonkers, Squeakers and Moonglobbers made no sense to him. Whatever they were, they seemed important to the man who had invaded his home. The ball in his stomach cavity clenched a little bit more, and he found himself, once again, looking again at the mobile phone lying face down on the table.

He was seriously considering trying to call the police. Surely, there was no way the man could know if he did, as he had been gone for some time.

It could be a trick. He could be outside watching you right now.

Billy didn't like that idea, and let his eyes slide towards the rain streaked kitchen window and the ever deepening gloom beyond. There were certainly plenty of places out there to hide, although someone of the Trans Energy man's size would find it difficult to remain concealed.

Unless he's not working alone.

That idea hadn't dawned on him, and he half wished he hadn't thought of it at all. Like it or not, it was true. It was more than plausible he could have an accomplice, someone equally as deranged who was out there right now, watching the place. With calling the police out of the question, he considered his other options.

He could, of course, just run for it, but he knew deep down his conscience would never allow it, even though a horrified part of him was considering it as a viable option. Could he leave his wife and child to a fate at the hands of this overweight, mentally unstable giant? He immediately told himself there was no way it would ever happen, the little voice in his head reminded him that it wasn't too long ago he was questioning his love for Angeline anyway, and maybe life without her wouldn't be so bad.

And what about Tyler?

He waited to see what his inner monolog would make of that particular bombshell, and when no answer came, he knew his decision had been made for him. He would have to do whatever it took to defend his home and protect his family.

~II~

There were two guns in the house. The first was an old Winchester rifle which hung above the fireplace in the study. Although it was functional, Billy had no ammo for it. The other gun was a 9mm pistol he had purchased on a whim ten years earlier. He had only fired it once, but it had a small

amount of ammunition, and would be his best chance at defending himself if things got out of hand. The gun was upstairs on the top shelf of the walk-in bedroom closet. He took a deep breath and stood, resisting the temptation to look outside into the gloom as he walked through the kitchen and upstairs, trying as best he could to keep casual and calm. Somehow, his shaky appendages carried him safely to the bedroom. He opened the closet, reaching past the old photo albums and spare blankets, he removed the dusty shoebox, and went and sat on the bed where he opened the lid. Suddenly, as he stared at the chrome of the weapon shimmering in the gloom, everything seemed so much realer somehow. It dawned on him that he might have to take another man's life, and just to think about it made him nauseous. When it came down to it, Billy understood his primary job as a husband was to ensure his family's safety. The bizarre man from Trans- Energy had made the conscious decision to enter their home and threaten his family, and so would have to deal with whatever consequences came from it.

He took the box of ammunition from the shoebox, wishing it was a little heavier. His suspicions there weren't many rounds left were confirmed when he removed the lid.

There were four bullets left.

It would have to do. Although his only experience of firing the weapon had been during a singular visit to the firing range, the man from Trans Energy was a pretty big target, and he was sure if it came down to it, he could make sure at least one bullet hit its intended destination. Billy was afraid, the feeling was unlike anything he had ever experienced before. It left a thick taste in his throat, and the somersaults his stomach had been performing when the whole ordeal began had now subsided, leaving his innards feeling like a tight, compressed ball. With the weapon loaded, he stood and tucked the gun down the front of his jeans and covered it with his t-shirt, but it was too obvious and uncomfortable, and it would restrict his movements. He recalled every action movie he had ever seen, and instead of the front, he tucked the gun into the back of his jeans instead. This time, it was both concealed and secure, and even though he felt grossly out of his depth, he was determined not to let himself be intimidated. He glanced to the window, trying as best he could to ignore the growing gloom of the coming night. Other than the torch which was downstairs on the kitchen table, he had no other means to generate light. Why hadn't they bought candles? How many times had they walked right passed them in the store and not bothered to pick any up for situations like this one? Of course, it was easy to say now. At the time when they were trying to work out their finances, keep an eye on Tyler and the conversation between themselves civil, such things as candles were an easy oversight.

He dismissed it as best he could, ignoring his pallid, haggard reflection, made a conscious effort to will away his frustrations and force his body to relax. He couldn't afford to give his intruder even the slightest hint anything was amiss. He ran a hand through his hair and tried to be casual as he headed back downstairs, pausing on his way to flush the toilet in the en-suite bathroom. He wasn't entirely convinced there was anyone out there watching the house, of course, but he wasn't willing to

take the risk.

Even though he had only been away for a few minutes, when he walked back downstairs, the lack of light was alarming. The entire house was now cast in a perpetual gloom, and the shadows were deep and wide, spreading across the walls and growing out of the corners as they devoured the room. He walked down the hall, passed the sitting room and into the kitchen, and sat back at the table. The silence was absolute. It weighed heavy, and even the house, which often made noises as it settled, was deathly quiet. Outside, the sky was shifting from light blue to dark. Within the hour, it would be full night.

Once again, his eyes fell on his discarded phone on the table. He picked it up and opened the menu, grateful for the pale blue glow of light from the screen. He navigated to his contacts list and scrolled down to Angeline's number. It would be so easy to call her. Or even send a text. At least, he would be spared the agony of the current situation, stuck in a limbo where he had no idea what was happening or what was the right thing to do. He half suspected the crazy man from Trans Energy was bluffing and was hoping to achieve the exact outcome that he had – leaving Billy a prisoner in his own home who was trying to second guess every situation and unable to commit to a decision. The truth of it was, although he had to hope the crazed man was lying, something in his gut told him he was telling the truth.

There was a knock at the door, three sharp rappings which sounded deafening in the stillness of the house. Instantly, all of Billy's attempts at retaining his composure were dissolved, and outright terror surged through his body.

The man from Trans Energy was back.

The knock came again, louder this time. Billy didn't move. He couldn't. Every fiber of his being told him not to answer the door, and to do so would be madness.

"Hey, man, you in there?" The muffled voice shouted from outside.

Relief replaced fear, and Billy ran for the door and swung it open.

Alex looked puzzled, an expression that morphed into fear when he saw his friends' haggard appearance in the gloom.

"What the hell happened to you?" Alex asked.

"You shouldn't have come here." Billy croaked, his eyes darting as he glared into the gloom.

"You look like shit. Are you okay?"

Billy nodded, then ushered his friend into the house.

"Come on, before he gets back."

"Before who gets back? What the hell happened here Billy?"

He didn't answer. Instead, he headed to the kitchen as Alex followed.

"Why are you sitting here in the dark?" Alex asked as he sat down in the same seat the man from Trans Energy had used. Billy said nothing and sat opposite, trying to rationalise his thoughts and get

them into some kind of order. He knew he must look crazy because that was exactly how he felt. Until the man from Trans Energy had knocked on the door, Billy had always considered Alex to be a 'big' guy. Now, though, he couldn't help notice how small he was in comparison. He was still an imposing figure, of course, all forearms and shoulders and an expert in martial arts to boot. His skin was the colour of cocoa beans and his dark eyes shone with a sharp intelligence.

His friend waited for an explanation, his eyes sharp and attentive despite the concerned frown he now wore.

"What's going on here Billy?" He asked.

As the gloom deepened, Billy took a deep breath and told Alex everything that had happened.

~III~

He had hoped telling it would make him feel better but was dismayed to find it had no effect other than making it even more real. Alex had listened without interrupting, nodding occasionally as the story unfolded.

"This guy's a nut, you know that, right?" He said when Billy had finished speaking. "You have to call the police."

"He said no cops. He was clear on that." Billy said, shaking his head.

"Look, man, this guy is fucking with you. He doesn't have Angeline or Tyler. He's just telling you that to keep you from leaving."

"No! He knew. How could he know about them otherwise?"

"It doesn't take a genius, man. Look at the fridge."

Billy craned his neck to see. The front was covered with drawings done by Tyler, held in place with magnets. There were also photographs there of the three of them as a family. Billy felt both relieved and stupid at the same time.

"My guess is, this guy saw the photos when he came in here and decided, for whatever reason, to fuck with you. Maybe he had a bad day at the office or something. He used a little bit of educated guesswork and let you do the rest."

"He sounded crazy, and then there was the way he came out of the cellar without clothes."

"The world is full of crazy people," Alex said with a shrug "That doesn't mean he's dangerous."

"Look, for the record, you are probably right. I just don't know what to do."

"I do," Alex said with a grin. "I'll speak to him, put this prick in his place. If you want him to leave, I'll make him leave."

"I don't want to mix you up in all this Alex."

"Hey, you were there for me when I needed help. I'm not much good for anything except fighting. Lucky for you, that's the one thing I'm damn good at."

“I don’t want this to break out into some brawl. This is still my house.”

“This isn’t about brawling,” Alex said, his teeth an ocean of white against his skin. “This is about control. About laying down ground rules.”

“He’s a big guy Alex. Really big.”

Alex shrugged. “I fought big guys before, and in my experience, speed and technique always beats size.”

“Are you sure you can take him?”

“Like candy from a baby. Let’s see what this prick has to say for himself when he comes back. I guarantee the asshole will back down and leave.”

“What if you're wrong?”

“It still doesn’t matter.”

“Why not?”

“Because even if it comes down to fighting, I’m the best. Relax buddy, we’ll have this all resolved soon.”

Billy didn’t like the look in his friend’s eye. It was too cocky, too overconfident.

He doesn’t know what we’re up against here.

“Don’t beat yourself up about going along with it,” Alex said. “Hell, I think I would have done the same, especially with the house in darkness like this. That alone would be enough to freak a man out. Give her a call, and then call the cops. I would bet he is long gone from here and won’t even come back now he managed to scare the shit out of you. Either way, I’ll stick around just in case he does try to get aggressive.”

“He didn’t seem aggressive.”

“That’s because he thought he was in control. It could be a different story if he thinks you have seen through his prank.”

Billy nodded. Although everything Alex had said made perfect sense, he wasn’t entirely convinced. Still, the implications he might have actually ended up shooting a man because he had been spooked by the dark weighed heavy, and he just wanted an end to the entire ordeal. He snatched up the phone and dialled Angeline’s number.

He let it ring until it went to voicemail, then hung up without leaving a message and tried again with the same result. He looked across the table at Alex.

“Maybe she’s driving. Don’t panic.” Alex said. Although the words were expressed with conviction, his expression had changed to more closely mirror Billy’s own.

He was worried.

“She should be there by now.” Billy said, dialing the number for the third time. “She should have called to check in....”

He was desperate for her to answer as memories of his earlier nightmare came flooding back. He

shoved the phone into his pocket and held his head in his hands.

“She always answers her phone. She never leaves it...” He muttered.

“Hey, you need to take a breath and get your shit together.”

Billy nodded and tried to do just that. It was the thing about Alex he liked the most. He was a no-nonsense friend. He said it how it was, always blunt and to the point.

“Thanks, man, this whole thing has me really freaked out.”

“Just call the police. Tell them about this guy....”

Alex was interrupted by the sound of the van approaching the house. The two friends looked at each other.

“That him?” Alex asked.

Billy nodded. He wished he had been given more time to explain to Alex because as he watched his friend, it wasn't fear he saw but anticipation, and perhaps just a little excitement.

“Hide!” Billy blurted as he heard the engine of the van switch off.

“I'm not hiding. I'm gonna confront this guy.”

“Please, we don't know for sure he's lying.”

“We don't know he's not. The more you comply, the more power he has over you. I know about shit like this, it's like before a fight, when an opponent is trying to intimidate you.”

“This isn't a fucking cage fight.” Billy hissed, gripping the edges of the dining table as he heard the dim sounds of the man from Trans Energy whistling that annoyingly familiar tune as he approached the house.

“We need to stand up to this guy, show him we aren't afraid,” Alex said, standing and staring down the hallway at the front door.

“I am afraid!” Billy said, and that at least, got Alex's attention. “It's my family, it's a risk I'm not willing to take. Please, just get out of sight until we know what's going to happen.”

Alex nodded. “You're right. I'm sorry man.”

He looked around and then headed for the cellar door. “I'll be listening. If things sound like they are getting crazy, I'm coming out.”

Billy nodded, only half listening himself. Alex lingered for another few seconds then walked quickly into the basement, fearlessly heading down into the darkness and out of sight. A split second later, the front door opened, and those heavy work boots made their way down the hall.

The man from Trans Energy was carrying a large box as he came back into the kitchen. His face was damp with sweat, which glistened in the gloom.

“I got all the parts for the repair job. It could take a couple of hours you....”

He set the box on the kitchen counter and whipped his head towards Billy, who almost screamed outright. The man's expression was a terrifying rictus of hate and disgust.

“SNIFFERBLOBS! YOU HAVE SNIFFERBLOBS IN HERE!” He screamed, taking two quick steps

towards the table and tipping it aside, sending its contents spilling across the kitchen. Billy couldn't move. He was frozen in place as the man strode towards him and grabbed him by the shirt, leaning close.

"You brought Snifferblobs in here! I knew you had squeakers!" He hissed, his disgusting breath almost making Billy retch.

His mind screamed at him to do something, to say something, but he couldn't move, or react. He could only stare wide-eyed into this deranged man's eyes and wait for death. The small of his back was sweaty where the handle of the gun pressed against it, but Billy was simply too afraid to reach for it.

"Make mine silly won't you? I'll show you and those squeakers. I'll show you all!" He cackled as he released his grip on Billy and reached down to his tool belt, unhooking the pipe wrench.

"You can't keep them. Good pets they don't make. Don't you see they keep breeding?"

There was an almost pleading tone to the man's voice as he hit the business end of the wrench against his grubby, open palm.

"I'll show you, I'll show you all!" He cackled as he released his grip on Billy.

"I'll show you, I'll show you all!"

"Hey!" Alex said confidently.

The man didn't immediately turn towards Alex, but locked eyes with Billy and smiled secretively, as if the two were in league against Squeakers, Snifferblobs and whatever else was troubling the deranged man. He slowly turned towards where Alex stood at the entrance to the basement, then smiled at him, speaking in a whisper.

"I could smell you, squeaking Snifferblob. I could smell you bad. Ha!"

Billy was watching, and although he couldn't be sure due to the poor light, he thought he could finally see fear on his friends face.

"Look pal, I don't want any trouble here. Leave now, and we don't have to take this any further." Alex said, holding his hands out palms up and trying to sound confident, the register of his voice was a little too high.

"Don't think you can fool me, Snifferblob. Remember what you did to my daddy and his good egg nest?" The man shrieked, fidgeting from foot to foot as he took a cautious step towards Alex.

"Look pal, I have no idea about any of that. My friend here would like you to leave. I do too."

The man from Trans Energy turned towards Billy, his face betrayed and hurt. He resembled a spoiled child who had just been told 'no' for the first time.

"He wouldn't say that we are going to fix the genny and get rid of you squeaker pests. Tell him it's not true!" He barked at Billy, who couldn't answer. He was too afraid to do anything but watch.

"Hey!" Alex said, growing more confident. The man turned back towards him. He was close to tears, his bottom lip trembling as he glared at Alex.

“We were going to kill the squeakers, you damn Snifferblobs always get in the way,” He whined, sounding more and more like a child than a giant of a man wielding a pipe wrench. Billy could sense a definite shift in the balance of power, and it seemed Alex was now in control.

“Look this has obviously been some kind of a mistake. There are no squeakers or... anything else here. You made a mistake.”

“No.” The man said, shaking his head.

“Last chance. If you don’t get out of here now, I’ll be forced to make you leave.”

“Sniffers can’t fly. Every mother knows that eh?”

“Take it easy. Calm down and put down the wrench.”

“No, I won’t do that.”

“Come on, we are all friends here, right?”

The man hesitated, licking his lips as he flicked his gaze from Alex to Billy.

“I... I guess so, yeah. Why not?”

“Okay, that’s good. This is a bad time. No visitors today.”

“He called. He called the number for a fix.” The man said, pointing at Billy.

“He obviously made a mistake.” Alex locked eyes with Billy beyond the man, then turned his attention back to him.

“Let’s call it a night. You have earned a day off work, right?”

“Well, I could use a break...” the man mumbled, scratching at his greasy, matted hair. “I haven’t been sleeping much lately.”

“Then just go home. We can manage fine enough here.”

The man hesitated, and chewed on a filthy fingernail as he tried to decide what to do.

“You Snifferblobs would tell me anything. Devious, devious creatures. Not like us, not like us.”

“Just leave. Go home, get some rest.” Alex said, trying to soothe and coax the man. “Put the wrench down, and leave.”

“I made a mess now.” The man mumbled, glancing towards the table, which was on its side by the sink.

“That’s okay, we’ll take care of it,” Alex said, taking a cautious step forward.

“You promise me you aren’t lying Snifferblob? Swear on your whore mother?” The man said, narrowing his eyes.

“I swear, I’m not lying. I don’t want any trouble.”

Billy watched the man deflate as his arms fell to his sides.

“I’m sorry,” He said, half turning towards Billy. “This Snifferblob of yours has the devil’s tongue!”

Billy saw it coming, but couldn’t react in time. The man from Trans Energy whirled around and swung the wrench towards Alex. Only his fighter’s training gave him the reaction speed enough to

throw a defensive arm up towards his face, but bone was never going to beat steel, and Alex's forearm shattered with a sickening crack. He roared in pain, staggering into the kitchen counter and sending plates and dishes crashing to the floor. The man took another step forward, closing in on Alex and leaving him nowhere to run. For all the confidence and bravado, he never stood a chance.

With his shattered arm hanging limply at his side, there was nothing he could do.

"Billy, help me!" He screamed, realising too late the danger he was in.

Come on legs, push up out of this chair.

Yep, in a minute chief.

Come on arms. Grapple this guy before he attacks your friend.

Right away boss. Just as soon as I get my head around all the crazy shit that is happening here.

He wanted to help, he really did, but his body seemed to be in protest because he could only sit there and stare open mouthed as the man went to work on his friend. Billy had once dropped a watermelon out of a bag when he was taking the shopping into the house, and the sound as the wrench connected with his friend's head was similar a sloppy, wet crunch. He expected Alex to scream, but other than a dull grunt, he remained silent as his skull was destroyed by the man.

"Filthy lying Snifferblob! Eat my breakfast with no mouth now haha!" He gibbered and cackled as he brought the wrench down time and time again, streaking the walls with blood which looked black in the darkness. When he was finished he stood, his overalls splattered with claret, his hands and arms the same. The fringe of his black hair had covered his eyes, and as he slicked it back into place, he left a bloody smear on his forehead. Breathing hard, he turned towards Billy, smiling broadly, as if expecting praise for his actions.

"You have to watch those Snifferblobs," He said, pointing the bloody wrench at Billy for emphasis. "Lies are all they know. Can you smell it?"

Billy could only smell his own sweat and the coppery undercurrent of fresh blood. He was too afraid to argue, and so he nodded.

"I thought he had you too. He would have eventually you know." The man said, shrugging his shoulders.

He was perfectly calm, and as he walked towards Billy he left bloody footprints behind. He lifted the table back into an upright position and slid it roughly back into place.

"Good news about the repair," He said as he grabbed the large box from the counter and set it on the table.

Billy was astounded by the way this man was calm, and the way he was acting as if nothing had happened, as he opened the lid to the box and started to rummage inside.

"Some of these parts were expensive, but I'll throw in killing the Snifferblob for free," He said, tipping a wink at Billy.

“Wha... where is my wife?” He heard himself say from some faraway disjointed place. He still couldn’t take his eyes from the pulpy, shattered remains of his friend who was in the corner, one arm, the broken one, leaning against the wooden paneling of the counter at a nauseatingly unnatural angle.

The man didn’t answer, instead, he went on looking through the box.

“You should have known better than to move to an area like this. Did you know Sniffers are rampant here? All they do is eat and fuck and breed.” He shook his head in disgust. “Awful things. You should think about moving if you don’t mind my say so sir.”

“Please... tell me my wife is okay.”

He paused, narrowed his eyes and looked at Billy.

“She isn’t a Snifferblob is she?” He asked, putting a bloody hand to the wrench in his belt, which was still matted with hair and clumpy flesh.

“No, no she isn’t.” Billy blurted. He swallowed with some effort and thought about the gun in his jeans.

“That’s good.” The man said, returning to rummaging through the box. “Because if she was, it would change this entire dynamic we have here. And I think we are heading towards having a great friendship, don’t you?”

Billy nodded, doing whatever he could to keep the man happy. He didn’t like the way the conversation was heading, however and decided to try and steer it in a different direction.

“So, what’s in the box?” He asked.

“Ah!” The man said, clapping his bloody hands together. “I’ll show you. These are the parts I need to fix the generator.”

He set out the items on the table, and Billy found he wasn’t nearly as shocked as he would have expected. Afraid, yes, but not shocked.

The first item was what looked to be two rusty old cans taped together with an antennae of sorts made from a short branch. Next was a square of long grass complete with earth. The next item was the head of a deer. It appeared to have been roughly severed, and it made a wet sound when it was set on the table. An hour ago, such a thing would have caused revulsion. Billy barely gave it a second glance.

“Oh!” The man added, flashing a sick grin. “I got you something to help with your infestation problem.”

“Infestation?”

“You know, the Snifferblobs,” He whispered, jabbing a thumb towards Alex’s corpse. “This will keep them away. Just put it out in front of your door before you go to bed and they won’t come in.”

He lifted the object out of the box with two hands and set it on the table, and this time, Billy did react, pushing himself away from it.

It was a human head. One which, as he looked more closely at it, realised he recognised. It

belonged to their neighbour, Conwell, he with the red barn from down the road. His lower jaw was missing, and sturdy branches jammed into each hollow eye socket. Around the head, was an elaborate cage made of more branches and tied with string, which in turn connected to the branches jammed into the eye sockets of Billy's neighbour. Conwell's tongue had been nailed horizontally to the front of the makeshift cage, and bizarre markings, which could have been words, had been carved into it.

Billy's stomach flipped and threatened to eject its contents as the man from Trans Energy stood proudly by his creation.

"I hope you like it. It's not as detailed as I would have liked, but I wanted to finish it before dark. Everyone knows Snifferblobs are most active at night." He said with a shrug.

"Get it away from me!" Billy blurted, unable to tear his eyes away from the awful contraption.

"Why? What's wrong with it?" The Trans Energy man asked, sounding genuinely hurt.

"Just get it away, get it out of here!"

The man's bottom lip began to tremble, and he glared at Billy.

"Don't tell me you're one of those Snifferblob sympathisers?" He said, shaking his head putting a hand on the bloody wrench. "Don't make me tell my mother on you. You remember what she did last time!"

"What have you done with my wife?" The ferocity in which the words came even startled himself and the man took a step back.

"You are one of them aren't you? You and the Squeaker of a wife, spawning little Snifferblobs." The man grabbed at his head, fighting whatever inner conflict was going on in there.

Now he had recovered from the initial shock of what had been happening, Billy noticed just how dark it had become, and how the night had almost completely taken his house. He also realised he had to act, to do something. This man was obviously more than just disturbed. He had already killed two people, and probably more than that. Billy had never committed a crime, nor had he ever been arrested. He knew if he were to survive, he would have to kill this twisted man who had invaded his home.

The man was walking slowly towards him, his expression one of rage, betrayal and disgust rolled into one.

"All of you are the same, all of you hiding the Squeakers, the Sniffers. I bet you even mix with the Lungtangs and Cripodoops don't you?"

Billy's inner voice screamed at him to move, to use his knowledge of the layout of his home to his advantage, which could only be further assisted by the lack of light. He only hoped when he made his move, his legs would comply. His first task was to get past the hulking man who was now walking towards him.

"I should have known. You people are always the same."

He swept his arm across the table, sending its contents spilling onto the floor. Mr. Conwell's head

came to rest face down near the basement door. It was that event which triggered him into making his move. He launched towards the door, skirting past the giant man. Hoping for the element of surprise, he lurched towards the hallway. Just as he was sure he was going to make it, he slipped in the blood on the floor. He tried to right his balance, pitched forward and slammed his face into the granite counter, the corner catching him above the eyebrow. He went down hard, white flashes exploding in front of his eyes like a miniature fireworks display as he tried to regain his footing. He failed and fell to his knees, then rolled onto his side. The man from Trans Energy was smiling, and as Billy watched, he took the bloody wrench out of his belt.

“You are one of them aren’t you?” The man asked as he slowly approached.

Billy couldn’t answer, his brain was like mush, a thick soup which was taking too long to clear. He touched his forehead and when he looked at his fingers, they were coated in blood.

“I’m not what you think,” He mumbled, trying to compose his thoughts.

“You wouldn’t know if you were, mommy. He didn’t,” The man said, pointing the wrench at Alex’s corpse. “Not until I peeled him open and looked inside.”

“Please... don’t do this.”

“I need to see if you have a pure soul, and to do that, I need... to look... inside.” The man said, speaking slowly as if he were trying to convey some basic information to a child.

It was only then Billy remembered the gun. He reached around and pulled it out smoothly, aiming it at the man from Trans Energy, who stopped and smiled.

“I’ll use this, just back up!”

“No, you won’t.”

“I swear I’ll shoot you.”

I can see how your hand shakes. You won’t do it.” He said, taking two quick steps forward. Billy didn’t want to, that much was true. He had been left with no option. It was either kill or be killed, and he desperately wanted to live. The wrench wielding man was close, there was no way he could miss. He closed his eyes and squeezed the trigger.

Nothing happened.

Safety switch!

His inner monolog screamed at him to release it, but he knew there wouldn’t be time. He saw the flash of chrome as the wrench was swung towards him, catching him on his outstretched hand. Pain exploded through his wrist as the gun was launched down the hallway and into the darkness. Billy gritted his teeth and clutched his broken hand to his chest. He had never experienced the agony of a broken bone before, and with his wrist on fire, he stared helplessly up at the towering mass of flesh standing over him. He was grinning, his teeth barely visible in the darkness.

“I’m doing this to help you. I’ll peel you open quick and get that parasite out of you. I promise mommy, I really do.”

Billy was barely listening. All he could focus on was the wrench hanging limply in the man's massive hand. He wondered how long it would take for the pain to stop, and hoped it would be soon. His wrist throbbed and pulsed like a rotten tooth in need of extraction, although, despite it, he had somehow transcended beyond fear, beyond pain. He had reached a place of acceptance that his time was up. The Trans Energy man noticed it too because he widened his grin.

"Just relax, I'll make it quick," He said, and began to whistle that annoyingly repetitive tune. Billy tensed as the man reared back with the wrench.

With everything he could muster, Billy kicked out at the man's knee. It hadn't been pre-planned. In fact, there had been no thought about it at all. Something inside, perhaps some primal instinct to prolong life which lives within everyone, stirred and made his body react. Because Billy had no idea he was going to do it, his assailant didn't see it coming either and wailed painfully as Billy's boot connected solidly with the side of his kneecap. The blow would be enough to hurt anyone, but due to the immense size of his wrench wielding attacker, it was especially effective. As the knee Billy had kicked skidded from under him, the rest of his near four hundred pound frame, was for a moment, supported by just the one leg, which was both unprepared and ill-equipped to carry such a load. With a grunt, the man twisted and fell, crashing into the table, then onto the floor, his head hitting the wood hard enough to echo around the room. He let out a surprised grunt as the wrench skidded across the floor and came to rest by the blood streaked leg of Alex's body. Billy, however, barely gave his dead friend a second glance, and had already staggered to his feet and was making his way down the hall, his eyes scanning the gloom for the gun. Behind him, he could hear the grunting of the man from Trans Energy as he got to his feet and hobbled in pursuit.

Billy staggered down the hall, sliding across the wall and knocking photographs onto the floor. Behind him, the man was whistling as he followed. The door was just ahead. He was sure once he was outside, he could easily outrun the man, even with a broken hand. He just needed to get some distance from that wrench. He hurried to the door, fumbling at the handle with his left hand, his right useless. A task that should be incredibly simple felt alien to him. He didn't need to look over his shoulder because he could sense the man behind him.

It was the same instinct which made him kick out at the Trans Energy man's knee that alerted him to the danger. Instinctively, he ducked to the side a split second before the heavy wrench embedded itself into the door, splintering it with ease. Ignoring the fact his skull would have suffered the same fate had he not moved, he squeezed passed the man as he tried to free the wrench and ran upstairs. Even in the dark, he was familiar with the layout, which he supposed gave him a slight advantage. The hallway had four rooms leading off it. The tiny guest bedroom was first, then the bathroom. A little further down the hall was Billy's office, where just a few hours ago his only worry was finishing his presentation for work. Finally, at the end of the hall was the master bedroom. It was there he headed, trying to be as quiet as he could. He tried to remember exactly which floorboards creaked and which

doors made a sound when they were opened. He made a point of slamming the bathroom door closed as he passed, hoping it would act as a decoy before he entered the shadowy confines of the bedroom. He had no idea what he was going to do when he got there. He stared through the gloom, looking for somewhere he might be able to hide other than the horror movie cliché of under the bed or in the closet. It was then he realised he would have been better served hiding in the study. From there, he could break a window and drop down onto the porch roof, then down to the ground. Cursing his own stupidity, he doubled back intending to do just that, when he heard the creepy unhurried whistle and saw the ugly shadow draping across the wall as the man from Trans Energy slowly climbed the stairs.

~IV~

Billy crouched behind the bed. Although he wasn't exactly hiding as such, it felt good to have a solid object of some kind between himself and the man, who he could now see standing at the end of the hall. From this distance, he looked even more immense. His face thrown into ghoulish shadows which made his eyes look like bottomless wells and his mouth like the screaming maw of some unearthly creature. He was taking his time, whistling that maddeningly familiar tune as he stared into the gloom. It appeared he couldn't see Billy yet, perhaps due to his unfamiliarity with the layout of the house, or maybe through sheer blind luck. Trying to ignore the agony in his arm, Billy watched the man approach the guest bedroom, pushing the door open with the end of his wrench and glancing inside. It was no more than a box room, and it was obvious enough there was nowhere in there a person might hide. He turned his attention back to the hallway.

"You can't hide from me Snifferblob. I can smell you up here. You Squeakers are all the same. Pesticides are what you need. Well, I have justice for you, just like mother said I should."

He wasn't shouting, and to Billy that made it worse somehow. He was cool and calm, speaking with certainty and – more worryingly – absolute belief Billy was a Snifferblob – whatever the hell that meant. The man was obviously deranged, perhaps the victim of a violent upbringing or some kind of untreated mental illness. Whatever was wrong with him, his grasp on reality was dangerously skewed. The silence was broken by the sounds of boots on hardwood as the man slowly walked down the hall.

"I've already killed her you know, that wife of yours. She split open like ripe watermelon." He whispered, his voice carrying through the darkness of the house.

Billy knew its intention was to draw him out, but once again, fear had taken him, and he could only cower in the shadows and wait.

"Filthy Snifferblob whore wife," He growled as he pushed open the bathroom door. Once a Snifferblob, always a Snifferblob. You know that already, don't you?" He muttered as he moved on, making his way ever closer to Billy's hiding place. The study was up next, and because of its shape, Billy knew the man would have to go fully into the room to ensure he wasn't there. It was his best chance of escape, and he crawled as slowly as he dared through the darkness to the edge of the

bedroom door frame.

The man was now at the study door, and paused, tilting his head as he listened. Billy held his breath, sure he would give himself away somehow, that he would cough or scrape a wall. Angeline and Tyler flashed up in his mind's eye, and as cold as it felt, he pushed them aside. He couldn't deal with it right now. His entire reason for carrying on was in the hope they were alive and the freak in the hallway was either toying with him or so deluded that he really believed the things he was saying.

"Are you in there Sniffer?" The man cackled as he knocked on the study door. "Are you hiding in there, pissing and waiting to die?"

Billy tried to stay calm, which was easier said than done with his heart beating its own tune in his chest at a tempo way higher than he would have liked.

"Come on out of there Squeaker. Come to Grant."

Billy found it strange that the man stalking through his house had a name. He was sure he had, in fact, introduced himself by name when he first arrived.

"Name's Grant," He said, pointing to his chest, where, indeed, his name was embroidered in a tatty red font. "Power Company sent me. You need a fix, right?"

He wasn't Grant to Billy. He was just the man from Trans Energy, the one who had chosen him to inflict his reign of terror upon. A memory that had been long forgotten suddenly came to stark clarity in his mind, so clear and vivid he wondered how he could ever have forgotten it.

It was when he was a boy, back when his father had taken him to a turkey farm to choose a bird for thanksgiving that year. He remembered standing there beside his father, watching the turkeys gibber and gobble as they went obliviously about their business.

"Which one do you want to get Billy?" He had asked, watching his son carefully.

Billy remembered turning his attention back to the birds. Trying to choose one. There was one in particular that caught his eye. It was set apart from the others and had a strange skitter to its walk.

"That one." Billy had said, pointing to the bird with the gimp walk. "He looks like a Joey to me dad. What do you think?"

He remembered how his father's face had soured slightly, perhaps because he had underestimated how much his nine-year-old child understood.

"Oh, you can't give it a name son."

"Why not?"

"Because it makes it harder."

"What do you mean?"

"If you give it a name, it makes it harder to kill when the time comes."

He remembered looking at the bird in a different light, perhaps for the first time seeing it for the purpose it was intended. He recalled the guilt at choosing the fate for this animal he had chosen because he liked the quirky way in which it walked. He never considered that he had sentenced the

animal to death. His father had seen the doubt on Billy's face and smiled as he ruffled his hair with a cracked, calloused hand.

“Don't think of them as animal's son. Think of them as food. That's why we don't name them. We might keep them at the house for a couple of weeks, but come thanksgiving, that bird is gettin' its neck broke n' goin' in the oven.”

Billy never thought as he crouched there in his own bedroom, that the advice he received twenty-five years earlier would resonate now, but those wise words of his father, fit with his current plight perfectly.

“If you give it a name, it makes it harder to kill when the time comes.”

Billy made the conscious decision to not think of the intruder as 'Grant' or anything else which might humanise him. He was an animal, an insane thing dressed in a blood-drenched Trans Energy uniform which seemed hell bent on tearing him open to see if he had a Squeaker or Snifferblob inside him. An animal he would kill if he had to.

He watched as the man entered the study. Billy was grateful he hadn't bothered to tidy it of late, and it was going to mean his stalker would have to go inside and physically check he wasn't hiding in there amongst the accumulated crap.

He peeked around the corner in time to see the man disappear into the room. It was now or never. He took a second to compose himself and convince himself this was all real. This was no movie or video game. If he screwed up, he would die, of that he was now certain. He gripped the edge of the door frame and launched himself out of the room, charging down the hallway towards the steps. It was both exhilarating and horrifying to finally be doing something other than cower in the dark.

Look straight ahead. Concentrate on the goal.

It was sound advice. He charged past the study door, denying his urge to look and see how much time he might have. As with earlier, he sensed the man rather than saw him. A quick flash of silver entered his peripheral vision, and he instinctively flinched away. The wrench connected with his shoulder, missing his head only by inches. Pain exploded down his ribs as he careered off balance, his legs threatening to give way. He bounced off the wall, his momentum sending him pitching him towards the top of the stairs. He pinwheeled his good arm, trying desperately to keep his feet, but he knew he was going down. He couldn't stop, and fell head first down the stairs, rolling and crashing against the wall before landing on his side at the bottom. Fresh jolts of agony surged through him, his arm and shoulder now useless. Somehow, more on instinct than conscious thought, he scrambled to his feet, sucking air and ignoring the taste of blood in his throat. He stumbled into the front door, flailing at it with his one remaining good arm. The reassuring click as the door opened was, Billy thought, the greatest and sweetest thing he had ever heard. He wrenched open the door, ready to make his escape, and it was then he screamed. A raw pained sound which came from the pit of his stomach.

Two bodies hung from the porch, strung up by the neck with the Christmas tree lights Billy kept in

the garage. A woman and a small boy.

His family.

Tears blurred his vision, and he felt the air leave him, making him deflate as if he were some kind of punctured balloon. The fight had gone. His wife's green eyes were open and staring, her swollen tongue protruding from her mouth as she swayed on the porch except...

Angeline has brown eyes!

He wiped tears and snot from his face with the back of his good arm and as much as it was a harrowing sight, looked closer. The bodies did indeed belong to a woman and child, but it wasn't Angeline or Tyler. Now he had really been able to take a closer look, they didn't resemble them at all.

And why would they?

His inner monologue chimed in.

After all, they would have been long gone before this guy showed up.

The slimy, sick feeling in his stomach returned when he realised on countless occasions he could have escaped. He could have run away from this crazy man. His wife was safe and he could do that now, run to her and leave this freak behind, and yet... He looked at the dead woman and child hung from the porch. Sure enough, they weren't his wife or child, nevertheless, they were somebody's family. Somebody somewhere was waiting for them to get home, and now, because of the deranged freak who was lumbering down the stairs, they never would. He felt the change, it was as if a switch somewhere deep inside him had been flicked, and the flight instinct had switched to the other setting. The one where people did things outside of their nature. He wasn't stupid of course, and would have fought the instinct had he not seen the gun in the living room doorway.

The entire thought process had taken seconds. He glanced back into the house. The man from Trans Energy was still waddling down the stairs, favouring his damaged knee. He was still unhurried, still whistling. He was either supremely confident or too far gone to really know what was happening.

"Lucky escape there squeaky Squeaker," He said as Billy staggered towards the kitchen, snatching up the gun on his way and wondering if he would still be able to use it with his weaker left hand. His right was completely out of the question. He could feel his pulse pounding in his temples, and imagined he could hear the blood rushing through his veins. It was both the biggest high and most harrowing, horrifying experience in his life all rolled into one. He stood by the table, sparing a quick glance to the corpse of Alex slumped in the corner.

The man from Trans Energy entered the room, ignoring the gun that was pointed at him. He started to speak, but Billy had heard enough. In a single fluid motion, he flicked off the safety and fired.

Gnurk.

That was all the man had said before the room was filled with the deafening sound of gunfire. The top half of his face exploded in a shower of claret and bone, the other three bullets hitting him in the chest. He staggered backwards into the kitchen counter, then rolled off and down into the cellar, his

body making a tremendous noise as it crashed down into the dark. Streaks of blood and brain dripped down the back of the open cellar door as Billy fell to his knees in exhaustion, still trying to fire the weapon even though it was empty. Tears rolled down his cheeks and into the corner of his mouth, the salt mixing with the blood he could already taste.

Gnurk.

Billy wondered what it was he was about to say before he shot him in the face.

Gnurk.

It sounded like it belonged in the same bracket as Snifferblobs and Squeakers and all the other crazy shit the man had so passionately talked about. An emotion came over Billy he hadn't expected. He felt guilt and even sorrow for taking another man's life. Sure enough, people would say he did what he had to, and it was a case of live or die, but those people would be able to sleep at night. They wouldn't have to live with what had happened for the rest of their lives.

He carefully got to his feet and looked around the horrific scene in his kitchen. The police would need to be called. Statements taken. He was sure it would even make the news. The last thing he wanted was to have his picture plastered all over the television screen, but the fact was there were five dead bodies in his house, one of which he was responsible for.

A wave of nausea came without warning, and he barely made it to the sink before he vomited. Even when there was nothing left to eject, he continued to retch anyway, dry heaving and trying to stop his hands from shaking. His legs felt weak, his stomach light and giddy.

I'm going into shock.

He staggered down the hallway and into the sitting room, falling heavily onto the sofa, chewing over the fact he could go to prison, and although he had always lived by the rules and tried to contribute to society, the one singular decision to make the phone call to the power company had skewed his life off track in the worst possible way. He managed to fish his phone out of his pocket with his working hand and opened up the menu. The dull blue light felt good as it illuminated the room a little, pushing some of the shadows back into the corners. He looked at the display, and scrolled down to Angeline's number, but couldn't bring himself to dial. How could he possibly explain? How could he tell her what had happened to their home? How can he tell her what he had been forced to do in order to protect them? With a marriage which was already close to breaking point, would she even understand? One thing he was certain of, however, was his own experience of being so close to death had given him a brand new appreciation of life. And more importantly, how much he did actually love his family. When all the bullshit was stripped away, all the money, jobs and affairs and even psychotic home invaders, it was the desire to love and be loved that prevailed. He so desperately wanted to hear her voice, and yet he still couldn't bring himself to make the call. Because part of him, deep down, couldn't handle what would happen if she didn't pick up. That thought process sparked another idea, one which was as unwelcome as the man who had come to fix the

power had been.

What if he got to her after all?

He thought it was unlikely, in fact, had convinced himself of it. The fact was, he had no way of knowing, not really. Still unsure what he would say if she answered, he pushed dial and lifted the handset to his ear.

Two rings.

Three.

Four.

“Hello?”

He had intended to calmly tell her what had happened, and explain he was okay, but the sound of her voice opened the floodgates, and he began to sob, crying unconsciously and without shame or embarrassment.

“Billy? What’s wrong? What happened?”

“Are you okay?” He croaked.

“Are you crying? You're scaring me Billy.”

“Please, just tell me, are you okay, both of you?”

“Everything’s fine here, we're about to eat dinner.”

“And Tyler?”

“He’s fine too. What’s happening?”

“Is he there, can you see him?”

“He’s watching TV right in front of me. You better tell me what’s happening right now.”

He didn’t think he would be able to, and had intended to spare her the gory details, but he found as he began to explain what had happened, the words continued to pour out of him. He had only cried in front of her once before, back when he had found out about her affair. Now as he told her everything, he couldn’t stop the tears from coming. He finished, and there was silence on the other end of the line. He could almost believe she had hung up, or the line hadn’t been connected at all if it wasn’t for the fact he could hear her own ragged breathing on the other end of the phone.

“Have you called the police?” She said her voice wavering.

“Not yet. I wanted to call you first.”

“Are you hurt?”

He didn’t want to worry her but didn’t want to lie either.

“I hurt my shoulder, maybe broken my wrist.”

“Oh god, she began to cry again, and Billy heard her voice become muffled as she asked her mother to take Tyler out of the room. She came back on the line.

“I’m coming straight home. I'm not letting you go through this alone.

“No! You can't be here to see this... Alex is...” he trailed off, unable to finish the sentence.

“I’m coming home right now.”

“Don’t bring Tyler,” He said, trying to ignore the raging pain in his arm.

“I’ll leave him here with my mother. Do you want me to call the police for you?”

“No, I’ll do it, better if it comes from me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I killed a man Angie. I... shot him I...”

He couldn’t even finish saying it. His eyes stung, and he would have cried even more if not for the fact he was out of tears.

“Remember how you always tell me that we’ll get through whatever life throws at us?”

“Yeah,” He mumbled, wiping his eyes with the sleeve of his shirt.

“Well, this is no different. I’m bringing dad with me.”

Normally he would have argued against that idea, but not only did he not have the strength, he actually thought having someone there to help would be a good idea, even if it was Angeline’s judgmental father.

“Please hurry...” He said, feeling another wave of nausea sweep over him.

“I’m scared Billy,” She whispered down the phone.

“I’m scared too,” He said, and paused before he spoke again.

I love you.

It sounded like such a simple thing to say in his mind, yet despite everything that had happened, those three little words still wouldn’t come.

No matter how much he meant it and wanted her to know, for some reason, he still couldn’t express it verbally. Instead, he cleared his throat as his phone chimed in his ear to indicate the battery was running low.

“Look, I have to call the police. I’ll call you back in a few minutes okay?”

“Billy? Are we going to be okay?”

“Of course, we are. We’ll be fine.” He lied and did it well. Or at least,, he hoped so. The line grew silent, and he wondered if she too was struggling to formulate a way to say those three words which had been impossible to utter since their respective affairs. His phone angrily beeped again in his ear, and he knew he had to hurry.

“Look, my battery is low. I need to make this call now okay? I’ll call you right back.”

He ended the call before she could protest, feeling like a cold, heartless bastard for not giving his wife the reassurances she needed. But he had another call to make, one which would change his life forever. He looked at the display, which for the third time expressed its demand for power.

He punched in the number for the police, hoping the charge would last long enough for the call to go through. It was then he heard the sound. It was a dull scrape, a subtle noise that would have otherwise gone unheard if the house wasn’t so quiet. Although there was no way to be certain, he

knew deep down exactly where that stealthy scrape had come from.

It was in the basement.

He clutched the phone hard as he held his breath and listened, and heard it again, a dull, subtle scrape. In the movies, this was the point where some overconfident teen might go to investigate, but that was completely out of the question. He was too exhausted and too afraid. Instead, he finished his call, waiting for the line to connect to the police operator as he stood and walked behind the sofa, crouching there and ensuring there was something between him and whatever that noise was.

Just in case.

The line connected, and he whispered down the phone.

“This is Billy St John, I need assistance immediately. There is someone in my house... he’s already killed people and now he’s after me. I shot him. I don’t think he’s dead. Please! Send somebody now!”

He waited for the response but was greeted with silence.

“Hello, hello?” He repeated. It was only when he looked at the phone he realised what had happened. Tired of giving warnings about its pending death, the phone had shut down. He knew this, but lifted it to his ear again anyway, because he had to try. The alternative didn’t bear thinking about.

“Hello! Please!” He said, desperate and afraid. He threw the phone across the room and pounded his fist on the floor in frustration. It was then the goose flesh climbed up his arms and down his back because this time there was no mistake.

He heard it slithering out of the basement. Impossible as it was, the sound was easy to pick out in the utter stillness of the house. It was impossible because Billy had shot the man in the Trans Energy uniform in the face from close range, sending his body tumbling down there in the first place. Now he was back, and Billy had neither ammo nor the strength left to run. In the movies, the hero always had a plan, always had an idea. In reality, there was only the cold grip of fear and the certainty his life was now almost certainly over.

As he cowered in the darkness behind the sofa, his broken arm and shoulder throbbing in agony, he was grateful at least Tyler and Angeline would be safe, no matter what was about to happen to him.

He could hear it now, the thing from the basement, dragging itself across the kitchen tiles towards where he hid. As if that idea wasn’t surreal enough, it had started to whistle that tune again. The one he was sure was from an old movie or TV show but couldn’t quite place, only now it was garbled and wet, a sloppy half slurped expulsion of air.

Although he knew it was empty, he checked the gun hanging limply in his one good hand anyway, wishing he had saved a bullet for himself. Hindsight was a wonderful thing, and for as much as he could wish to go back and change things, he couldn’t, because what was done was done, and what would be would...

Silence.

The slithering and whistling had stopped, but rather than relief, it brought only fresh terror raging

through Billy, as he would rather hear it and know where it was, than not hear it and risk it sneaking up on him. He checked the perimeter of the room, wishing for the lights to come back on, wishing those shadow heavy draped corners of the room were visible enough to give up their secrets. Most of all, he wished he had told his wife and son he loved them before he had sent them away. He supposed they knew, but he still didn't say it nearly often enough, and if, by some miracle he survived this, he promised himself he would make sure that changed.

A thud from the hallway snapped him back to the present, and he licked his lips, which were suddenly dry despite the sweat which was pouring out of him. He knew the man in the Trans Energy uniform was outside the door. He just knew. Billy tightened his grip on the gun, ignoring the little voice in his head told him it was now useless, reminding himself it had been useless even when fired at point blank range because the thing in the cellar had taken it, and come back anyway. But it felt good to be holding it in his hands, and any comfort he could get was worthwhile.

He fought the urge to scream as the door creaked open, and the slithering thing entered. He had just about succeeded when the thing on the floor started to whistle again, that wet throaty sound which reignited his horror, as it sounded even more disgusting from a few feet away. As he cowered, Billy asked himself the same question that had been racing around his mind since the entire thing began.

Why did this happen to us?

The slithering thing stood, extending to its full height. For the first time, Billy wished the darkness was more complete if only so he wouldn't have to look at the thing standing in front of him. For the most part, it still resembled the man from Trans Energy. The upper half of its overalls were now soaked with blood, and something in its nervous system seemed to be damaged, as it twitched madly. Its face was still recognisable too, although the skull was now misshaped, skewed off centre around where the bullet had entered just above its right eye, which had been pushed out onto the cheek. A flap of skin hung over its ear and Billy could see it was a matted mass of blood, bone and hair. He tried to figure out where that part came from, where it fit in the regular human anatomy, and realised it must be from the back, maybe thrown there when the bullet exited and was now somehow hanging down the side of the things face. One of the bullets Billy thought had hit the man in the chest must have actually hit his face because there was another ugly opening on its cheek, and Billy could see the glistening remains of shattered teeth beyond.

How is he even alive?

It spoke, the sound wet and pulpy as it manipulated its shattered mouth.

"I can still smell you Snifferblob," It said, even attempting a bloody grin.

Billy threw the gun, watching as it bounced harmlessly off the man's chest and clattered to the floor.

"Leave us alone!" He yelled. The thing in the doorway didn't respond or move. It simply watched him.

“I can’t do that, mommy. I have to peel you and look inside. It’s the rules.”

Billy looked around for anything that could be used as a weapon, but nothing came close to being usable.

“Please,” He said. “You have it wrong, there aren’t any Snifferblobs here.”

“Heh!” He snorted, dislodging the flappy piece of skin from his cheek. “That’s exactly what a Sniffer like you would say. I can smeeeeelllllllll them in here.”

“You have it wrong. You need help.” Billy said, knowing he should be trying to escape, but equally aware his body wouldn’t move even if he wanted it to.

The shattered faced thing tilted its head as another flap of skull dislodged from the back and slopped down onto its shoulder.

“I’m not crazy if that’s what you think.” It slurred in its phlegmy, wet, Texas accent. “You people never see the truth until it’s too late.”

Billy’s eyes flicked to the window. Hundreds of westerns he had watched as a child flashed through his brain, and he thought he was now desperate enough to try and jump through the glass and escape. Although it was dangerous, he would gladly take the cuts and bruises over the certain death from... from whatever was standing there in his living room, because he was starting to realise whatever the thing in the Trans Energy overalls was, it simply wasn’t human. Not fully.

Billy started to laugh, and it frightened him because he had no idea where it came from. Even the Trans Energy man looked puzzled, as Billy’s chuckles transformed into howling laughter.

“What’s so funny Sniffer?” It slobbered as crimson drool ran down its chin.

“This,” He said, flicking his arms in an exaggerated shrug. “This whole situation is... is...” he couldn’t get the words out such was the intensity of laughter. His stomach ached and his eyes streamed with tears. “This is so... fucking absurd, you have to laugh...”

The thing across the room seemed to relax slightly, perhaps thrown off by the unexpected reaction, and that precise second was exactly what Billy had been waiting for. Still cackling, he lurched to his feet and charged for the window, wondering if something inside him was broken, perhaps his brain was now permanently damaged beyond repair, because although he wanted to, he simply couldn’t stop laughing. Whatever it was, he would deal with it later. Right now, escape was his only thought. He was almost at the window and went over his actions in his head.

Jump hard and fast, protect the face, roll through on the other side. On the good arm if possible.

He estimated there was perhaps a two-foot drop to the flowerbeds outside the house, and unless he was unlucky enough to twist an ankle or slit a vein, he was sure he could escape. He tried not to think about what could go wrong, and convinced himself he was owed a little good fortune. He took a deep breath, covered his head as best he could with his good arm and leapt at the full-length plate glass window.

In the movies, the windows would always explode in a satisfying symphony of glass and wood as

whichever hero or villain was exiting landed gracefully on the ground, perhaps in glorious slow motion. Billy found out the hard way life didn't always imitate art. He had pushed off well and hit the window with everything he had. Rather than exit gracefully and land in the soft earth like some John McClane, Rambo or Schwarzenegger, the window stubbornly bounced him back, mangling his nose against the glass. He crumpled to the floor, landing with all his weight on his injured shoulder, screaming out in agony and frustration. All he wanted was one lucky break, one chance to try and survive, and even that had been denied. Rather than break and give him a chance at freedom, the window had knocked the fight right out of him. He waited, moaning softly on the floor and watching as the thing approached him.

"Just relax sir." It slobbered. "I'll have that Sniffer right out of you."

The thing in the Trans Energy suit shuffled into the room towards where Billy lay on the floor. He instinctively moved back, trying to push himself through the wall. He knew he was trapped. The shambling thing knew it too, and reached into its tool belt, casually unhooking the claw hammer.

"Those Snifferblobs live deep," it slurred, as it shuffled past the sofa. "I'll have to really dig to find it," It added, testing the weight of the hammer in its hand. Billy dragged himself to his feet, leaning against the window which had so stubbornly refused to break. He could see a bloody smudge where his face had impacted the glass and was reminded of a photograph he had seen of a pigeon that had left a similar pattern when it had flown into a window.

"Please... I have a family..."

"You have a Sniffer. That box of yours will find another dick in time. Don't you worry." It said with a shrug. The thing swung the hammer, claw end first at Billy's face. He heard the distinctive whoosh as it cut through the air inches from his nose. Relying on what had been effective earlier, he swung a kick at the thing's knee, but the thing saw it coming this time, twisting away out of range. Billy saw his opportunity and charged past the man, this time, willing to push past the two corpses outside if he could only get to the front door. He was free and clear, with open ground between him and the shambling horror behind him.

I'm going to make it.

The thought had barely had time to register when pain exploded through his cheek. He felt his teeth crumble and shatter as the claw end of the hammer took purchase on the inside of his mouth. He was pulled backwards, smashing into the floor half in, half out of the lounge door. He rolled onto his front, crawling desperately as he spat up broken teeth and blood. The hammer was still embedded in his face, its handle dragging across the ground as he crawled on his belly.

The Trans Energy man began to whistle again, but Billy barely heard it. He was concerned only with survival. His one working hand shook as he tried to drag himself out into the hallway and towards the door. The thing shuffled to him and put a heavy boot on his back, then flipped him over.

"One day you people will realise I'm only trying to help you," It said wetly. "Sneaky those

Snifferblobs. Sneaky, sneaky.”

It pulled a screwdriver out of its belt, the steel blade some eight inches long and tapered to a point at the end. It deftly spun it in its hand as it approached. Billy tried to kick and scramble away, but it was no use. The thing began to stab at him, and even though he threw his hands up to protect him, the agony of the steel piercing his skin was like hot fire as it scraped against his bones and punctured into his body. After a while, he couldn't feel the pain anymore and stopped fighting, and when that happened, the Trans Energy man tossed the bloody screwdriver aside and took a moment to catch his breath.

“Don't fight it now,” It said softly, almost soothingly. Billy trembled as his punctured body screamed in agony.

“I... do...do.... pl...”

“Shhhh.” The man said gently, smiling at Billy lovingly with its broken mouth. “It's time to get that Snifferblob out of you now. I have to open you up I...”

“No... Please...” Billy gasped as he spat up more blood and broken shards of teeth.

“You are going anyway Squeaker. There ain't no changing that. Death is on its way to you one way or the other. I can make it easier. I can make sure you don't hurt anymore.”

Billy couldn't answer. His body was like an inferno of agony. But he did want the pain to go away. There was no denying that. He managed a nod, barely perceptible, but there all the same.

The thing in the Trans Energy uniform saw it, and Billy watched as thin black tendrils began to push out of the back of its skull, each slick and glistening in the darkness. There was no fear in Billy, not anymore. He had gone to a place far beyond that. Instead, he watched the shambling thing grow further tentacle-like appendages from its fingertips, the sound of its skin splitting all the more awful in the otherwise heavy silence of the hallway. Billy was overcome with a calm acceptance, an inevitability from knowing his time was at an end.

The thing leaned over Billy, and even so close to the stink of blood and sweat, and the sight of those mottled, slick tentacles probing the air like blind snakes, still he didn't shy away. The tentacles reached down, attaching like leeches to Billy's arms and face. Others still snaked out of the creature's bloody overalls, pushing Billy's t-shirt up and attaching themselves in a rough circle around his stomach.

The pain in his body began to subside, replaced with heady, liquid warmth which began to envelop him. He could see the tentacles pulsing as they pumped him full of whatever was numbing his pain.

“Thank you...” Billy mumbled, even managing a smile as the thing carefully removed the hammer from his cheek and tossed it aside.

“I... I don't want to suffer...”

The pulsing tentacle clad beast didn't respond, it only watched. Waiting for the right time to do what it needed to do. As Billy sank into his hazy euphoria, he saw nothing in the things eyes. No

kindness, no compassion, no empathy, no humanity. It was a beast. A creature with a task to complete.

“It’s time.” The thing said, and although such a statement should frighten him, Billy barely acknowledged it. The warmth was so good, so comforting, that nothing else mattered. He barely noticed when the ring of tentacles attached to his stomach retracted, taking the circle of skin with it. Blood pattered on the floor as the flap of skin and muscle was set aside, exposing his stomach cavity. There was no pain, or perhaps he was too far gone mentally to acknowledge it.

That was part of me once. Billy thought absently as the thing reached its arm into his stomach. He could feel his innards being pushed aside, manipulated as the thing began its search, its remaining teeth gritted in determination. There was no pain. Instead, he saw flashes of his life, memories of things which had gone before. He saw his wedding day, how beautiful and full of hope Angeline had looked. He saw the day Tyler was born, quickly followed by the first day to his new job. All times when life seemed full of hope, full of possibilities.

His world exploded into bright white light.

I’m dead.

The thought lasted only a split second because the thing in the Trans Energy uniform was screaming. It stood, withdrawing the tentacles and giving Billy back the pain it had taken away. He blinked and screamed as the agony seeped back into his body. It was only when he was free of that drug-like haze he understood what had happened.

The power had come back on, the hallway light banishing the dark, and burning into the thing from Trans Energy like fire. The creature grunted and squirmed as it staggered to its feet, its tentacles writhing and hissing as wispy black smoke began to pour off them. Billy watched as a single light bulb did what bullets couldn’t. The stench which filled the hallway was acrid, thick and heavy as the thing’s tentacles melted. It dragged itself across the wall, leaving sticky black streaks behind as it staggered for the door, which it threw open hard enough to chip the wall where the handle slammed into it. It staggered outside and pushed past the two hanging bodies, which clattered against each other as the thing staggered away into the night, screaming in agony. He listened as the thing’s wails faded, and once again the house was quiet, but it was a good quiet. A natural quiet. He noticed now even a quiet house, one which had power, at least, made noise. The refrigerator hummed steadily, the heaters clicked as they powered up. It was good. It was normal. He also knew he was dying. He would never see Tyler grow up, he would never get to tell Angeline he loved her. He was fading. He knew his time was close.

Sorry pal. It’s time to go.

His trusty inner voice was right. There was nothing left to fight for. His stomach rolled, sending fresh agony raging through him, but he was too weak to scream.

Something moved inside him. Visions of the thing from Trans Energy leaving something behind rekindled his horror, and with a tremendous force of will, he lifted his head to look at the gaping hole

in his stomach.

A tiny humanoid hand reached out, grabbing at the flayed flesh on the edges of his wound. Another tiny perfectly formed hand joined it, as whatever was inside him pulled itself out.

Billy was too weak to react and was too far beyond fear to do anything but stare.

The humanoid creature stood on Billy's chest, pulling sinewy clumps of flesh off its domed head. Its tiny mouth scowled, and Billy could clearly see dagger-like teeth glistening with moisture. It looked like one of Tyler's action figures, a miniature human-like thing that had been living inside him.

"Are you a Snifferblob?" He whispered.

The humanoid creature only looked at him, hopped down onto the floor and began to walk towards the kitchen, not looking back. It was only then Billy noticed the emptiness inside him the creature had left. It seemed the Snifferblob was more a part of him than he had ever realised. Perhaps the little voice in his head was actually the voice of his Snifferblob. He listened, trying to sense if it was still there. All he could feel was a vast empty void. For all his fighting, the thing in the Trans Energy overalls was right. There had been a Snifferblob inside him. And now it was gone. He needed to hang on, to wait for Angeline to come to him because now he was ready to say those three words that meant so much. It was only now, as he lay shivering and bleeding out on the hallway floor he realised some things were bigger than affairs, revenge, or holding grudges. Some things in the world had neither rhyme nor reason, and he had seen first-hand that sometimes, things came out of the darkness and knocked on the door which could derail a life in a split second.

Billy smiled as he watched the tiny creature which had climbed out of his stomach enter the kitchen, giving the macabre cage containing Mr Conwell's severed head a wide berth. Three more of his kind appeared, pushing open the cupboard under the sink and awaiting their fellow creature. They helped it to climb up into the darkness, and with one last look back at Billy, the foursome gently closed the cupboard door behind them. The silence in the house was broken only by the gentle sounds of pans being displaced, as the tiny creatures disappeared further into the darkness to wherever they dwelled.

Snifferblobs.

Billy took one last breath and smiled.

WATCHERS

[This is one of my favourite stories. It very nearly made the cut for inclusion in Funhouse, but I left it out because I wanted to make a few tweaks to the story and the deadline for finalizing the stories was getting close. I like the idea that those malevolent and supernatural things which are always so dumbed down in books and films might actually have been much the same as people are in life. The idea of a grim reaper with a bad attitude and jaded with his job was just so appealing that I had to write it straight away.]

YOU KNOW ME. You might not think so, but you do. I'm in the corner, watching and waiting just like I've done your entire life. Sometimes you might sense me, but I'm always one step ahead, gone by the time you stare into the darkness and try to figure out what that sound you just heard was. I don't mean anything by it. I just get bored, and when that happens you're an easy target.

Let me explain.

I'm that thing.

You know what I'm talking about. The glimpse of a shadow moving in the corner of the room or the stealthy thud that wakes you at night. The horrible feeling that comes over you for no reason and makes your skin crawl.

All me.

It's funny, really. You humans are so easy to scare. There's no sport in it anymore. The world has changed now. It's all gadgets, electronics, and social media. Everyone is just so damn busy these days that a lot of the innocence has gone. You humans became desensitized and stopped believing in the possibility that something like me could ever exist.

Don't worry, though, I'm still here.

I always have been.

Of course, it was different when you were younger. It was easier back then, easier to fuck with your susceptible little mind. That part is always fun, especially at that ripe age where kids still believe in monsters and the boogeymen, and things that go bump in the night.

Kids, in general, are more receptive, more aware of things from my side of the world. Hell, some kids can see us no matter how much we try to hide. We light up like Christmas trees to them, which makes the job harder than it should be. They're rare, though, and we have specialists who deal with the 'bright light' kids. You call them psychic. We call them a problem. Lucky for me, though, you're not one of them. Don't get me wrong, back when you were a kid, you were plenty aware of me. I remember those nights when you were tucked up in bed, lying awake and staring into the darkness and just to fuck with you, I would make a noise. Something subtle. Maybe just a whisper, or maybe I'd drag my claws lightly across the floorboards next to your bed. I'd watch you sit there, covers pulled

up to your chest as you glared into the darkness. It always amused me the way you tried to justify everything that those sounds could be, dismissing them one by one until you were left with the only possible option.

Me.

Don't sweat it, though, it's just jest. It's a way for me to get my kicks and whittle away the boredom whilst I wait. Sometimes I would make myself into a physical form and watch you sleep. I'd stand over your bed, a towering, shapeless, black thing, and watch you dream. If I was feeling particularly mischievous I would touch your cheek and watch as you shuddered and pulled the blankets closer around you and away from my cold, dead hand. No, sir. There is nothing more fun than messing with the minds of kids. I'll tell you what my favourite thing is. You know that feeling when you are just drifting off to sleep, and you jerk awake for no reason?

Guess who.

Of course, it's a lot harder now. You grew up and stopped believing in things like me. Those noises that used to make you shit your Jim-jams, you barely even hear anymore. You forgot about me, and before I knew it, you had moved out and started a family of your own. I came with you of course. Those are the rules. Each human gets assigned one of my kind at birth who will stay with them until it's time to die. Lucky for you, I'm fucking good at my job. Some might say one of the best.

Want to know just how good I am?

I'm watching you right now, just waiting for you to switch the TV off and go to sleep. You, of course, have no idea I'm here because I don't want to be seen, not yet, at least, and so that's how it will be until I decide otherwise. Even so, you might feel a chill if you walk through the place where I'm waiting. And wait I will. Time doesn't mean anything to me anyway. Some might say it's all I have.

Believe me, if there's one thing you need for this job, its patience. Sometimes you don't have to wait for too long, and in a way, those gigs are the best. You can be clinical, efficient. Grade a professional. On the flip side, sometimes it can take a while.

Let me tell you it ain't easy. There are no breaks; no clocking off at five to go home, put your feet up and catch up on the latest goings on in the soaps or to see which country is edging the world closer to a third world war... No-sir-ee. When we get assigned to someone, we're there 24/7 until the end. Like I said, it's a big commitment.

Some of the others like me, they don't like the long jobs. No patience for it, they hate the waiting around until you punch out for the last time.

Me?

I never had a problem with it. I get a kick out of seeing how you humans grow up, watching as the innocence is driven out of you and the cruelty of the world rears its ugly head just before it kicks you right in the balls.

Man, I couldn't tell you the things I've seen. I've seen good kids go off the rails and become

vicious murderous scum, and I've seen bad kids turn their lives around and go on to do great things that make a difference.

Oh, that's another thing you should know.

There are no secrets from me.

I know everything. Every dirty, little, private moment that you think is yours alone, I know it. I see it.

I'm always with you. From beginning to end, right there by your side.

What a waste of a life. You had it all. Wife, kids, promotion in the offing if you just applied yourself a little harder, made a little more effort. As always, you still managed to find a way to screw it all up, and now you're all alone.

Such a shame.

To tell you the truth, it's bittersweet. For twenty-seven years I watched you grow, watched you change as you discovered that the opportunity-filled world which your parents painted for you was all bullshit. You became cynical, and with it, lazy. As is the way with your species you started to look out for number one, screw everyone else. You piss and moan and think you have it tough, and to that, I say...

You should try living in my shoes for a few hundred years. Still, I can't complain. This job isn't too bad. I could have done better, that's for sure, but I could have also done a lot worse, and unlike you I choose to look on the bright side. Every cloud, and all that bullshit.

And so here we are, the watcher and the watched. The dying and the already dead. I can see you staring at another one of those shitty reality shows that you seem to be hooked on these days, all the glitz and glamour.

Fuck that.

You're yawning, though, and I can tell you're getting tired.

Soon then.

I suppose it's only fair as I wait for you to finish watching this god awful crap on the TV that I tell you what I do. It makes no difference to you, in the long run, of course, but I don't often get to talk about my work and for once I want to indulge. Call it nostalgia; call it readying myself to move on from this job to the next. Whatever you like.

I take souls.

I know. Scary, right?

Let me give you a second to digest that little snippet, whilst I tell you a little more. We have time yet. I can see you well enough from the shadowy place here in the corner, and you don't seem quite ready to give in to the tiredness.

First up then, a few harsh truths.

Heaven and hell aren't as it seems. You people have this idea that it's some kind of titanic battle

between good and evil, which, incidentally, causes no end of amusement over on our side. The reality is that it's a business. The guy upstairs and the guy downstairs work together to achieve a fine balance. Of course, every now and again, they will clash, and stupid decisions are made. The Boxing Day Tsunami in Indonesia and the 9/11 attacks on New York being just a couple of examples of when things got out of hand and one of them spat their dummy out. Mostly, though, they get on fine. They share the workload and it's left to guys like me to get down on street level as it were and do the dirty stuff.

If you're wondering why I'm telling you all this, then you're a little slow on the uptake. See, tonight is your night. You shouldn't be surprised. It's been coming for a while. The problem is that you humans never learn. It's always live fast, work hard, play harder. You never take a moment to sit back and really look at the world. Even now, you're screwing around on your overpriced smartphone, and it pains me to see what that innocent little kid in the Spiderman pyjamas who always dreamed of being an astronaut has become.

I'm right here in the room with you, something that as a kid, you would have picked up on in an instant, but not anymore. A damn freight train could plough through this shithole apartment of yours and it still wouldn't stop you from gawping at the tiny screen which contains your entire fake world. I'm tempted, just for a second to goose you, just to see if I can get a reaction for old times' sake, but I won't.

You'll get yours soon enough.

Just know that if I did choose to let you see me, I mean if I changed from this transparent thing in the darkness and materialized in front of you...well, to put it bluntly, it would blow your little fucking mind. I knew a guy once who got so pissed off with his assigned human that he made himself visible and started throwing the guy's furniture around. The human had a heart attack right there in his bed. When the cops arrived, his hair was white, and he was barely alive. He'd also gone blind. That's what it would mean to see us for what we are. You might think I have a problem with humans, but you couldn't be further from the truth. See, I used to be just like you. Human, I mean.

Now, of course, I'm nothing. A formless thing, an entity. An incorporeal presence. But a long, long time ago I, too, was made of flesh and bone. I had a family and friends, hopes and dreams to go on to greatness or, at least, leave something behind to show I'd at least existed on this rock. However, the price of immortality is that you have to watch everyone you ever knew die. I'm not bitter, it's just how it is. For the first few hundred years, it plagued me but I learned to live with it. I mean, what choice did I have, right?

Don't bother giving me any sympathy. I long ago stopped having such things as feelings or emotions anyway, and without the ties of family or the other trappings of humanity I can devote myself fully to what I need to do, which is good news for me and not so good for you. Even so, you can't blame me if I sound a little bitter. Hundreds of years of waiting in the dark and watching human

after human throw their lives away soon becomes frustrating. It doesn't matter anyway because, as I said earlier, tonight is your night. You'll be in bed soon, and this dingy little shitbox apartment, which is a far cry from the nice house that you and your soon to be widowed wife used to share, will be the last thing your waking body will ever experience. Man, I loved that house. It was big, there was room to move, room to breathe. But you went and screwed it up and flushed the one good thing you had down the toilet. Now that house is gone, and the wife is with someone else.

I still wonder why you didn't fight, didn't even try to win her back, especially when the kids started calling her new guy Daddy. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. You waited, and waited, and now it's too late.

You've finally switched off the TV and put away the phone and are up and locking the doors, the first part of the going to bed routine. I guess I'd better wrap this up.

Let me tell you all about death. The ever after. The afterlife. Whatever you choose to call it. First up, there is no out of body experience, nor any white lights or rose-filled gardens where the spirits of the departed loved ones come to meet you and take you into the next life.

Please.

Don't tell me you ever believed that shit?

If you did, you're in for a rude awakening when it's my ugly ass that greets you and takes you to the other place. Incidentally, you're lucky. You've got what we call in the trade an 'easy' death. You, my friend, are going in your sleep. A nice, peaceful, natural causes removal. That's what they call it by the way over where I come from. A removal. Make no mistake, though, you really are lucky, because going in your sleep is a damn sight better than those waking, painful deaths. The car crashes, and drownings, the domestic disputes gone too far. You won't have to suffer any of that. None of the knowing it's coming. Yours will be quick, tidy and quiet.

This is how it will go.

You will go to sleep as you do every night, fully expecting that tomorrow will be another day when you finally go on that diet, or call your wife and tell her you're sorry for being such an asshole, or really apply yourself at work to try and snag that promotion, only that's not how it will go, your time, buddy, is up. No more chances, no more tomorrows. You, my friend, have seen your last sunset.

I'll wait until you're sleeping.

I'm not talking about the light, toss and turn crap. I mean the deep, do not disturb type sleep. That's when I'll appear.

The room will grow cold, but you'll be too far under to notice. That's when I'll take form.

I'll stand over you and for a while I'll just watch until its time. We work to a very strict timetable and have to take you at exactly the right moment. When it comes, I'll reach out my hand, and my fingers, like long tendrils of mist, will reach down to your face. I might whisper in your ear, reassuring you with my dry, dead breath that it will be okay, that I know what I'm doing. You won't

hear it of course. You'll still be sleeping, expecting to wake up the next day. Poetic really if you think about it.

I'll open your mouth then turn back into that wispy, misty form, then in I go.

You won't feel it. That I promise.

I'll go in and I'll find the soul.

Troublesome things you know, souls. They never stay in one place, and tend to get spread out around the body as the years go by. Some of it will be in the brain, that much is a given, and there's always a big old chunk in the heart. The rest...ah that's anyone's guess. Each of us has our own system. Me, I'm methodical. I search every organ, every muscle, and every cell. I'm thorough. I always get all of it. Incidentally, you want to know something interesting about ghosts? That's what happens when a less careful of my kind doesn't get all of the soul. The parts that are left behind roam the earth in a kind of never-ending limbo, most of the time not even aware they're dead. It's a horrible, horrible way to go.

Anyway, I'm getting side-tracked.

So, I'll gather the soul. During this time, you're still alive, by the way. Still breathing and dreaming. But not for long. I come back out the way I came—through the mouth—and reform by your bed, bringing your soul with me. It's then that the body dies. See the body is just a machine—and a laughably flawed one at that—. And without the soul to pull the strings, it's a useless organic thing.

I always watch my human take their last breath.

Partly to make sure my job is done, and secondly because there's beautiful about it. That's when I know it's over, and my work is done.

You know the belief that you will go to either heaven or hell depending on how well you lived your life?

Well, that part is kind of true.

In the trade, we call it the drop-off.

Let me try to describe it in a way that your mortal little mind would understand. I'll be quick, though because I can see you getting ready for bed, and I'm scheduled to take you not long after you go to sleep.

Imagine a huge chamber stretching as far as the eye can see, a room that's immense beyond comprehension. Inside are others like you, fresh souls, confused and aware but helpless until we release you. So we wait for our turn, and together we go to meet with your purgatory advisor to find out where your destination will be. These guys can be sour, and a little short with you, but try to remember that they're just trying to do their jobs, and with millions of people to see, you can forgive them if they're a little abrupt.

They will discuss your life with you, and more importantly if you made the most of it. See that's the kicker. If you've done well, and lived a full, good life, then you get to go upstairs and enjoy

peaceful oblivion, or whatever kind of fuzzy goodness goes on up there. But if you haven't, then you better be prepared for the other place. The place where I come from.

And you can forget that image that just popped up in your head, too. It's not all fire and brimstone as you might have been led to believe, in fact, there's nothing but a cold, black emptiness. Seconds feel like hours. Minutes like weeks, Hours like years. It's lonely and you will wait there in that void until you're called upon. It could be days or weeks. If you are lucky, it will just be a few months. Usually it's years. Some of the particularly bad ones are made to wait for centuries. Let me tell you, just floating around in that void is... well, for want of a better word, it's hell.

Eventually, you will be called in front of him.

Now a word of advice. You don't want to look him in the eye. In fact, don't say or do anything. Just keep your eyes down and your ears open. He will assign you a duty. You might be unlucky and get one of the shitty jobs. Fucking poltergeists are the lowest of the low and you don't want to get stuck doing that forever. Another one to avoid is becoming a demon. A guy I know found himself doing that back in the early 1900's and has been called up by stupid kids playing on their Ouija boards more times than he can remember.

If you're lucky, though, you might get a gig like mine and become a reaper. It's a good deal. You get to see the world; you get to watch as human life goes on. More than that, though, you get to spend a lot of time away from that dark pit. I have my fingers crossed for you, but the decision isn't mine to make.

Ahh, there you go now. You've just climbed into bed, and I can see how tired you are. Say goodnight to the world, buddy, it's almost time.

Anyway, I digress.

I'm sure you'd prefer to go up there and live in with the good people but...

Man, this part is always hard to say.

You haven't led a perfect life.

Not bad by any means, just not perfect. The truth is you're borderline. I've watched you and willed you to do something worthwhile, but it's always tomorrow. Always soon. Never today. You've had a life of opportunities, chances to make a difference, but like it is with so many humans, you waited too long, spent too many hours out drinking or sitting in front of the TV and wasting the time you have. And I'll be straight with you, chief. I'm worried that it's too late.

Ahh, there you go.

Deep sleep.

It's time, but don't worry, I'll look after you.

Just like I promised.

You look so innocent, so unaware of what's about to happen. Either way, it's time we were going. The lines at the purgatory hall are always a bitch, and it's best if we get there early. I wonder if you

will have any regrets when you find out it's over?

I think I would, although to tell you the truth, your wife and kids will probably lead better lives without you there to screw it up. It may be harsh, but it's true. The world won't miss you. In fact, it will be better without you in it. That big wheel will keep turning regardless.

You're in that place.

Deep, do not disturb land, and I was never a reaper that needed to be told twice.

It's time.

FIRECRACKER

[This is one of those stories which seem to crop up every now and again, in that I genuinely don't recall writing it! Based on the dates on the word document, it looks like it was sometime in mid-2011, which would tie in with the Dark Corners writing sessions. Either way, I can't recall it, and discovering it again was a pleasant surprise. I like the simplicity of it and although it takes a few liberties with real world procedure, I'm happy to include it here.]

SIX MINUTES. THREE hundred and sixty seconds. The human heart beats between sixty and eighty times per minute when resting, but I know mine is going a hell of a lot faster than that right now. It's funny how you never think about time until you don't have much left. But I'm thinking about it now, because in exactly five minutes and twenty-eight seconds, the world as we know it is going to end.

I know this because I made it happen. I'm not some lunatic cult member either like David Koresh of the Canadian guy who thinks he is Jesus. I'm just a man like everyone else, I'm just fortunate that the fringe benefits of my job have given me the opportunity to pull the plug on this shithole world that we live in.

It's funny because even as a kid growing up I think I always knew that this was my fate. We relied too much on governments without backbones who, when the time came, didn't have the guts to stand up and be counted. Whilst my buddies were watching cartoons and riding bikes, I was watching the news as those people in power continued to flush the country down the drain. Even then it left a sour taste in my mouth and I knew what I needed to do.

Four minutes.

It's strange knowing what fate intends for you from such a young age. I knew what subjects I would need to take to get there, and I devoted myself to getting there whatever the cost. It was because of my complete dedication that I had no friends growing up. I didn't need them either. I learned early on that most people are out for number one and will stab you in the back first chance they get. My parents and teachers were overjoyed and encouraged me to keep working hard. As I grew up, I was still wet behind the ears. I thought I could make a difference, I thought that by getting involved with these political groups that I could bring about change, but it didn't take long to find that it was a hive of the corrupt, fed by the greed of those who only wanted to increase their own power.

The thing is, it would have been easy to join in with those tyrannical old men. They were the snake offering the tainted apple, promising the world if only I would sell them my soul. I will admit to being tempted. I was young and hungry for success, but when it all came down to it, I couldn't face the idea of becoming a member of that particular club, clinging on to power with one gnarled hand whilst I stuffed pockets full of cash with the other.

Not likely.

My decision to shun their invitations made me a target, but I was never one to shy away from a good fight, and so I used the public against them. It was easy to get them onside, because many of them, like me were sick of these people who were running the world into the ground. I told it how it was, I exposed their flaws, uncovered the skeletons they had tried so hard to bury, and the public loved me for it. One particular world leader made some derogatory statements about me in the press back in two thousand and two, but I wasn't some wet behind the ear rookie anymore, and I arranged for a dead hooker and two kilos of heroin to be found in his hotel room. No matter where you are in the world, that would be enough to get you a stretch in prison, but this was Texas, and it was punishable by death. I pushed for it to happen. Not publicly, but behind closed doors. I schemed and whispered and planted seeds of ideas in the heads of the right people. In two thousand and four, after two appeals and numerous protests, he was sentenced to death by lethal injection. In public, I said it should serve as an example that nobody was above the law. In the circles I ran in though, people suspected that I had more to do with it. The disdain they had for me grew into fear, and that suited me just fine.

Two minutes fifty. Time flies.

I had to dispose of a lot of people on the way up. Don't be so surprised, though. I wasn't the only one that got my hands dirty. You might say I was just as vile and corrupt as the rest of them, but I'm different. You see, I had that one goal, that one idea of what needed to happen if the world was to really become a better place. I knew by then that words alone wouldn't change things. Only action would do that.

My only sorrow is that when the world finds out what I did when they really dig into my history,

they will brand me a terrorist. And more than anything else, that concerns me. What I'm about to do is for the people of this world. It's a chance to reset, to rebuild and make this world a better place. You might say I'm a terrorist. I say I'm a martyr. My only wish is that I could be here to see what happens afterwards. But by now, they will know what I have done and will be coming for me.

Two minutes left. I better hurry this up.

The headaches started at around the time I announced my intention to run for president. By that time, I had two distinct reputations. One in the public as a golden boy, a smiling, baby kissing forward thinking symbol of hope. Behind closed doors and with those who moved in the same political circles as me, I was a beast. A monster. Someone to be feared. Nobody dared to make a move against me because they knew what would happen if they did. I made enemies almost daily, and I suppose it was inevitable that it wouldn't be long until somebody decided to try and off me. It was July 11' when I was at a peace rally in Chicago when some loon tried to shoot me. He got two shots off from around eight feet away before security took him down. One bullet completely missed and hit the wall behind me, the other hit the silver lighter in my breast jacket pocket and ricocheted off to safety. The event that should have killed me only left me with an ugly bruise on my chest. I still have that lighter. I can see it on the desk in front of me, all bent out of shape and twisted.

I found out who tried to have me killed, and dealt with them accordingly. All off the books you understand, all away from the prying eyes of the public. I never did anything myself of course. I'm not a hands on kind of guy. But I gave strict instructions to the people I paid to do it to make sure the son of a bitch suffered before he died. If anything, the assassination attempt only served to increase my popularity with the public, and in turn, the fear amongst my political peers.

I can hear them now outside, banging on the door and trying to get in. I have barred it though. Barred it good. The headache is throbbing behind my eyes, and the office suddenly seems too bright, too harsh. I long for quiet, I long for an end to everything. My chief of staff is lying face down on the floor, the blood pooling around his head soaking into the blue deep pile carpet. The gun on my desk is a magnum, just like the one Clint Eastwood used to use when he played Dirty Harry. I want to make sure you see. I want to make sure there is no comeback.

Less than a minute to go. I better wrap this up.

I Became president last year. Me, Dillon Brooks, president of the United States of America! Who would have thought it? It was a landslide victory. I thought that I owed it to myself to at least try to put things right without resorting to the extreme measures that I have now put into place, but I found that even with the title of president, I couldn't solve everything. Sure enough I might, over time, be able to change a few things for the better, but the world had become a cancer, and the vile roots of those who controlled it went deep. Plus, there were the other countries too. The ones intent on destroying the planet. Our natural resources are depleting. Oceans are rising. Overpopulation is becoming a problem. But at no point has anyone decided to try and change things. Only by purging the planet can

we change things for the better. Only by making sure that future generations have a chance, can we rest easy.

The voices on the other side of the office door are getting louder now, and I'm sure they will soon break through. It's already too late, though. There is no stopping this now.

Time to wrap this up.

The genesis project is a top secret weapons program. People think that the atomic bomb is the be all and end all, and so did i. but it turns out we never stopped developing our weapons capability, and Genesis makes the nuke look like a firecracker. I'm not exactly sure how it works, something about charging the oxygen in the air and making it volatile. It was never launched because there was no way to control how much of the oxygen it would burn. It was shelved and labelled as unsafe, but I had the power to restart the program. I poured as much money as I could into it. My advisors asked how I intended to afford it but never pressed too hard. Maybe because they trusted my judgement, or maybe because word had gone around about my ruthless streak. Either way, it doesn't matter now. I can already hear the rumble in the distance and the sky has gone dark.

I didn't realise quite how powerful the blast would be, it's frightening how large that wave is, that wall of fire racing towards me. I have the gun of course but that doesn't seem fair anymore. I only got it in case things went wrong, so they couldn't send me to trial. I know now that I won't need it. Nothing could survive this. Nothing at all. Besides, I don't think my family would have approved of me wimping out and not dealing with the situation I caused. That's not my way. I can see it coming now out of the window, a column of fire as far as I can see, the rumble shaking the photographs off the walls. Even the banging on the door has stopped. I think they know as well as I do that there is nothing to be done. It's so beautiful.

I only hope it's quick.

GONE FISHING

[This is another story which was written for an anthology which never saw the light of day. (This happens more than you might expect) I love the idea of a post-apocalyptic world, and although there are plenty of stories out there about how such worlds came to be, I wanted to look at what life would be like for someone who was born into that world. Into a world where the world as we know it never existed. I had the idea to try and incorporate a more visual cue of how that world might be which you will see as you progress through the story. Hopefully you will enjoy it.]

I CAN'T REMEMBER the sun. Some of the old timers claim to recall it, but the world I know has always been this shade of grey which blankets everything. The rains come often, but they are more ash than water and leave a greasy sheen on the skin. I think today is my birthday, but I can't be sure. The people who took me in when my family died count that day as my birth, which to them it was. Hell, I don't even know how old I am. Maybe twenty three or so, although I look and feel nearer to forty. People around here call me James, and although I know it's not my real name, I don't argue. Names don't matter anymore really. What matters is that I - we are still here. The last survivors of a dead world. I have dated the start of this journal as July 7th just for the sake of keeping records, although the truth is, we stopped counting days and months long ago. If nothing else it will serve to keep my thoughts in order as I write them down.

The story of what happened isn't one that any of us like to talk about. After all, we all lived it. We know. We look into each other's eyes and there is something there. Shared knowledge, shared respect. I don't really know what it is. Some kind of solidarity. It's funny, because in the movies back before the world actually went and died on us, they always painted a picture of scattered groups of mangy survivors hiding from cannibalistic bandits and trying to make their way to salvation. The reality was that there are no bandits, not that I know of at least. In fact, those of us who are left have pulled together. I don't know if it's good fortune or irony that it took the world going to hell around us to finally make us set aside petty squabbles and come together to survive.

Our group consists of just seven people. We had twelve until recently, but we lost two on our last hunt, and another four to cancer. Damn radiation, that's the enemy now. Even as we struggle to survive it eats away at us. That and the things in the water.

Before I get to that, I think a little backstory is in order. I managed to find this journal in the ruins of a schoolhouse, and borrowed a pen from Gimmy, who out of everyone understands best why I need to get this on paper. See, I'm pretty sure I'm dying. The cough that started a few weeks ago is still here, and I have started to bring up blood. My nails and hair haven't started to fall out yet, but I don't think it will be too long before it happens. Brad thought I was just paranoid when I told him I thought I had the cancer, but he can't understand that I can feel it inside. It's in there, mutating my cells, screwing around with my internal composition. The others don't seem too concerned about my plight. We have all become desensitised to death, and even though they don't say it, the look in their eyes tells me they see me as a dead man walking - an inconvenience. An extra mouth to feed when food is scarce. They won't cut me loose from the group, but I don't think many tears will be shed when I join the other four billion plus who have died on this god forsaken ball of rock since this all began. We go hunting in a few days, and that means facing those things, those foul abominations that live in the oceans. Brad thinks they are stupid and mindless, but I don't think so. They know we can't live off the land, and that our only food source is out there with them. I keep wanting to call them fish, but that would be an understatement. They are mutations, amalgamations of the things that used to live in the oceans before the event happened. Abominations of nature ruined by whatever polluted the water. I don't have time to go into it now. The shadows are getting longer, and we will have to get the fire going soon. The nights are so cold. Tomorrow, I'll tell you all about how this thing started.

Didn't sleep too well. This damn cough kept me awake, and the few times I did drift off, I dreamed of those things out in the water. For as much as we have coped with a lot, it's hard to handle how they look. First one I saw was twenty footer. Imagine a whale mingled with a squid and then turned half inside out, and you would be somewhere in the right ballpark. They are hellish, violent things, their need to hunt us as much as we them making our clashes inevitable. But all that will be told in time. Later today, we go out to face them, and that frightens me more than I could ever express in words. The day the asteroid hit was a Thursday. It cut through the sky at over 20,000 miles per hour, and impacted somewhere in the Pacific Ocean. The sky lit up for five solid days, and then the world became shrouded in darkness - a worldwide blanket of ash which blotted out the sun. Millions were killed by the blast and the resulting tidal surges. Countless others by the fallout. Nothing was left untouched. Nothing escaped the hell that came. For all the arrogance of man, it astounds me just how quickly we died out as a species. There was no fight, no master plan. Nature simply decided our time was done, and snuffed us out.

A few of us remain of course. Skeletal, filthy wretches with haunted eyes that only tell part of the horror. There aren't many though. Death is something that we all grew used to pretty quickly. I sit now in this abandoned husk of a building, its interior as ravaged and barren as I'm sure all of us feel inside. I know I do. Some of the others question why I bother to write something down when there is no hope that anybody will ever read it, and I suppose they have a point. I think whatever my reasons, it makes me feel better to get it down on paper. Maybe, just maybe whoever you are that might be reading this are in a better world than this one. I think about what is about to take place, about going out on the water, and it fills me with a horror even worse than the lingering stench of ash and death that clings to those of us who are left.

Benson just told me that he understands if I don't want to go out there with them. When I asked him why I wouldn't, he mumbled something about my condition. I know he didn't mean to cause offence, but I still found myself getting defensive, screaming and shouting that I was fine. Truth is, I don't want to go out there. None of us would if we didn't have to. Let them keep the damn oceans to themselves if that's what they want, but the fact is, we have no choice. They are the only thing left that we can eat, and so we have no choice but to try and hunt them. Even though they gave me a readymade excuse not to go, I still have my pride, and wanted to prove my worth out there before I find a quiet corner to die in. I need to get away from these people, at least for a while. It's funny that even in a world as empty as this one, we still need to spend time by ourselves.

Had to get away yesterday. Hated looking at their faces. They look at me like I'm some kind of leper. I suppose, in a way I am. I walked out into the bleak wastes, everything covered in grey ash or burned and broken. Bodies of the dead lie mummified in their thousands, some taking on a ghostly stone effect from the ash build up. It reminded me of something from Pompeii, and I almost laughed outright. The quiet is something that even now I struggle to get used to. There is absolute deathly silence. There are no birds left to sing, no animals left to scratch at the undergrowth. No people to exchange nods with and share pleasantries. All there is, is the sound of the water, and the knowledge of the things that we all know live in it. I have found some letters on my travels. Voices of ghosts from the past that I have gathered from various places as I walked the earth and tried to figure out what I was supposed to do. I don't know any of the people who wrote them, but I somehow still feel a connection to them. My intention is to leave them with this journal when it's finally my time to pass so that someone else might be able to get some sort of useful information from them, or at the very least see how things were for us. More and more often I wonder about my wife and daughter and I ask myself for the millionth time if it's possible they somehow survived. I know of course that they didn't. I went to all the places where I knew they would go if we were separated. I only hope for them it was quick and painless. I wouldn't wish this life I have now on anybody. I don't feel much like writing anymore today, but as promised, I will include the letters I found within the pages of this journal, just so you can see for yourself the devastating impact on the world. If anything, maybe the next species of humans will learn how not to do things.

DEAR JULIA,

I KNOW YOU WILL NEVER READ THIS, AS YOU HAVEN'T YET BEEN BORN, BUT I NEED TO EXPLAIN MY ACTIONS AND WHY I HAVE TO DO WHAT I'M ABOUT TO DO.

WE HAVEN'T EATEN FOR DAYS NOW, AND I FEAR FOR YOU. ALTHOUGH SOME SAY I CARRY NEW LIFE INSIDE ME, I DON'T WANT TO BE RESPONSIBLE FOR BRINGING YOU INTO WHAT IS LEFT OF THE WORLD. WE MET A SURVIVOR, SOMEONE WHO CLAIMED TO HAVE FISHED THE SHORE NEAR THE IMPACT SITE. HE SAID THE OCEAN STILL BUBBLED AND BURNED LIKE THE PIT OF HELL, SUCH WAS THE HEAT STILL GENERATED BY THE IMPACT.

HE TOLD ME THERE WERE THINGS IN THE WATER - MUTANTS - THINGS THAT USED TO BE ANIMALS BUT HAD CHANGED. ACCORDING TO HIM, ANOTHER GROUP HAD BEEN ATTACKED BY ONE AS THEY HAD TRIED TO FISH OFF SHORE WHERE IT WAS A LITTLE LESS HOT.

I WAS DESPERATE NOT TO BELIEVE HIM, BUT I COULD SEE FROM THE LOOK IN HIS EYES THAT HE WAS TELLING THE TRUTH.

HOW CAN I BRING YOU INTO THIS WORLD KNOWING THAT AT BEST YOUR FUTURE WILL BE ONE OF SCRATCHING AROUND AND TRYING TO SURVIVE? I WISH THERE WAS SOME KIND OF HOPE TO GIVE YOU, BUT THERE IS NONE. NONE AT ALL.

EVERYONE WE ONCE KNEW IS GONE, AND THERE IS NOBODY HERE TO
HELP US. THAT'S NOT THE LIFE I WANT FOR YOU. OR FOR ME. I TRIED
TO THINK OF THE MOST HUMANE WAY TO DO THIS, AND ALTHOUGH I
WOULD HAVE PREFERRED SOMETHING QUICK LIKE A GUN, I WOULDN'T
HAVE THE FIRST CLUE WHERE TO FIND ONE.
THERE IS A BRIDGE NEAR HERE WHICH IS BROKEN BUT STILL STANDS,
AND ALTHOUGH I HAD CONSIDERED IT, I DON'T WANT YOU TO BE IN
THE WATER AND BE EATEN BY ONE OF THOSE GOD AWFUL THINGS.
BECAUSE OF THAT, I HAVE DECIDED THAT HANGING WOULD BE BEST FOR
US. ONLY I WILL FEEL THE PAIN, AND I SUPPOSE I DESERVE IT.
I TOLD THE OTHERS WHAT I INTENDED TO DO, HALF HOPING THAT THEY
WOULD TALK ME OUT OF IT OR ENCOURAGE ME TO WAIT, BUT THEY
JUST LOOKED AT ME LIKE I WAS ALREADY DEAD.
I SUPPOSE ONE LESS MOUTH TO FEED GIVES THEM A BETTER CHANCE
OF LASTING ANOTHER DAY.
PLEASE DON'T SEE THIS AS A RASH DECISION. I HAVE DONE NOTHING
BUT THINK ABOUT IT SINCE THIS HAPPENED. IT COMES DOWN TO
QUALITY OF LIFE. I WOULD RATHER WE WENT OUT THIS WAY THAN WAIT
TO DIE SLOWLY. I FOUND US A NICE QUIET PLACE IN THE WOODS NOT
FAR FROM HERE. THE TREES THERE ARE DEAD AND BURNED, BUT I F
OUND ONE THAT IS BIG AND STILL STRONG ENOUGH TO HOLD THE ROPE.
PLEASE FORGIVE ME MY ANGEL.
KNOW THAT I HAD NO OTHER CHOICE.
JULY 10th

Barely slept last night. I think it was because I know today is the day that we head out onto the water. Even Stan was tense this morning as he checked the netting and harpoon guns. Four of us are going out. There is me (obviously), Benson who once again told me he understood if I didn't want to go. He's a nice guy and he means well, but I'm not about to be seen as a coward. Also coming with us is Toby. He's pretty new to the group. Found him wondering down the side of the road, weaving around burned out husks of cars. He's only fifteen, and although he talks like the big man, this morning I saw fear in his eyes. The kid shouldn't be ashamed. We all feel it. It's like a physical thing, hanging in the air with the ash and the smell of rot and death. Benson told him not to worry, and that he was going out there as a boy, but coming back as a man. I don't believe that. After all, I have seen what's out there.

In charge of the fishing trip is Stan. He knows all about these things, and claims to have caught dozens of them before he joined up with our group. He certainly talks the talk, and we couldn't help but feel reassured as he told us exactly how it will go down out there. He says there is a spot around eighty miles off the coast where these creatures roam, and that will be our best bet of finding them. It sounds crazy I'm sure. Hell, it looks crazy even writing it down. Nobody in their right minds would go looking for these things, but we are all hungry, and have people relying on us. If we could manage to snag one, even one of the smaller ones, it would give us food for a few days. We would be able to eke out another few weeks of existence. Of course we all know the dangers. There is a reason going out there is a last resort. We know before we even set off that we might never come back. From where I sit, perched on the hood of a burned out car, I can see the ocean. It laps against the shore. In the water is the rusting remains of a passenger plane, its blue and white frame a flashback to a life which is long dead. I look at the water, a dark undulating mass, and I know that they are out there. I think here is a good time to include one of the letters I found, as it concerns these creatures. I have to go and get myself ready to go out there anyway. With the sun unable to break through the ash that hangs in the atmosphere, it will be chilly, and the last thing I want to happen now is to catch a cold. I'll be back soon to write some more.

ABOMINATION!

FROM THE FIRES OF HELL THEY CAME! TWISTED THINGS, AMALGAMATIONS OF THE LORDS BEAUTIFUL CREATIONS TWISTED INTO TERRIBLE, TERRIBLE THINGS.

DEMONS!

DEMONS FROM THE DEEP. I SAW IT WITH MY OWN EYES, AND I KNEW THAT NO PRAYERS WOULD BE LOUD ENOUGH, NO FAITH WOULD BE STRONG ENOUGH. I SAW THE DEVIL. I SAW IT SWIM RIGHT UP TO THOSE INNOCENT PEOPLE AND PULL THEM OFF THE DOCK.

ABOMINATION!

NEVER HAVE I SEEN SUCH A DISGUSTING FREAK OF NATURE. NEVER HAVE I WITNESSED SOMETHING SO TWISTED AND SO DISFIGURED. I SAW ITS EYES, AND PRAISE JESUS I SAW ITS MAW, RINGED WITH FANGS WHICH WAS ENOUGH TO MAKE MY BLOOD RUN COLD.

THE END HAS COME!

THE END HAS COME AND WE WILL ALL ANSWER TO OUR MAKER!

WE WILL ALL BURN, WE WILL ALL SUFFER. WE WILL ALL FACE JUDGEMENT. THE DEMONS FROM THE DEEP WILL SEE TO THAT!

PRAY TO THEM, PRAY TO THEM AND BEG FOR MERCY. BEG FOR FORGIVENESS. BEG FOR OUR LORD TO GRANT US PASSAGE TO HEAVEN. BEG FOR HIS MERCY FROM THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE DEEP. PRAY FOR HIS LOVE TO GUIDE US INTO THE LIGHT AND THE WARMTH OF THE SUN.

PRAY!

FOR IF YOU DO NOT THEN THOSE THINGS WILL TAKE YOU AND DRAG YOU TO THE HELL FROM WHERE THEY CAME. PRAY WITH ME PEOPLE. PRAY FOR THE SUN TO BRING LIFE BACK TO THE EARTH. PRAY FOR FORGIVENESS AND THE WARMTH OF HIS LIGHT.

PRAY!

We are on our way. For a while, I wasn't sure I would be able to even step onto the boat, but somehow I did it. It has started to rain, and although we are all cramped together here in the galley (no food of course!) nobody is saying much. I think we are all just trying to deal with what we are about to do in our own special way. The boat is a 90 foot crabber. It has seen better days, but is still seaworthy. Not many boats survived after the impact, so to find one still useable was something of a miracle. A minor victory in our hellish life, and the reason why we have set up camp by the water. Like our ancestors, we live near our food source, although this is quite unlike anything our ancestors had to deal with. The gentle rise and fall of the bow is making me sleepy, and I might even think I could get a couple of hours sleep if not for the nervous excitement of our situation. My stomach feels like a tight ball, and the nerves are really starting to kick in as the safety of land gets lost in the ash filled sleety haze.

The kid, Toby, looks terrified. He seems to have left his usual bravado on the shore, and he looks every bit the frightened child that he is. Hell, I can't blame him. We are all scared, apart from Stan maybe. He's maybe in his forties, his hair long and silver, just like his beard. It's his eyes that concern me though. There is a little bit of craziness in them. A little glint of something not quite right. He's our only fisherman though, and the only one experienced in hunting these things consistently. This, incidentally, is my second fishing trip. The first one was a few weeks ago. We managed to catch fifteen footer. It looked like an overgrown, deformed eel. A second head had started to grow out of its face. We fought for hours to wrestle it on board and kill it. It writhed and thrashed on the deck, and I still don't know how we managed to kill it without anyone getting injured. Oh, I should mention something else too. My hair is starting to fall out. I'm pretty sure that means I definitely have radiation sickness. It shouldn't be a surprise, not really, but it's still a shock. I think I'm going to go stretch my legs out on deck. Maybe I'll try to talk to the kid and see if I can get him to relax a little. God knows, he looks like he needs it.

I feel guilty.

My husband always insisted we be ready for the end of the world. He always got laughed at. Always ridiculed, but nobody is laughing anymore. I guess now he has some kind of vindication, because he was right.

We survived. He is sitting across from me now, staring at the roof, one of his many guns resting across his knees. The shelter we are in - the one I kicked and screamed at him about installing - is our new home. Even though we are fifty feet underground, the smell of ash still manages to get in. Billy says it has something to do with the air filtration system.

I can't imagine what is happening up on the surface. There is no TV of course, and the radio airwaves are long dead. We have food and water though, and for now power, which is fed by the generator. I asked about fuel, but Billy being Billy, he stockpiled plenty of everything. Food, water, gasoline, weapons.

Even so, it doesn't stop the guilt. You want to know something about bad timing, then how about this. The morning the asteroid hit, I had just told Billy that I had enough of his paranoid delusions about the end of the world and how we might survive. I was packing my case when it

happened. The flash came first, a split second of right white and then gone. Then the noise came. It was a distant rumble at first, something deep and subtle, but growing. Billy raced into the room then, eyes wide, bag on his shoulder. He grabbed me by the wrist and dragged me through the house, out back towards the woods where this shelter is. I could see the sky had gone from the pale blue of what was looking to be a gorgeous day, to a fiery orange.

I didn't know what it was, but I also knew enough not to question Billy as he shrieked about how right he was. He had thought of everything. Even the hatch cover had a board over it with leaves glued to it to make sure it was perfectly camouflaged. He ushered me down the ladder into the darkness as that rumble grew louder and louder. I think we were both screaming as he closed the hatch and sealed it.

My god

The noises were awful. For days they went on, barely muted by the earth between us and the surface. We didn't have to see to know it's hell up there. That's not the worst of it though. Being down here with Billy is unbearable. He knows I don't love him. I said some things right before the explosion or whatever it was, that cut him deep to the bone. I can't look him in the eye,

and although we don't mention it, we both know things are irreparably damaged between us. I don't know how long we have been down here. Weeks at least, judging by the amount of food we have eaten. Still we barely speak. At least the noises from the surface have stopped. It's funny, because for as much as I hated that constant rumble, it was better than the silence. Billy has started to scare me. He's started to talk about repopulating the planet, and said we should start calling each other Adam and Eve. I laughed at first, but he's not joking. He said it was for the good of mankind, but when he touched me, I felt repulsed.

He hit me.

I never thought it would happen, but he did, and then forced himself on me. I kicked and screamed and fought him off, and then he told me that I would be dead if not for him. I told him I wished I was, and that he was never to touch me again. That was a week ago, and we haven't spoken since. I have to act now though. I can't stay here.

He's gone insane. I don't know if he was already on his way before any of this happened, but something in his mind has broken, and I can't be around him. I have seen what he plans to do. The storage room has a lock, and he plans to put my bed in

there. I saw his plans on paper. 'Project Adam' he had written on the paper, then a sketch on how he was going to lock me away and rape me until I was pregnant. His plan was for at least one child per year, who would be counter bred with each other when they reached the viable age.

Can you imagine anything more sick? I hear him whispering to himself on a night when he thinks I'm asleep about how he is some kind of god, and will repopulate the earth with children in his image. I'm so frightened, and didn't know what to do until this morning.

He has started to insist I call him lord.

Can you believe it? A pig farmer who managed to get lucky when his paranoia became true, now thinks he is the second coming. He hasn't attempted to touch me yet, but I know it's coming. He has started to clear out the storage room, and I won't let him do what he intends to do to me. For now though, I have to play along.

Tonight, I'll slip something in his meal. I found some tranquilizer tablets and managed to crush them up when he was busy with his plans. I'll stir it into his food and wait until he passes out, then make my leave. You might think I'm crazy to leave safety behind to go out into whatever awaits me on the surface, but you just don't understand.

how it is down here. He is a man I used to love, a man who at one time I would do anything for. But he is also a man changed. And as much as it hurts me to say it, he scares me.

I thought about killing him, but that somehow seems unfair. This is his place. He built it even against my will and whilst being ridiculed by our former friends and neighbours. I worry about how it will be up there, and it scares me. Still, I can't back out now. I will seal this letter in an envelope and keep it with me at all times. At least I will have something to leave behind. I half hope that I will wake up and find that this has all been a dream, but I know it isn't.

The fact that I would rather risk everything by taking my chances on the surface tells you how desperate I am to leave this place.

Please, God let me be safe. Let there be hope.

Wish me luck.

Malorie.

Benson thought he saw one of them breach the surface. We stopped the boat and stared out into the water. It was eerie, an absolute flat calm. The silence was thick and we were grateful for the wind which rocked the boat as it drifted on the tide. We stared at the water for a while, half hoping that it was what we were looking for, half not. Something spooked the old man alright. You can see it in his eyes. As usual, only Stan seems unafraid. We might have stood there all day had he not started the engines again and set off on our way. We seem to be further out than usual. I asked Stan where we were headed and he mumbled something about deeper waters. That scares me. We all know that the deeper the water, the bigger these things are. Some people claim they grow to hundreds of feet in length. Some side effect of whatever the asteroid leaked into the water. Nobody I know has ever seen one that big. Stan said he saw fifty footer once, and that for me is plenty big enough. I did see a guy with a tooth once though. He claimed he cut it from a carcass somewhere near the coast (which by the way, if we were going by the pre asteroid map would be a good few miles inland). The guy seemed a little off, but as true as I sit here he had it. At the time I was traveling alone, and because I was curious, and asked him if I could see it. He took off his backpack and laid it on the floor, then untied the straps. The tooth was in several pieces in his bag. He said he had to break it to fit it all in. He laid it out on the floor there in the ash and pushed the pieces together like some kind of sick jigsaw puzzle. When he put it all together, there were no words that seemed right. All we could do was look at it. It was around three feet long, and around two and a half at its thickest point. The sides were smooth, but the guy said they had been serrated before he sanded them back to stop them cutting his bag open. I asked him how big the carcass was that it came from, and he gave me this look. To this day I still don't know quite what that expression was.

Admiration.

Disbelief.

Fear.

Maybe a bit of all three. I pushed him again for an answer but he just shook his head and told me I wouldn't believe him if he told me. That I didn't like, as most people would be keen to share such a spectacular story. Not this guy though. He packed away his tooth and asked him if he wanted to join me. He asked where I was heading and I told him towards the coast. He shook his head and told me I was crazy to be going anywhere near the water. Without another word he threw his bag over his shoulder and walked away, heading inland. He never looked back, not once. I do sometimes wonder what happened to him. I wonder what he would think if he could see me now, in a boat heading further north than we have ever been before. We all know they are out there, those creatures. Down in the darkest, deepest depths. We can only hope that we can catch a smaller one and get back before they notice.

By the way, I tried talking to the kid, but whenever I try to get through to him he throws his guard up. It's almost like if he doesn't admit that he is scared, he won't come to any harm. That's not a bad outlook to have I suppose, but the downside is it will hit him really hard when we finally make contact. One thing I should point out which might be a sore subject when you come to read this. Just know that (hopefully) the world is a much better and less desperate time for you than it is for us now. Maybe for you, bait shops exist, as do other things to lure in our predators. For us, we have no such luxury, so we have to make use of what we have.

The key is to find a body that still has plenty of meat on them. They don't seem to mind so much about the rot, as long as they are meaty. I know they were once people, but this isn't a time where we can afford to be picky. Besides, we have to do something to draw them to us. Anyway, you can save your judgement. We do what we have to in order to survive. End of story.

God, I'm hungry. That's the plus side of food being so scarce. We can't afford to be picky. Believe me, I have wondered on more than once occasion if we are doing more harm than good by eating stuff that swims in these polluted seas, but then I also remind myself that we don't really have much of a choice. It's like the way a bear might chew through its own paw to escape a trap. Sometimes, you just have to do whatever you have to in order to survive. We are definitely going further out than usual. I hope Stan knows what he's doing.

SendAttachSave DraftSpellingCancel

To: ALEX GREENWALLShow BCC

Cc:

Subject: OBJECT 3579-2Plain Text

Arial12BBIUTextColorLinkImageAlignList

Good morning Alex, I just wanted to say thanks for the heads up on that N.E.O you saw. As you know, we take all Near Earth Objects seriously, and because of its position relative to the sun, hadn't seen this one approaching. I'm sure you understand the need for confidentiality here, and that to alert the public of its proximity to earth and its possible trajectory, it is vital that we allow NASA and the governments of the world to decide what is best. I'm sure you understand the need to keep this matter strictly confidential. I have attached to this email details on possible trajectories, and you will see that a strike with earth is not guaranteed, which, given the short timescale for any potential impact can only be to our benefit. Would you mind analysing our findings to see if you concur?

Sincerely,

C. M. Jackson

SendAttachSave DraftSpellingCancel

To: CASH JACKSONShow BCC

Cc:

Subject: OBJECT 3579-2Plain Text

Arial12BBIUTextColorLinkImageAlignList

Mr Jackson,

As I pointed out to you in my previous correspondence, this is a matter of utmost urgency. I have tried to contact both NASA and the government directly and have been pushed aside and given call-back promises, which you and I both know are out of the question considering the timescale. I ask again, do you have a contact telephone number where you and I might be able to discuss this in person?

Alex,

SendAttachSave DraftSpellingCancel

To: Alex GreenwallShow BCC

Cc:

Subject: OBJECT 3579-2Plain Text

Arial12BBIUTextColorLinkImageAlignList

Alex,

I'm afraid I cannot contact you by telephone due to my current location not receiving any form of service signal. I will be at my system here awaiting your immediate response. Did you have a chance to compare our data yet with your own findings?

As I'm sure you are aware, time is critical.

Please respond as soon as possible.

Cash.

SendAttachSave DraftSpellingCancel

To: CASH JACKSONShow BCC

Cc:

Subject: OBJECT 3579-2Plain Text

Arial12BBIUTextColorLinkImageAlignList

I examined your findings and found a flaw in your theory. You forgot to account for the increased velocity of the object as it passes our moon. I cannot stress this enough.

THIS OBJECT WILL NOT MISS!!!

I have done the calculations, and am preparing my family for the worst. You must understand the gravity of this situation. My calculation say that the object will impact somewhere in the pacific ocean in less than 9 hours. You must do something to help!!

Send

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Spelling

Cancel

To: ALEX GREENWALL

Show BCC

Cc:

Subject: OBJECT 3579-2

Plain Text

Arial

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















Alex,

As you know, there is no evacuation plan for something such as this. I know it is hard to swallow, but I implore you to get you and your family to safety. Somewhere below ground if possible, go and go now. I'm sure you can understand how hard it will be to ensure the safety of you and yours. Get to a safe place, and God be with you.

Casy

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To: CASY JACKSON

Show BCC

Cc:

Subject: OBJECT 3579-2

Plain Text


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















I'm sorry, but I cannot accept such indifference to this situation. You do realise that this is a potential extinction event? Tsunamis hundreds of feet high decimating coastlines, not to mention the impact which will blanket the earth in ash and cloud.

Extinction, sir. Surely you cannot afford to assume this object will miss us? Or perhaps your lack of telephone signal because you and the rest of your government officials are already deep below ground where you will be untouched by the horror that is to come?

I have to warn somebody. I have to take action.

Send

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To: CASY JACKSON

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Subject: OBJECT 3579-2

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























Hello?

Are you there? Did you receive my last email?

Send

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To: CASY JACKSON

Show BCC

Cc:

Subject: OBJECT 3579-2

Plain Text


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
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





















Since you have again failed to respond, I'm afraid I am left with no option but to try as best I can to alert the authorities. I will be printing several copies of this chain of emails as evidence, and taking them with me to any and all reputable news agencies or indeed anywhere else that I can leave them where people might find them and learn the truth.

I only wish that you and your fellow government officials had the backbone to face up to this situation. You, sir and your colleagues are going to be responsible for death on an unimaginable global scale. People should at least be warned, to have an opportunity to at least find shelter.

I doubt anyone will even listen to me, but I have to try. If I can save just one person, then at least my conscience can rest easy.

You all deserve to rot in hell for this.

I intended to do this sooner, but my hands were shaking too badly. We saw...something. The right words for what it was are too hard to find right now. All I know is that it was bigger almost beyond my ability to comprehend. I'm not exaggerating here, when I tell you that it was at least two hundred feet, or at least the part of it that we could see was. It's back arched of the water, and it was a mottled pinky brown. There was a half developed tentacle growing out of its back, squirming and thrashing as the misplaced appendage broke the surface of the water. It was as thick as the oak tree that used to be in our back yard when I was a kid, a memory that until I saw that hellish creature, I had completely forgotten about.

Stan is chasing it.

We all protested, but he screamed at us to sit quiet or he would throw us over board. He could do it too, he's a big guy and more than a match for all of us. Besides, nobody else knows how to operate the boat, or get us back to land. For now, we are just helpless passengers.

The kid is crying. He's trying to be quiet, but we can all hear it. The fact that nobody is trying to help him or offer comfort says a lot about the current mind-set of those of us who are left. We are living all of those clichés of old. It's a dog eat dog world, only the strong survive etc. etc. Don't get me wrong, I would love to help him. As I peek over the top of the pad as I write this, I can see him on the seat opposite me. Knees pulled up to his chin, head down as the boat crests the waves in pursuit of our creature. I think he would take that now, that comfort or reassurance. The simple fact is that I have none to give. I have my own problems, my own issues and my own fears, the most pressing of which is what we are going to do about our captain, who is now cackling and whistling as we chase this giant monster. Doesn't he know that we can't possibly hope to capture it? We aren't experienced hunters or fishermen. Hell, we struggled to capture that fourteen foot eel last time. What the hell does he expect us to do if we catch up to this thing? I look at the others, and they meet my gaze. We are all thinking the same thing, and wondering if we should do something or just wait and let things play out. Either way, I feel sick and just want to get back to dry land. Maybe that guy I met with the tooth was right. We have no business being out here.

Toby is dead, even worse, I don't think the rest of us are too far behind. I paused just after writing that and couldn't quite believe it. The poor kid lost it, panicked and charged at Stan, demanding we return to dry land. They got into a fight, although that's probably not the right word. Toby tried to attack Stan, and got the hell beaten out of him for his troubles. Stan dragged the kid out on deck and straddled him, hitting him over and over again. The sound was so loud, so raw that I will never forget it. He eventually stopped fighting, but Stan carried on anyway. None of us moved, none of us even tried to help.

I feel so guilty, but it still caused no reaction. Am I really that broken? Am I really so desensitised to this new world that I can't even find a reaction to a grown man beating someone to death whilst we all watch?

Maybe this new earth is just what we deserve. We have become so barbaric that maybe death would have been too good for us.

THE EATING OF THE FLESH BY J. TRANSDEN

CANNIBALISM (FROM CANIBALES, THE SPANISH NAME FOR THE CARIB PEOPLE, A WEST INDIES TRIBE FORMERLY WELL KNOWN FOR PRACTICING CANNIBALISM) IS THE ACT OR PRACTICE OF HUMANS EATING THE FLESH OR INTERNAL ORGANS OF OTHER HUMAN BEINGS. IT IS ALSO CALLED ANTHROPOPHAGY.

A PERSON WHO PRACTICES CANNIBALISM IS CALLED A CANNIBAL. THE EXPRESSION "CANNIBALISM" HAS BEEN EXTENDED INTO ZOOLOGY TO MEAN ONE INDIVIDUAL OF A SPECIES CONSUMING ALL OR PART OF ANOTHER INDIVIDUAL OF THE SAME SPECIES AS FOOD, INCLUDING SEXUAL CANNIBALISM.

THE CARIB TRIBE IN THE LESSER ANTILLES, FROM WHOM THE WORD CANNIBALISM DERIVES, ACQUIRED A LONG-STANDING REPUTATION AS CANNIBALS FOLLOWING THE RECORDING OF THEIR LEGENDS IN THE 17TH CENTURY. SOME CONTROVERSY EXISTS OVER THE ACCURACY OF THESE LEGENDS AND THE PREVALENCE OF ACTUAL CANNIBALISM IN THE CULTURE.

CANNIBALISM WAS WIDESPREAD IN THE PAST AMONG HUMANS IN MANY PARTS OF THE WORLD, CONTINUING INTO THE 19TH CENTURY IN SOME ISOLATED SOUTH PACIFIC CULTURES, AND TO THE PRESENT DAY IN PARTS OF TROPICAL AFRICA.

IN A FEW CASES IN INSULAR MELANESIA, INDIGENOUS FLESH-MARKETS EXISTED. FIJI WAS ONCE KNOWN AS THE 'CANNIBAL ISLES'. CANNIBALISM HAS BEEN WELL DOCUMENTED AROUND THE WORLD, FROM FIJI TO THE AMAZON BASIN TO THE CONGO TO MAORI NEW ZEALAND.

6 NEANDERTHALS ARE BELIEVED TO HAVE PRACTICED CANNIBALISM, AND NEANDERTHALS MAY HAVE BEEN EATEN BY ANATOMICALLY MODERN HUMANS. IT IS NECESSARY IN TODAY'S WORLD TO PERHAPS CONSIDER RETURNING TO THESE LONG FORGOTTEN PRACTICES. NECESSITY DICTATES THAT BECAUSE THE EARTH IS NO LONGER RICH WITH EDIBLE PLANTS AND WILDLIFE, THAT WE MUST LOOK TO OURSELVES IN ORDER TO SUSTAIN OUR SPECIES.

INDEED, MUCH OF THE HUMAN ANATOMY IS ENTIRELY EDIBLE IF ONLY ONE CAN OVERCOME THE MORAL ISSUES PRESENTED. FOR EXAMPLE, THE MEAT OF THE THIGH AND CALF WOULD BE PARTICULARLY GOOD AREAS TO FEAST UPON. I MYSELF JUST RECENTLY BEGAN PERFORMING THIS PRACTICE, AND ALTHOUGH NOT ENTIRELY PLEASANT, THE VITALITY THAT FEASTING ON THE FLESH GAVE ME WAS ONE WHICH HAS SPURRED ME TO WRITE THIS ARTICLE AND SHARE WITH THOSE WHOM I MEET ON MY TRAVELS.

THE FLESH OF THE HUMAN IS AN ACQUIRED TASTE, OF THIS THERE IS NO DOUBT. HOWEVER, AS A RULE, HUMANS MUST EAT TO SURVIVE. I HEAR REPORTS OF BRAVE GROUPS HEADING OUT TO SEA TO TRY AND CAPTURE THE HELLISH CREATURES THAT DWELL THERE, AND WHEN SUCH STORIES REACH ME, I LAUGH, FOR IT IS QUITE UNNECESSARY. WHILST THEY RISK THEIR LIVES DEALING WITH AN AGGRESSIVE AND HIGHLY EVOLVED PREDATOR, I HAVE DEVELOPED A SYSTEM OF ENSURING THAT I CAN EAT ALMOST AT WILL.

NOTE OF CAUTION!!
LARGE GROUPS ARE UNSUITABLE.

SINGLE TRAVELLERS ARE BEST. THERE IS AMPLE OPPORTUNITY TO FIND SUCH INDIVIDUALS OUT THERE ON THE ROAD WHICH WOULD SUFFICE FOR THE FIRST TIME CANNIBAL. I SUGGEST RENDERING THE CHOSEN VICTIM UNCONSCIOUS, THEN HANGING BY THE FEET FROM A TREE. BEFORE THE VICTIM REGAINS CONSCIOUSNESS, AND TO ENSURE THAT YOU ARE ACTING IN THE MOST HUMANE WAY POSSIBLE, SLIT THE THROAT OF THE VICTIM AND LET THEM BLEED OUT.

DO THIS FROM BEHIND TO ENSURE YOU ARE CLEAR OF ANY ARTERIAL SPRAY. THERE WILL BE MORE THAN YOU ANTICIPATE I ASSURE YOU. FROM HERE, YOU CAN BEGIN TO DISSECT THE MEAT. ALMOST NOTHING GOES TO WASTE APART FROM THE ENTRAILS, WHICH ARE BOTH INEDIBLE AND COMPLETELY USELESS.

EAT WELL MY FRIENDS, AND I HOPE TO DINE WITH YOU SOON.

We are under attack.

It keeps circling the boat.

We are all going to die out here.

Stan is quite mad. I'm sure of that now. We are really in a situation now. After he finished with Toby, Stan picked him up and tossed him over the side. He should have known how stupid that was. The fresh blood in the water must have been like a dinner bell, and that big thing we had been following turned its attention towards us. We started to panic, but Stan just laughed.

If I live through this, I will never, ever forget how that thing looked as it came towards us.

What the hell do we do now?

Hahaha! You have to laugh. Not as dumb as they look these fish!!

Stan threw Benson over the side. He keeps looking at me and I think I might be next.

Creature still circling.

I feel like I should do something but I'm too afraid to move. I can feel his eyes on me, and when I glance up at them I can see the crazy. I don't know if I'm more scared of him or this horrible thing that keeps circling us. Stan said as long as we keep feeding it, it should leave us alone, which is all well and good, but there is only me left. I get the feeling it's going to come down to him or me, and I don't think I can take him in a fair fight. Even if I could, what then?

This is all such a mess.

Clever girl!!!! Clever, clever girl!!!!

For all the worrying, I didn't even have to make the choice. Stan is gone, and now I'm alone. At least I am if you don't count our circling friend out there. Some fishing trip hahahahaha!!!

I feel like Captain Ahab, only I'm way out of my depth. This has to end soon, so I suppose I should explain what happened to Stan.

I was trying to get him to return to land. There is no food or water on the boat, and it was this that I was trying to draw attention to, rather than the fact that he had killed two people since we came out here. He sat and listened, keeping those crazy eyes locked on me the entire time. He heard me out, then told me that I knew what had to happen. That they had to be fed to make sure they are kept strong. He said it was so they could breed and make sure there was enough food to go around for everyone. He stood up then, and I was sure it was my time.

That's when the attack came.

The creature hit the boat from below. It could have easily, easily have smashed it into kindling, but it hit it underneath at the front, just hard enough to knock Stan over the side. He started to scream, and then laugh before the creature pulled him under.

I panicked then, because I was alone out there. I ran to the controls, not really knowing what I was doing but desperate enough to try. I can't remember if I was laughing or screaming, but I was certainly making a racket. I managed to start the boat, and had angled back to shore when I felt another nudge from underneath, then a shudder as the boat stopped moving. The engines were on, but my forward momentum had stopped. I had no drive, and I think I know what happened. It seems these animals aren't so dumb after all. It had hit the props, breaking them off before returning to that maddening circling and waiting. After all it was in no rush. Unlike me, it had eaten. Ha! The perpetual grey dusk seems to be mocking me as my skeletal shadow stretches out across the deck. Out there on the water, it still circles. Every now and again it will breach the surface, and I can see its milky eye as it watches me.

Well, let it watch.

I have decided to hunker down in here and wait for it to go away. I can be stubborn and patient if I want to, and this is one of those times where it will help me. Let it waste its energy out there if that's what it wants to do. I'm going to stay in here and keep you all entertained.

Night came and went, and it's still out there. I didn't sleep much. Not because I didn't want to, believe me I'm exhausted, but that thing out there keeps nudging the boat. Not hard enough to damage it, but just enough to keep me afraid and on edge.

I think it's the fear that is making me so tired. The night was a never ending cycle of paranoia as I stared out of the window at the black waves. Even when it was too dark to see it, I could still hear it out there, breaching the surface and making its presence known.

Thoughts have turned to my own survival, and I really don't know what to do. As I may have already mentioned, there is no food on board. Worse than that though, there is no WATER.

How ironic that the stuff surrounds me but it's way too polluted to drink. Even if I could keep it down, it would kill me within hours. If I had some way to boil it, then maybe I would stand a chance, but I have nothing on me but this pad and pen I'm writing with. I suppose if things get desperate I can try to drink the ink haha!

In all seriousness though, I really am stuck here. It's not like I can just call the coastguard and wait for help to arrive. It just nudged the boat again. I think it's waiting for me, but I won't give up just yet. I shall just have to try and ignore the hunger and keep my thoughts on writing. I'm going to go and search the boat again and see if there is anything I might have missed.

Spent the last two hours going over every inch of the fishing boat. The creature has gone for now, but just when I start to relax and thinking I'm safe, it nudges the bottom. I'm so tired. I really think I would feel better if it would just let me sleep. Either way, here is a list of exactly what I have on board here with me.

1 harpoon gun.

1 cigarette tin (Empty)

Ten feet of fishing net.

1 broken shard of mirror (I think it belonged to Toby)

1 putrid female torso (for bait)

1 pad (on which I'm writing)

1 pen (with which I am writing this!!)

That's all. I don't see anything there that can help me out of this situation, and I'm starting to get scared. It's bad enough trying to get through the day as is, but stranded out here in such a confined space is hell. It's almost a form of sensory deprivation. The only sound is the creaking of the boat as it drifts in the tide and my guts grumbling for some kind of sustenance.

Back at our camp, the others should have realised we are late back, not that they can do anything about it.

I'm so tired.

I might try to get my head down for a while.

--

Please, just let me sleep for a while. Just an hour is all I need.

--

Still no food or sleep. That fucking thing still keeps hitting to boat. I don't think I can take it anymore. I NEED food. What I wouldn't give for a nice cold glass of water. I think back to the days when we had water on tap and it feels like an extraordinary luxury. I don't want to write anymore. I need to think. Every hour that passes saps my energy.

--

I think I heard my wife call to me in the night. I staggered out on deck, but I couldn't see her. And why would I? She's dead. Ha! The thing is still circling the boat. Why won't it just leave me alone?

I'm so hungry.

Couldn't help myself. It was meant for the fish but it has eaten recently and I haven't ha! The smell made me gag, but I forced myself to keep it down. The trick was to pretend it wasn't human. What have I become? Need to act now before it's too late. I never expected things to end this way. My wife is calling to me from somewhere down in the water, and I just want to be with her. I'm so thirsty, and at least that soon will be at an end. I hope I can bring myself to swallow enough water before that thing out there gets me. The thought of feeling those teeth puncture my skin whilst I'm still alive is one that frightens me almost to the point of backing out. But if I'm going to do this, then I intend to do it my own way. I intend to tie the harpoon to my leg with the fishing line. It should be heavy enough to make sure I sink. This journal along with its collection of letters from strangers who were nothing more than ghosts of the past, I shall leave here. My voice shall be added to that of those who came before me. I shall leave it by the wheel of the boat. If by some miracle it remains afloat, if by some miracle you are reading this by the light of the sun, then I know at least that you are in a situation better than the world I am about to leave. I only hope that if you are reading this, those creatures died with us who remained on this planet, and the world you inhabit is safer, happier place.

It's time to go now. It's getting late and I want to do this before I lose my nerve. I hope this book finds you in good health. For me, it is time to go. Tell them if they ask where I am that I have gone fishing.

SCRATCHERS

[This one came about in the weird way things sometimes do. I was woken up early one morning by a strange scratching sound. I thought it might have been a mouse or something, but it turned out it was just a bird up in the eaves. Either way, it sparked an idea which morphed into the story you are about to read. It was originally part of the individual kindle only stories in the Taste of fear series.]

I'M NOT CRAZY. That's something I want to get straight right off the bat. I'm sure they will say otherwise of course when they get here – especially when they see the holes in the walls and the blood

on the floor. But really, I'm not. I have already called the police, and I want to write this down before they get here. Consider it my confession if you want to. My name is Trenton Hughes, aged thirty-three. I'm a surveyor for a pretty big global firm. You have probably heard of them, but I'll spare them the indignity of being associated with me after word of this gets out, although the chances of retaining any form of anonymity after this are probably already out of the window by now. No matter what you think when you (whoever you are) reads this, please know that I'm a good person, and have always tried to live a good life. There isn't a good way to tell you about this other than to just come out and say it, even though it sounds as ridiculous to me as it will probably sound to you. Still, no time to stand on ceremony anymore so here goes.

I started to see the little people who live in the walls a few days ago.

See? I told you it would sound crazy. Bear with me, though, and I'll do my best to explain.

It started just after my wife, Hilary, told me she wanted a divorce. In hindsight (which I've since discovered in a wonderful but frustratingly useless thing) I probably should have seen it coming. As a husband, I was lacking in a lot of areas, although none that I thought would lead to her dropping 'the big D' on me. Either way, I had no idea things had gotten so bad, and the news hit me like a cliché filled freight train. I went through the expected responses. Telling her things would change, telling her things would get better. She responded to this not with love and open arms and forgiveness as I'd hoped, but by instead informing me that not only did she not want any kind of promise of change from me, but she was already seeing someone else, a work colleague called Ted.

I asked how it was that I'd never heard of Ted, and why she had never mentioned him before, then it dawned on me that a secret affair usually meant that the clueless husband is kept completely out of the loop. I asked her if it was serious and she said Ted had told her he loved her and wanted her to move in with him.

Thanks, Ted. Thanks a lot.

How did I respond to this earth shattering news I hear you ask? Was it with the British stiff upper lip that my birth parents possessed and had tried to drill into me when I was a nervous, spotty youth? Was it with grace and dignity, or a steely determination to deal with the situation and set about building a new life by myself?

Not exactly.

I went and had myself a nervous breakdown.

You hear all this bullshit about how time heals, and if you love someone, let them go. But none of that means anything when all you can think about is your wife with her legs wrapped around another man's waist and screaming his name whilst you gradually come apart at the seams. Let me tell you, it's not a great place to be. Either out of stubbornness or some childish desire to do everything I could to piss her off, I started to do all the things she hated.

I started smoking again, not because I missed the delicious flavour of those tar-packed cancer

sticks, but because I knew Hilary hated it. She used to moan and whine about the smell and the damage that I was doing to my body. Despite her warnings, that first one tasted pretty sweet, and almost made me forget all about her fucking someone else whilst I was by myself polluting my body.

Same story with the drinking. The six pack a night that I started with to help me get through to the next day soon became twelve, and in the interest of efficiency, those have now been replaced with a bottle of Vodka a day, or failing that, good old Jack Daniels. Hell, I would drink anything if it would help to take away the feeling of absolute worthlessness and self-pity for a couple of hours. It was during one of these self-depreciating binges that I first saw the wall people, or Scratchers, as I have since christened them.

I was slouched on the sofa, eyes raw from lack of sleep, booze, or crying – take your pick – when I saw one of them scurry across the edge of the wall. I didn't freak out as you might expect, instead, I sat there and stared, feeling like Gulliver in the Lilliput of my too expensive, too empty apartment.

He was about six inches tall – action figure sized if you will – and wearing a tiny brown tunic. His tiny eyes glinted in the semi-gloom, and he was armed with what looked to be a converted nail file sword, one of Hilary's no doubt that had been lost at some point in the past. He froze and stared at me, holding the tiny weapon defensively in my direction. I could only gawp back, the worthless drunk and the impossible tiny man engaged in a stare down. The Scratcher sniffed the air, then shoved the kitchen door open a crack and squeezed inside. I just sat there, listening to the tiny pitter-pat of his feet as he went. It was then, as I sat and really listened to the house, that I truly heard them.

They were stealthy, moving behind the walls, a subtle scratching as they moved between plasterboard and insulation. The sound of them reminded me of the house I grew up in, the way the rats that used to make nests in our barn during winter months used to scurry around as they looked for food to scavenge on. I think that was when I truly started to feel afraid, because as I sat there and listened, it sounded like there was a hell of a lot of them.

My response to this disturbing discovery was not to leap into action the way any self-motivated hero would, but to finish my freshly opened bottle of Mr. Daniels's finest and bring on a glorious, booze-fuelled sleep. The next day, with a head that throbbed like a rotten tooth, I dragged myself off the sofa and walked to the kitchen, trying to convince myself that I wanted a glass of water when I knew it was the unopened bottle of Smirnoff that I was really looking for.

Gleaming white tiles greeted me, the room edged with expensive, custom made fitted cupboards which I had never wanted but Gloria had insisted on. I wondered in the back of my mind what kind of cupboards Ted had in his house and how long it would take her to get her claws into him and take away his decision-making ability on such things. Probably not yet. They would still be too busy enjoying each other for mundane things like kitchen furniture.

Anyway, I'm losing track.

As soon as I opened the door I could hear them, that same subtle scratching sound as they went

about their business. I don't know how long I stood there and held my breath. It felt like hours, the average lung capacity of a human being, especially one who had just rediscovered his old smoking habits told me it was significantly less.

With more effort than I expected it to take, I forced myself to walk across the room to the cupboard under the sink and kneel in front of it. Most of the noise seemed to be coming from there, and I grasped the handles with every intention of looking, but just couldn't bring myself to open them. I don't know if I was more afraid of seeing them, or of not seeing them. Either way, I didn't think it bode well for my sanity. Eventually, I found the guts to do what I needed to and yanked the doors open, expecting to see a fully function micro- village like something from *The Borrowers*, but was greeted instead with the familiar landscape of spare mop heads, cleaning materials and old washcloths. I was about to close the doors when something caught my eye that looked out of place. I fished out one of the washcloths from the back of the cupboard and held it up to the light, half mesmerized, half afraid. Clothes had been cut out of the material, leaving only tiny templates for trousers and shirts behind. With my racing heart feeling like it was now beating in my throat, I checked the other rags and cloths that were in there, and almost all of them were the same. It looked as if my dish rags had clothed an entire tiny populace.

Surely now he will react and do something proactive, I hear you say.

Actually no. I closed the cupboard, opened the Smirnoff that I had tried to lie to myself I didn't want, and drank until I passed out on the sofa. (I hadn't been able to sleep in the bed since Hilary left. It still smelled of her perfume). When I woke up, I was aware of three things all in fairly quick succession. First, that my body felt as if it had been put through a mangle stamped on and then put through it again. Second, that I was struggling to cope with the amount of booze I was consuming, and that I ought to slow down a touch. The third thing I noticed was the note taped to my chest. It was written on a small scrap of paper, and the text looked to have been scrawled by a young child, or - dare I say it - a tiny hand. The writing was uneven and spiky, and in truth barely legible, but still, the message was clear enough despite the awful spelling.

Firgit abot us.

Or els.

Ice replaced blood, and even the throbbing headache subsided for long enough for me to be afraid of that tiny scrap of paper. There was sinister simplicity to it. A way of wording that told me that these people- pardon my French – don't fuck around. As I write this – covered in blood and waiting for the police to arrive – it dawns on me that I should have left there and then. The second I got that note, I should have packed a bag and got the hell out of dodge, but stubbornness has always been a problem for me, and so I decided instead to do something stupid. Much like the dumb hero in a cheesy horror flick will confidently walk into the dark and tell his friends he'll be right back when we the viewer know what's waiting for him, I had my very own stupid idea. I decided to try and catch the little

critters on video, partly to prove to myself that they weren't a figment of my imagination (Believe me, the idea had dawned on me more than once) and second, to maybe get the bragging rights of discovering something never seen before, a new species of undiscovered creature that had taken residence in my walls. Hell, my booze addled brain thought that I might even earn a little bit of money and maybe, just maybe, use my new found fame to win my wife back from the arms of the mysterious Ted.

I set up a couple of cameras. One in the corner of the living room, getting as much of the space in shot as possible, the second in the kitchen, facing the cupboards. The idea was to leave the cameras recording, stay awake all night and log everything that happened. I wanted to get everything, you see. Log it so that when the inevitable questions came from the newspapers and such I would be able to answer. I wanted to know how many there were, where they came from, what they did when they came out, and more importantly, what they wanted with me. But my grand plan was, as always, derailed by the demon booze, and although I promised myself I would stay sober to complete my important mission, I had passed out by ten o'clock, three-quarters of a bottle of whisky for the worse with my notepad in hand and pen poised over paper. It was almost three in the morning when I jolted awake, spilling remainder of the precious liquid all over myself, and for a second, I didn't know where I was. It was only when I reached over to turn on the lamp that I saw the notepad. Before I had nodded off, the page had been clean and empty, ready for me to log the night's events. But now, there were words on the page, scrawled in that same spiky longhand, and with much the same abruptness as before.

Last chans.

Stoppe now.

The word now was double underlined, and I glared into the gloom, looking for any signs of them watching me, but all was silent. Hell, even the scratching in the walls had stopped. The silence was total as I sat there staring at those four words and clutching the three-quarters empty vodka bottle hard enough to turn my knuckles white. The state of my sanity again came into scrutiny as I tried to decide if I was seeing things or if these little people really were coexisting in my home when I remembered the cameras. Lurching out of the chair, I went to the one in the corner first, desperate to check it. Surely whatever had written those words would have been captured on film, and I could, at least, answer the nagging doubt over my state of mind, or at least that would have been the plan. I snatched the camera off the tripod and found that it had been switched off. There was no sane reason for that to happen, but I thought perhaps the battery had died. I powered the camera up, noting that as I suspected, there was almost a three quarter charge remaining. Tossing the useless gadget on the sofa, I hurried to the kitchen, shoving the door open to see if the other device had suffered the same fate.

If there had been any doubts about low batteries or technical gremlins with the first camcorder, there were none with the second. Its remains lay on the kitchen floor, shattered fragments of green circuit board and copper wire strewn around it. With hands that shook either from the booze or

through fear, I picked up the remains of the camera. I could see the markings on the outside like somebody had hacked at the casing with a pair of scissors (or perhaps a nail file knife) and had done a damn good job of destroying the innards of it too. I thought my legs were going to give way, but they somehow carried me back to my beloved sofa, where I crashed down and lit a cigarette. I could hear the need for alcohol gnawing at my gut, and was equally aware that the small amount that I had left wasn't going to cut it. I needed to talk to someone, to tell them what was happening. Hell, maybe I even wanted to ask for help. I know I shouldn't have done it, especially as I was still half drunk, but I called Hilary. It was a mistake, and part of me knew it when I dialled her number, but my booze-ravaged mind didn't care. I slurred at her, first telling her how afraid I was of the people in the walls, then turning angry and blaming her for leaving me and making me feel the way I did. Another voice came on the line then, crisp and authoritative. The elusive Ted. He told me never to call again, and that if I did, he would call the police. I tried to think of a witty retort, something sarcastic maybe about my adulterous wife, but he had already hung up the phone and left me there with a dial tone in my ear. It was then that I had the idea that would bring me full circle as to the reason why I'm sitting here and writing this now. I decided that if I couldn't catch them on camera, then I would have to literally catch one and find out what they wanted. It seemed like a perfectly rational idea at the time.

Good God how wrong I was.

I picked up a dozen or so mousetraps (yes, and a couple more bottles of my beloved sour mash whisky before you ask) and set about putting my plan into action. The guy at the store tried to offer me those humane ones, telling me they were the better option. How could I tell him that my traps were for little people who live in the walls, and would be intelligent enough to escape? Of course, there was no way I could tell him that, so I plumped for some of the old school wooden ones with the metal snaps designed to kill.

Jesus, I just realised that this was only the day before yesterday. It almost seems like another lifetime. Anyhow, I better hurry up and finish this. I can almost imagine that I can hear the police sirens coming closer.

So, back to the mousetraps.

I put them in all the places I would expect mousetraps to go. In the corners of the rooms, in the cupboards themselves and in the kitchen where I had heard most of the scratching. I wasn't even sure it would work, but I was desperate enough to try. I set my traps and sat on the sofa, intending to wait and watch, but the liquid stuff was calling me and I started on the first bottle, promising that I would only drink half and save the rest for later. As always, my willpower deserted me, and I passed out after draining the entire bottle.

I dreamed of strange things. I dreamed of Hilary and the faceless Ted laughing at me as swarms of tiny people streamed from the walls and climbed up me, forcing themselves into my mouth, forcing themselves down my throat and attacking me from the inside out, the pain agonizing as Hilary and

her faceless new lover laughed and whooped and danced.

I was woken by the snap of a mousetrap.

Even though I was more than a little worse for wear because of the alcohol I had poured down my neck and the disturbing remnants of the nightmare, I staggered to the kitchen, pushing the swing door open, desperate to see what I had caught. The two of them froze as they looked at me. One of them was injured, its foot severed by the mousetrap. His colleague had him under the arms and was dragging him towards the open kitchen cupboard, leaving a tiny trail of blood behind from its wounded leg. Behind, I could see more of them, huddled in the darkness of the cupboard as they watched the rescue take place. Even in the gloom, I could see them glaring at me. I grabbed the first thing I could see - the coffee cup that Hilary bought me for my birthday - the one that said coffee addict, with a huge arrow pointing up towards the drinker. I threw it overarm, grunting with rage. The cup shattered against the cupboard door, showering the miniature people in shards of broken ceramic, which to them must have looked like immense boulders. They flinched but didn't deviate, continuing to drag their wounded colleague towards the safety of the cupboard. Two more came out to help, these armed with weapons - the old kitchen scissors that had been lost some time before, the other with what looked to be the business end of a corkscrew. Their faces were painted with red war paint stripes, and as they dragged their wounded compatriot to safety, they paused to glare at me from across the room, their tiny faces twisted into hateful grimaces. With that, the cupboard door closed and I could hear the scratching in the walls as they moved around back there. Something happened then. Maybe it was rage, maybe it was fear. Probably, it was a combination of the two. All I knew is that I wanted them out of the house, out of my damn walls. I jogged across to where I had last seen them, the tiny blood trail leading from mousetrap the only evidence that they were ever there, and yanked open the cupboard door, spilling pans and dishes all over the floor as I searched for them. All I could hear was that incessant scratching. It felt like they were mocking me, laughing at me, just like Hilary. Just like Ted. The hammer had been in the toolbox which I had scooped out of the cupboard onto the floor, spilling the contents. The business end was large and sturdy, the kind of weapon that could do serious damage, especially to action figure sized home invaders. I snatched it up, stumbled to the worktop and set it down, then with shaking hands, ripped open the top on the bottle of Jack Daniels that I had bought and gulped a third of it down in one, wincing as it burned my throat.

Haha! Come on then Trenton, stop being such a pussy! Let's find these little shits!

My inner voice seemed to like the booze just as much as I did, and with another hefty swig of the good stuff for courage, I scooped up the hammer and swung it at the wall as hard as I could, screaming in both rage and defiance as I did it.

Plasterboard exploded, wood shattered.

Damn it felt good.

I cackled and swung the hammer again, revelling in another explosion of wood and plaster dust. I

pulled at the hole, ignoring the cuts to my hands as I peered into the cavity. I couldn't see them in there, but could still hear them, louder now scurrying through the walls. By then, I wasn't about to let them escape me. I took the hammer to the wall again, chasing those scratching sounds around the house. By the time I had finished, I could barely move my arm, and my hair and clothes were covered in plaster dust and flecks of wood. The house looked like a warzone.

I didn't see a single one of the little people.

Not one.

I could still hear them, though, and somehow that was worse because it felt like they were mocking me. As was my way when faced with something I don't want to deal with, I turned back to the bottle, crashed out on the sofa and drank myself into oblivion.

It was only half an hour ago that I woke up from that, and as I write my head is still fuzzy, although I'm pretty sober now after what happened. God knows, I would kill for another drink now (the irony. Ha!). I really feel like I need one. Anyhow, no time to get ahead of myself. The sirens that I imagined I could hear earlier are definitely coming, and not a moment too soon, as the little guys have started to scratch around again in the walls. I better hurry up and finish this.

It was pain that woke me from my alcohol induced sleep. A tingling sharpness in my wrist. Headache thundered in my skull, and I forced my eyes open and looked down at my arm, which was hanging over the edge of the sofa.

There were two of them sitting there. One of them I'm almost certain was the one who had glared at me from the cupboard door as he had helped his wounded kin from the mousetrap. The other was ignoring me, tiny white teeth gritted in determination. They were holding a single blade from a pair of kitchen scissors and were sawing away at my wrist with it as if it were the world's biggest redwood. Blood was already flowing, and I screamed out and threw my arm in the air, the two little people launching across the room like rag dolls. Although my wrist was bleeding pretty badly, I was lucky to have woken up before they did any serious damage. It was only then that my overloaded brain realised what had been happening.

The little people had been trying to kill me.

I expected the idea of that to make me afraid, but instead, it was anger that surged through me, and I snatched up the hammer from the seat cushion beside me. The noise in the walls was deafening, a scratching mass of scurrying movement all around. It sounded like an army back there, and I was their primary target.

Again, it just dawned on me that I should have left, just got the hell out of there, but I inherited my father's stubborn streak, and - with another swig of whiskey to steady my nerves - I readied my attack.

Most of the noise was coming from the kitchen. Subtle scratches, stealthy thuds. That seemed to be where they were most active, and if mousetraps didn't work, then maybe a more direct approach would. Tightening my grip on the hammer, I charged across the room, kicking the door open and

swinging the weapon with every ounce of strength I could muster I...

There was no way I could stop myself. I need to make that clear right now. Besides, how could I know she would be there?

I saw Hilary a split second before the hammer made contact with her forehead, her eyes wide and frightened, her mouth open in surprise as her wild-eyed, plaster dust covered husband came at her. The sound was a wet crunch as her skull bowed inwards, the tray of toast and coffee that she was carrying crashing to the floor in a symphony of spilled liquid and broken crockery. She didn't scream, I don't think she had time. But don't worry, I screamed enough for both of us. There was so much blood. I tossed the hammer aside, watching as it left a bloody streak behind where it slid to a halt by the wall, reminding me of the one left by the little persons severed foot. I cradled her head, and although I prayed that she would be okay, I knew just by looking that she was gone. Her eyes were glassy and wide, and I knew just by looking that she was gone. Blood ran from her nostrils and ears, and the top of her head was misshaped, a concave depression which quickly filled with blood. At some point, my screams turned into sobs, and I started screaming for help, hoping that someone would come and tell me what to do.

That was when I saw them. The little people.

They were everywhere. Standing on the worktops, peering out of the cupboards. I even saw the one that I had caught in the mousetrap, standing on makeshift crutches with his tiny stump bandaged. There were more of them than I could have ever imagined. The two that had been hacking at my arm walked defiantly past where I knelt on the kitchen floor, my trousers and arms drenched with Hilary's blood. They looked at me as they passed, tiny faces glaring and smug. They knew they had beaten me, they knew I was broken and wouldn't retaliate. I watched as they disappeared back into the walls, squeezing through gaps in the worktops, others through the holes in the walls that I had made with the hammer. The rest through the cupboards. The scratching as they made their way deeper into the spaces between the walls was very loud, and one I knew I would never forget. Revenge was no longer an option. I didn't care anymore. I don't care anymore.

And that, I think brings us pretty much up to date. The scratchers are still moving around in the walls, and although I have closed the kitchen door I know Hilary is there. I didn't think I loved her anymore, but knowing what I have done, knowing that she will no longer exist in the world feels me with a guilt and sadness for which I know I can find no words to be able to ever accurately explain. The fact that she came back to help me despite everything tells me that maybe she did still love me after all. But now she will never love anyone ever again. The Scratchers saw to that.

I also know that the police won't believe me and that in all likelihood, I will spend the rest of my days in some kind of institution as doctors prod and poke me and try to convince me that what I saw wasn't real. But I know it was. Despite the breakdown and the alcohol and everything else, I know those little people are in the walls. And I know this is all their fault.

The police are here now, I can hear them knocking on the door. I should let them in, but I don't think my legs would support me. Those little bastards in the walls know enough how to play the game, though. For the first time since this all started, they are silent. It has just dawned on me, as the police start trying to break down the door, that this could all be a figment of my imagination. Not Hilary of course, she's dead, no doubt about it. But them, the Scratchers might not even be real.

What if, despite everything, I have imagined the whole thing? Could it be that my exhausted brain could have created them to fill the gap left by Hilary when she decided that Ted was a better option for a life partner?

Is it possible that the lack of sleep and excess of whiskey and vodka has rotted my brain to the point of hallucinating these things?

It's possible, but I don't think so. I know my mind, and I know what is real. I also suspect that this isn't over. I expect that one day in the not too distant future, as I sit in my cell with the padded walls, that I will hear them again, skittering and scratching as they cut their way through to me. After all, I killed one of theirs, and if I've learned anything, it's that they are vengeful little bastards who will want revenge. Either way, there's no point worrying about it now. If and when that happens, I guess we will just take it as it comes.

It's time to go. The police are almost in and I have a lot of explaining to do.

Wish me luck.

Trenton.

SEAT 6A

[This was one of those stories that started off as one thing and morphed into something else entirely along the way. The original idea was to do a story about my very real fear of flying and the anxiety it causes. I won't spoil it here, but the story naturally morphed along the way into what you are about to read. This was initially written way back during the first batch of writing session for Dark Corners, and was only cut because it didn't fit with the theme of the rest of that particular collection. Those who have read Dark Corners will note that the unwelcome passenger of flight 444 is actually Monde, who appears in a couple of the other stories within the collection.]

CINDY STIFLED A yawn as she looked at the expanse of empty seats on American airlines flight 444. The idea of another long flight filled with whiny passengers who thought it was acceptable to talk to her like something they had stepped in filled her with dread. Although she had worked her way up to the position of head flight attendant, she was jaded with the lifestyle and was desperate for a break, to do something different with her life. This flight would be her three hundredth, and she was thankful that the most drama she had ever encountered was a mid-flight water break of a heavily pregnant passenger, where she along with the other attendants had been forced to deliver the baby as they flew over the Pacific. It was always in the back of her mind that one day something worse might happen. A hijacking or a passenger becoming violent, but she tried not to think about it too much. She had just turned thirty-five and still considered herself in decent shape. Slim with hazel eyes and brown hair, she had strong cheekbones and a kind smile which endeared people to her. She walked to the open rear door of the jet, breathing in the cool, crisp Chicago air. It was a little after six in the morning and there was a small smudge of orange just beginning to creep over the horizon line. Apart from a few small patches of cloud, it looked like it was going to be another scorcher of a day. Unable to put off the unpleasant task to come any longer, she made her way through the aircraft towards the cockpit. Pausing for a moment outside the door to compose herself, she knocked and entered without waiting for a reply. She was just about able to hide her grimace as she locked eyes with the pilot, Captain James Henshaw. He was relaxing, sipping a Starbucks as he went through his pre-flight checklist. He gave her a quick, greedy once over then turned his attention back to his paperwork. Although he had always prided himself on looking his best, Cindy could see the cracks starting to form as age started to win out over his attempts to cheat it, which pleased her immensely. His cheeks had begun to sag ever so slightly, giving him a bulldog-like appearance. His eyes were developing crow's feet at the edges and had great dark rims underneath from either too little sleep or too much drink when off duty. Combined with his paunch which strained at his pristine white shirt, Cindy wondered how he had ever managed to talk her into bed in the first place.

“Good morning, Cindy,” He muttered, keeping his eyes down.

His voice was smooth, the words rolling with slick assurance from his tongue.

She held the clipboard she'd brought with her towards him. “Here's the flight manifest.”

Henshaw turned to face her. “How many on board?”

She felt a flush of anger, hating the fact that he could so easily stir up a reaction in her. She glanced at the manifest still clutched in his right hand, and then back to him and his smug blue gaze nestled underneath ugly salt and pepper eyebrows. She thought he wouldn't look out of place in one of those over-dubbed hair dye commercials for middle-aged men desperately trying to cling to their youth. Stifling the urge to laugh at the mental image, she decided to just answer his question and waste as little time as possible in his presence.

“All full apart from two seats. Cancellations.”

“Very good,” he nodded, waving away the unread manifest.

Screw this, she thought. He won’t beat me this time.

“Any adverse weather for the trip, Captain?” She said as confidently as she could, making sure to push her chest out to show the arrogant captain what he couldn’t have anymore.

“Clear all the way as far as we can see. It’s gonna be another hot one today.” He replied, taking an opportunity to let his eyes linger over the front of her blouse. “So,” he said, smiling in what she knew was his best flirtatious way. “What’s on the menu today?”

He raised one eyebrow as he waited for an answer, the innuendo impossible to miss.

Somehow, she managed to stifle the urge to punch him in the face. “Either fish, roast beef or lasagne, sir.”

She was pleased with the way that his guard dropped momentarily to show his frustration at her rebuttal. Like a switch being flicked, Henshaw realized he wasn’t going to get anything from her, and reverted back to the smooth pilot voice. “Put me down for fish.”

She nodded, writing on her notepad and adding a doodle of an angry faced woman tearing her hair out by Henshaw’s name.

“And the co-pilot and navigator, sir?” she said, not missing a beat, her face neutral as she waited, pen poised over her pad.

“You’ll have to come back and ask them,” he snapped, still sore at her resistance to his attempts to flirt. “They should be here within the half hour.”

“Very good, Captain,” She said, spinning on her heel and walking away, able to feel his eyes crawling all over her. Just for good measure, she made sure to wiggle her ass as best she could as she left to remind him again of what he couldn’t have anymore.

Twenty minutes later she had calmed enough to forget about Henshaw, and was pleased to have something to distract her as the rest of the flight crew were starting to arrive, faces she knew well, and one, in particular, she always looked forward to seeing.

“Hi, Hun, how you been doin’?”

“I’m good Sylvia, how are you?” Cindy replied, hugging the smiling woman warmly.

Sylvia Hosier was African-American, with one of the broadest New York accents you could ever hope to hear. Her eyes were warm and friendly, her skin the colour of rich coffee and despite having a good few years on Henshaw, unlike the captain hers was both worry and line free.

“I didn’t know you were doing this run now,” Cindy said, genuinely happy to see her friend.”

“I’m filling in, you just lost someone to maternity leave haven’t you?”

“Yeah, but I didn’t know they’d be sending someone as experienced as you.”

Sylvia smiled. “I don’t know quite how to take that honey.”

“Oh god no, I’m thrilled you’re here. It’s amazing to see you again.” Cindy replied, hugging her friend for a second time.

As they separated, Sylvia held on to Cindy's arms, keeping her at arm's length. "I heard about you and Robin, I'm so sorry. I thought you two were solid."

Cindy shrugged and tried her best to smile through the pain. To anyone else she would have lied, told them she was fine, but not Sylvia. She would know.

"It had been coming for a while, Sylvia. It wasn't his fault, I was responsible for it all."

"don't you go beating yourself up about it, do ya' hear? You have to move on."

"I'm doing my best. That's all I can do."

"Well, if it helps, you look great, hon. Really great."

Cindy smiled, feeling awkward but grateful. "Thanks, I've been trying to keep myself healthy. I let myself go a little after the divorce."

Sensing her friend's embarrassment, Sylvia changed the subject. "Anything specific I should know for the flight?"

Glad for the not so subtle subject change, Cindy picked up her notes. "Not really. By all accounts, it should be a straightforward trip. All full bar two."

Sylvia took the flight manifest from Cindy, scanning over it.

"Damn girl! You never said horny Henshaw was captain."

Cindy laughed, grateful for her friend's effortless ability to lighten the mood.

"It's okay; I dealt with it, Sylvia. He's an asshole. I'm not letting him get to me."

"Did you take the cockpit crew meal order?"

Cindy nodded. "Partly, but he started trying to get a reaction, so I left."

Sylvia sucked air through her teeth. "That son of a bitch. How he kept his job is beyond me. Then to try and put the blame on you..." She put a hand on Cindy's shoulder, directing her towards the coffee counter in the galley. "Tell you what, you leave it to me. I'll head up there and take the rest of the order; you go ahead and make us a coffee then we can have a catch up before we start boarding."

Unable to hide her relief at not having to deal anymore with Henshaw, she smiled. "Thanks, I really owe you one."

Sylvia returned the gesture, a sea of white against her dark skin. "Hell, you do girl. Now go on, you make that coffee."

Within the hour, they were ready to start boarding. As expected, it was already getting hot, the sun now beating down without mercy on the runway. Sylvia was standing by the front hatch waiting to greet the passengers as Cindy busied herself making last minute checks in the galley. The passengers were starting to filter on, each doing the same subconscious thing that each and every one of them did. They would look around the plane, scrutinizing it, checking where the exits were, and looking at the roof and the windows as if they could see any flaws that might cause any potential problems. Some, of course, hid it better than others, but even the confident ones still had that underlying tension that came as part and parcel of air travel. She slipped effortlessly into her role, smiling broadly at the

passengers as she passed them, pausing to reassure, guide them to their seats, sharing jokes which she had heard a hundred times before, helping to ease worries and distract people from ideas about a mid-air wiring fire or faulty rivet that could potentially cost them all their lives.

She heard a commotion from the front and looked up to see a group of seven or eight football jocks, joking and laughing as they jostled each other. Cindy squeezed to one side, allowing them room as she endured the usual chorus of wolf whistles and smart comments.

“Take it, easy guys, it’s a long flight,” she said, finding a little of their exuberance rubbing off on her.

“You hear that goof, she meant you, and she’s going to spank your ass,” one of the jocks said, and they all laughed as if the comment by their blonde-haired buddy was the funniest thing they had ever heard. Ushering them into their seats, she turned, bumping into another passenger and dropping her clipboard on the floor.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” she said, crouching down and gathering her papers together, which had come loose from the board. She tried to ignore the jeers and whistles from the jocks, suddenly wishing she were somewhere else. She glanced at the passenger’s feet; the leather shoes looked expensive, possibly Italian. She spoke as she stood, finding herself unusually flustered.

“Let me show you to your seat, then I’ll get you a...”

The word she meant to say was ‘drink’, however, it never made it past her throat. As she stood, she took in his jeans, stone washed, again a perfect and stylish match to the Italian shoes. The jacket was black leather, complimented by a white shirt, top buttons open to show a bronzed wedge of chest. She looked at his face, his smooth Mediterranean complexion, the jet black hair brushed backwards away from his face to rest on the nape of the neck. All of those details were ones she hardly took in. All she could look at were his eyes.

His eyes were completely black.

She was lost for words and hoped that her face didn’t betray the terror, which filled her. He smiled, a gesture that normally she would return. The ability to do so was beyond her. All she could see were his eyes, which were reflective pools of black which seemed to have no end. He moved away from her, breaking the eye contact as he moved to his seat, taking off his jacket, and setting himself down. Her instinct told her to get as far away from this man as she possibly could. The rest of her, the more rational side, argued that there might be a perfectly normal explanation for his appearance, maybe a medical condition that affected his eyesight.

Her legs felt weak; her stomach vaulted and rolled. Fearing she was about to throw up, Cindy made her way towards the back of the plane and the galley. She had to force herself not to run. The last thing she needed right now was a cabin full of uneasy passengers. Once safely behind the curtain and out of view, she leaned on the stainless steel counter, head down as she tried to compose herself. The feeling was similar to vertigo, a dizzy, disorientating sense of fear. Fearing she was about to collapse,

she sat in one of the seats reserved for the crew, staring at the beige carpet between her feet and trying to pull herself together. She wasn't alone for long, as the Sylvia appeared, sweeping the divider curtain aside.

"I saw you come down here lookin' close to tears, Hon. What's wrong? What happened?"

Cindy couldn't answer. It was as if staring into those black eyes had drained the life and energy from her.

"That man," was all she could manage to say, her voice fading away to a whisper.

Frowning, Sylvia glanced around the small galley area. "What man? Honey, you're not making sense."

"The man in 6A." Was all she could force out before another wave of nausea swept over her. She was aware that she probably sounded crazy, and was thankful that it was Sylvia who was with her and not one of the junior crew members.

"6A? What did he do, do we need to call security?"

Cindy shook her head. "He didn't do anything, He's just..." She slumped back in the seat, unable to finish the thought. She started to cry, unsure why and hating how weak she must look.

The curtain swept aside again as David, one of the new trainee cabin crew strode confidently towards them.

"Okay, everything's ready to go," He started with a grin, then seeing the mess Cindy was in, grew serious. "Hey, what's going on?"

Sylvia looked at David, his awkward, gangly frame hovering in the doorway.

"Its okay, David, honey, Cindy just had a funny turn."

He nodded, his green eyes drifting from Sylvia to Cindy and back again. "Look, sorry to disturb, but we're ready to lock down. Everyone is on board and we're good to go." He shifted his weight, desperate to be let off the hook so he could leave.

Sylvia nodded, taking over the role that was usually Cindy's without drama. "David, can you do me a favour?"

He nodded, folding his arms across his wiry frame. "Sure, what do you need?"

Trying to sound casual as possible, Sylvia continued. "Take a walk up towards the front, and look at the passenger in 6A, but be subtle, don't go gawping at him or anything."

"Why, what's wrong, is there a problem?"

"Don't be ridiculous, just please go up there and take a look, then come straight back here. And tell me what you see."

"What am I looking for?"

"Just go take a look then come back, okay?"

He nodded, "whatever you say, I'm just saying it would help to know what I'm looking for, though."

“You’re not looking for anything in particular. Just remember to be discreet.”

He nodded and left, leaving the two women alone. Sylvia stood and made coffee, her friend content to remain wordless and stare at the carpet.

“So what happened?” Sylvia asked as she prepared the drinks.

“That man in 6A...there’s something wrong with him.”

Sylvia handed Cindy the coffee, then sat opposite and cradled her own cup as she looked at her friend.

“What in the lord’s name spooked you, honey?” she said, placing a reassuring hand on her friend’s leg.

“I—I’m not really sure,” was the answer she settled on, unsure if that made her sound even more unhinged than if she had told Sylvia what she had seen.

“You know,” Sylvia was choosing her words carefully. “Maybe you could do with a break, a little time off might do you the world of good, with the divorce and all, you haven’t really stopped.”

“I’m fine. I’m not crazy.” She knew she had answered a little too quickly, with a voice a little too high pitched, and had inadvertently made herself sound exactly that.

Sylvia was about to respond when David returned through the curtain. “All looks fine to me up there.”

“The man in 6A?” Cindy said, feeling the eyes of her friend on her.

David nodded “Yeah, the European-looking dude, right?”

“Yes, that’s him,” she said, almost adding on

The one with the black eyes, you can’t miss him.

Frowning, David shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “Well, he was sleeping, but as far as I can tell, he looked normal.”

Sylvia nodded, flashing her friend a quick, concerned glance.

“He’s right here on the manifest,” he added, waving the clipboard at Cindy. She took it from him and put a name to the horrific face she had seen.

Monde.

No last name. Not a Peter, or a James or any other ordinary name. Just that one word.

Monde.

She wondered what it meant, what country he came from, but her mind was already filled with too many questions that were in need of an answer, so she set the manifest aside. Hot tears welled up, which she struggled to fight off.

“Thanks, David, go ahead and close the doors,” Sylvia said, keeping a close eye on Cindy.

David nodded and then began to wring his hands, reluctant to move.

Sylvia looked him in the eye, her own heart now racing a little faster than she would have liked. “Was there something else?”

He locked eyes with her, too proud to show fear, although it bubbled close enough to the surface to make it impossible to hide. “Well,” he said quietly, “Whilst I was up there, the people in 6B and 6C, just...left.”

Sylvia’s heart skipped a beat. Cindy’s almost leapt out of her chest.

Careful to keep a steady voice, Sylvia spoke quietly. “What do you mean they left?”

David’s cheeks flushed, and he looked at his feet. “Just that, they just gathered up their bags, and walked off the plane without a word.”

Troubled, Sylvia tried to keep calm, despite the sense of unease which was growing by the second.

“They didn’t say anything?”

David shook his head. “Not a word, but they did both have the same expression on their face.”

“What do you mean?” Sylvia asked, not really sure if she wanted to know the answer.

“Well,” David said, as he pointed at Cindy. “They both looked like that.” He shifted his weight, and his cheeks flushed with colour. “To be honest, it kinda freaked me out.”

Sylvia placed a hand on his shoulder. “Look, I appreciate you may be a little uneasy, but I need you to concentrate and do your job.”

For a moment, she thought he might refuse, and she couldn’t blame him. She trained her cool gaze on the agitated flight attendant. “Can I trust you to do your job?”

“Yes, of course, I’m sorry.”

Sylvia smiled, one of those natural, instantly reassuring gestures which she seemed to be able to muster so effortlessly. “No need to apologize.”

He offered her a small smile, which did little to hide his uncertainty. “Okay, so what do you want me to do?”

Sylvia looked at Cindy, who was watching the conversation unfold. Her face was a pale, red-eyed parody of her usual self. Sylvia turned back towards David, knowing that her next decision would either prove to be completely right, or wrong. No middle ground.

“Lock the doors. Tell the captain we’re ready for take-off.” She said, doing all she could to sound decisive.

She thought she saw a flash of something in his face, perhaps anger, more likely fear.

“Of course, right away.” he mumbled, then left, sweeping through the curtain towards the front of the plane.

Sylvia turned back to Cindy. “You get yourself strapped in. I’ll take care of the crew.”

Cindy looked at her friend, her eyes haunted and devoid of hope. “Everyone on this plane is going to die,” She said simply. Her matter of fact tone raising goose bumps on Sylvia’s skin.

Cindy fastened her seatbelt then turned her head, looking out of the small window at the runway as the pneumatic cabin doors locked into place, locking them into whatever fate awaited them.

The smooth take off did little to alleviate Cindy's terror. She sat with her chin resting on her hand, trying to ignore the eyes of the crew as they bored into her. Word it seemed had travelled quickly. As she watched the ground drift further and further away she was still filled with an unshakeable sense of dread. It was as if the artificial atmosphere in the cabin was heavier than normal and seemed to push her into her seat. She glanced at Sylvia, hoping to find reassurance, but instead saw that she too was afraid, even if she was doing a better job of hiding it. Glancing out of the window, her mind drifted to her life, and she wondered absently if she had wasted it. Up to that morning, she had never really appreciated the paper thin line between life and death, how fine a balance it truly was. Now, though, it felt right to think about such things. It made sense to consider the fragility of their existence. Closing her eyes, she prayed it would be quick, visualizing the headlines in the newspapers reporting on the crash that she was absolutely sure would happen. She wondered how it would be, those final minutes as the plane plunged towards the earth at five hundred miles an hour, the high pitched whistle the only accompaniment to their screams. She was fired back to the present by the chime of the seatbelt removal signal, which signalled that they had reached their cruising altitude of thirty-two thousand feet. Blinking, she glanced over at the crew, who were staring at her as if she were about to sprout a second head or burst into song.

"Okay guys, let's get to work," She said as confidently as she could, trying to show them she was okay.

Nobody moved. Instead, they looked blankly back at her, waiting for an explanation as to her sudden meltdown.

"Look, I've been working a lot of hours lately, and things just got to me, but if we can just pull together and get through this flight as normal, I'd appreciate it." Even as she said the words, she hated herself for the ease that the lies slid from her tongue. She imagined she sounded just like condescending Captain Henshaw.

She waited. They looked back, their expressions telling her they hadn't believed a word she had said, and why should they? It was, after all, bullshit.

"Okay everyone," Sylvia said as she stood. "We're here to work, not enjoy the ride. Let's get out there and do what we are paid to do."

This time, there was no delay. The crew stood almost as one, busying themselves with their various jobs. Sylvia stood, hands on hips and making sure that everything was in control.

One of the crew, a young girl named Carol, unclipped a stainless steel trolley laden with drinks and snacks. She had a natural beauty to her and even without makeup, her features were striking. Her green eyes were without fear, and as it was her first day on the job, she was determined to take whatever was thrown at her in stride.

Sylvia put a hand on the girl's shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze. "Just relax, smile, and ask the passengers if they want a drink. You've trained for this. You will be fine. See me if you have any problems, okay hon?"

Carol nodded, chewing her bottom lip as she positioned the trolley.

"They may get a little rowdy, but that's normal. Don't let it get to you," Sylvia added, straightening a few of the bottles that had been dislodged.

Carol fidgeted but didn't move.

"What's wrong?" Sylvia asked.

"Well," Carol said, choosing her words carefully, "it's not the rowdiness that bothers me... it's the lack of it."

"What do you mean, Hon?"

"Just take a look."

Frowning, Sylvia ducked her head through the curtain looked down the length of the plane. Instead of the usual chatter and excited conversation, there was deathly silence. The atmosphere within the aircraft was oppressive and foreboding. Without realizing, Sylvia reached for the silver crucifix which she wore around her neck and began to rub it between her finger and thumb.

"Carol honey, change of plan. You stay back here and start getting the breakfast trays ready. I'll serve the drinks today."

Carol frowned, Sylvia detecting a hint of anger as her cheeks flushed. "I wasn't trying to get out of it, I was just making a point. All due respect, but whatever else people are thinking, I'm not scared."

"I know honey, it's just...there's a weird atmosphere out there and it's not fair on you, it being your first day and all."

"I can handle it," She replied, looking past Sylvia towards Cindy.

"I'm sure you can. But for now, I want to do this myself."

"I can do my job," Carol snapped, her cheeks flushing. "I don't see the point in bringing me out here if you won't even let me--"

"That's enough," Sylvia cut in, steering Carol away from the dividing curtain.

"I know you're capable, and you will get a chance to prove it. But right now, I'm taking this first trolley service. You can do the next one, okay?"

"But..." Carol trailed off and broke eye contact as Sylvia took control of the trolley.

"It's okay to be scared. Nobody has to know."

Carol looked at her feet, then at her hands. "I—" she swallowed, struggling to formulate her words.

Sylvia took Carol's hands in her own.

"It's okay, we're all feeling a little...strange today," Sylvia said, confident that she had gotten through to the young girl.

Carol flicked her eyes to David, who stood behind the two women with a semi-amused smile. She licked her lips and tried to speak with conviction, but the shake in her voice betrayed her fearless expression.

“There’s nothing out there to be scared of. Now please, let me do my job,” she said sharply as she pulled her hands away from Sylvia’s, and adopted a defiant pose, hands lodged firmly on hips.

Under ordinary circumstances, Sylvia wouldn’t have accepted such attitude, however, she was aware that the situation was far from ordinary, and so felt obliged to give Carol more leeway than she otherwise would have. “Then go to it. The first sign of any trouble....” she trailed off, as Carol seemed to swell with an ugly but obviously fragile confidence, as she glanced again at David, allowing a ghost of a smile to formulate on her lips. “What kind of trouble, I’m only serving drinks.”

Sylvia glared at the young stewardess. “Take this as a warning, honey. You speak to me or anyone else on board this aircraft again like that, you will be out of a job quicker than a hiccup, you got it?”

Realizing she had overstepped the mark; she flushed, lowering her head. “Yes, of course, I’m sorry,” Carol mumbled.

Sylvia nodded as Carol grasped the trolley risking another glance at the still smiling David, who was watching, arms folded and leaning on the air-sealed door. Carol pushed past him on her way with the drinks.

Sylvia turned and glared at David just long enough to make him squirm and to wipe the arrogant smile off his face, then turned her attention back to Cindy.

III

Sipping her mug of tea, Sylvia tried to relax and ignore the fact that the whole incident with Carol had managed to get under her skin. She sat in the jump seat opposite Cindy, who continued to stare out of the porthole window.

“It’s quiet out there,” Sylvia said, watching Cindy’s reaction carefully.

“Yeah, it’s a weird one alright.”

“You know Cindy, the crew are at breaking point, and all due respect, you need to take control before things get out of hand.”

Cindy nodded. “Of course, I’m so sorry, I—I really don’t know what’s come over me.”

“Whatever it is, it’s affecting all of us.”

Cindy had never known Sylvia to be intimidated or worried by anything for as long as they had known each other.

“Sylvia...” Cindy said, nervously licking her lips as she searched for the right words. “Do you think I’m crazy?”

Sylvia chuckled, taking a sip of her drink. “No more than the rest of us on board this damn tin

can.”

They both shared a laugh, the smiles quickly melting from their faces as Sylvia grew serious.

“Back here it’s not so obvious, but out there,”

She rubbed at the crucifix on her neck and lowered her voice. “Out there...something is in the air. It feels....dirty.”

Cindy nodded, recalling the sick feeling of dread she had felt when she had come face to face with the black-eyed man.

The smooth ride of the aircraft brought no sense of calm, and within the pressurized confines of the cabin, it was still deathly silent. Cindy waited anxiously for something to happen, but other than the horrible sense of dread, the flight seemed to be as routine as any she had ever experienced before. She was just starting to relax when Carol came back through the curtain. Both she and Sylvia saw it right away. Gone was the cocky, self-confident exuberance. She looked blankly at them, her lip trembling as she tried to hold it all together.

“What’s wrong?” Sylvia asked, standing and placing a reassuring arm around her shoulder. Cindy didn’t move. She knew perfectly well what the problem was before Carol even opened her mouth.

“His eyes...” was all she managed before she began to sway on her feet, and was helped to one of the free jump seats by Sylvia and David.

Sylvia turned to Cindy, and rather than the calm confidence, there was a hint of fear etched onto her face. “You need to tell me what’s happening here right now.”

Knowing there was no way to avoid it, and that as crazy as she would sound, it had to be shared, Cindy told the rest of the crew about her experience with the man with the black eyes. They sat in silence for a while, until David broke it with a nervous laugh.

“I don’t believe any of it,” He said matter of factly, leaning on the curved white interior wall. “I went up there and everything seemed okay.”

“Well, something is obviously wrong. You only have to look around to see that.” Sylvia said, giving him a cold stare. “Besides, you seemed spooked when those other passengers got off the plane before take-off.”

“It’s just nerves,” David hissed back, and although he was trying to put on a brave showing, his eyes darted nervously and he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “Besides, people get off planes all the time, it doesn’t mean anything.”

“Fine,” said Sylvia, standing and looking him in the eye. “You say nothing is happening, the girls here say there is. I’ll go take a look for myself and then we can decide what we should do about it.”

“It’s a waste of time, you know that, don’t you?” he said, staring at the dividing curtain.

“Maybe, but I’m still going up there to take a look. You stay here and make sure everyone keeps calm, okay?”

“Okay,” He repeated as he gave another uncertain glance to the dividing curtain.

“Good. Then we understand each other. But you have to keep calm. There are almost three hundred passengers on board this aircraft, and the last thing we want is a mass panic, understood?”

He nodded, and then sat beside Carol.

Sylvia paused at the curtain and wondered what was so terrible that it had seemingly incapacitated the crew in some form or other. She was determined to find out, even if it might mean they had to deal with something truly unique.

The walk towards the front of the aircraft seemed to last forever, and as she made her way closer to the passenger in seat 6A, she felt her heart begin to beat a little faster. She walked straight past him at first, moving through the curtain dividing the front section of the aircraft from the passengers. She took a moment to compose herself, and then peeked back through a small gap in the blue curtain. She saw him immediately. Just as David had said, the seats beside him had been vacated, and she could see why.

He was looking out of the small window at the ocean of clouds, but she could tell even from his profile that it was exactly as both Cindy and Carol had said. His eyes were bottomless inky pools, and she started to pray under her breath as she watched him. As if he heard her mumbled words, he turned slowly towards her, locking his expressionless shark's gaze on the tiny gap in the curtain from where she watched. She felt nausea sweep over her, and her legs almost gave way. She suddenly understood why Carol and Cindy had been so affected, for it was plain that this thing was evil. She reached up to grasp her crucifix and increased the tempo of her prayers. The black-eyed thing in 6A seemed to grimace and then turned its gaze back towards the window.

The instant its eyes were off her, she began to feel more in control of her body, and the nausea passed. She realized that the hand not holding the crucifix was clenched into a tight fist, and as she relaxed her grip, she saw tiny crescents of blood in her palm from the pressure.

Her next thought was of what to do next. The black-eyed man had boarded with no trouble and had caused none since the flight had been in progress. However, like Cindy, her mind was now filled with images of mid-air explosions and depressurized cabins. Somehow fighting off the urge to panic, she hurried back down to the rear of the craft, staring straight ahead and just about resisting the urge to scream and run.

A cup of tea later, Sylvia was almost back to her normal self. So far she had said nothing and rightly guessed that she probably didn't have to, as her facial expression would tell enough.

The crew was waiting expectantly, and with deceptive calm, Sylvia set her cup down and spoke. “We need to turn around and land this plane.”

“What happened?” Cindy asked, chewing her lip nervously.

Sylvia turned to the rest of the crew before she answered. “There's evil on this plane, and if we don't land, I think we could all be in serious trouble.”

“Oh come on, not you too,” David said, shaking his head. “This is crazy.”

“Go look for yourself,” She said simply.

“No, I don’t want to do that.”

“Then please be quiet, unless you have something worthwhile to add.”

“We can’t turn around now,” Carol said. “Not without causing a panic or having a damn good reason. I don’t know about any of you, but I don’t really want to have to try and explain this to the pilot.”

Sylvia looked towards Cindy, and her friend nodded.

“I’ll speak to him. I know him outside of here, but for the record, I don’t think he will go for it.” Cindy said.

“You’re sure you’re willing to do that?” Sylvia asked.

“I don’t see what choice we have.”

“Alright, if you’re happy to try to convince him, then we would all appreciate it. Just don’t do this if it’s going to make you feel uncomfortable” Sylvia said, unable to hide the shadow of fear from her eyes.

“I can’t promise anything. All I can do is try to convince him.”

IV

“Absolutely not,” Captain Henshaw said, as he looked Cindy up and down.

“Please,” she said, trying to keep as composed as she could in front of this despicable man.

“Sylvia seems to think—”

“She doesn’t get paid to think, she gets paid to look after the crew, the same as you do. You can leave the thinking to us.”

“You are prepared to risk the lives of these people just to prove a point?”

Henshaw turned towards her, as the co-pilot and navigator tried their bests to ignore the confrontation.

“Don’t flatter yourself. This isn’t about anything outside of this aircraft. Right now I’m doing my job, which is what you should be doing. If every captain turned around every time someone was spooked or had a bad feeling, then nobody would ever get where they were going.”

“This isn’t about the crew or even the flight,” She shot back. “This is about me rejecting you.”

“Really,” he said, snorting down his nose. “Don’t flatter yourself. You weren’t as big a deal as you think.”

“I’m glad you feel that way, because as soon as we land in Boston, I’m done. You can consider this my notice.”

“Your loss,” Henshaw said with an exaggerated shrug of the shoulders. “But with or without your resignation, the flight will go on as scheduled. Now you can do whatever you have to in order to keep the crew and passengers safe, but you will do your job and we will continue on to Boston without

interruption. Is that understood?”

There was so much that she wanted to scream at the arrogant, pompous man, but she knew that to do so would only please him and show that he had managed to get under her skin. Instead, she turned and opened the cockpit door. As she was leaving, Henshaw called over his shoulder.

“Oh, and before you and your crew make more mountains out of molehills, be aware that we’re heading into a storm, so expect some turbulence.”

Cindy felt sick and knew that was how it would happen. How they would all die at the hands of the black-eyed man.

Henshaw smiled, mistaking her distress for anger, then turned back to the controls of the aircraft.

She made her way back to the rest of the crew, flashing the black-eyed man a wary glance as she passed him. He was looking out of the window, and she was grateful for the small mercy that his opaque gaze was turned away from her.

She told the crew of the outcome of her attempt to talk the captain around, and they stood in the galley, wondering what to do. Sylvia listened, and watched as Cindy told her story, and when she finished speaking, Sylvia took over.

“I’m not convinced we can stop this creature,” she started, looking at each of them in turn “But I’m willing to try and hold him at bay until we land.”

“Hold him off how?” David asked quietly, his eyes flicking between Sylvia and the curtain leading towards the passengers.

“When I went up there to see him for myself, he looked at me, and I grabbed my crucifix and prayed. He didn’t seem to like that, and I think it weakened him.”

“You think it did?” Carol asked.

“Yes.”

“But you don’t know for sure?”

“No, but it’s all we have, I can’t do it alone, though, I’ll need all of you to help me.”

“By praying?” Carol said her voice shrill “I don’t see how that will help.”

“Keep it down,” David said, glaring at her.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly, “it’s just that.. I don’t believe...”

“I understand,” Sylvia said, offering the younger woman a warm smile. “But even if you don’t, I need you to do it anyway; I don’t think I will be strong enough on my own.”

Their discussion was broken by the sound of Captain Henshaw’s voice drifting through the aircraft over the public address system.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. Please be advised that we will shortly be entering a small patch of bad weather, and you may experience some turbulence.”

The frightened crew shared worried glances, and it was Cindy who spoke next.

“We have no choice. We can argue about it later, but right now, it’s worth a try. We’re with you,

Sylvia. Whatever it takes.”

V

Ten minutes later, they were in the front galley, the curtain separating them from the passengers, and, more importantly, the man in 6A. Sylvia paced and wrung her hands, as Cindy and the others looked on, wondering what was about to happen.

Outside the aircraft, the soft white spread of clouds had started to morph into an ugly slate grey, and the smooth ride had started to shudder and jolt, only a little for the time being but with the promise of more to come.

“What do we do?” Cindy asked, trying to ignore the waves of nausea that surged through her.

“I need to see him, and he needs to see me,” Sylvia replied. “I need for you to pray with me, even if you don’t believe.” She looked at Carol as she said it, but all the fight had gone out of her, and she looked back blankly and nodded.

“Okay, let’s go.”

Sylvia walked through the curtain, leading the crew to the front of the plane.

“Okay,” she said to the others as she moved out of sight behind the divider curtain. “You all sit here. Hold hands if you want, but you don’t have to. All I need to you to do is pray.”

“How? What do I do?” Carol asked.

“Just ask for his help,” Sylvia replied, rolling her eyes towards the heavens. “And ask that we be led to salvation.”

Cindy took her friends hands in hers, the two women locking eyes. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“No, not really,” Sylvia said, almost managing a smile. “But I have to try. Stay here and join them. Pray for me, and I’ll do what I can out there.”

“You seem so unafraid.”

“I believe my God will save us,” Sylvia replied. “That’s all I need.” Before Cindy could say anything else, Sylvia pushed through the curtain and took up a position near the door of the plane, the crucifix removed from her neck and gripped in her hand. The man in 6A sensed her immediately, and cast his black gaze upon her, grimacing at the sight of the crucifix.

Sylvia locked eyes with him and moved her lips silently. Only she heard whatever prayers she was saying. The man with the black eyes squirmed and as Cindy watched, a light sweat began to form on his brow.

The rest of the passengers were oblivious, and may as well not have been on board because all that mattered was Sylvia and the man in seat 6A.

Cindy wasn’t religious, not really, but she glanced at David and Carol, and they were both sitting in

their jump seats, holding hands and concentrating with their eyes closed. The aircraft lurched, and a murmur of concerned comment and laughter drifted from the passengers, who were otherwise silent. Rain now barraged the porthole glass windows, and there was another stomach-churning lurch, which brought the ‘fasten seatbelt’ lights flashing to life.

The passengers responded as one, doing as they were told as another shudder rolled through the aircraft.

Sylvia and the black-eyed man were oblivious, they were locked eye to eye, will to will. Sylvia clutching the crucifix as she continued her silent prayers, the black-eyed man squirming and glaring.

As Cindy watched, Sylvia’s hair began to change, the rich black colour starting to fade to grey. The plane vaulted, and for a split second, Cindy was sure this was it, and they were about to crash, but somehow the wings reaffirmed their grip on the air, and the aircraft righted itself. Now, the initial isolated comments of concern were a general murmur of worry as passengers glanced out of the windows as they entered the storm.

The black-eyed man screwed up his features, and as Cindy watched, a single crimson tear rolled down his cheek. Sylvia’s hair was now almost completely white, and she looked to have aged impossibly as if the last few minutes had taken years from her life.

The aircraft creaked, and the rain continued to tap and probe for a way in. Cindy could hear Carol sobbing softly, but couldn’t take her eyes away from the battle raging in front of her.

The black-eyed man groaned, the sound perfectly crisp in the stillness of the air, and then, almost immediately, something happened. The atmosphere which had been so heavy and electrically charged, changed and the man glared at Cindy with a look which contained so much rage, so much fury that she drew breath. She knew that sleep would be something that would be a rare luxury from that day on because she would never be able to rid the image of that expression from her mind.

Sylvia looked like hell, and ready to fall at any second. Cindy wanted to reach out to her but dare not for fear that she would distract her friend and send them all to their deaths. The plane shuddered once more, and then the light outside changed as the rain was replaced by sunlight which streamed through the aircraft windows. Whatever power the man in 6A had, now seemed to have gone. He shook his head and looked out at skies which were once again blue and clear.

The public address system crackled to life, and the smooth, if slightly tense, tones of Captain Henshaw filled the cabin.

“Apologies for the unsteady ride back there, but we are now in free air until we reach Boston. We will be ready to land in around twenty minutes time. Thank you.”

Cindy touched Sylvia’s arm, which felt cold and leathery. Her friend blinked, and the idea that she had somehow aged was only enhanced by the exhausted sigh, which she released.

“We did it, we’re safe,” she whispered, her eyes dull and ancient since her encounter.

Words like thank you didn’t seem appropriate, or enough, and so Cindy simply nodded as Sylvia

shuffled to the nearest jump seat behind the curtain and sat down hard. Nobody said anything and could only watch as she sobbed quietly, still rubbing the crucifix between her thumb and finger.

VI

The plane landed safely in Boston. By then, the passengers had almost forgotten about the turbulence, and Cindy thought it was some horrible injustice that they would never know how close to death they came or the sacrifice that one woman went to in order to save them. Sylvia still hadn't spoken. Instead, she stared at the cross, her waxy features having lost the same life and vigour as her hair had. The man with the black eyes was the first to exit the plane, glaring at Cindy as he walked past her, his face still one of rage and defiance. The rest of the passengers followed, and when they were all off board, Cindy walked Sylvia, holding her frail friend under the arm and led her to the employees lounge in the airport terminal. David and Carol did not follow, and neither would ever set foot on an aircraft again, handing in their respective notices later that week. Cindy watched out of the window at the vast expanse of runway as planes landed and took off and were boarded and emptied. Life went on, but for her, it was changed, as she knew there were evil things in the world that existed alongside humanity.

She toyed with her glass and looked at Sylvia, who was staring vacantly ahead. "What happened up there?" She asked quietly.

Sylvia said nothing, and Cindy was about to ask again when she spoke, her voice as old and broken as she was. "What day is it?" she asked.

"Tuesday, it's Tuesday."

Sylvia nodded, and drained the double scotch in one with hands that she could barely stop from shaking.

"I failed." She said simply.

"No, no you didn't. You saved everyone on board. You did it, Sylvia."

Sylvia looked at Cindy then, her eyes glassy and vacant, and she offered a thin, ghostly smile.

"No, I didn't. I made it worse. He told me, told me that he was going to get right back on another plane. He told me he would make sure it was bad, and that whatever happened would be my fault."

"What do you mean told you? I don't understand."

"Here," she said, tapping her temple with her index finger. "I heard him in here, I saw what he is, what he intends."

"Maybe we can call security, get someone to find him?"

Sylvia shook her head. "No, he will have changed form now anyway. They can do that. We'll never find him. The first we will know is when we hear about it in the news."

Sylvia put the silver crucifix on the table, and slid it towards Cindy.

“I don’t think I’ll need this now. Not after today. I want you to keep it.”

“I can’t accept this, please Sylvia, you’re worrying me here.”

“Don’t think any less of me will you?” Sylvia asked, her bottom lip trembling. Cindy grabbed her friend’s hands, ignoring their dry, ancient feel.

“You saved the lives of a lot of people today, I... we, owe you more than we could ever repay.”

Sylvia smiled and stood. “Today will be a day we will never forget, but I know now what I need to do.”

“Sylvia, what’s going on?”

Sylvia’s lip trembled, and she lowered her gaze.

“Goodbye, Cindy.”

She walked away, and in her shock, Cindy didn’t follow. Her mind was in turmoil, and she couldn’t seem to make sense of anything. She had intended to go home, but with a well-stocked bar on hand, Drinking seemed like a better idea. She was there two hours later when the news reports started to broadcast on TV. Suddenly, Sylvia’s words made sense, and as Cindy ran for the toilet to throw up, she finally understood the magnitude of what had happened. As she wiped the mucus from her mouth and looked at herself in the mirror through eyes streaked with makeup, Sylvia was in a motel room five miles from the airport. She had used her belt for a noose, and although she hoped it would be quick, she had suffered and kicked as life stubbornly tried to hang on.

Cindy returned to her table in the employees lounge, and along with the large crowd that had appeared, watched as events unfolded. People put her pale expression down to the terrifying images on the television screens, but she knew different. She held Sylvia’s crucifix and rubbed it gently as she watched the reports on the news go from bad to worse. She was certain that the black-eyed man was onboard one of the planes. Sylvia’s words raced around her brain, and she had to stifle a horrified giggle.

“I made it worse. He told me, told me that he was going to get right back on another plane. And this time, he would make sure it was bad, and that whatever happened, was my fault.”

“What have we done,” Cindy said to herself as she glanced down at the newspaper, knowing that today was a day that nobody would ever forget.

It was Tuesday, September the 11th, 2001.

THE BIRTHDAY

[This one is another story from the Funhouse sessions and has bene kicking around in some form

of another for a while. I like the idea of the amount of psychological drama the human brain can endure and how it might cope with it. Although this is a pretty bleak and harrowing story, I wanted to include it here as part of this collection as it was previously only available in the kindle only Feast of Fear omnibus. Like the other stories from this line, they've had a bit of a polish to improve on their initial raw nature.]

WHY DID IT continue to mock him? Why did it laugh the way it did? What did he ever do to deserve the disappointed gaze or the shake of the head? The Boy tried to ignore it, but even when he looked away he could feel it staring at him, eyes burning into the back of his head.

He shuffled further into the corner, cross-legged and filthy as he stared at the line where the walls of the room met.

If he concentrated hard enough he could ignore the filth of the bare brick, he could see beyond the mildew stench of the black mould which grew and festered and spread across the walls to other, less painful places. He could even ignore the ghostly memories associated with this room, the one that had become his prison since the day his father had decided to lock him in and hadn't let him out since. At first, he was just sent there as punishment, and only for a few hours. Over time, the spells became longer, until eventually they stopped letting him out at all.

He remembered his father's cruel words, drunken, foul mouthed tirades about learning respect, about how he was being shut away for his own good. Despite it all— if he concentrated hard enough — he could break beyond those four walls, and in his mind could see other places. He saw great rolling fields of green or vast beaches of soft, golden sand. More importantly, he could see solitude. Peace. He could see freedom. There were, of course, things that he could not ignore. The room was cold, and his coverless and filthy mattress which he slept on was clammy with damp against his body, which itself was covered in sores and infected scabs. He couldn't ignore the constant pain which ravaged his emaciated frame, or the perpetual pain and hunger which plagued him during his walking hours. It wasn't always like this. He was once a decent if average looking boy with strong features and sharp blue eyes. Not anymore.

He was now an Auschwitz cliché, skin and bones mostly, his once bright eyes were now dull and set deep into his horror mask face. He hated the way he looked, hated what he had become. Then of course, there was him.

He couldn't be ignored. Not for long anyway. He was always there. Always watching always waiting for an opportunity to open his damn mouth.

The boy glared at him, and opened his own mouth so he could, at least, get the first word in, but

his parched, dry lips cracked, releasing only a murmur. Even if he could shout, the boy knew nobody would hear. The house was empty during the day and would remain so until his father returned, usually late. That was the way it had been for as long as he could remember.

The Boy tried to think back to when he was last outside of this windowless room? When did he last see daylight? When did he last feel the warmth of the sun on his skin, which had long lost its youthful vitality and was now covered in lesions and bruises? They were the questions to which he had no answer.

He thought of his father, and tried to imagine what kind of mood he might be in when he returned with his stepmother, the two of them bad for each other, both too volatile, both too stubborn. They would engage in arguments fuelled by drink and drugs and they would go on into the night, smashing furniture and breaking things until they tired of attacking each other and had the urge to really hit something.

That was when they would come. He would hear the heavy footsteps as they climbed the creaking steps to the attic where he was forced to live out his existence. He would wait, feeling the nausea build as they arrived. The door would unlock and they would come, stinking of booze, slurring cruel insults as they fell upon him. Sometimes they would just use fists or feet, but sometimes they would bring things. A screwdriver. A chain, a lighter. Sometimes even hot water which they would pour over him, laughing all the while. One time they used a cheese grater on his back and arms. The Boy had learned to accept it, to adapt to the situation. For if he complained or expressed his pain then they wouldn't feed him, and even rancid meat and mould covered bread was better than nothing at all.

And so, he had learned to take it, to relax his body and close off his mind, to close his eyes and blot out their drunken insults and their kicks and punches and drift away to those secret places in his head. The beaches, the rolling fields, the places that they could never take from him and never find him.

He thought that today might have been his birthday, although he couldn't be certain. Time had lost its meaning some time ago.

How old was he? How old would he be?

Seventeen?

No. Eighteen. He was eighteen. The same age as him. The one who always stared, the one who laughed at him. The one he couldn't ignore.

The boy used to have a name a long time ago. Nobody called him it now. But he remembered it; he said it out loud sometimes if only to remind himself he was still a human being.

Steven.

Easy to say. He did so now, the word sounding strange, deafening in the silence of this windowless room with its single bare light bulb. His stomach growled and grumbled, but he ignored it. He knew there would be no food. Not until after the beating when either through guilt or to preserve his pitiful

existence until the next one they would give him something. Never fresh, never cooked, but edible. He had learned to ignore the taste of things, to fight back the reflexive retch as he ate.

This was his life. This was his existence.

He was tired, his eyes growing heavy. He wanted to sleep, and even though that filthy stinking mattress was far from appealing, it was all he had. But he knew that to get to it he would have to face him. Him and his mocking, him and his laughing.

He peered over his shoulder, hoping against hope that he wouldn't be there but of course there he was. Watching waiting. That smile, that twisted smile on his face as it always was. Why did he never sleep? Why did he have to watch all the time?

"What do you want from me?" Steven asked over his shoulder.

But as often was the case, he didn't answer. He just watched and grinned. How he hated that grin. He hated it almost as much as the crazy look in his eyes.

"I'm not afraid of you." Steven croaked, ignoring the pain of his cracked lips.

"Yes, you are."

This was rare. He wanted to talk. He usually just stared. And laughed. And waited. But not today. Today he seemed to have something to say.

They used to talk a lot, in the beginning, back when they still shared the hope of escape, of freedom. But their conversations led them to realise quite quickly that they had little in common apart from a similar stubborn streak, and their relationship quickly deteriorated into one of silence brought on by the utter hopelessness of their situation.

Part of it was triggered by a sizeable amount of bitterness on Steven's part. Over the years he had grown weaker, his body and mind drained.

Yet him...he seemed the same, thinner now, of course, victim of the same undernourishment, but he seemed to be in overall better physical condition. He also seemed to avoid the majority of the beatings, and on those occasions where they were together when it happened, he simply laughed all the way through.

How Steven hated that laugh. It was a humourless sound, and to be free of it would be enough to perhaps let him tolerate his life as it was, but he wasn't so lucky. There was to be no respite.

Frustrated, Steven turned back to the wall. He had no intention of talking to him. It never ended well and he had neither the will nor the strength to engage in another battle. He wouldn't rise to it. He would sit here in his space and keep quiet.

"Hey, birthday boy. Come over here. I want to talk to you."

He tried to ignore it, the sneering goading tone in his voice.

Steven scratched at his matted, lice infested hair. "Go away. I'm not talking to you."

"Hey come on, don't be like that. We used to be friends remember?"

He did remember, back at the beginning, before things got bad. "That was a long time ago," He

muttered.

“I want us to be friends again. I have a birthday present for you.”

Steven’s heart increased in tempo. So it was his birthday. He couldn’t remember the last present he received. Steven shuffled around to face him and saw that for once he wasn’t smiling, wasn’t laughing, and wasn’t staring. He looked...sad.

“You can come closer, I won’t bite. Come on, Steven. Let’s be friends again.”

He was curious, he couldn’t deny that. Slowly, cautiously he shuffled forward coming to rest on his knees just out of his reach. Just in case.

“I’m not coming any closer!” Steven said, ready to lurch away at the first sudden movement.

That’s okay, I understand. Look, I want to say sorry for how I’ve treated you over the years. Both of us together in this room... well, it makes life hard.”

Steven shook his head. “You made my life hard. I never did anything to you, but you hurt me. You let them hurt me. And even when I hadn’t done anything you still let them beat me, always watching always with that smile on your face.”

No reaction.

Steven suspected that he didn’t like to hear the truth. Well, so what. He had a right to say it. It was his birthday after all.

“Look, I can’t change the past. I know I was shitty to you, especially when the two of us should have stuck together during this....whatever this is. But that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. I’m giving you the gift you have always wanted.

“I don’t want anything from you,” Steven said, thinking about those places in his mind where he always escaped to.”

“You’ll want this one. Believe me.”

“Oh yeah? What is it?”

He leaned close, causing Steven to take a compensatory shuffle back. “I’m leaving this place. I’m leaving you alone.”

Steven gasped, his heart speeding up slightly at the thought. Peace, at last, freedom from the laughing, and the staring. That was the worst. The way he just...observed.

“Are you really leaving?” Steven asked.

He smiled then, not his ‘lion about to eat its prey’ smile, but one of sadness. He looked theatrically around the room, then pulled out a seven-inch glass shard from behind his back. It had a handle made from a tightly wound strip of his filthy T. shirt.

Steven shuffled back, eyes wide and afraid. “What the hell is that for?”

“You and I both know that we will never get out of here,” He said. Eying Steven cautiously. “I for one can’t take anymore, so I’m getting out. My way.”

“Suicide??” Steven blurted as he recoiled in horror. “You can’t! Don’t you see? They’ll think I did

it! They'll think I killed you!"

He seemed to consider this, and then his face lit up with inspiration. "Then why don't you come with me? This is no life Steven, locked in this room in shit caked rags waiting for them to come back then pray that they don't decide to beat you."

"I can't take my own life, I won't let them win!" Steven replied, shaking his head.

"They won a long time ago and we both know it. Let's take away their power. We can go together. Here."

He held out his hand, offering him the makeshift knife.

"I won't do it" And yet, he found himself reaching out and taking the blade anyway. He looked at it in wonder.

"All you have to do is cut your wrists. It shouldn't hurt too badly. As for me, I'm making sure. I'm going to cut across the throat. No way am I letting them get me to the hospital in time just so they can kill me later their way. No thanks." he said with a smile, his mouth full of yellowed leaners.

Steven went to answer and then froze.

Of course.

This was another one of his ploys. The laughing and the staring hadn't worked. He had tried it from the beginning, and for a time, Steven had been his equal. He lost count of the hours they would spend staring at each other back then, each trying to intimidate the other, neither willing to back down. Eventually, Steven had tired of the games, tired of the grinning, of the staring. He decided not to play anymore, preferring instead to sit in the corner and imagine the open spaces, to imagine freedom. And so, it seemed that his great nemesis had come up with this 'suicide' idea instead. He had to admit, it was clever. Very clever, but he was clever too, and could play the game as well as anyone. Let's see how his grin happy roommate dealt with this little bombshell.

"Ok, let's do it. But I don't know what to do." Steven said, watching carefully for a reaction.

"Are you kidding me? Just cut one wrist then the other and pass the knife over to me before you bleed out. Come on, work with me here."

Steven put the blade to his wrist and then with a smile held it out in his outstretched hand. "You first."

Steven saw a flicker of uncertainty flash in his eyes then, perhaps realising that his plan had backfired, but not enough to revert back to that maddening laugh, that damn stare.

"Okay," he said calmly, taking the blade back gently by the handle. "Are you sure you don't want to go first? I'm cutting my throat remember? There will be a lot of blood. I don't want it to put you off."

"I'll be fine, besides we might not bleed as much as you might think; neither of us is exactly fat are we? I mean look at me, I'm just skin and bone and you're not much different."

Steven was playing the game, playing it well. He waited for the response.

"Well it's your call, but if you really want me to go first, I will. Just don't say I didn't warn you."

“I won’t” Steven said, holding his gaze.

“Are you absolutely sure?”

“Yep.”

“Positive?”

“You sound scared.”

“Hey, I’m just checking you’re not going to throw up and then wimp out. But whatever, you had fair warning. You might want to turn away, though. This is likely to be messy”

“No, it’s fine. You spent long enough over the years watching me, now it’s my turn to watch you. Go right ahead.” Steven managed a smile as he said it, careful not to give away that he had discovered the plan.

With a sigh, he adjusted his grip on the makeshift handle and lifted it with a shaking hand to his throat. Without the smile and stare, he looked just like Steven. A scared boy with no way out.

He stilled his trembling hand. “Happy birthday Steven.”

He cut.

The initial shock that his staring smiling nemesis had actually gone through with it turned to confusion at the pain which engulfed Steven’s body. The carotid artery severed, he pitched forward, his face slamming into the glass of the large and ornate mirror sending a large splintering crack across its surface right up to the top corner which was already missing a long thin section. Steven slid to the floor and slumped to his side, his vision fading as he looked at his own reflection. Still staring. Still smiling.

Happy birthday.

FACES

[This story is actually the basis that my novel Whisper was built on. Initially, whisper was to be a short story (the one you are about to read), but as I thought more about it, there was more story to tell there than I had done in this particular story. Readers of Whisper will see the parts which were transferred over to the novel. The run down house and young couple, the supernatural occurrences and voices of the dead, and of course, Donovan. I thought I would include this here for you to see the story which gave birth to the novel which s since spawned a couple of sequels. This original tale still means a lot to me as it inadvertently set me off on the path to writing my first novel. I hope you enjoy it.

JUST SEVEN DAYS. Seven days to turn a perfectly rational man into a quivering, broken-minded wreck. He held his head in his hands and slumped to the ground on his haunches, sliding down the oak counter. A low pained whine came from within him as he looked the face in the floor. It stared back at him, mocking and arrogant. It was supposed to have been the home of their dreams, a fresh start after a difficult period of their eleven year marriage. It was their chance to work towards putting things right, but now it had all changed. His Susan, his beautiful blonde haired, green eyed Susan with the playful, seductive smile, his Susan who had a way of bringing the best out of him and had made him a better man. Susan who had gushed over each and every room as the agent had shown them around the Victorian townhouse, envisioning how it would be, how it would work out. He had followed behind, momentarily forgotten as his wife proclaimed her love for the beautiful property. The agent, smelling a sale as surely as a shark smells blood, proceeded to sell it to them, transitioning into his well-practiced pitch. Alex wasn't as convinced and couldn't see what she found so appealing about it. Where he only saw wood rot and damp, Susan saw original features and fittings that could be restored. Where he saw gutters and window frames in need of replacement, she saw a chance to modernize whilst retaining the charm of the building. The overgrown and weed filled garden that to him was hours of back breaking work, to her was filled with potential. 'What about in the summer?' she'd said, 'when it's all done we can sit out here and watch the sun go down.' She was so convincing that even he had started to see the possibilities. It would be beautiful when it was completed. Not buying the house from that point on was never an option, and although disheartened by the amount of work it would require, he went along with it.

But it didn't matter now.

None of it mattered because Susan was dead.

She was rolled up in the red rug that used to be in the very kitchen where he now sat and stared at the face in the floor. When they first discovered it they were curious but unafraid, as it wasn't fully formed. It was more a suggestive thing at the time, the swirls and knots in the wood forming a vague form of an open-mouthed female face. Depending on the angle it was viewed from, it was either laughing or screaming.

Susan said she found it charming. He found it a little unsettling. It was a few days later that he noticed the face had changed, morphed into a different position. The face was now less vague, it's form easier to make out. The closer they looked, more details could be seen. The shape of an ear, the pained glare of the eyes which stared venomously out of the floorboards. The suggestion of if the face was screaming or not was now resolved. It was clear now that it was in the middle of what looked to be an agonised wail.

They didn't want to discuss what it might have been, but they agreed that, charming or not, it had to go. They hired an industrial sanding machine. And he spent the entire day sanding down the kitchen

floor. When he was done, the wood that was once dirty and tired was now bright and clean and devoid of blemishes, face included.

That should have been the end of it, but less than a week later it started to reappear. At first, it was just a ghost of the eyes and the vague outline of the mouth, but there was no doubt what it was, the unblemished floor made it easier to spot. For the first time, they understood why perhaps they had been able to buy the place so cheaply. He and Susan had knelt beside it and leaned close, peering at the wood up close. It was cold to the touch and gave them both the urge to wash their hands as if they had been soiled somehow. It was at this point that the atmosphere in the house changed and they started to argue. Day by day, slowly but surely the face in the floor reappeared, only, this time, the face had changed. Instead of an anguished scream, the face in the wood now had a roar of rage, brow furrowed, eyes narrow and glaring, mouth turned down at the corners. It wasn't alone. Other faces were starting to appear, ghostly forms swimming out of the wood and growing more and more visible with each passing day.

Susan wanted to leave the faces to come through, certain that they were trying to convey some kind of message. He just wanted to be rid of them because he simply had never believed. He had never believed in Bigfoot or aliens or things that creep around in the dark and wait until the lights go out before they come to get you. And as a sceptic with no rational explanation for what was happening, he decided that eradication was the best course of action and was also much easier to deal with than believing in the possibility that there could be something out there that he didn't understand and that modern science could not explain by blaming temperature fluctuations, or mass hysteria or anything of the like. And even if they could, he wouldn't believe them because as much as he might try to deny it, the face in the floor was looking at them and they could see it was angry.

As the faces grew more and more detailed, they, in turn, became more afraid.

Afraid to tell anyone what was happening, even afraid to sleep. As the fear increased, so did the intensity and regularity of their arguments. He had never laid a hand on her before the faces appeared, but now he had taken to regularly beating her, pounding her through sobs of rage and fear and wondering what the hell was happening to them.

Things reached crisis point and they knew they that they had to do something, and so with a wife sitting opposite him across the table who was bruised, hurting and unable to look him in the eye, he had applied for permission to replace the wooden floor with concrete, hoping that it would, at least, be an end to the whole thing. However planning permission was denied—the building was listed, and even though they owned it, legally they couldn't proceed with any work which may cause damage to the original features of the house, the kitchen floor of which was one.

Desperation won out over common sense, and so they decided to do it anyway. He spent a week tearing up the old wood, removing the faces which were now so clear that they could have been paintings delicately penned onto the wood. The old floorboards were burned and new floor re-laid.

Now their period house had an out of place bare concrete floor, but they didn't care. The removal of the faces meant they might have a chance to get their lives back on track and perhaps start to rebuild a little of the relationship they had already broken. For a few weeks, things went well. The arguments stopped, and the faces in the floor were forgotten, blocked out for the simple reason that thinking about them for too long was likely to send a person insane.

As Alex sat on the kitchen floor, lost in recollection, he couldn't believe how quickly things had changed again.

The faces had started to reform a week earlier.

At first, they had started as vague impressions in the concrete. They tried to convince themselves it was a blemish, an inconsistency in the concrete mix or a smudge of dirt or scuff of a shoe even though neither of them truly really believed it. For the first time they felt terror— true pure terror, unlike anything they had ever experienced before, as day by day, the faces in the floor started to reappear.

This time, they were clearer, horrific in detail as they melted themselves into the concrete. The screaming woman who seemed to be central to the phenomenon wore a smug, arrogant, gap-toothed grin. The wrinkles on her skin, the knowing glare in her eyes showing through in frightening clarity on the otherwise unblemished concrete. He imagined her in his head, speaking to him, telling him what he had to do to make them go away. For six days he lay awake at night, staring at the roof and listening to the old house creaking and moaning, and imagining that old hag faced woman in the floor pulling herself out of the concrete and coming to him, touching him with her cold, leathery fingertips and whispering in his ear with hot breath smelling of rot and earth.

Fear.

Sleep deprivation.

Insanity.

All viable excuses, but whatever spin he tried to put on it, the end result was the same. The last argument with Susan had gone too far, and with the voice of the hag woman in his head, he had given into an overwhelming and all-consuming rage. This time, it was more than a punch or grabbing her by the hair and screaming in her face. This time, he had strangled her, tendons bulging out of his neck like steel cables, hands clenching down hard on his windpipe as he glared through gritted teeth and imagining the old hag's corpse breath in his ear telling him he was doing the right thing.

When it was done, sanity returned to him and he saw what he was responsible for. His wife lay dead on the floor, eyes bloodshot, the tip of her tongue protruding from her mouth. He had glanced to the old woman in the floor, the satisfaction on her face complete. He couldn't bear to look at Susan anymore, and so had wrapped her in the carpet and moved her until he could decide how to tell the police what he had done. All of that had now changed, though Because Susan was back.

She was there in the floor with the old woman, her face somehow cut into the concrete in a series of smudges and scratches, the detail too real, too horrific. She was glaring at him, one more accusing

face amongst the thirty or so others that now covered the concrete floor of the kitchen. Some of them were no more than fleshy skulls, empty eye sockets still able to stare. Others were young and vibrant, no more than children who he understood now had met their end in this house. Worse was the old woman, her smile ancient, knowing. Satisfied.

The human mind is a funny thing, he thought to himself as he wedged the barrel of the handgun into its mouth, the taste of oil and steel making it all so suddenly real.

After all, what is love, what is guilt, what is life?

He needed to be with her, needed to explain, and there was only one way to do that. The old woman's voice in his head was telling him what he had to do. He looked at Susan's glaring, furious face in the floor, hoping she would understand, hoping she would let him explain. He wondered what the next people would be like who would buy the house. He was sure he would see them from the floor alongside his wife and the others, forever a permanent fixture of this place. With the dead breath of the old hag in his ear, he closed his eyes and pulled the trigger.

GRANDPA

[This was supposed to be the opening story to Dark Corners when I initially came up with the idea for it being an interconnected series of stories. The old man in the story was supposed to appear in between each tale in Dark Corners and tell the grandson what had happened, in essence introducing each story ala The Crypt Keeper in Tales From The Crypt. In the end, I abandoned that idea but liked the introduction to the old man and the grandson, and so decided to create a new story from it which has been sitting around for the last couple of years until now.]

THE OLD MAN was close to death. With a wheeze, he pushed his frail body upright to enable him to establish eye contact with his grandson. Their eyes locked, the old man's tired and weary, the boy's bright and full of hope. With a shaking, liver-spotted hand, the old man lifted the oxygen mask to his face and inhaled deeply, his eyes never leaving the boy.

"Grandpa, are you alright? Do you need the nurse?" the boy asked as he rubbed his hands together. The old man waved his free hand dismissively at the boy, then set the mask down beside him on the

bed. He was frail and thin, his leathery skin stretched over his bones. The boy felt a pang of sorrow, and also a little revulsion. He couldn't imagine ever becoming this way himself, clinging on to life by the fingertips.

"How old are you boy?" the old man asked, pushing a few strands of wiry, white hair away from his eyes.

"I'll be fifteen next month Grandpa, you asked me last week, remember?" replied the boy. Lowering his gaze to the ground.

"Sixteen" the old man repeated, nodding slowly. "And are you a good boy?"

There was something in the old man's eyes which the boy had never seen before. A brightness, or perhaps a nervous excitement. The boy shuffled on his chair by the bedside. "I – I suppose so. I mean I try to be."

The old man nodded, and took another long breath on his oxygen mask, his hand shaking with effort. "You have your father's eyes. He looked just like you when he was your age. Of course, that was a long time ago."

The boy did not know how to reply to that and instead looked down at his feet as he shuffled his weight on the chair. There was a lengthy silence, and the boy glanced around the room as he waited for his grandfather to continue. "Grandpa...you asked to see me. You said it was important."

"Yes. There is something that I have to tell you." He replied, beckoning the boy closer. The boy shuffled forwards on the plastic chair, its feet scraping on the polished floor, and was now close enough to pick up the faint smell of disinfectant and starch from the bed linen.

"Grandpa, I'm not sure I understand."

The old man laughed, the sound morphing into a wet rasp and then a cough. The boy stood as to help, but the old man raised a hand. He waited as the old man finished coughing into a tissue, wishing he hadn't seen the bloody residue left as he wiped his mouth.

"It has to be you boy...it has to be you." The old man said, then coughed again, and for a second the boy thought that he would again need to bloody another tissue, but the cough subsided, and the old man settled for taking another long breath on the oxygen mask.

"I'm dying. There's no escape from it now."

"Grandpa...."

"Don't be sad, Boy. Frankly, I'm glad. I'm tired and in need of my rest."

The boy frowned, chewing on his lip.

"Before I go, there is something that I need to tell you, something that nobody has ever been told before."

The boy was intrigued and leaned forward in his seat, curious as to what could be so vital for the old man to share so close to his death.

"What do you mean? I- i don't understand."

The old man smiled, showing a mouth full of crooked, yellow teeth. “You will boy, you will.”
A flicker of fear ran through the boy’s body as the old man continued. “What do you know of
vampires?”

The boy frowned. “just what I’ve seen on TV. Last year we read Dracula in literature class at school,
other than that..not much. Sci-fi is more my thing, Grandpa.”

The boy was confused and wasn’t entirely sure if the old man even knew what he was talking about.
He seemed lucid enough, however, his manner had changed completely. The boy realised that he was
growing afraid of this withered old man, and wished at that moment for one of the nurses to come in,
perhaps just to check on them, or to administer his Grandpa’s evening medication.

The old man smiled, just a curl of the lip, this time, and once again the boy couldn’t help but notice
the change in his demeanour. The boy thought this was how a hungry lion might look at its prey
before it eats it.

“Would you be surprised to know, Boy, that vampires are quite real? That in fact, they are an active
part of our society?”

The boy laughed, trying to breaking the tension. “Come on, Grandpa, everybody knows that the
vampire myth is based around the story of Vlad the Impaler. We wrote a paper on it last term.”
The old man smiled at the boy’s laughter, and yet there was no real amusement within it. If anything,
the boy thought he saw a flash of anger.

“I’m glad that you’re amused, Boy. But ask yourself this. Can you really be sure it’s just a myth?”
“Grandpa, I’m not sure what you’re saying exactly.”

The old man nodded. “Oh, I think you do. I think you know exactly what I’m saying.” He replied,
pointing a bony finger at the boy.

There was a shift in the atmosphere, a palpable energy which made the hairs on the back of the boys
neck stand on end. “Grandpa, I’m worried, maybe I should get a nurse or something...” he made to
stand, but the old man stilled him with a single glance.

“You, of course, don’t believe me. May I ask why?”

That flash of anger again, buried somewhere behind those ancient eyes.

“Because vampires don’t exist. They’re fiction.” He shrugged, wondering if the old man even knew
what he was saying.

The old man smiled, leaning close and speaking in a whisper. “Because I am one of course,” He said,
before leaning back on his pillow and awaiting the boy’s reaction. The boy started to laugh but cut it
off almost immediately. The old man was looking straight at him, almost through him. The boy
realised his grandfather was telling the truth.

“Have no fear Boy, it isn’t as you have been conditioned by your books and movies to believe. You
are in no danger from me.”

The boy struggled to suppress the jolt of terror that slammed through his body. The thing in the bed

had transformed somehow, and although at a glance was the same, no longer resembled his grandfather. The boy thought he could see a flicker of crimson in those grey eyes, or perhaps it was a trick of the light.

“Forget all notions of our kind that you have read about in books. The reality is quite different. We do not drink blood, nor are we allergic to garlic, or afraid of crucifixes.” He said with absolute conviction.

“What about sunlight?” asked the boy, unable to suppress his curiosity.

“Harmless. We are no different to you in principal, except that we are immortal.” The old man’s conviction in the way that he confided in the boy was disturbing.

“I don’t understand. I mean, you’re so frail.... you said so yourself that you’re dying.” The boy said, trying to remain as calm as possible.

The old man nodded. “Yes and no.”

“The vampire is a creature of evolution. We are a parasite if you will. We attach to a host and feed on that host until it is time to move on.” He said to the boy, that same humourless smile turning his lips into a dark line on his wrinkled face. The old man sat up with some effort. He was now turned towards his Grandson, eyes watching the boy with hungry intensity. He licked his lips before continuing. “Sadly, unlike the movies that you watch or the books that you read, we have no regenerative abilities. Our hosts continue to age. They become diseased, they grow ill. We stay with them until such a time comes that we need to move on. If we do not, if our host dies before we can move to another, we also die.” He shrugged.

The boy went pale, unable to speak. Despite common sense telling him that it was a fabricated fantasy of a dying old man, he believed him. He was utterly convinced that the old man, the same one that every year spent the Christmas holidays with them, the same man who taught the boy to ride his first push bike, the same man who had taught him how to fish when he was just ten years old, was exactly what he claimed to be. The old man seemed to be able to read the thoughts as they moved through the boys mind, and laughed dryly.

“Don’t be alarmed, I haven’t asked you here for any reason other than to tell the truth of what i am. For centuries I have moved from body to body, drifting without purpose. I have seen enough of this world to know it holds no more that I wish to experience. It has become a cruel, cold place, even for my kind. I intend to die along with this body you see before you. Eventually, even immortality becomes a burden” said the old man with a tired sigh.

The boy nodded, convinced that his best chance to survive would be to play along until he could escape.

. “How old are you exactly?” he asked as he gauged the distance to the door. The old man watched him and smiled.

“You don’t need to run. We are misunderstood. This body is eighty-seven. However my essence, the

vampire itself...” the old man closed his eyes as he contemplated the answer. “I cannot recall. I remember as early as the fifteenth century, the time between then and now has been a hazy blur of friendships made and broken. Loved ones living and dying. The existence of our kind is a lonely one. Perhaps it is our curse, the price of our immortality. Yes, the time has come to rest.” He said with a sigh.

The boy licked his lips, choosing his next words carefully. “I have a question...”

The old man smiled, for now back in the guise of the boy’s grandfather. “By all means ask. Your curiosity is the reason I chose you to tell of this,” said the old man, folding his hands across his chest.

“What if I don’t believe a word of this?” he said, forcing himself to look the old man in the eye.

“What if this is just words, a sick joke?”

The old man nodded, considering the question.

“Knowledge can be a burden, especially if carried around for as many years as I have. I’m tired boy. Your grandfather’s body has been good to me. I have spent time with a good family of good people who have made me long for my own who are now but dust. A vague memory at best which itself has started to fade.”

The boy was surprised to see a tear roll down the old man’s cheek. “You’re crying”.

The old man nodded “as I said, do not believe everything you think you know about our kind.”

The boy licked his lips “when did you....”

“Inhabit your grandfather’s body?”

The boy nodded.

“It was many years ago, he was nineteen and serving in the army. I was attempting even then to end this cursed life. It was world war two, the city of Dresden in Germany was in ruins after the bombing raids of the allied forces.”

The old man had a faraway look in his eye now as he recounted the story to the boy

“The air still smelled of fire and blood. It was as close to hell on earth as you could ever expect to experience. I had been inhabiting the body of a German tailor when the war broke out. I was enlisted along with every other able-bodied man and had seen enough to know that humanity was on a downward slide to which there was no escape. I had seen wars in the past, of course, but those were for a reason. For power, to liberate a country. Not this one. Hitler was an evil, evil man, and because I was enlisted, there was no way for the parasite to escape whilst the body it was in was useable. That is the rule that has stood for centuries. The decision to end my existence was an easy one. I had fashioned my noose and with some effort attached it to one of the remaining rafters of a building already half destroyed by the bombing. The noose was around my neck, and I was looking forward to being freed from my curse. Your father and his squad entered the building as I jumped. Even as the noose pulled taught, I tried to warn him, tried to tell him to leave me be.”

Another tear rolled down the old man’s cheek as he closed his eyes and continued

“He was a brave man, and without thinking scrambled up to cut me down despite me being the enemy. This thing inside me recognised that the body it was in was already broken and no longer of any use. Even as I felt the numb bliss of death, it jumped to your grandfather who was trying in vain to revive the empty vessel of flesh and bone. Just like that, death was taken from me and the curse of life further given for me to endure.” He shook his head slowly “if only he would have left me be, I would have found my peace.”

The boy had forgotten his fear and was now engrossed in the conversation

“Did you try again? I mean if you were that determined....”

“It’s difficult to explain. The parasite once attached to a new host enjoys a certain period of euphoria. The feeling is unlike anything that you could ever imagine. Power, excitement, the sheer thrill of experiencing life in a new body. More powerful, more intoxicating than any drug. For a time, it is easy to forget that you long for death, and this for a vampire is a dangerous time. We are reckless and impulsive during this period. The human body, of course, tries to fight the invasion of the unwanted parasite, and a battle of wills between vampire and the host. Of course, the vampire always wins eventually, but the process can take several years in some cases. By then, of course, the entire process begins again. Day by day, week by week, year by year the vampire sinks its barbs deeper and deeper into the host. Eventually, all that remains is vampire, and the host is no more than a shell to keep us alive.”

“So my grandfather... is dead?” asked the boy.

“No. Your grandfather and I are entwined into one. Even as you and I speak, he fights. But on our death, we both agree. We are both tired of this frail existence. You need to stay here and make sure that when the time comes nobody disturbs us. You have to help me, your grandfather the vampire. “You’re using me?” the boy’s cheeks flushed with anger. “What if I don’t believe a word of this, what if it’s the ramblings of a crazy old man if – “

The old man moved with inhuman speed. Before the boy could react the old man had a hold of his wrist and was pulling him closer. He tried to squirm free, but the old man’s grip was like iron. Their faces were only a few inches apart, and the boy could smell the tobacco laced breath of the old man who whispered now in a low voice. Their eyes were locked, the boy now unable to dismiss the red flecks in the old man’s eyes as a trick of the light.

“You don’t understand, you....” The old man released his grip, convulsing back onto the bed and clutching at his chest as an alarm began to sound. The boy tumbled to the floor, before quickly getting to his feet and watching. The old man had begun to drool as he thrashed wildly within the covers, one pale leg kicking out into the air. The boy waited to see what would happen, as two nurses hurried into the room.

“Don’t touch him!” yelled the boy as he was pushed aside.

The nurses worked on the old man, opening his pyjama top and began compressions on his chest. The

two nurses worked for almost ten minutes, then ceased their efforts, before turning off the alarm.

The room was silent as the boy looked on. The old man was dead.

One of the nurses, a heavy set woman with black hair pulled back into a tight bun looked over to the boy, who was still staring at the figure on the bed.

“I’m sorry,” she said to him. “He’s gone”

The boy nodded, before walking slowly towards the open door.

“Excuse me, young man,” the nurse called after him. “Do you want me to call anyone, family or –“ She stopped mid-sentence. The boy was looking at her over his shoulder, a wry smile on his face. She thought it was the kind of smile that a hungry lion might give to its prey just before he ate it. It must have been a trick of the light, as she was sure that she saw a brief flicker of crimson in his blue eyes. “No need for that.” The boy said to her. His eyes drifting towards the old man on the bed. “After all, life goes on doesn’t it?” without waiting for a response from the nurse he turned and quietly left, closing the door gently behind him.

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